

# How Colleges and Universities Can Support DACA and Undocumented Students

**Susana Muñoz**

RISE Scholar, PhD

**Douglas H. Lee**

Graduate Research Assistant

*RISE Report*

June 18, 2020



Colorado State University

An equal-access and equal-opportunity University



SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

The United States Supreme Court blocked the Trump administration's attempt to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which allows some undocumented individuals to be eligible for a work permit and receive a renewable two-year period of deferred deportation. Though this is a good sign, the fight for immigrant rights is far from over and NOW is the time for colleges and universities to show a renewed commitment and support for undocumented and DACA students. Staff and faculty lack critical information regarding immigration laws and policies, contributing toward a hostile campus environment (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018) rife with microaggressions (Muñoz, et al., 2018; Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). Moreover, racist nativist rhetoric propagated by politically charged current events and the Trump administration regarding immigration policy has heightened these challenges facing undocumented students.

In this policy brief, the Race and Intersectional Studies in Educational Equity (RISE) Center at Colorado State University highlights research from RISE scholar Dr. Susana Muñoz to spotlight strategic actions higher education can take to show undocumented students that colleges and universities will support their education and well-being. These practices include building holistic institutional support, improving campus climate, and eliminating the exploitation of undocumented and DACA students.

### **Holistic Institutional Support**

Supporting undocumented students requires a holistic approach that includes providing vocal support from administrative leaders, resources, and financial support



targeting this community. A holistic approach can first begin with eliminating the use of racist nativist terminology when describing undocumented students as “illegal” (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). The persistent use of the term “violates one’s personhood by dehumanizing, [silencing, and criminalizing students’] existence” (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018, p. 463). Removing the term as well as offering public displays and statements of support by leadership sets a strong example for the campus to allow undocumented students to feel welcomed.

Undocumented students are also often misclassified as international students in the college application process, which erases their lived experiences. Unlike international students, who are often (rightly or wrongly) presumed to possess financial affluence and a relative legal status stability in the United States, many undocumented students face economic and legal precarities and fear of deportation. The misclassification can also place undocumented students in international student offices, which can prevent them from having access or knowledge of services that would otherwise be available to them (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). Properly classifying these students outside of international offices allows for more focused attention to their needs.

Educational forums and trainings for faculty and staff to learn best practices for outreach and support to undocumented and DACA students are also key to building holistic institutional support. Faculty trainings focused on pedagogical practices that reject nativist microaggressions and humanizes undocumented and DACA students create an environment for undocumented students to not feel attacked or targeted in the



classroom. Administrative trainings, especially for student affairs professionals, centered on educating participants on undocumented and DACA student identity development helps build stronger support practices for existing student affair units. Broadening the equity and justice lens to include legal status strengthens student affairs units to critically analyze practices and policies that may negatively impact undocumented and DACA college students.

Other ways to support undocumented and DACA students involves opening institutional financial supports to these students. Whether it's having direct financial support through work-study or scholarships or having administrative support through a dedicated office or staff to help navigate institutional bureaucracy can add to the holistic institutional support for undocumented students that is imperative for their college success.

### **Improve Campus Climate**

Holistic institutional support for undocumented/DACA students underlines the importance of building trust with individuals and systems by fostering an inclusive and humanizing campus climate. The excessive exposure to visual and verbal racist nativist microaggressions fueled by an anti-immigrant sentiment and are central to the platform of the Trump administration (Muñoz, et al., 2018) are acts of violence towards undocumented students which can cause immediate and long-term psychological stress (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). In these dehumanizing environments, undocumented students



navigate hostile spaces as they negotiate the process of disclosing their status, exposing themselves to potential mistreatment, and worse, potential deportation (Muñoz, 2016; Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). Among students who identify as undocumented and unafraid, the biographical construction of their legal status is cultivated by the messages one receives about their legality. If students receive negative messages about their immigration status, these experiences shape how they disclose to others. This can all lead to negative academic performance for undocumented students navigating college under the current political landscape (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Muñoz et. al, 2018).

Fostering a better campus climate for undocumented students can start with building and supporting peer groups. These groups in partnership with community immigration advocacy organizations can support undocumented students as they grapple with their social identities, and gain agency to advocate for themselves, their families, and their communities. These community and peer organizations play an important role in how DACA and undocumented students navigate their status and exploitative conditions in multiple contexts (Muñoz, 2016).

### **Stop the Exploitation of Undocumented Students**

As undocumented students have been pushed to the political forefront, educational institutions have appropriated the opportunity to exploit the undocumented narrative for their own profit and gain. One example of exploitation by institutional leadership is using the narratives of resilience and institutional inclusivity of



undocumented students for prospective donors and institutional fundraising. Often, this work is without institutions compensating students for their time and labor (Muñoz et al., 2018). The mental and physical toll of being seen as superhuman becomes even more problematic as institutional leadership uses it as an opportunity to declare that their campus is a safe zone for undocumented students and can also halt even more outreach and support that is needed as current events transpire. Institutions must be ready to not just offer support but address the underlying issues of racism, white supremacy, and intergenerational trauma to create systemic change (Muñoz et al., 2018).

## **Conclusion**

By understanding how higher education can provide support and outreach during this era of uncertainty, leaders to gain the trust and confidence among undocumented and DACA students. Shortly after the 2016 election, numerous college and university leaders rapidly declared their campuses to be sanctuary campuses, and created policies and practices, showing how responsive they can be to current events (Muñoz & Osorio, 2018). Higher education should also use this opportunity to reexamine its roots in white supremacy, racism, and the subjugation of minoritized communities. Transforming campus climates that have fostered fear and silence among undocumented students begins with unpacking whiteness that has shaped higher education. Unpacking and confronting these core issues can allow higher education to better address how it provides equitable space and opportunity for its most vulnerable students and connected communities.



## References

- Ishiwata, E., & Muñoz, S. M. (2018). “They tried to bury Us”: Scholar advocacy in the wake of the DACA rescission. *New Political Science*, 40(3), 558–580. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2018.1489093>
- Muñoz, S. M. (2016). Undocumented and unafraid: Understanding the disclosure management process for undocumented college students and graduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(6), 715–729. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0070>
- Muñoz, S. M., & Espino, M. M. (2017). The freedom to learn: Experiences of students without legal status attending freedom university. *Review of Higher Education*, 40(4), 533–555. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2017.0021>
- Muñoz, S. M., & Vigil, D. (2018). Interrogating racist nativist microaggressions and campus climate: How undocumented and DACA college students experience institutional legal violence in Colorado. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 11(4), 451–466. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000078>
- Muñoz, S. M., Vigil, D., Jach, E. M., & Rodriguez-Gutierrez, M. M. (2018). Unpacking Resilience and Trauma: Examining the “Trump Effect” in Higher Education for Undocumented Latinx College Students. *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal*, 12(3), 33. <https://doi.org/10.24974/amae.12.3.405>

Muñoz, S. M., & Maldonado, M. M. (2012). Counterstories of college persistence by undocumented Mexicana students: Navigating race, class, gender, and legal status. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 25(3), 293–315.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2010.529850>

Muñoz, S. M., & Osorio, Y. H. (2018). Undocutrends in Higher Education. In M. Gasman & A. C. Samayoa (Eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Higher Education* (pp. 182–195).  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429438127-11>

