



USC Race and
Equity Center

HOW CAN WE TRANSFORM THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS?

Marisela Hernandez and
Nancy Jodaitis

*Humanizing, Caring, and
Supporting People's
Identities*

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BIOGRAPHY



Marisela Hernandez (Her/She/Ella)

Senior Specialist

Marisela Hernandez is a Senior Specialist. Marisela has ten years of experience supporting undocumented students at California Community Colleges. She works collectively with the California Community College Chancellor's Office, UndocuLiaison Network statewide, and undocumented student experts throughout California to support colleges in building their capacity to best serve undocumented students. She spearheaded the creation of the statewide [Undocumented Student Support eHandbook](#). Previously she founded the Sacramento City College Dreamers Program and helped establish the Sierra College Undocumented Student Center. She earned her B.A. from California State University, Chico, in Communications Studies and is currently enrolled in the California State University, Sacramento, Master's Program in Business Administration for Executives. Marisela is passionate and committed to helping create safe, welcoming, and supportive environments for all students while engaging in equitable practices to support underrepresented communities.

BIOGRAPHY



Nancy Jodaitis
(she/her/hers)
Director of Higher Education

Nancy is the Director of Higher Education, Immigrants Rising. She has dedicated her skills to building educational pathways for undocumented students in higher education for the past fourteen years. Nancy's efforts include providing technical support and elevate promising practices to post-secondary institutions to increase undocumented students' enrollment and graduation rates. She also conducts trainings and creates learning communities for educators, administrators, financial aid, and admissions departments to facilitate cross-campus learning. Nancy is currently coordinating a statewide initiative to [increase equitable enrollment of in-state tuition at California's public colleges and universities](#). She is also researching award rates to reduce potential roadblocks for the CA Dream Act. Nancy has also developed a [library of educational materials for undocumented students and guides for colleges & universities](#). Previously, Nancy worked as a financial aid counselor, pre-admissions/transfer advisor, and undocumented student advocate for more than a decade.

While this brief is informed by our experience working in the field, the views in this document represents our personal opinions, not the views of our organizations.

Eloghosa is a student whose immigration journey was very difficult. She came to the United States from East Africa via Brazil. Full of dreams, Eloghosa visited her local college but had a difficult time at the admissions and financial aid office responding to triggering questions about her immigration status. Eloghosa felt lost and was about to give up her dream of attending a California Community College to learn English and get a degree in computer engineering.

INTRODUCTION

Undocumented communities have and will continue to contribute to the future of California. They are valuable members of our society that have businesses, are caring for your children, work as professionals and are part of our communities. **Undocumented immigrants and mixed immigration families are the future of California.**

Undocumented students should be welcomed in the California Community College (CCC) system regardless of [DACA, AB540, CADAA](#) eligibility. However, this to happen, we must build an institutional and systemic infrastructure to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for all students. Unfortunately, although undocumented student enrollment has increased as new legislation provides new opportunities, CCCs are still turning away too many eligible students. This is happening due to the lack of awareness regarding resources for undocumented students. Unless we work collectively to remove the roadblocks in admissions, financial aid and other services that dramatically reduce the retention of this student population, we are diminishing the academic success of this highly motivated population – even though close to fifty percent of CCCs have opened an undocumented student center.

In this brief, we outline specific recommendations for practitioners, staff, faculty, administrators and student leaders to truly welcome undocumented students and their families. By ensuring compliance with legislative mandates, expanding access to available resources and elevating promising practices, we can build a stronger institutional infrastructure to effectively guide students and allow them to make informed decisions about their educational goals.

OVERVIEW OF UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN CALIFORNIA

2020, it was estimated that undocumented students accounted for more than 427,000 or approximately 2 percent of all students in higher education in the United States . In California, most of these students are enrolled in the CCC System.

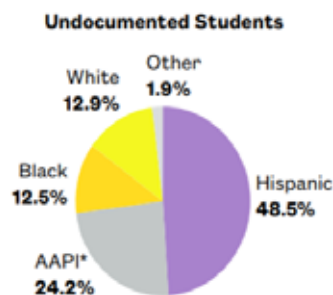
Although the Chancellor's Office (CO) has not determined a safe way to collect and protect undocumented student data, they estimate between [75,000 and 156,000](#) undocumented students are enrolled in their system.

During the 2020-21 academic year, the CCCCO [reported](#) 62,417 AB 540 students. That same year, the California Student Aid Commission received 49,776 applications for the California Dream Act. The combination of these data points reflects the need to build a better systemic response to adequately serve these communities.

Too many students are not able to take advantage of tuition equity: less than 50 % of eligible undocumented students are classified as AB 540.

Furthermore, less than one-third of enrolled students even apply for state-based financial aid.

The undocumented communities in California come from different backgrounds, cultures, and intersectional identities. Stories like Eleghosa's reflect the diversity of this population. This intersectionality and unique needs of this student population should be treated with respect. Furthermore, practitioners should be trained to intentionally address their needs. A high percentage of recent immigration arrivals are from families that come from Central America, Asia, and Africa, which requires educators to be more inclusive in our approach to serving UndocuScholars.



Equity-minded language is important and has developed and continues to change over the years. In this brief, we are consciously using the term “undocumented” because we want to be as inclusive as possible. While some campuses, systems, and non-profit organizations are using the term undocumented, students may self-identify with terms that do not “out”

themselves. This allows them to feel safer and minimize conflict by reflecting programs or laws they benefit from. For example, “I am an AB540 student, Dream Act or DACA recipient.” This is especially true in rural or conservative areas of the state. Be mindful that the term DACAmented or Dreamers does not represent the new generation of undocumented high school students. Additionally, the term Dreamer also isolates applicants and recipients of other immigration options such as Temporary Protected Status recipients, U-VISA, and T-Visa applicants. This is reflected in stories such as Mahalia, who overstayed her visa.

Mahalia came with her parents from the Philippines as a young child. When her family overstayed their visa, Mahalia unknowingly became part of the largest growing population of undocumented individuals in the U.S. Unfortunately, whenever she sought to access services at her local college, most educators didn't realize she was undocumented, which limited her ability to access specific resources that would help her achieve her academic goals. Luckily, she found a student led organization that helped connect to & advocate for more support.

ADVOCACY TIMELINE

Undocumented students have been at the forefront of educational equity in California and across the nation for decades, advocating for their ability to obtain a college education to improve their lives and the lives of their community. Their courage, community organizing, and advocacy at institutional and statewide levels have built a future many of us could not have imagined. It has also elevated powerful role models and empowered a new generation to build solutions to today's barriers. As a former CCC undocumented student, Marisela and many others were actively advocating for the changes we see today.

2000's

Through the efforts of many undocumented young people and their allies, California has become a national leader in expanding access to higher education for undocumented communities. In 2001, California passed AB 540, a tuition equity law that made college much more affordable for students who graduated from a California high school. Nancy's activism has been integral in increasing the number of students who have been able to benefit from this important law. Despite two updates to the law ([AB 2000](#) & [SB 68](#)), which expanded attendance to adult schools and noncredit and credit at the California community colleges, there are still

[dramatic inequities in AB 540 implementation](#). Fortunately, under her leadership, Immigrants Rising was able to spearhead an intersegmental workgroup [develop statewide solutions](#) which is made up of undocumented individuals and the educators who serve them.

2010's

Another large victory brought about through the dedicated advocacy of undocumented students and allies was the passage of the California Dream Act/ CADAA ([AB 130](#) & [AB 131](#)) in 2011. This allowed institutional scholarships to be awarded and opened up access to state and institutional grants for students who meet AB 540 requirements. As a financial aid counselor directly involved in the implementation of state-based financial aid for undocumented students, Nancy has seen MANY more students enter and pay for college. This legislative effort is what gave Marisela and many other students an opportunity to graduate and give back to their communities as undocumented educators and professionals. Unfortunately, ten years after the CA Dream Act was implemented, too many CCCs have not prioritized building effective practices to disburse financial aid regardless of a social security number. To address these barriers, Nancy created [Promising Practices for Financial Aid Counselors to Increase Award Rates for the CA Dream Act](#) in collaboration with the California Student Aid Commission.

2020-present

Two years ago (2020), advocates won a legislative mandate along with funding that would [designate a liaison for undocumented students \(AB 1645\)](#) at all California public colleges and universities. This came about through committed individuals, student advocates and allies, who documented the gap between legislation and educational opportunities across California colleges and universities, especially at California community colleges where the overwhelming majority of undocumented students seek to enroll. Marisela's role has been to build and train a network of practitioners and administrators responsible for implementing AB 1645.

Nationally, student and community activism and political pressure were essential in creating the opportunity for undocumented individuals to obtain work authorization and a stay of deportation ([Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals/DACA](#)). Check out '[Find Your Ally](#)' to connect immigrants at the CCCs with legal services. The lack of a comprehensive immigration reform nationally, combined with the limited number of individuals eligible for DACA, pushed California to pass [SB 1159, allowing for](#) licensure even without a social security number and [other legislative](#) opportunities.

DOCUMENTING THE CHANGES: THEN & NOW

From this/Then (Prior to 2012)	To this/Now (2022)
Underground Network and lack of services at many campuses	Some level of institutionalized support at the majority of California public colleges and universities
No federal or state Financial Aid	State-based financial aid (CA Dream Act) Dream Loan Programs Institutional grants
Lack of awareness about entrepreneurship opportunities	Entrepreneurship Opportunities Social Entrepreneurs for Economic Development (SEED)
Very limited professional development or hands-on educational experiences for undocumented students	Campus-based Internships Inclusive Fellowships Dreamer Service Incentive Grant (DSIG) College Corps
Undocumented Students cannot get professional licenses	SB 1159 : State Licensure SB 1139 : Health Professionals Pre Health Dreamers Undocuprofessionals

Transforming the Educational Experience of Undocumented Students

When Marisela and Nancy began the work over a decade ago, they were part of an underground network that was working to increase awareness, build solutions for specific students and elevating individual policies with the hopes of replicating their impact. Today, we have the tools, legislation, and available resources to transform the educational experience for undocumented students at CCCs. However, we must work together to ensure that this work is taken up not only by a committed few, but by the entire institution to meet our obligation within an equity framework and in compliance with the law. While it is essential to have a point person at each school, work on behalf of undocumented students cannot solely be the responsibility of undocumented student centers or UndocuLiaisons. *It will take all of us to develop safe and inclusive campus communities that welcome all students regardless of immigration status.*

The CCC system has come a long way, but there is still so much more work to be done. [The CCC Dreamers Project Report](#) was the first state-wide landscape analysis of support services for undocumented students. It found that “undocumented students face multiple system barriers beyond the threat of losing DACA protections”. One of the report’s top recommendations was to expand the number of dedicated stakeholders and spaces at each campus. As AB 1645 has been implemented, the number of undocumented student centers at the CCCs has grown from 39 to 55 (14 % increase). The [CCC Undocumented Student Support Timeline](#) tracks the milestones led by educators and student advocates.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS IN ACTION

Throughout our years interacting with undocumented students and the educators who serve them, we have found the following actions helpful in supporting the unique needs of these communities:

Individual

As faculty, staff, student leaders, and administrators we have a personal responsibility to support students from all backgrounds and identities. Here are the recommendations you can immediately undertake on your own:

- Stay up to date on [Legislation Impacting Undocumented Students](#).
- Complete the **Undocumented Student Learning Module** in the [Vision Resource Center](#). Follow up with participating in a UndocuAlly Training.
- Connect with the UndocuLiaison ([Find a College Tool](#)) on your campus and find out where the undocumented student center or program is located.
- Review all of your presentations, flyers, canva and syllabus to have [inclusive language](#) and available resources.
- Make your support visible by displaying your UndocuAlly sticker or a symbol of support on your desk or office.
- Commit to the [Top Ten ways to Support Undocumented students](#).

Group

While one person can make a huge difference to a limited number of students, a group of people can build momentum to collectively address the issues undocumented students are facing.

• Review Departmental Procedures

- Conduct an audit of outreach materials, application procedures, and practices within your department that might inadvertently prevent the participation of undocumented students. (i.e., requirement of a social security number, exclusionary language, class requirements, etc.).

• Create a Task Force

- Gather like-minded individuals with expertise in different departments to [develop a strong campus-wide undocumented/AB 540 student task force](#). It will be easier to increase awareness, seek input and develop solutions with a broad cross-section of departments.
- Get started today! The majority of taskforces were created through the efforts of faculty and staff, active students, and/or community members, not mandated by the president/chancellor.
- Select [two or three areas of focus](#) to demonstrate impact. Add a few long-term goals as the group progresses.
- Have diverse membership that extends beyond Latinx support services and/or programs and ensures the participation of undocumented students.
- Remember, the task force should be action orientated-not an advisory committee. It cannot rely solely on the UndocuLiaison to drive the process.

• Connect with Your Campus Unions & Associations

- Align with your faculty, staff and unions & associations to increase the ability to mobilize support, funding and infrastructure.
- Enlist your campus' Student Senate, Associated Students and additional student clubs to advocate for inclusive and equitable practices.

Institutional

Each campus must commit to building institutional practices that will ensure undocumented and other immigrant students are integrated into the campus community and receive accurate information within every department and classroom.

- Review the [UndocuCollege Guide and Equity Tool](#) to recognize accomplishments and identify areas of growth.
- Ensure compliance with federal and state regulations regarding [protection of student data](#) and against [immigration enforcement activities](#).
- Commit to equitable [implementation of in-state tuition](#) and [promising practices to increase award rates for CA Dream Act](#).
- Be intentional in [elevating the needs and providing support for undocumented educators](#) working on your campus.
- Build a regional response by strengthening partnerships with schools in your area (K-12, adult schools, non-credit programs, & 4-year universities).
- Expand professional development cross-campus learning through trainings, webinars, and conferences.

System

While the majority of work is taking place at an individual and group level, it is time to shift the responsibility for change to system leaders to lead the transformational work around undocumented student success in our state. We must continue to advocate with the CCCCO as well as supporting organizations, such as, the [California Student Aid Commission](#) to foster a culture that welcomes and celebrates diversity and inclusion for undocumented students, faculty and staff.

- Be a leader in creating effective support for [Undocumented Asian Pacific Islander \(API\) students](#) and [Black undocumented students](#) to meaningfully recognize the intersectionality within communities.
- Collaborate across sectors to support the long-term success of undocumented students.
- Expand the reach of the CCC annual [Undocumented Student Action Week \(USAW\)](#) to include the expertise and voice of undocumented students.
- Amplify programs such as [Find Your Ally](#) which provides free immigration legal services to CCC students.
- Promote the [Undocumented Student Support E-Handbook](#) which aims to elevate promising practices across the system.
- Effectively engage with CSAC to address significant gaps within application and award rates for the Cal Grants, Promise Grants and the Dream Service Incentive Grant.



CLOSING

We encourage each and everyone reading this to actively take steps to transform the educational experience of undocumented students. We ARE the ones we've been waiting for! By implementing the recommendations listed above, more students like Mahalia will find a college that not only welcomes them but celebrates their experiences.

Undocumented Student Centers cannot be the only place undocumented students feel welcome. As educators, it is our responsibility to create equitable and holistic services throughout our campuses for all students regardless of immigration status.

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