

Overview

Undocumented educators (or “UndocuEducators”) are a vital resource to undocumented students to ensure their success in higher education. Their shared lived experiences provide them with special expertise and cultural competency to more effectively guide their students through college. However, UndocuEducators face challenges that make it difficult for them to retain and thrive in their roles. Their consistent high turnover in their positions means that higher education institutions are losing out on valuable guides and mentors for their undocumented students.

This resource is intended for staff, faculty, and administrators in colleges and universities. It provides an overview of who UndocuEducators are, as well as the value they bring to their institutions. It also gives tangible recommendations for campus stakeholders

to better support and retain UndocuEducators. Ensuring that these individuals thrive in their roles means that their important contributions are carried over to the next generation of undocumented students.

Through this resource, specific personnel are provided with individual actions to expand their support of undocumented staff on their campus. This short guide serves as a reminder that UndocuEducators were once these students who have accomplished their academic goals, but are now facing different challenges in their campuses. It calls for the definition of UndocuAlly to expand and to encompass the awareness and support of UndocuEducators.

This guide was informed by the reflections and discussions of the UndocuEducators Group, a support space for currently and formerly undocumented professionals working in higher education in California. Started by then-Dream Center Coordinator Pamela Ortiz Cerda, the group aims to provide leadership development, professional growth, and wellness strategies to its members.

UndocuEducators’ Valuable Contributions to Higher Education

As individuals who navigated similar educational pathways, UndocuEducators bring special expertise and knowledge to their roles serving undocumented and first-generation students. They often have a deeper understanding of the challenges students face, as well as the resources, policies and strategies that can help them succeed in higher education. Their shared identity can also foster trust and connections with students, which helps ensure that they get connected to the support they need.

As individuals who had to creatively navigate higher education and advocate for themselves throughout their academic journey, UndocuEducators are strong voices in expanding and institutionalizing support for undocumented students. They have contributed to building and strengthening undocumented student programs on their campuses, and created innovative solutions to address the continuing uncertainty undocumented individuals face.

Who Are UndocuEducators?

/ˌənˈdäkyə, ˈejəˌkādər/

UndocuEducators are formerly or currently undocumented individuals working in higher education. They include those who have been granted work authorization most often through Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and those in the process of adjusting their immigration status.

UndocuEducators occupy different positions in higher education institutions including staff, faculty, and administrators. They are often most visible when working directly with undocumented students at Dream Resource Centers or Undocumented Student Programs.

Challenges Faced & Recommendations to Address

Based on discussions with undocumented educators across the different systems of higher education in California, we will be highlighting challenges they experience as well as recommendations and individualized actions to build institutional support.

CHALLENGE 1

UndocuEducators experience a lack of institutional funding and budget transparency that can impact their roles and programs.

Though this is common in most student service departments, it especially impacts those working in undocumented student centers and services. Limited funding for these centers often cover only part-time personnel, impacting the program's ability to address the multiple types of services needed. Additionally, institutions have to scramble to come up with a programming budget, making it hard to develop and sustain adequate services. But given the complex needs that undocumented students are facing and their shared identity, UndocuEducators routinely go beyond their job responsibilities and perform their tasks outside of their work hours.

Furthermore, these centers are often housed under various campus departments to take advantage of funding sources, meaning there is no guidance on how budgets are allocated or accountability for programs to meet their goals. Even when institutional funds are available, UndocuEducators face a lack of transparency around budget allocations. These factors combined can make it especially difficult for UndocuEducators' positions to be retained. Yet, many of them stay in their roles despite these limitations because of their commitment to the undocumented community.

Recommendation

Allocate funding that is equitable and aligns with the institution's mission and vision to support students while retaining current staff members. Include UndocuEducator stakeholders in budget decisions, especially as it pertains to their roles and programs.

Individual Action

- If you are a **supervisor**, include UndocuEducators in the decision-making process regarding program funding and be transparent about operational budgets. If needed, create action plans with UndocuEducators should their positions be affected by budget changes.
- If you are a **task force/advisory group member**, advocate for sustainable personnel and programmatic budget allocations.
- If you are an **administrator**, advocate for and be transparent about budget and funding allocations. Develop budget proposals that adequately take into account program and staffing needs.
- If you are in **human resources**, provide effective guidance on position classification that actually matches job responsibilities.
- If you are a **president or chancellor**, allocate a fair and sustainable operating budget and salaries that adequately support UndocuEducators and their programs.

CHALLENGE 2

UndocuEducators, especially those in undocumented student programs, tend to be hired in temporary and lower paid positions. These positions and job descriptions are not classified in a way that reflects their unique skills set nor the expertise required to adequately support their students. Many UndocuEducators also tend to take on responsibilities outside of their job descriptions.

Undocumented educators often have challenges in obtaining traditional paid professional experience or credentials before serving in their roles. Because of this, they are viewed as having less intellectual capital to be classified in higher positions.

Though this can also be common for other student services staff, UndocuEducators' shared identities with their students and drive to serve their community make it more likely for them to take these undercompensated positions. Despite years of experience in self-advocacy as undocumented immigrants, they also feel ill-equipped to navigate campus bureaucracies and the reclassification processes because they are first-generation professionals. Furthermore, many UndocuEducators struggle with feeling responsible to serve their community and meet the financial needs of their loved ones. In addition, they are faced with campus bureaucracies and politics that make it harder to create change or find new ways to support students. This creates a common experience of burnout and imposter syndrome.

Recommendation

Support and advocate for the reclassification of all undocumented student support staff across California's higher education institutions to be in alignment with their job responsibilities.

Individual Action

- If you are a **supervisor**, mentor UndocuEducators to orient them in their roles and provide professional development opportunities. Advocate for fair compensation, additional staffing, and proper classification.
- If you are a **task force/advisory group member**, mentor UndocuEducators to help them navigate their institutions and ensure they are connected with leadership that can advocate on behalf of them and their students.
- If you are an **administrator**, ensure proper classification, fair compensation, and adequate staffing. Validate the expertise of the UndocuEducators (including non-paid professional experiences). Facilitate proper communication and respect among department heads and undocumented student personnel.
- If you are in **human resources**, create and implement a straightforward and equitable hiring and onboarding process for UndocuEducators. Recognize the expertise of the UndocuEducators (including non-paid professional experiences).
- If you are a **president or chancellor**, validate the work and expertise UndocuEducators provide to the campus. Uplift undocumented narratives that include staff alongside students. Ensure that all departments provide fair compensation, adequate staffing, and proper classification for UndocuEducators.

CHALLENGE 3

UndocuEducators are oftentimes the only people considered responsible for meeting the needs of undocumented students.

Their understanding and personal navigation of the unique challenges that undocumented immigrants experience gives them the expertise and insights to effectively address the situations students face. However, without cross-departmental collaborations, the problems are not adequately addressed because these efforts are piecemeal and unsustainable. This results in UndocuEducators being overworked and feeling burnout since every issue related to undocumented students is assigned to them.

Recommendation

Allocate funding for the hiring of additional full-time staff members to work in undocumented student programs. Establish departmental liaisons in key programs to share responsibilities regarding undocumented student issues. Educate these departments about undocumented issues and tasks they can take on.

Develop or expand a [strong undocumented student task force](#) that delegates responsibilities and builds institutional support for undocumented students.

Individual Action

- If you are a **supervisor**, have 1:1 conversations with UndocuEducators to identify staffing needs and areas to support or engage allies on. Help determine and approach campus partners that can champion undocumented issues.

- If you are a **task force/advisory group member**, share responsibilities and tasks by assigning departmental liaisons to ensure that not all undocumented-related things are handled by the center/program.
- If you are an **administrator**, ensure adequate staffing that matches undocumented student needs is provided. Identify campus partners to support in undocumented-related responsibilities.
- If you are in **human resources**, create a process to support staff in including the roles of departmental liaisons to their job descriptions.
- If you are a **president or chancellor**, support the creation of a sustainable undocumented student task force and funding allocation to hire full-time support staff. Call on all campus members to make it a safe and welcoming environment. Build institutional practices that do not rely on the goodwill of one or two people.

CHALLENGE 4

Lack of institutional awareness around legal processes including DACA means that UndocuEducators face the undue burden of navigating complex immigration policies that affect them emotionally, financially, and professionally.

The constant attacks on immigration policies create fear and uncertainty for UndocuEducators. While institutions have improved their legal support of their undocumented students, these resources often do not include UndocuEducators. UndocuEducators often have to educate their campuses on how policies impact their years of professional experience, onboarding and retention in their roles. They often do not have campus support when policy changes impact their livelihood and must develop their own solutions.

Recommendation

Create, support, and promote awareness and understanding about the complex immigration policies UndocuEducators are confronted with. Furthermore, create action plans that include financial, legal, professional, and emotional support for UndocuEducators when their immigration status is affected.

Individual Action

- If you are a **supervisor**, be vocal about the resources available to staff regardless of immigration status and collaborate with campus entities to create an action plan should an UndocuEducator's status change.
- If you are a **task force/advisory group member**, be vocal about support for UndocuEducators by including their needs in your advocacy efforts. Commit to developing an action plan that supports the retention of UndocuEducators when their immigration status is affected.
- If you are an **administrator**, work with HR to create and adhere to a straightforward and equitable hiring and onboarding process for UndocuEducators centered around a clear understanding of immigration policies. Create a pipeline of [inclusive fellowships](#) that provides paid professional development opportunities for all students and alumni, regardless of immigration status.
- If you are in **human resources**, implement hiring and onboarding practices that avoid processing DACAmented individuals as international employees. Identify and use promising practices to inform UndocuEducators about their work authorization expiring that does not center fear or lack of support.
- If you are a **president or chancellor**, ensure your institution adheres to the [model policies by the CA Attorney General](#) (if they're not already) and consider also using these guidelines to ensure the safety of UndocuEducators on your campus. Create awareness of and provide for the unique needs of undocumented educators by allocating funding to include immigration filing fees and legal services for UndocuEducators.

CHALLENGE 5

Accessing health care has been a challenge for UndocuEducators due to the different funding sources and position classifications. Since many of their positions are temporary, part-time and/or grant funded, too often employers are unable to offer health benefits to undocumented educators creating a challenge to prioritize their well-being. In some cases, if they do receive health benefits, they may be limited in mental health care options that do not fully support their needs.

Recommendation

Advocate for the allocation and disbursement of funding for adequate health benefits for all UndocuEducators, including temporary and part-time employees. Additionally, create partnerships with organizations that assist undocumented people in finding accessible healthcare options and mental health providers that center the undocumented experience.

Individual Action

- If you are a **supervisor**, advocate for fair health benefits and provide mental health check-ins during 1:1 meetings. Create a culture that validates what they are sharing as well as offering time off for self-care.
- If you are a **task force/advisory group member**, be vocal about the need for appropriate health care benefits for all UndocuEducators. In addition, include staff in self-care events created for the campus community.
- If you are an **administrator**, ensure your institution is vocal in supporting undocumented educators and provides for their unique needs such as mental health services that center the undocumented experience.
- If you are in **human resources**, allow for the provision of health benefits for temporary staff. In the meantime, provide a list of healthcare resources people can access if they are not eligible for full-time benefits.
- If you are a **president or chancellor**, champion adequate health benefits for all UndocuEducators. Implement programs and promising practices that offer health support for part-time and temporary employees.

CHALLENGE 6

UndocuEducators experience secondary trauma when working with undocumented students as they often face similar issues. This can lead to compassion fatigue; leaving them feeling emotionally and physically exhausted, powerless, and hopeless.

Facing the urgent and ongoing needs of their students while not receiving adequate support themselves, can create a barrier for UndocuEducators to prioritize themselves as undocumented people. They begin to believe that their students' undocumented status has a higher importance than their own.

Recommendation

Incorporate the experiences of undocumented educators in UndocuAlly trainings to build awareness of the challenges they face and promote understanding of what they offer to the campus.

Sustain or provide for UndocuEducators to participate in professional development opportunities specifically designed for undocumented individuals to help them build a sense of belonging, develop trust to center their own needs, find collaborative solutions, and thrive. Some examples include: [Immigrants Rising's UndocuEducators Group](#) or [NASPA's Immigrant and Allies Knowledge Community](#).

Individual Action

- If you are a **supervisor**, provide individual support through regular check-ins, monthly goal-oriented meetings, and 1-on-1s. Provide time for UndocuEducators to participate in relevant professional development opportunities. Offer hands-on mentorship that provides insight on campus policies, politics, and ways to navigate higher education as professionals.
- If you are a **task force/advisory group member**, provide a safe space for UndocuEducators to seek mentorship and guidance on ways to navigate their experience and the campus.
- If you are an **administrator**, ensure that UndocuEducators are able to participate in and allocate paid work time for professional development opportunities designed for them.
- If you are in **human resources**, include the experiences of undocumented students and staff in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion trainings.
- If you are a **president or chancellor**, acknowledge the important role, expertise, and valuable service UndocuEducators bring to your campus (i.e. make a statement and post it on your website).

Summary

Overall, higher education institutions need to understand the experiences of UndocuEducators and take tangible steps to resolve the unique challenges they face. We need institutional support to ensure they thrive and remain in their roles. Ensuring their success means colleges and universities provide their undocumented students with some of the best support possible.

This resource serves as a roadmap for supervisors, task force members, administrators, presidents, and chancellors to take specific, measurable steps. Together, let's transform the culture of support for undocumented immigrants in their community.

Acknowledgments

This resource was co-created by Maria Barragan and Madeleine Villanueva of Immigrants Rising.

We wish to thank Pamela Ortiz Cerda, founder of the [UndocuEducators Group](#), for igniting this work and creating a collective that provides professional development opportunities, community building, and a sense of belonging for undocumented professionals.

We also want to acknowledge Nancy Jodaitis from Immigrants Rising for celebrating UndocuEducators' accomplishments, providing mentorship, and being the champion we all need.

This resource would not have been possible without the commitment, passion, and vulnerability of the members of our UndocuEducators Group. Thank you for continuing to be trailblazers in our community.

About Us

Founded in 2006, **Immigrants Rising** transforms individuals and fuels broader changes. With resources and support, undocumented young people are able to get an education, pursue careers, and build a brighter future for themselves and their community. For more information, visit [immigrantsrising.org](#). For inquiries regarding this resource, please contact Madeleine Villanueva, Catalyst Fund Specialist, at madeleine@immigrantsrising.org.