

Immigration Status and Postsecondary Opportunity: Barriers to Affordability, Access, and Success for Undocumented Students, and Policy Solutions

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ABSTRACT. Immigrant and undocumented students face significant barriers in accessing and obtaining a postsecondary degree. The anti-immigration agenda of the Trump administration and its impact on higher education made this issue of paramount concern. In this article, we review issues at the intersection of immigration and postsecondary education. First, we define the population of interest, with special attention to the differentiated rights of different groups. We argue for the policy significance of immigration for postsecondary education. Second, we provide an overview of the main identified barriers facing undocumented students in accessing postsecondary education. We then examine policies that have been adopted by states and by institutions of higher education to address some of those barriers. We conclude with policy recommendations to improve affordability, access, and success for undocumented students and argue for the inclusion of immigration status as a variable in research on equity in postsecondary education.

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Introduction

On his first day in office, newly inaugurated President Biden announced several executive actions, including a memorandum “Preserving and Fortifying Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).”¹ This stood in sharp contrast to the previous four years during which the Trump administration advanced a broad range of exclusionary immigration rules, policy memos, and executive orders that adversely impacted undocumented students and families as well as international students and scholars. During those years, leaders and practitioners at colleges and universities, and policymakers coordinating higher education systems had to quickly assess the implications of changing policies on their communities, scramble to meet new regulations, and/or challenge them in court. While the siege has lifted under the new Biden-Harris administration, higher education leaders still have to grapple with the significant impacts that immigration policies have on immigrant and international students in higher education.

Federal and state policies affecting undocumented students, students with DACA, and other immigrant-origin students require further examination to inform likely debates on immigration policy and immigrant rights. While researchers had been examining the barriers immigrant students and, in particular, undocumented students face to access and obtain a postsecondary degree, the continuing uncertainty surrounding DACA and immigration reform means that issues at the intersection of immigration policy and postsecondary opportunity are particularly relevant for postsecondary stakeholders. There is a need for better understanding the implications of these issues for higher education, immigrant integration, and social inclusion.

In this article, we offer some tools for that debate. First, we define the population of interest, with special attention to the differentiated rights of different groups, and argue for the policy significance of immigration for postsecondary education. Second, we provide an overview of the main barriers facing undocumented students in accessing postsecondary education and the policies adopted by states and institutions to address some of those barriers. Based on the barriers that are inadequately addressed by current policies, we then provide policy recommendations to improve affordability, access, and success

for undocumented students. We conclude by arguing that immigration status should be included as a variable in research on equity in postsecondary education and by recommending areas for further research.

Undocumented Immigration Status

We use the word “undocumented” to refer to those immigrants lacking authorized legal documents or having a liminal (temporary) protective status, such as DACA, to reside in the United States. Undocumented immigrants are usually defined as foreign-born individuals who entered the United States without inspection or stayed beyond the expiration of a visa, who do not hold permanent resident visas, or who are not protected under other policies that allow for long-term residency or work permits (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011). DACA recipients are a subset of the undocumented population who satisfy certain criteria and—under the 2012 DACA program—receive two-year renewable grants of work authorization and protection from deportation.² DACA also allows undocumented students the opportunity to have a Social Security number and obtain a driver’s license (Enyioa 2019).

Nationally, there are over 10 million undocumented immigrants (Kamarck and Stenglein 2019), of which approximately 700,000 are active DACA recipients (National Immigration Law Center 2020). There are 450,000 undocumented students in higher education, representing 2 percent of all postsecondary students. A subset of these students, numbering approximately 216,000, are DACA recipients or DACA-eligible³ and represent 1 percent of all postsecondary students. The largest number of undocumented students in higher education are in California and Texas, at 92,000 and 66,000, respectively (New American Economy and Presidents’ Alliance 2020).

Although this article focuses on undocumented and/or DACA students, students who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents with families of mixed immigration status also experience immigration-related barriers and stressors. A recent study shows that as of 2018, there were 5.3 million immigrant-origin students in higher education, representing 28 percent of all postsecondary students. (International students were not included.) The study defines immigrant-origin students as

students who are first generation immigrants (born outside of the United States) or second-generation immigrants (U.S.-born to one or more immigrant parents). Of the 1.7 million first-generation immigrant students, a little over a quarter are undocumented/DACA students, while the remainder are naturalized U.S. citizens, green-card holders, refugees, asylees, or otherwise authorized. Likewise, a portion of the second-generation immigrant students come from families of mixed immigration status, including undocumented parents or other family members. The report underscores both the importance of immigrant-origin students in higher education and the personal and consequential bearing that immigration policy has on them, not only on undocumented or international students, but also on the many students coming from immigrant families (Batalova and Feldblum 2020).

Immigrant-origin students have been a significant driver of enrollment growth for colleges and universities, accounting for nearly 60 percent of postsecondary enrollment growth between 2000 and 2018. Further, immigrant-origin workers are projected to drive U.S. labor force growth until at least 2035 (Batalova and Feldblum 2020). The study demonstrates the large proportion of immigrant students in higher education, with implications for enrollment management, racial equity, institutional-level supports, and broader postsecondary attainment agendas.

Undocumented students, DACA students, asylee and refugee students, and students with citizenship or legal permanent residency from families of mixed immigration status may all face different sets of constraints related to their immigration status and have differentiated rights. The literature has yet to examine in depth whether these distinctions have different implications for postsecondary affordability, access, and success.

Policy Significance

Legal Framework and Segmented Rights

The Supreme Court held in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) that undocumented students have the right to free public primary and postsecondary education, and that school districts cannot discriminate against children

based on immigration status. The Court also stated that children have no control over their parents' decision to immigrate without documentation and should not be held accountable (Enyioa 2019). As a result of this decision, undocumented children grow up with legal access to public K–12 (primary and secondary) education but face significant barriers to postsecondary and economic opportunities (Abrego and Gonzales 2010).

Based on the current legal framework, access to educational opportunity becomes segmented in two ways. First, undocumented students have the right to public education until they graduate from high school, but federal policy does not guarantee undocumented students the right to postsecondary education. Second, as undocumented individuals navigate life after high school, the opportunity to access postsecondary education and other benefits to which they are entitled is often contingent on the state where they reside, which adds an additional layer of segmentation to the structure of education and economic opportunity. Every year, an estimated 125,000 undocumented students reach high school graduation age, and 98,000 undocumented students graduate from high school facing uneven prospects (Batalova and Zong 2019).

Given the absence of federal policy on what happens to undocumented students after high school, states have adopted a range of policies to either expand or hinder opportunity for these students, as discussed in the sections on barriers to affordability and access and policy solutions.

*Undocumented Students and Race-Conscious
Postsecondary Attainment Agendas*

The advent of DACA and the extension of in-state tuition and financial aid to undocumented students in a growing number of states have increased college-going rates among undocumented students, yet these students still complete college at lower rates than their peers. Policymakers, funders, and educational policy organizations have called for more educationally credentialed adults for two reasons: first, a skilled workforce is necessary for the United States to remain globally competitive and, second, individuals completing postsecondary

education are more likely to be employed and earn higher salaries than their peers (Carnevale and Wenzinger 2020). Forty-three states have formally established postsecondary attainment goals and advanced policies to meet those goals (Lumina 2020). But analyses of degree attainment by race and ethnicity identify a gap in every state between Black and white adults and between Latinx and white adults (Nichols, Schak, and Jones 2018). Advocates have raised awareness about race and ethnicity being a significant factor impacting the likelihood of obtaining a postsecondary credential. Consequently, some states have embedded racial equity goals in their postsecondary attainment agendas to both increase attainment and to close or eliminate gaps (Meehan, Ballerini, and Hagood 2019).

Of the 454,000 undocumented students estimated to be enrolled in postsecondary education nationally, 46 percent are Latinx, 25 percent are Asian American and Pacific Islander, 15 percent are Black, 12 percent are white, and the remaining 2 percent include biracial and multiracial students (New American Economy, Presidents' Alliance 2020). Given the substantial number of undocumented high school students graduating every year, as well as the racial and ethnic diversity of undocumented students in postsecondary education, policies that promote postsecondary affordability, access, and completion for these students will contribute to the advancement of race-conscious postsecondary attainment goals (Research for Action, Presidents Alliance 2020). However, to be effective, these policies should consider the unique set of barriers that undocumented students face due to their immigration status. The following sections will review the main barriers facing undocumented students in accessing and completing postsecondary education.

Main Barriers to Postsecondary Affordability, Access, and Success

This review is guided by a framework for the analysis of postsecondary policy that analytically differentiates program components and policies according to their implications for postsecondary affordability, access, and success (Callahan et al. 2019). This framework was used to analyze Promise programs,⁴ whose complex designs include program components addressing different barriers facing students.

Nonetheless, the framework can be a useful guide to analyze postsecondary opportunity more broadly, as it covers the main issues that either facilitate or hinder the attainment of a degree.

According to this framework, *affordability* policies are those concerning financial aid at all levels (federal, state, and institutional). Policies impacting *access* to postsecondary education concern who is eligible for college admission and for different postsecondary benefits, including financial aid, as well as how college and career guidance is offered by high schools and other organizations. Staff who offer college and career advising make students aware of the opportunities that are available to them, thus shaping their expectations for life after high school. Finally, policies supporting student *success* are related to measures to increase student engagement, accountability, and academic preparedness, as well as to initiatives supporting students to meet basic needs such as food, housing, transportation, and other social services.

Policies to improve affordability, access, and success have been designed and implemented at different levels and in different jurisdictions. Policies to improve affordability include policies at the state level (statewide), system level (for example, Board of Regents or similar entity), and institutional level (colleges and universities). Policies to improve access include policies pertaining to college and career advising at the state, school district, or school level. Finally, although some states have statewide policies to improve student success or provide funding to individual institutions for that purpose, most of those policies are designed and implemented at the institutional level. In the sections below, we summarize the main barriers facing undocumented students related to college affordability, access, and success, along with the policies that have been designed to address them.

Prohibition of Access to Federal Financial Aid

Neither undocumented nor DACA students are eligible for federal financial aid, such as federal grants (Pell, FSEOG), federal work-study, or student loans. In 1996, two pieces of legislation excluded undocumented immigrants from social safety nets and impacted postsecondary opportunity. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity

Responsibility Act (PRWORA) bars the provision of federal public benefits, including federal financial aid, and “state and local public benefits” for non-qualified “aliens” unless the state passes an affirmative law making them explicitly eligible, including “postsecondary benefits.”

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) stipulates that undocumented immigrants cannot receive state postsecondary benefits solely based on where they live unless they additionally meet the following qualifications: 1) attended public school in the state for three years prior to graduation, 2) earned a high school diploma or GED in the state, and 3) lived in the state for 12 months prior to the date of the student’s enrollment in postsecondary education (Enyioa 2019).

State-Funded Financial Aid Fills in the Gap

After PRWORA and IIRIRA, some states passed legislation to start offering in-state tuition and state financial aid to undocumented students. Others established prohibitions to enrolling in public institutions. The rest remained silent on the issue. This left systems, subsystems (such as community college systems), or individual institutions to determine their own policies. As of September 2020, 21 states offered in-state tuition to undocumented students, while undocumented students or DACA recipients who otherwise qualify for in-state tuition had access to in-state tuition at one or more public institutions in 13 other states. At least 15 states and the District of Columbia made undocumented students eligible for state financial aid and/or scholarships (Presidents’ Alliance 2020).⁵ In some cases, depending on budget allocations for state financial aid each year, undocumented students receive state funds only after U.S. citizens and other eligible students are fully funded (Ballerini et al. 2019). To award state financial aid, states assess the financial need of undocumented students via a financial aid form alternative to the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), administered either at the state or institution level (Burkander et al. 2019; Burkander, Kent, and Callahan 2019).

In addition to in-state tuition and state financial aid, state loan programs, such as the California Dream Loan Program, provide loans to students who are eligible to receive state financial aid, offering interest rates

that are comparable to those of the Federal Direct Subsidized Stafford Loan. In states that have no policies or exclusionary policies, undocumented students are either banned from attending public institutions—making private institutions their only option—or have to either pay out-of-state tuition or pay as international students, making costs significantly higher and unaffordable for many (Mehta and Ali 2003).

Undocumented student eligibility for in-state tuition and state financial aid vary greatly by state, with states ranging from comprehensive policies to prohibitive enrollment. Some states offer postsecondary benefits only to DACA recipients, while others include all undocumented students (Presidents' Alliance 2020). There is also variation within states; in a single state, undocumented students may be eligible for all or some of the state-funded financial aid programs, such as need-based aid, merit-aid, and Promise programs or free-tuition programs. This overview does not account for the growing number of private institutions across the country that also offer enrollment to undocumented students and process access to institutional funding or other scholarships for them.

Table 1 summarizes the barriers to postsecondary affordability as well as current policies. In a third column, we summarize policy recommendations that can expand and improve affordability for undocumented students.

Research shows positive effects of offering in-state tuition and state financial aid to undocumented students, as it increases college enrollment and improves outcomes such as academic achievement, credits attempted, and first-semester retention (Flores 2010a, 2010b; Flores and Horn 2009; Kaushal 2008; Ngo and Astudillo 2019). However, research to date has found no evidence that these policies improve completion rates (Darolia and Potochnick 2015). Although these policies improve affordability for undocumented students, they do not address other crucial barriers impacting access to information, retention, and completion of undocumented students.

Inconsistent and Inaccurate College and Career Advising and Messaging

The transition from high school to life after high school usually requires that individuals provide state-issued forms of identification

and proof of legal status (Pérez 2012). Constrained in their ability to obtain a driver's license, buy a cellphone, apply for a work permit, and apply for financial aid to go to college, undocumented students face additional barriers that differentiate them from their peers. Completing

Table 1

Barriers to Affordability, Current and Recommended Policies

Barriers to Affordability	Current Policies	Recommended Policies
No access to federal financial aid, including grants, work-study, and loans	PRWORA bars the provision for "non-qualified aliens" of federal public benefits and "state and local public benefits" unless state makes them eligible, including "postsecondary benefits."	Repeal PRWORA prohibition on postsecondary benefits for "non-qualified aliens." Ensure federal aid for individuals who obtain relief through Dream Act or similar law.
Limited to no access to state financial aid	Section 505 of IIRIRA bars states from providing "postsecondary education benefits" to those "not lawfully present" based on in-state residency unless all U.S. citizens eligible. State policy affects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-state tuition • Access to state financial aid (need-based, merit, Promise, or free-tuition programs) • Access to institutional aid, state loan programs (e.g., California Dream Loan) 	Repeal IIRIRA's Section 505 prohibition on in-state tuition based on residency. Expand Promise or tuition-free college to undocumented students. Extend eligibility of in-state tuition and financial aid to undocumented students who would otherwise qualify for in-state tuition/financial aid

Note: PRWORA = Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Responsibility Act; IIRIRA = Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act.

forms with personal information and fulfilling requirements to access benefits for which they do not know if they are eligible, both during this transition and later in college, often means having to take difficult risks that may compromise their safety as well as that of their family members (Gonzales 2008).

Applying for scholarships and other funding creates anxiety due to lack of legal status, which may prevent students from applying for scholarships (Pérez et al. 2010). While students are required to complete the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in high school to access federal financial aid, undocumented and DACA students are not eligible. Even for those students who are U.S. citizens from mixed-status families, completing the FAFSA becomes challenging when it requires providing personal and tax information of an undocumented parent, and students and families may be reluctant to fill it out (Contreras 2009).

Trusted school and college practitioners, as well as staff from community organizations providing college and career advice, can play a key role in helping undocumented students navigate the college process (Enyioa 2019). However, the postsecondary benefits that undocumented students have access to vary greatly by state, and also within a state, making the admissions and financial aid landscape more complex for undocumented students than it already is for all other students.

Institutional barriers combine with lack of expertise among high school and college administrators, faculty, and staff on the complexity of immigration policy and its implications for postsecondary opportunity to present a serious challenge (Hesse 2017; Nguyen and Serna 2014; Davidson and Preciado 2017). High school counselors and college admissions staff are not always aware of the opportunities that undocumented students have access to, leading to inconsistent and inaccurate information (Ballerini, Feldblum, and Kent 2020; Barnhardt et al. 2013; Hesse 2017; Nienhusser et al. 2016). Moreover, undocumented students are less likely to be viewed as college-going by high school staff and, as a result, are not always offered relevant information (Nienhusser et al. 2016). Finally, research has found that undocumented students tend to lack strong social networks and social capital in the secondary school context (Cebulko 2013; Garcia and Tierney 2011).⁶

Strategies to Reduce Information Gaps

Due to the ever-changing and complex nature of immigration policy and of state postsecondary benefits, lack of information among educators and practitioners becomes a challenging problem to tackle. Immigration policy paradigms also shift between inclusionary and exclusionary approaches, while public opinion is shaped with narratives created to justify each approach. Given the complexity of the issue, policies to address information gaps and promote trust are limited. Examples include state-level, institution-level, and district-level initiatives.

At the state level, Oregon, for example, is acting on this informational challenge. The Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission publishes numerous materials on its website in both English and Spanish and has developed a communications toolkit for practitioners and advocates in its state that clarifies the range of postsecondary benefits to which undocumented students have access (Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission 2020).

At the postsecondary level, some colleges and universities offer “ally training” for faculty, staff, and students who wish to become allies to undocumented students (Freeman et al. 2020). The training typically covers basic information about state and federal legislation, raises awareness of the challenges undocumented students face, and offers information on relevant campus and community resources. College outreach and admissions staff who are aware of these issues will be better equipped to advise prospective undocumented students. At the school-district level, partnerships with immigrant organizations trusted in their communities can be useful to provide college and career advice and bridge the information gap (Southern, Wisell, and Casner-Lotto 2017).

The Community College as the Access Point to Postsecondary Education

Because community colleges provide a more affordable and accessible avenue to postsecondary education, immigrant and undocumented students are more likely to attend them. Immigrant-origin status applies to one-third of all community college students (Southern et al. 2017; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2019). While community colleges provide postsecondary opportunity for almost half of all the students enrolled

in postsecondary education, they have been historically underfunded and under-resourced. Suboptimal levels of funding at community colleges prevent these institutions from adequately serving their students, most of whom are low-income, minority, and/or immigrant (Beach 2011). Despite the potential of community colleges for providing educational opportunity, 40 percent of students who enroll in community college graduate within six years (Bailey et al. 2015). These completion rates may be lower for immigrant and undocumented students.

Community colleges have undergone a series of reforms to address low retention and graduation rates. Although the analysis of community college reform is outside the scope of this article, reform based on guided pathways that provide a clear road map to a degree has received a lot of attention. Teranishi et al. (2019) argue for increased attention to issues impacting immigrant students, such as help navigating financial aid and creating inclusive learning environments. In the next section, we discuss in more detail the main barriers to success faced by undocumented students and institutional policies that have been designed to address them. Table 2 summarizes the barriers to postsecondary affordability as well as current policies. In a third column, we summarize policy recommendations that can expand and improve postsecondary access for undocumented students.

Barriers to Success and Policy Solutions

Undocumented students face a range of obstacles that may encumber degree completion, including the ever-changing landscape and uncertainty of immigration policy, psychological and social burdens related to immigration, and lack of access to public benefits to meet basic needs (Bjorklund 2018; Education Trust-West 2018; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2011; Teranishi et al. 2015). Below, we discuss some of these barriers as well as policy solutions.

Psychological and Identity Issues

Some authors refer to the undocumented student's transition from high school into adulthood as the "transition to illegality" (Gonzales 2016; Pérez 2012). This transition marks the end of the right to free

public education and the beginning of lived experiences of blocked opportunities, stigma, and fear (Pérez 2012). This “transition to illegality” is typically associated with psychological and social burdens that further constrain students’ abilities to pursue postsecondary education and be successful (Bjorklund 2018). These students grow up “American” yet only have partial access to mechanisms that promote social inclusion and mobility (Pérez 2012). Research has pointed to conflicts of identity as students begin to question the narratives and identities about self and world and are forced to reassess the feasibility of their aspirations (Gonzales et al. 2013; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2011). Awareness of the limitations of their legal status often has negative effects on mental health and well-being. In addition, fear of deportation may prevent students from seeking the help they need. Undocumented students have high rates of anxiety and depression (Teranishi et al. 2015). While counselors and mental health professionals on campus can offer support, they are often unfamiliar with the issues the students face, and students find it hard to build trusting relationships with them (Muñoz 2013).

Structural Barriers to Meet Basic Needs

As of 2015, one in four undocumented immigrants lived below the poverty line and over half lacked health insurance coverage (Hines 2018). In addition to requiring financial support to succeed in college, low-income students are likely to face food and housing insecurity, as well as childcare and transportation challenges (Daugherty et al. 2020). Some postsecondary institutions offer case management or referrals to public benefits and services offered by community-based organizations to support food, housing, legal, transportation, and childcare needs. Research has identified that these comprehensive student supports are effective ways to increase rates of student success in postsecondary education (Daugherty et al. 2020; Miller et al. 2020; Scrivener et al. 2015). However, these studies do not consider whether immigrant and undocumented students either use or benefit from these services. Previous research has found that due to fear of deportation, undocumented or mixed-status families are less likely to seek the social services they need, even when their children may be eligible (Abrego and

Table 2

Barriers to Access, Current and Recommended Policies

Barriers to Access	Current Policies	Recommended Policies
State policy on eligibility for admission to public institutions	Prohibitions on enrolling in public institutions	States should offer eligibility to enroll in public institutions to undocumented students who would otherwise qualify for admission. Congress should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mandate nondiscrimination in admissions and enrollment based on immigration status • incentivize states through grants.
Staff offering college and career advice lack consistent & accurate information on postsecondary opportunities for undocumented students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication toolkits • Ally trainings • Cross-sector partnerships 	School districts/high schools can partner with community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and higher education institutions offering trainings.
Community colleges as entry point to postsecondary education may not provide adequate support for students and have lower graduation rates compared to four-year colleges	Community college reforms include guided pathways	See next section for policies to address student success.

Gonzales 2010). Changes to the public charge rule⁷ have exacerbated this concern, with research demonstrating the “chilling effects” on populations not targets of the rule as well as the declining use of benefits not covered by the rule (Armus 2018; Straut-Eppsteiner 2020).

Transportation Barriers

While many students face transportation barriers, these are exacerbated for undocumented individuals who, depending on where they live, may be unable to get a driver's license. Only 15 states and Washington, DC allow undocumented immigrants to obtain driver's licenses. On the other hand, DACA recipients are eligible for driver's licenses in any state (NCSL 2020). When students are unable to get a driver's license, they must either spend long hours on public transportation if available, or drive without a license (Bjorklund 2018; Abrego and Gonzales 2010). These barriers to mobility hinder not only students' ability to engage in different campus activities, but also to seek and maintain employment during and after college.

Barriers to Career Development

Because they lack work authorization, undocumented students are constrained in their ability to participate in internships and to obtain employment upon graduation. Regardless of employment authorization, internships play a key role in providing undocumented students with an opportunity to gain practical experience and career development (Bjorklund 2018). In states that offer occupational and professional licensure, students have more opportunities upon graduation. Immigrant organizations offer career guidance on opportunities for licensing, employment through worker cooperatives, and entrepreneurship. Colleges and universities can partner with immigrant organizations to offer these services and/or train their career advising staff through ally trainings.

Comprehensive Policy Solution

One policy solution to the wide range of barriers to success that colleges and universities have implemented is noteworthy. Undocumented

Student Resource Centers (USRCs) have been established at different institutions and provide a variety of services, including academic and career advising, mental health and legal services, food, and financial assistance. As of 2018, there were 56 USRCs, most of them located in California. Other states where institutions have established USRCs include Washington, Oregon, Utah, Arizona, Texas, Florida, Colorado, and New Jersey. Out of the 56 USRCs identified, 31 were at four-year institutions, while the remaining 25 were at two-year colleges (Cisneros and Valdivia 2018).

USRCs are common in states and localities with large numbers of undocumented students. Although not all colleges and universities are able to offer such a wide range of services tailored directly to undocumented students, they can partner with community-based organizations that work with immigrants and can provide adequate support.

It is important to note that despite many of the challenges summarized in these sections, undocumented students also demonstrate remarkable resilience and motivation (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2019). They also have high levels of civic engagement, including social service, volunteering, community work, or activism (Pérez 2012). Most importantly, undocumented activism has driven many of the policy solutions summarized above, as undocumented students have often led the development of programs and policies (Cisneros and Valdivia 2018).

Table 3 summarizes the barriers to postsecondary success as well as current policy solutions. In a third column, we summarize policy recommendations that can expand and improve postsecondary success for undocumented students.

Conclusion

Almost one-third of all postsecondary students belong to immigrant and international communities. They have also accounted for almost 60 percent of postsecondary enrollment growth in the last 20 years. Acknowledging that situation shifts the conversation away from a story about “them”—as it is often cast by anti-immigration proponents—to a story about “us.” It deepens our investment in these trends and positions them within the national context. Yet,

immigration status as a variable is still largely invisible in studies examining equity in postsecondary opportunity. As this article has shown, immigration status shapes and constrains educational trajectories and hence should be included in frameworks used to assess equity, especially when examining transitions from high school into college, as well as in research on postsecondary retention, graduation, and attainment. Immigration status should be added to variables such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other context-specific indicators of inequality in analyses of equity in higher education opportunity. Moreover, immigration status should be understood in its intersectionality with race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, and gender identity (Bjorklund 2018).

Research on immigration and higher education has predominantly focused on undocumented students and DACA students. Immigrant-origin students include a wide range of groups, including asylee and refugee students, and students with citizenship or residency but who grow up in immigrant families. These immigration-impacted students face different sets of constraints related to their immigration status and have differentiated rights. Research should inquire whether these distinctions have different implications for postsecondary affordability, access, and success. If so, different policy solutions should be designed to address them.

In *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), the Supreme Court pointed to the “pivotal role of education” and concluded that denying K–12 education to undocumented children would result in a “lifetime of hardship” and a permanent “underclass” of individuals (as cited in Abrego and Gonzales 2010: 149). Since this ruling almost 40 years ago, the U.S. economy has changed significantly, and a high school education no longer guarantees employability or economic mobility. Access to and attainment of postsecondary education has become a condition for economic and social inclusion and mobility in the 21st century. Unless Congress passes legislation to provide a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, policies that seek to expand postsecondary opportunity should consider the complex interplay of immigration policy and postsecondary and economic opportunity.

Table 3

Barriers to Success, Current and Recommended Policies

Barriers to Success	Current Policies	Recommended Policies
Mental health issues: “transition to illegality,” liminal status, and fear of deportation	Campus-level counseling and mental health support	Offer mental health services via Dream Resource Centers or community-based organizations focused on immigration.
Transportation barriers	15 states offer driver’s licenses to undocumented individuals	More states offer access to driver’s licenses to remove barriers to mobility.
Lack of access to benefits to support basic needs	PRWORA denies undocumented persons federal means-tested benefits, such as SNAP and TANF Public charge rule	Rescind the public charge rule.
Barriers to career development	Some states and/or licensing boards allow undocumented individuals to obtain a professional or occupational license.	Remove barriers based on immigration status to licensure (professional and occupational) for any otherwise qualified applicant. Postsecondary institutions partner with immigration organizations for career advising of undocumented students.

Note: PRWORA = Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Responsibility Act; SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (“food stamps”); TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The “public charge rule” allows immigration officials to judge whether a visa applicant or immigrant may, in the future, become dependent on public benefits. Status of rule uncertain as of January 2021.

People without citizenship or voting rights have effected change and expanded mainstream democratic practices throughout our history. Like many groups before them, undocumented activists are leading fights for civil, social, and political rights, and are becoming a force in government policy, as proven by the DACA program and the ongoing push to pass Dream legislation. Undocumented individuals are racially and ethnically diverse, and have been at the frontlines of the global health crisis, serving in occupations facing critical shortages such as healthcare and education, as well as participating in other essential critical infrastructure work such as farming, food distribution, and food service. Improving postsecondary affordability, access, and success for undocumented students creates better conditions for social inclusion, leading to more dynamic societies, where marginalized groups have an increased capacity to make demands upon democracy.

Notes

1. DACA stands for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a policy designed to delay for at least two years the deportation of children who came to the United States with parents who lacked proper documentation.

2. A July 2020 DHS Wolf memo reduced the grant period to one year (Department of Homeland Security 2020).

3. DACA stopped accepting new applications after September 5, 2017.

4. Promise programs typically offer tuition-free education at community colleges and/or four-year institutions. In addition to improving college affordability, they also include components that intend to improve college-going and student success.

5. State financial aid programs available to undocumented students include need-based aid, merit-aid, and Promise programs, which are often last-dollar programs that cover any unmet financial need after all other gift aid has been applied (Callahan et al. 2019).

6. Although acknowledging the lack of social and cultural capital in some spheres is needed to create adequate student supports at the institutional level, research has found that undocumented students use different forms of capital “to navigate institutional barriers, give back to their communities, strengthen their emotional and social wellbeing, and work toward social justice” (Bjorklund 2018: 654).

7. Introduced by the Immigration Act of 1882, the public charge rule requires government officials to measure the likelihood of an immigrant to the United States becoming dependent on government benefits.

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