

## Introduction



Financial aid counselors and administrators play a vital role in the enrollment and retention of undocumented college students. Yet far too many undocumented students have not been able to successfully navigate the financial aid maze, and as a result, do not receive all the financial aid for which they are eligible. This is despite the fact that state-based financial aid has been available to undocumented students in California for nearly a decade. Being able to pay for college continues to be the biggest barrier undocumented students face to entering undergraduate and graduate programs.<sup>1</sup>

Using highly effective and concrete steps as a financial aid counselor can make a dramatic difference in reducing the barriers to paying for college that undocumented students face. Financial aid counselors from across the state have shared promising practices regarding choice of language, inclusion of key information, and the creation of simple departmental procedures that have been instrumental to increasing award rates for the CA Dream Act (CADAA). Immigrants Rising is sharing these promising practices with the hope of implementing these invaluable changes within financial aid offices throughout all California colleges and universities.

## Getting Started



### Always say “FAFSA or DREAM”

Ensure you (and your colleagues) make a conscious effort to include the words “or California Dream Act” every time you say “FAFSA.” Asking a student: “Did you apply for the FAFSA or California Dream Act?” lets them know you are aware that state-based financial aid is available for undocumented students in California. This is important because if you ask “Did you apply for the FAFSA?” and they say “No,” when you ask “Why not?” you are inadvertently asking them to out themselves as undocumented.

### Include CA DREAM Act in all outreach materials

Including the CA Dream Act in all of your campus’ educational/outreach materials ensures prospective and current students are aware of their eligibility for state financial aid. Providing students with the ability to obtain information and positive messaging without having to self-disclose their undocumented status allows them to increase their knowledge and get answers to pressing questions.

### Increase website presence

Having accurate and up-to-date information for undocumented students on your campus website is vital as the majority of undocumented students look online for questions about admissions, AB 540, financial aid, and scholarships. Check out Immigrants Rising’s guide on [Strengthening Your Campus Website for Undocumented Students](#), which includes an overview on important elements, recommended language, and key resources for financial aid websites. It also has sections for admissions & records and undocumented student resources websites. Use the [comprehensive website checklist](#) to evaluate what steps can be taken to strengthen online support for undocumented students at your college or university.

### Highlight data protection

Expand campus and community awareness that the school will not release any personally identifiable student information, including any data related to immigration status, without a judicial warrant, subpoena, or court order, unless authorized by the student or required by law. Review [Protecting Student Data in California](#) by Immigrants Rising and [Guidance and Model Policies to Assist California’s Colleges and Universities](#) by California’s Attorney General for more details. Publicizing these protections can reduce fears that providing information will put them

<sup>1</sup> [CCC Dreamers Project: Strengthening Institutional Practices To Support Undocumented Students \(2019\)](#) and [Persisting Inequalities and Pass Forwards: Report of the State of Undocumented Students in California’s Public Universities \(2020\)](#)

or their families at risk. It can also improve submission rates for the CA Dream Act as well as compliance with departmental requests for income verification, document requests, and follow-ups.

### **Support mixed-status families**

Clarify that students who are citizens, but whose parents are undocumented should apply for the FAFSA, not the CA Dream Act. Ensure students are aware they are eligible for federal and state aid once AB 540 status is verified by the college or university. Consider including the [Mixed Status Households](#) flyer to your website, which includes important steps for parents, such as entering 000s for Social Security Number (if parents don't have a valid SSN) or the use of a parent signature page (instead of FSA ID).

## **Taking It to the Next Level**



### **Identify a point person**

Designate a financial aid counselor as a point person. They will be charged with developing a solid understanding of the California Dream Act, common issues undocumented students face, and departmental practices that promote compliance with California state laws and educational codes. Clearly identifying that individual as a point person for undocumented students and allies builds trust, reduces roadblocks, and ensures accurate and up-to-date information is available.

### **Encourage departmental training**

Ensure all financial aid personnel are adequately trained on the basics of the CA Dream Act, AB 540, and FERPA to reduce misinformation, improve departmental credibility, and reduce equity gaps. Encourage your colleagues to participate in UndocuAlly trainings to be aware of the diverse issues undocumented students face, stay up-to-date on current legislation, and build effective frontline strategies.

### **Show FA Award & add outstanding holds**

Work with your IT team to create procedures that will allow you to post a student's financial aid award AND prevent its release until certain criteria are met. These can include creating conditional awards or inserting a negative service indicator (or hold) for students who are awarded a grant but are not yet classified as AB 540. Allowing the student to see the award and the hold will permit them to verify possible aid, if and when the necessary steps are completed. This is especially important for verification of the AB 540 affidavit since verification of AB 540 status is usually available months after the award has been offered.

### **Collaborate between departments**

Build working relationships and/or create a cross-departmental team to increase CA Dream Act award and disbursement rates. Working with the financial aid and admissions departments and with your school's registrar or undocumented student liaisons is key because the California Dream Act aid requires that students meet eligibility for AB 540/SB 68 in order for their aid to be disbursed. The collaboration can include, but is not limited to:

1. Reviewing current policies and procedures to ensure there are no unintended roadblocks;
2. Developing an effective, efficient, and safe process to contact undocumented students who meet CA Dream Act eligibility, but do not have an AB 540 affidavit on file;
3. Developing a parallel procedure to contact undocumented students (including DACA, U Visa or TPS status) who have an AB 540 affidavit on file but have not applied for the California Dream Act; and
4. Consulting regularly with undocumented student liaisons to gain key insights and ensure accurate info is provided application.

It is also helpful to establish working relationships with other colleges or universities that are successfully implementing these practices to share tips and strategies to replicate them.

### **Support students with U Visas & TPS Status**

Identify students who are classified as residents based on their U Visa or TPS status. Contact these students to see if they are aware of the AB 540 requirements and have submitted their nonresident tuition exemption form and California Dream Act application. Work with the admissions or registrar's office to verify their AB 540 eligibility and

determine if they need to be reclassified as non-residents. Once their AB 540 eligibility and/or reclassification is confirmed, release their CA Dream Act aid.

## Useful Financial Aid Resources

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Highlight these guides to provide useful information to current and incoming undocumented students:

- [FAFSA vs. CA Dream Act: Apply to the Correct Financial Aid in CA](#)
- [CA Dream Act and Cal Grant Application Checklists](#)
- [California Dream Act Map](#)
- [CSAC's Training Webpages for Colleges & Universities](#)
- [CSAC's ListServ](#)

## Put This Into Place

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Centering the role that financial aid counselors play in the enrollment and retention of undocumented students cannot be underestimated. These promising practices vary in complexity, but each one will have a dramatic impact on the ability of your campus' undocumented student population to enter and graduate from their college or university. These practices will also reduce staff processing time once they have been effectively implemented and increase student access and success. We recommend prioritizing one or two, identifying short-term and long-term goals, and taking the time to celebrate your successes. You are not alone! Join our [Financial Aid Counselors Supporting Undocumented Students in CA](#) Facebook group to share your institutional challenges and elevate your campus' promising practices.

## Acknowledgments

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## About Us

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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](http://immigrantsrising.org). For inquiries regarding this resource, please contact Nancy Jodaitis, Director of Higher Education, at [nancy@immigrantsrising.org](mailto:nancy@immigrantsrising.org).