

Effectively Supporting Black Undocumented Students Through Higher Education



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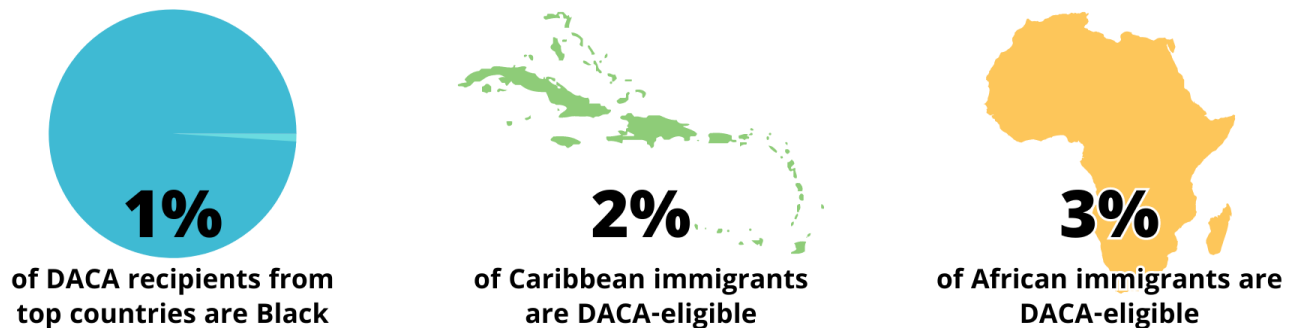
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Introduction

Increasing inclusivity for Black undocumented students may seem daunting due to the hyper-invisibility experienced by this student population. But campuses must take responsibility for ensuring ALL students who are admitted into their institutions have the necessary academic resources needed to graduate on time! This guide highlights focus group findings on structural obstacles that continue to plague the education system and negatively impact the Black undocumented community. It aims to raise awareness amongst staff, faculty, and administrators on how to create access and opportunities for Black undocumented students, which will allow them to thrive in higher education despite their immigration status.

Background on Black Undocumented Students

Figure 1. Percentage of DACA-Eligible Black Immigrants



Source: Black Alliance for Just Immigration, *DACA's Impact on Black Immigrants*, 2017.

As frequent targets of [crimmigration](#), Black undocumented immigrants are twice as likely as other immigrant groups to be deported. The intersection between race and immigration status makes their integration into American society especially difficult. Black undocumented Immigrants have the lowest employment rate among all other immigrant groups, and about 20% of Black immigrants live below the poverty line ([Sanchez-Lopez & Ai](#), 2017). That alarming reality is tied to substantial data that Black undocumented students are denied fair access to education. Often due to limited resources, Black undocumented students have to give up on their studies, which inevitably affects their quality of life and access to higher paying jobs.

An estimated 2,600 Black undocumented students graduate high school each year ([Zong & Batalova](#), 2019). The American Community Survey notes that approximately 427,000 undocumented students were enrolled in college in 2019; and out of this student group, only 12.5% identified as Black ([2021](#)). Black Alliance for Just Immigration's (BAJI) [State of Black Immigrants](#) notes that within the Black undocumented population, only 3% of African immigrants were eligible for DACA, while Caribbean immigrants constituted 2% (2016). As a result, very few Black undocumented students are DACA eligible.

Not only are Black undocumented students navigating the policing of their Blackness, they are simultaneously policing themselves due to the higher risk associated with disclosing their status. As a result, the few who manage to access higher education are often not comfortable voicing their needs if it requires disclosing their status. This creates the illusion that Black undocumented students don't exist in higher education which leads to them being underserved. This is why institutional support must be intentional about targeting resources towards this population.

Figure 2. Undocumented Students in Higher Education

	Undocumented Students	Share of Undocumented Students By Race	DACA-Eligible Students	Share of DACA-Eligible Students By Race
AAPI	103,263	24.2%	29,526	16.3%
Black	53,617	12.5%	9,607	5.3%
Hispanic	207,207	48.5%	126,515	69.7%
White	55,330	12.9%	13,010	7.2%
Other Race/Ethnicity	7,928	1.9%	2,966	1.6%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

Focus Group Findings

To get a better understanding of the experiences faced by Black undocumented students, Black undocumented organizers within Immigrants Rising conducted eight focus groups with Black undocumented students and college educators in January and February of 2022. This section highlights key findings from the focus groups regarding the experiences of Black undocumented students in higher education.

Student Group Highlights

The student focus groups were comprised of seven participants in total. Of the seven participants, two were pursuing their bachelor's degree, three had completed their bachelor's degree, and two were pursuing a master's degree. Of the participants, four attended California State Universities (CSU), two graduated from Universities of California (UC), and two pursued their studies outside of California in Texas and Kentucky.

Being Undocumented and Black

- All participants shared that being Black undocumented students limited their access to scholarships, education, and other resources like DACA, jobs, and fellowships.
- Participants often feel pressured to work much harder in order to access the resources that other students get with much less effort.

"I always knew that I was undocumented since the age of six. My parents thought that the only way for me to go to college and get a scholarship was to be really good in extracurricular activities such as sports and music. They thought I would get a scholarship based on that and that it was my only option to pay for college. However, I started building up anxiety because of the pressure that my parents were constantly putting on me." — *Black undocumented student from California State University*

- Participants felt that being undocumented and Black subjects them to discrimination such as racial profiling, and limitations such as inability to travel or be candid among friends. This led students to experience high levels of personal insecurity and emotional vulnerability.

- A student noted that they always tried to hide their identity because of the fear of being judged by friends or the fear of being arrested by the police. Moreover, family members reinforced the idea that they have to keep their immigration status a secret which only contributed to the fear.
- Participants were often confronted with the [good immigrant](#) stereotype and felt uncomfortable whenever the subject of immigration was brought up among their peers because they felt like they had to behave a certain way and be a *good immigrant*.

“Being an undocumented Black person makes you feel powerless because you feel like you are not in control of your life because there are so many things you can’t do and you feel the need to hide your identity.” — *Black undocumented student from UC Davis*

Navigating Higher Education

- Students mentioned that they chose their school because it offered more financial aid and helped them qualify for in-state tuition.
- Some students had access to Undocumented Student Services where they learned about resources such as [AB 540](#), but they did not feel welcomed in undocumented spaces due to lack of inclusivity and representation of Black students.
- The participants noted that educators, counselors, and other staff members they interacted with at their institution had little to no knowledge regarding resources available to undocumented, DACA, and AB 540 students. They were not helpful in navigating Black undocumented students through college.

“It is important to have a role model that looks like me and that can understand the battles that I have based on my identity. Unfortunately, DRC’s [Dream Resource Centers] do not provide that element of representation.” — *Black undocumented student from CSU Dominguez Hills*

Educator Group Highlights

The educator focus group consisted of a total of ten educators with five participants representing the UC, three participants representing the CSU, and three representing California Community Colleges (CCC). Of the ten participants, eight work within student services and two are professors. Additionally, half of the participants work directly with undocumented students and three are Black.

Knowledge of Undocumented Issues

- Of the educators interviewed, almost all noted that the Undocumented Student Services on their respective campuses did not target Black undocumented students.

Perception of Black Undocumented Students

- Educators noted the lack of media awareness regarding this population in the mainstream immigration movement, which creates invisibility on campuses.
- In terms of difference in experience between non-Black undocumented students and Black undocumented students, educators across the board highlight a unique sense of isolation among Black undocumented students due to their Blackness.
- The policing of Black students by campus police is another unique disparity educators noted that would have negative consequences for Black undocumented students due to the double criminalization they experience.

Experiences with Black Undocumented Students

- Hyper-invisibility: Even within Black spaces, educators note that Black undocumented students often opt out of disclosing their status to their colleagues. Similarly, within undocumented spaces, some would take advantage of the available services, but do not engage in the physical space or participate in social events.
- Black educators who had experiences with Black undocumented students noted that shared racial and cultural backgrounds made the students comfortable disclosing their immigration status to them.
- A key point made by one of the educators was that out of all the undocumented demographics she's served, the Black students have more often expressed the desire to [self-deport](#). This is attributed to anti-Blackness and the fact that most Black undocumented students are non-DACA which inhibits access to work and other opportunities.

Recommendations

Highlighted in this section are proposed solutions and recommendations informed by both educators and Black undocumented students on how to better serve this invisibilized and marginalized population.

Meeting Financial Needs

- Hiring culturally competent financial aid workers who understand the California Dream Act and AB 540 requirements and do not discriminate against Black undocumented students. This entails regular training for all Financial Aid Department Workers to ensure they are aware of the intersections in the undocumented community and avoid racial bias.
- Uplifting and creating professional development opportunities for Black undocumented students by creating more scholarships and fellowship opportunities (as opposed to internships) that are tailored to be inclusive of students without DACA. Most importantly, ensure the participation of Black undocumented students without DACA!
- Promoting fellowship opportunities off campus that are inclusive of undocumented students should be a priority for Undocumented Student Services and Black Student Services. Two examples are the [Dream Summer Fellowship](#) hosted by UCLA and the [Labor Summer Fellowships](#) hosted by UC Berkeley.
- Establishing specific scholarships/fellowships strictly reserved for Black undocumented students is vital. Black undocumented students have noted the few scholarships actually targeting undocumented students tend to be exclusive to the Latinx population.
- Developing fellowship opportunities for non-DACA graduate students (both Masters and Ph.D. programs) who are unable to get work-study or teaching assistantships to sustain themselves.

Building Social Connections on Campus

- Ensuring Black undocumented voices are included/centered during decision-making regarding services and support for undocumented students, as well as Black students.
- Highlighting the Black undocumented experience in artwork, graphics, and outreach materials used by Undocumented Student Services on campus can help reach Black undocumented students. This includes frequently posting news and updates about Black undocumented immigrants on social media sites, and showing solidarity with Black immigrant organizations.
- Building cross departmental relationships in order to highlight the experiences of Black undocumented students is a responsibility for Black Student Services on campus. They must work alongside

Undocumented Student Services to ensure the intersectionality of being both Black and undocumented is addressed.

- Pushing for Undocumented Student Services across the state of California to host annual conferences that address race and help connect undocumented students from different marginalized backgrounds.
- Destigmatizing the Black undocumented experience by highlighting this intersection will allow impacted students to feel more comfortable talking about their status to Black peers and educators, which will decrease the unique sense of isolation. Hosting an event each semester/quarter that highlights the Black undocumented community is a great way to normalize their identity.
- Acting as a bridge for Black undocumented students is another great way to fill the campus void. One educator noted that connecting Black undocumented students to one another, with their consent, is instrumental in creating a sense of belonging.

Ensuring Accountability from Educators/Administrators

- Educating administrators and professional staff members about the issues faced by Black undocumented students and ways to better support them. This involves learning about undocumented students through UndocuAlly trainings, and attending events both on and off campus that highlight Black undocumented migrants.
- Ensuring that practicum/field study work sites do not require background checks that involve social security numbers so that students can complete their graduation requirements on time.
- Avoiding contracts with Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE), which includes inviting ICE and Customs & Border Protection (CBP) officials to campuses for career fairs or as classroom guest speakers!
- Highlighting marginalized and overlooked populations on your syllabi and sharing undocumented student resources prior to lectures to signal allyship to students.
- Committing resources to and fundraising for mental health resources, financial aid scholarships, and pathways to higher education student services jobs that are specifically identified as benefitting Black undocumented students.
- Encouraging your institution to advocate for local, state, and federal policies that expand accessibility to undocumented immigrants, taking into consideration the experiences of the Black undocumented community.

Addressing Criminalization

- [Abolishing campus police](#) and decreasing police presence on campus to ensure the safety and well-being of Black undocumented students who are already doubly policed due to their immigration status and Blackness!
- Conducting mandatory anti-Blackness trainings for all professional staff and prospective students and include Black undocumented student voices/experiences in the training.
- Ensuring that Undocumented Student Services and Black Student Services have representatives in communication with the campus police department relaying the implications for arresting Black undocumented students so that the [arrest to deportation pipeline](#) is avoided altogether.
- Holding campus police accountable through a committee of campus partners representing marginalized student populations such as Black, queer, disabled, and undocumented.

Building Post-Graduate Support

- Providing free LSAT/MCAT/GRE review services and resources for undocumented students preparing for graduate school while prioritizing Black undocumented students.
- Establishing an alumni network for undocumented students that includes a mentorship program between Black undocumented graduates and current Black undocumented students preparing for graduation. Most importantly, ensure the alumni are receiving a stipend payment for their labor.
- Creating and allocating financial assistance such as stipends and grants that prioritize non-Daca Black graduates to help them adjust to post-graduate life while navigating employment alternatives.

Conclusion

As a result of double criminalization, Black undocumented students have a higher risk associated with disclosing their status. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the lack of representation that exists in higher education for Black undocumented students is due to the anti-Blackness that plagues our education system. This is evident in how higher education already negatively impacts our African American counterparts. Establishing trust with this underseen community is crucial and the best way to do that involves reinforced efforts that acknowledge and support their identity on campus. With continual efforts, the goal is that more Black undocumented students will enroll in higher education and have the adequate financial and academic resources needed to graduate. Most importantly, they will also feel a sense of belonging on campus, which will create more pipelines for prospective Black undocumented students to enter and thrive in higher education.

Additional Resources

Connect with Black Immigrant Organizations



africans.us



baji.org



blackimmigrantcollective.org



blmp.org



The Bridge

haitianbridgealliance.org



undocublack.org

Learn More About Black Undocumented Immigrants

1. [How an Undocumented Immigrant Looks at America](#) by [Immigrants Rising \(formerly E4FC\)](#)
2. [Undocumented and Black in America](#) by [Define American](#)
3. [Black Immigrants in the U.S.](#) by [Raices](#)
4. [Immigrant Voices of America - Episode 7: Shirleen](#) by [Immigrant Voices of America](#)
5. [Prison to Deportation Pipeline: Crimmigration & Black Immigrants](#) by [American Bar Association Immigration](#)
6. [Challenges faced by Black Immigrants](#) by [Human Rights First](#)
7. [“The State of Black Immigrants in California” & “The State of Black Immigrants and Black Lives at the Border”](#) by [Black Alliance for Just Immigration \(BAJI\)](#)
8. [The Plight of Black Immigrants In America](#) by [NEWSONE](#)

Highlight Black Undocumented Leaders

- [Shirleen Achieng](#), undocumented immigrant activist who founded Immigrant Advocacy Network and current organizer for the Haitian Bridge Alliance.
- [Bambadjan Bamba](#), DACA recipient and award winning actor, filmmaker, and immigrant rights advocate.
- [Eva-Vera Burns](#), advocate for immigrant rights and racial equity and current organizer at the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI).
- [Caliph](#), DACA recipient and grammy award winning recording artist.
- [Denae Joseph](#), DACA recipient and national immigrant rights activist who also hosts the [Undocumented Black Girl](#) podcast.

Acknowledgments

This resource was created by Shirleen Achieng and Eva-Vera Burns who are both Black undocumented non-DACA Immigrants; with editing support from Madeleine Villanueva and Nancy Jodaitis of Immigrants Rising. They would like to acknowledge and thank all the educators and Black undocumented students who helped bring this guide to fruition.

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, Higher Education Manager, at madeleine@immigrantsrising.org.