

Transfer Process for Undocumented and Refugee Students: Models and Considerations for 2- & 4- year Institutions

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Introduction:

Public community colleges enroll around 4,662,364 students.¹ Additionally, immigrant-origin students accounted in 2018 for 5.3 million students, or 28% of all students, in higher education.² Community colleges often serve as the gateway into higher education for many immigrant and refugee students; particularly for undocumented students. Given these large numbers, the purpose of this guide is to ensure that campuses, both 2 and 4 year, consider the unique experiences and challenges that undocumented and refugee students face during the transfer process. This guide is intended to provide tangible examples and resources that community colleges and 4-year institutions can adapt to create inclusive materials and programs and intentionally support the college and career success of undocumented and refugee students as they transfer.

Who is this guide for?

- Community college and 4-year institutions' staff, faculty, students and administrators

Who are undocumented and refugee students?

Oftentimes, both undocumented and refugee students are non-traditional students, adult learners, and parents. They may work full-time or multiple jobs, have degrees in their home country, and/or be English language learners.

- **Undocumented Students:** An undocumented student is a *domestic student* who: (1) entered the United States without inspection; (2) entered legally as a nonimmigrant but then overstayed their visa, lost their status, and remained in the United States without authorization; (3) has Deferred Action Childhood Arrival (“DACA”) status or has previously had DACA; or (4) is otherwise currently in the process of legalizing.³
- **Refugee Students:** A refugee student is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. For the purposes of this guide, we are referring to those who currently hold, or entered the U.S. on, refugee status. *Note that refugees are eligible to adjust status to legal permanent residence 1 year after arrival.*

This guide may be helpful in supporting other displaced students who may have varying immigration statuses, such as TPS-holder, asylee, or humanitarian parolee. Eligibility for in-state tuition, financial aid and scholarships will vary based on status.

¹[National Student Clearinghouse](#)- Fall 2021 Term Enrollment Estimates

²[Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration](#)- Immigrant Origin Students in Higher Education

³ [Overview of Undocumented Students](#) by Immigrants Rising

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I. Provide targeted outreach to immigrant and refugee students and families

We recommend 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities work in close collaboration with one another and with immigrant-serving community organizations and others to build a network of resources that inform students and families, build trust, and provide assistance in navigating transfer opportunities within the college educational system.

A. Inclusive Outreach

- Make all services inclusive for undocumented and refugee students. One way to promote inclusivity is to explicitly address the admission, financial aid, transfer, and other college processes for undocumented and refugee students. Another way is to clarify who are the trusted and trained allies on campus and in the community to help them navigate academic, career, financial, legal, and mental health resources.
- Tap into existing multi-sector partnerships that support the broader immigrant population. Key stakeholders include immigrant youth-led organizations, immigrant advocacy coalitions, community college and 4-year college counselors and faculty, adult education providers, faith-based organizations, refugee resettlement agencies, newcomer high schools, and businesses and employer groups.

Example: [Diplomás](#), a network uniting 21 cross-sector partners, works to increase college attainment and quality of life for San Antonio’s Latinx youth and specifically includes Latinx Dreamers in its outreach and activities.

- Address students’ unique financial, legal, and emotional challenges at events as part of college-wide outreach initiatives, such as college fairs, resource fairs, summer camp programs, or community information sessions. Colleges should engage parents in these events —by providing workshops tailored to parents in various languages— and keep them involved throughout the college preparation and transfer process.

Example: Bluegrass Community & Technical College’s [Latino Leadership and College Experience Camp \(LLCEC\)](#) is an intensive two-year and four-year college preparation and leadership development summer program for Latinx, immigrant, refugee, and English as a Second Language high school students. Students are able to visit with representatives from major colleges and universities in Kentucky. Parents attend orientation workshops, which helps to increase their awareness of college resources, and they receive their own at-home curriculum they can follow while their children are at camp.

- Create a career or job fair that is specific to undocumented and/or refugee students. These fairs should include resources and employers that are undocumented/refugee student friendly and aware.

Example: [Undocumented Professionals Job Listings](#)

B. Programming and Services

- Promote dual enrollment in high school and college courses as a cost-saving college preparation strategy that can lead to both associate's and bachelor's degrees. Dual-enrollment programs, which have enabled undocumented students to earn associate degrees while still in high school, can also increase awareness of transfer options to 4-year colleges. Partner with existing high school programs and immigrant students or the local newcomer high school.

Example: The staff at [South Texas College's dual-enrollment academies](#) organize campus visits outside of the area to institutions such as [University of Texas-Austin](#), [Texas A&M](#), and [Baylor University](#) to inspire undocumented students and help them gain the confidence they need to transfer to four-year colleges and universities.

Example: [Guiding Pathways](#), a grant-funded project of Diplomás, brings together higher education, local school districts, and nonprofit partners working together to ensure all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, or citizenship status have access to high-quality, dual-credit courses.

- Create outreach programs that focus on intentionally serving and increasing the transfer rates of historically underrepresented students such as undocumented and refugee students. Remember to include parents in the process by hosting workshops in multiple languages geared towards informing the entire family unit.

Example: The [Center for Community College Partnerships \(CCCCP\)](#) develops and strengthens academic partnerships between UCLA and California community colleges focusing on preparing first generation, low-income or historically underrepresented students. Through a multi-faceted approach at the student, faculty, and administrative levels, CCCC works to increase academic preparation and competitiveness, and helps community colleges develop a “transfer-sending culture” and universities to develop a “transfer-receptive culture.”

Example: [Exploring Transfer](#), is an immersion program at Vassar College, that has significantly introduced underrepresented, first-generation community college students to the possibilities of transfer to a wide range of 4-year residential liberal arts institutions. Accepted students receive a scholarship to the program that completely covers their tuition, room, meals, and books.

Example: [Pathway to the Baccalaureate](#) is an award-winning consortium of 10 institutions in Northern Virginia providing a seamless web of support for underserved students' transition from high school, through Northern Virginia Community College, to [George Mason University](#) and other 4-year institutions. The program has helped many low-income immigrant students through its one-stop, case management approach that offers college counseling and support services, and ongoing financial assistance to complete a four-year degree.

- Develop community college programs that provide information and resources to help immigrants, refugees, undocumented and DACA students navigate and gain access to academic support, financial aid and scholarships, non-credit to credit ESL bridge classes (as needed), vocational training, and career pathways. Use these programs as an opportunity to present and spread awareness of transfer opportunities to four-year institutions. Community colleges should establish and expand both navigational and instructional approaches that can help accelerate students' transitions to further their education and careers.

Example: The [Immigrant and Refugee Student Resource Center](#) (IRSRC) at Pima Community College, partners with the College and community agencies to bridge the information gap and empower immigrant and refugee students to achieve their educational dreams. The Center assists with training staff and faculty on immigrant and refugee issues, provides academic support and information about college processes and community resources, presents to student groups, supports counselors, and meets with family members.

Example: The [Transition Success Center](#) at Highline College provides academic and career exploration regarding degree pathways and short/long-term certificates, admissions and enrollment assistance, funding support, campus and community referrals, and advocacy support to non-credit ABE/ESOL and other students. The Center plays an important role in the development and advancement of immigrant and refugee students and helps them navigate college.

C. Student Organizations

- Host transfer application hands-on workshops and info sessions in collaboration with student clubs. Student organizations play a vital role in disseminating information to students who may be afraid to disclose their immigration status to faculty, staff or administrators. Encourage collaboration between community college clubs and 4-year colleges.

Example: [IDEAS' AB540 Project](#) at UCLA aims to inform and educate undocumented high school and community college students about AB-540 and other resources available in their pursuit of higher education.

Example: [Students Without Borders](#) at Rio Hondo College unites AB540 students and allies by sharing scholarship resources and information on legislation affecting community college students and the higher education system. The SWB website posts links to student-run organizations at various University of California and California State University campuses, including UC Berkeley's [Rising Immigrant Scholars Through Education \(R.I.S.E.\)](#), which promotes support services and leadership training to create safe spaces for undocumented students

II. Increase Access Through Digital Resources

College websites are often a student's first encounter with the colleges' programs and services and can be an important tool for raising awareness and access to college resources, including transfer opportunities. Undocumented and refugee students may not be aware of available campus resources and trusted allies to help them through the transfer process. Design websites with inclusive language and information that explicitly addresses undocumented, DACA, and refugee students. Clarify admissions, financial aid, and transfer policies/information pertinent to your diverse immigrant and refugee student body.

A. Immigrant- and Refugee-Friendly Websites

- Create a webpage(s) uniquely dedicated to updated immigrant- and refugee-related information and resources. Include links and contacts for college programs & liaisons, as well as community, employer, educator, and government partners. Some colleges have created webpages dedicated to undocumented/DACA students, while others more broadly address immigrant and refugee resources.

Examples:

- Community colleges: [Bluegrass Community & Technical College](#), [Dutchess Community College](#), [Highline College](#), [LaGuardia Community College](#), [San Antonio College](#), [South Texas College](#), [Westchester Community College](#)
- 4-year Institutions: [City University of New York](#); [State University of New York](#); [Texas A&M University-San Antonio](#); [University of Connecticut](#); [University of Texas-San Antonio](#)

B. Inclusive Language

- Use language that signals support for all students regardless of immigration status. For example, phrases such as “*transfer application support for all students regardless of immigration status*” or “*trained staff available to advise immigrant students of different backgrounds*” can encourage students to connect with college officials, particularly undocumented students who may be hesitant or afraid to reach out.

Examples: These community colleges have designed webpages that are specifically focused on the transfer process for undocumented students:

- [Bunker Hill Community College](#)
 - [Diablo Valley College](#)
- Make the information on your website available in several languages to help expand the college's outreach efforts. You can connect to native speakers of the languages you use on your website to check for cultural accuracy. This is a great opportunity to pay bilingual students at your institution as consultants to help with this.

III. Understand access to in-state tuition, financial aid, & scholarships

Each U.S. state implements its own policies in terms of whether to provide undocumented students with access to in-state tuition and state financial aid. This results in a patchwork of different policies across the country, with access depending on the state that an undocumented student lives in. Thirty-four states and D.C. [provide at least limited access](#) to in-state tuition to the state's undocumented students and/or DACA recipients. Of those states, 17 states and D.C. [provide access to in-state tuition and state financial aid](#) at all public colleges and universities. Four additional states [provide access to in-state tuition](#), but not state financial aid.

A. In-state tuition

- Familiarize yourself and stay up to date with the specific policies of your state. [For instance, sixteen states and Puerto Rico](#) have either no policies, restrictive policies (policies that actively bar access to in-state tuition or state financial aid) or prohibitive policies (policies that actively bar enrollment in at least some public institutions) for the state's resident undocumented students. Some of those states may still allow some undocumented students and/or DACA recipients to enroll and access in-state tuition at certain institutions. As a result of this national patchwork of policies, it is important to be familiar with and identify the specific policies of your state to understand whether undocumented students are eligible for in-state tuition and state financial aid.
- Review the [Higher Ed Immigration Portal's Portal to the States](#) page and map, which provides updated state-by-state information on in-state tuition and state financial aid policies for undocumented students in all 50 states, D.C. and Puerto Rico. You can also learn about [inter-state tuition agreements \(ITAs\)](#), which offer students who would otherwise be charged out-of-state tuition access to an in-state tuition rate or a discounted tuition rate in a participating state.
- Stay informed regarding refugee policies. Refugees have limited access to in-state tuition and state financial aid at all of their state's public colleges and universities. A growing number of states have implemented statewide policies expanding access to in-state tuition and state financial aid to individuals with refugee and other humanitarian statuses. Check your state policies and see [here](#) where current policies are being tracked. Refugees are eligible for status adjustment to obtain lawful permanent resident (LPR) status after one year from arrival and then are eligible for the same benefits as permanent residents.

B. Financial aid

Undocumented students with or without DACA are not eligible for federal financial aid, including Pell Grants and in some cases work-study, but they may be eligible for state financial aid and scholarships depending on the state's or institution's policies.

- Review the [Portal to the States](#) page and map, which provides updated state- by-state information on state financial aid access for undocumented students

Refugees are considered eligible noncitizens for federal financial aid.

- Read the [NASFAA Tip Sheet for Financial Aid Administrators Working with Refugee and Asylee Students](#)

- Read the Switchboard [Toolkit: Accessing Federal Student Aid for Refugee Youth and Adults: Resources and Tips for Successful Application Processing](#). Note that in addition to immigration eligibility, in order to qualify for Pell Grants, undergraduate students must also meet other eligibility requirements, such as not having an existing bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree.

C. Scholarships

- Share and regularly update lists of scholarships dedicated to supporting students regardless of immigration status. Consider scholarships focused on transfer opportunities.

Examples:

Undocumented Students

- [Jack Kent Cooke Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship](#): Undocumented, DACA, and refugee community college students are eligible to apply.
- [RaiseMe Micro-Scholarships for Transfer Students](#): These scholarships may be accessible to students regardless of immigration or citizenship status, depending on the university's grant funding policies.
- [TheDream.US: National Scholarship](#): High school or community college graduates with or without DACA or Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and qualify for in-state tuition at one of the Partner Colleges.
- [Scholarship & Fellowship Directory for Undocumented Students](#)
- The [College Promise Programs](#) website has a searchable database of Promise scholarships across the country that includes programs open to undocumented students

Refugee Students:

- [USA Hello Scholarships for Immigrants and Refugees](#)
- [University Alliance for at Risk Migrants Scholarship List](#)

- Learn about any local organizations or foundations in your area that support scholarships for immigrant students and partner with them to create transfer specific scholarships that help the retention, success and transfer of students.

Example: [Tulsa Community College](#) partnered with a local funder to create different types of scholarships that support undocumented students throughout various stages of their educational journey. For instance, an [access and success scholarship](#), a [retention and continuation scholarship](#), and a [transfer scholarship](#) for students transferring to Oklahoma State University.

- Audit your existing internal and external scholarships to ascertain their eligibility criteria and determine if they can be extended to undocumented students, and if possible without regard to DACA status.

Example: A fellowship letter written by the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration that encourages campuses to ensure that eligibility for institutional and external scholarships and programs are inclusive of undocumented students.

- Develop nonemployment based, funded experiential opportunities for undocumented students.

Example: [FAQ on Experiential and Funding Opportunities for Undocumented Students](#) by the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. This document seeks to offer a framework for consideration of various approaches as institutions endeavor to increase access to funded experiential learning for undocumented students and to help them thrive on their campuses.

- Find work/internship and service learning opportunities on campus for undocumented students.

Example: [Dream Summer Fellowship](#), an annual national fellowship of the UCLA Labor Center's Dream Resource Center provides immigrant youth and allies, regardless of immigration status, with a \$5,000 fellowship award, leadership and professional development training, movement building, and on-the-ground experience in social justice organizations.

IV. Provide Intentional Training and Culturally Responsive Counseling

It is essential for college and university staff to understand documentation, residency requirements, related eligibility, and other unique challenges facing undocumented and refugee students. A significant barrier to college completion for undocumented students is the psychological and emotional stress due to their uncertain immigration status and continuing political battles directly affecting their personal lives and academic performance. Newly arriving refugees may have endured traumatic and often stressful journeys to the U.S. In addition, they often face language barriers, adjustment to unfamiliar cultures and educational systems, and getting settled into new communities.

A. Intentional Training

- Designate and train a staff member/s whose responsibility includes specializing in the support of undocumented and refugee students through the transfer process.
- Partner with local immigrant advocacy groups in training sessions to help undocumented and refugee students know their rights as students and provide resources promoting transfer opportunities to support them in their educational or career pathways.
- Train staff to know how to guide students to available resources, including appropriate mental health services on campus or in the community if needed.
- Recruit, train and hire undocumented and refugee students as community ambassadors and student role models to serve as mentors/advisors during the transfer process and to speak at college events.

Example: [Texas A&M University-San Antonio's DREAM Peer Mentoring Program](#) provides speakers and assigns mentors to help Dream.US scholars and other undocumented, DACA, and Dreamer students navigate career and academic pathways and better integrate and succeed in the university.

B. Culturally Responsive Counseling

- Conduct early-stage academic and career counseling, with an understanding of undocumented and refugee students' unique challenges, as well as the talents and strengths they bring to campus communities and the nation. Start transfer opportunity discussions with undocumented and refugee students upon their enrollment in community colleges and continue to incorporate transfer process counseling and resources in first-year experiences and student success workshops.

Resources: TheDream.US offers an [Effective Practices Toolkit](#) providing resources for undocumented students, DACA, and TPS holders; employers, and career counselors. See also [Career Counseling Support for Undocumented Students](#) in the Higher Ed Immigration Portal.

- Guide students' course succession not only as it relates to their area of study, interests, and career aspirations, but also takes into full consideration the course requirements and prerequisites of the transfer institution. Ensure students are aware of organizations, such as Phi Beta Kappa, or experiences for which they may be eligible. For example, refugee students may be eligible for study abroad.
- Assist arriving refugees who have earned a college degree from their country of origin get their credentials evaluated. Many internationally-educated refugees have established careers in professional and technical fields in their home countries as well. It's essential to help students build on that base rather than start all over again. Credential evaluation can also help professional licensing boards and employers understand qualifications earned outside the U.S. It's important to understand students' goals, whether it's filling gaps in their education to prepare for graduate school, continuing their education in a new or related field at a four-year institution, or entering into a longer-term career pathway program.

Resource: [WES Global Talent Bridge's website](#) offers a detailed explanation of foreign credential evaluation as well as numerous Career Pathways e-guides providing guidance and resources to internationally trained immigrants and refugees seeking to use their education and careers in the U.S.

Example: [The Cooper Union Retraining Program for Immigrant Engineers](#) is a free professional development opportunity that supports immigrant, refugee, and asylee engineers. The program includes coursework in technology and engineering fields, career counseling, interviewing and job search skills, job placement support, and professional networking events with industry leaders.

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- Facilitate communications between transfer advisors at community colleges and 4-year institutions. Organize joint college information and orientations sessions, and engage students and families in formal education planning and transfer process. Incorporate student feedback and any other information to respond with effective programs and services.

Example: Transfer advisers at the [San Antonio College Empowerment Center](#), [Texas A& M University-San Antonio’s Dreamer Resource Center](#), and [University of Texas-San Antonio’s Dreamer Resource Center](#) all work closely together, including meeting once a month, to ensure a “warm hand-off” of transfer students. Additionally, former undocumented and DACA community college students who have transferred to Texas A&M University are included as speakers at university orientation sessions to share their experiences and offer recommendations on how to build support networks and thrive in the university setting.

- Encourage undocumented and refugee students to complete Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG) agreements, if available. These agreements guarantee university admission to well-qualified community college transfer students who meet the requirements and complete all TAG-related procedures.
- Designate safe spaces by identifying trained staff and professional counselors equipped to help refugee, undocumented and DACA students through use of decals or other visible means. Identifying college personnel as allies and advocates in this way helps to build institutional-wide awareness and support for undocumented and refugee students, going beyond one department or division.

Resource: [Quick Guide to understanding refugee eligibility](#)

Example: [Bluegrass Community & Technical College](#) offers 1-on-1 advising on career pathways specifically available for refugees.

If you are interested in receiving more up-to-date information about undocumented and refugee students, sign up to receive immigration related updates by:

[FWD.US](#)

[Immigration Forum](#)

[Immigrants Rising](#)

[Informed Immigrant](#)

[NILC](#)

[Presidents Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration](#)