

# How Can We Improve Graduate Training for Undocumented Students? Ethnic and Nativity-Based Inequities in Political Science Graduate Education

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In September 2017, the Trump administration announced its intention to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that granted legal presence and work authorization to select undocumented students. The University of California and others filed suit against the administration's actions. Several universities issued statements asserting their continued support for all students regardless of citizenship status. Although these actions likely are meant in earnest to support DACA recipients, they coexist in tension with systemic barriers faced by undocumented students, who are primarily Latinx and/or Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI).<sup>1</sup> As such, undocumented students face not only the same barriers as other minorities and noncitizens but also experience barriers unique to their intersectional identity.

There are moral and pragmatic cases for addressing the inequities faced by undocumented students. Morally, as educators, we are obliged to care for our students without regard to their race, sex, gender, citizenship, or other incidents of birth. Pragmatically, undocumented students have already had their K-12 education paid for, and it would be a waste of potential to not recruit and train them as political scientists if they show promise. Additionally, addressing the barriers faced by undocumented students would help both Latinx and AAPI communities.

As one of few undocumented students in the discipline, I am obliged to highlight the challenges we face and to propose ways in which these obstacles can be addressed to increase the recruitment and training of undocumented students. I acknowledge that many of these barriers are beyond the power of any individual political scientist—or even the political science discipline—to address. At a minimum, however, these barriers can be acknowledged.

## NOT ALL UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS ARE DACA RECIPIENTS

One of the main barriers that undocumented students face is that they often are portrayed as interchangeable with DACA

recipients. DACA granted work authorization and legal presence to a subset of undocumented students, but not all undocumented students managed to attain DACA status. Many undocumented students were unable to provide the documentation necessary to apply for it. As the term suggests, “undocumented” students may not have basic documentation, such as a birth certificate.<sup>2</sup> Some cannot afford the filing fees and legal costs involved with applying for DACA (Wong and García 2016). Furthermore, a subset of otherwise eligible applicants have been denied DACA status because of their past involvement in immigration-reform protests (Wang 2018).

The distinction between undocumented student and DACA recipient is meaningful. Many opportunities, including the American Political Science Association (APSA) Minority Fellowship Program, are open to undocumented students with DACA but not available for those without it. I acknowledge that there are legal difficulties in providing aid to undocumented students without DACA, but there are those who provided support to them well before DACA existed. Common strategies to work around restrictions include making indirect payments and providing in-kind support. For example, a given fund may be unable to award an undocumented student funding to attend a conference but it may pay for a hotel room.

## ADMISSIONS

The barriers faced by undocumented students begin in the admission process. Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh (2012) found that prospective college students with distinctively minority names are discriminated against when they attempt to set up an initial meeting with faculty members. This is an important form of discrimination because students rely heavily on faculty when applying for graduate school. Individual faculty members have little control over university admissions policies and there is little that can be done if a university does not accept undocumented students.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, faculty can provide undocumented students with vital information, such as how and where to apply to graduate school.

In addition to being less likely to have faculty respond to them—a barrier faced by all foreign-born minorities regardless of citizenship—most universities do not specify whether undocumented students should apply to graduate school as a domestic or an international student. This is not a trivial matter: undocumented students are not “domestic” because they do not hold US citizenship; neither are they “international” because they do not hold any visa. At some universities, undocumented students may apply as international

of the 2019–2020 academic year.<sup>5</sup> I focused on the top 50 programs because they disproportionately place their graduate students (Oprisko 2012; Schmidt and Chingos 2007) and produce a disproportionate amount of the discipline’s peer-reviewed publications (McCormick and Bernick 1982). As publishing pressures continue to increase among graduate students (Landgrave 2019), the top programs play a vital role in graduate-education training. Of the universities with a top 50 political science program, 34% have an undocumented

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students, but it requires them to divulge their sensitive status.

When I applied to graduate programs as an undocumented student, I had to contact departments to explain my situation. This required revealing my sensitive status to faculty and staff. In many cases, an ad-hoc solution was created. In other cases, I never received a follow-up response or I was met with overt hostility. It took me almost a year of research to make a list of programs to which I could apply. My experience is not unique among undocumented graduate students (RAMON 2018). How many are discouraged from applying to graduate school because of this seemingly trivial question?

#### INSTITUTIONAL ADVOCATES

Discrimination in the recruitment stage could be mitigated if undocumented students had institutional advocates who understood their unique status. When I applied to graduate school, I often had to explain what I meant by “undocumented” and clear up common misconceptions. Many people I spoke to mistakenly thought it was something easily fixed by marrying a US citizen or being sponsored for a faculty job.<sup>4</sup> I have acquaintances who were accepted to graduate school but had their offer rescinded when they explained what being “undocumented” meant. Most universities have a center that advocates for international students, but few have a similar center for undocumented students.

Table 1 shows the percentage of the top 50 political science universities (as determined by the latest *US News & World Report* rankings) that have an undocumented student center as

student center, disproportionately located on the West Coast (87.50%). Of those universities in the Midwestern and Mountain states, 38.46% have an undocumented student center. Among what some perceive as the discipline’s top programs (i.e., the CHYMPS<sup>6</sup>), only one has a center for undocumented students. This absence of institutional advocates limits where undocumented students can attend.

#### GRADUATE SCHOOL FUNDING

If undocumented students manage to overcome the initial barrier of applying to graduate school, they then face the barrier of funding. Undocumented students without DACA status are ineligible to earn funding through traditional teaching and research assistantships (TAs and RAs) because they do not have work authorization. If they want to attend graduate school, they need to enter a department that is willing to accommodate their situation. Some departments pay undocumented students “under the table” with gift cards, cash, and other ad-hoc work-arounds. Historically, private universities have been the most able to implement workarounds because they have sizeable sources of nonstate discretionary funds.

Undocumented students with DACA status can be a TA or an RA but still face financial uncertainties if DACA is rescinded or if they otherwise are unable to renew their work authorization in time. DACA status is granted in two-year intervals<sup>7</sup> and the renewal process can take between five and six months. In practice, this short interval means that an unexpected delay can lead to an undocumented student losing DACA status during the renewal process. I once had the misfortune of having my DACA renewal delayed because the post office lost my paperwork. My then-department rescinded my TA-ship because I did not have work authorization for the semester. For several months, I had to survive on savings and what I could earn under the table while I waited for my renewal to be approved. I do not blame my then-department for having rescinded my TA-ship because it could have faced legal penalties. As noted previously, however, some departments are willing to work around such restrictions by providing gift cards and purchasing essentials (e.g., groceries) for students using discretionary funds.

Table 1  
Universities with an Undocumented Student Center, Top 50 Departments

% All	CHYMPS	West Coast	Northeast	South	Midwest and Mountain
34.00	16.67	87.50	15.79	20.00	38.46
n=50	n=7	n=8	n=19	n=10	n=13

Similarly, I do not blame political science organizations such as APSA when certain funding opportunities are restricted to US citizens or undocumented students with DACA status. Funds may be restricted due to federal or state regulations. Only recently have some states allowed undocumented students to receive funding from private or public sources; access to federal funds is still heavily restricted. California only began to allow undocumented students to apply for private scholarships in 2011 with the passage of Assembly Bill 130. Many states still have various restrictions on funding for undocumented students (National Conference of State Legislators 2019). At the time of writing, the US Department of Education has ruled that undocumented students cannot

foreign names are less likely to receive a response from fellow academics and are evaluated less favorably by students than foreign minorities who adopt Anglicized names.

#### RESEARCH-RELATED TRAVEL

Undocumented students cannot fly easily due to identification requirements. This hurdle limits their ability to collect data and present their findings at academic conferences. Undocumented students with DACA status can fly within the United States using their employment authorization card, which is a federally recognized form of identification. However, it is a rare form of identification; I have been delayed several times by Transportation Security Administration agents unfamiliar with it. Undocu-

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receive emergency funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (Murakami 2020b). I do not blame anyone or any institution that follows federal and state regulations. I do note, however, that several departments and universities nevertheless have provided funding for undocumented students using discretionary funds (Murakami 2020a).

#### UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT INTERACTIONS

If undocumented students manage to enter graduate school training, they experience discrimination in their daily interactions with undergraduate students due to their accent and distinctive name. Undocumented students experience bias in their TA duties because of these features. They arrived in the United States as children, but they still are likely to have an accent and a distinctively ethnic name. Unless they arrived as very young infants, their speech is likely to have an accent (Bongaerts, Planken, and Schils 1995). Names are more malleable than accents, but undocumented students should not be expected to change their birth name to avoid discrimination.

Individuals with a foreign accent are perceived to be less competent (Baquiran and Nicoladis 2019) and less credible

ment students without DACA status also can fly within the United States if they have a passport from their country of birth. However, attaining a passport is difficult because many undocumented students lack a birth certificate and other paperwork necessary to prove citizenship in their country of birth.

These travel restrictions have an inequitable impact across subfields. Most of my academic work is quantitative. Some colleagues think my refusal to do qualitative research is because I do not value their research. The truth is simpler—I do not do qualitative work because I cannot do qualitative work. How can I travel to conduct interviews or visit archives when I do not know if I will be detained in deportation proceedings when passing airport security? It is easier to simply download the Cooperative Congressional Election Study and run regressions.

#### POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The political science discipline is attempting to diversify its membership to include more minorities, creating groups such as the Politics of Race, Immigration, and Ethnicity Consortium (PRIEC) (Pedraza and Lajevardi 2020) and People of

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(Lev-Ari and Keysar 2010). Although some of this penalty may be due to intelligibility, Kinzler et al. (2009) found that evaluations are lower for those with a foreign accent, even when intelligibility is comparable to native speakers. Those with a foreign accent are discriminated against because their accent is a salient marker of otherness.

Another salient marker of otherness is an undocumented student's name. In a series of experiments, Zhao and Biernat (2017) found that foreign minority graduate students who use

Color Also Know Stuff (Lemi, Osorio, and Rush 2020) to achieve this goal. These are admirable actions but, thus far, these efforts have focused primarily on native-born minorities. If the discipline is concerned about aiding all minorities, it should begin by diverting more resources to the recruitment and training of undocumented students.

As one of the key organizations in the discipline, APSA can play a vital role in promoting change. First, it can review its current status-committee structure. Currently, there are

committees on the status of first-generation, Latinx, LGBT+, women, Asian Pacific American, and Black scholars, among other groups. However, it does not have a status committee for undocumented students. This absence is understandable insofar as there are relatively few undocumented students. It may not be feasible to have an APSA status committee for each group that does not fall into an existing category, but it should be possible to create a “catch-all” status committee. Alternatively, the Latinx and Asian Pacific American committees could form a joint subcommittee on the status of undocumented students.

It may be tempting to claim that undocumented students already are represented by the Latinx status committee, but not all undocumented students are Latinx. The fifth largest country of origin for DACA recipients<sup>8</sup> is South Korea. India, Pakistan, and the Philippines also are major countries of origin for DACA recipients (US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2020). One of the most prominent undocumented scholars in political science was born in Hong Kong (Carney 2013). To subsume undocumented students under the Latinx status committee would isolate the undocumented AAPI community.

Second, APSA can remove citizenship requirements from its current diversity programs (e.g., the Minority Fellowship Program). APSA already has moved in this direction. Before the 2018 academic year, the APSA Minority Fellowship Program was limited to only US citizens; at the time of writing, US citizens, legal permanent residents, and DACA recipients are now eligible. Undocumented students without DACA status are still excluded. Although funding restrictions may not allow the program to be fully open to noncitizens, it should be possible to use discretionary funding to allow for one or two slots. Regional political science associations likewise should review their diversity programs and remove citizenship requirements, if possible. If it is not possible, they should seek to create alternative programs. Of course, there are budget restrictions, but it should be possible to fund at least one slot for a noncitizen in most diversity programs.

Third, we can advocate for the creation of undocumented student centers—and similar groups—to ensure that there are institutional actors advocating on behalf of foreign-born minorities. It may not be feasible to create a standalone center in every university, but surely the top research universities can afford one.

Fourth, individual members of the discipline can do their part as well. If you receive a request for advice from an undocumented student considering entering the academy, treat them the same as if they were a native-born student. These four actions are small ways in which we can do our part to ensure that everyone—regardless of their circumstances at birth—has an opportunity to enter the discipline.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Replication files are available on Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JYJBPG>. ■

#### NOTES

1. A small proportion of undocumented students are white. US Citizenship and Immigration Services (2020) reported that 5,000 DACA recipients are from Poland. There also are significant LGBT+ and Black undocumented populations, albeit their proportion is unknown due to data limitations.
2. It is only relatively recently that the undocumented population has gained access to documentation in the form of consular, municipal, and state identification cards (Ditlmann and Lagunes 2014).
3. Alabama and South Carolina restrict undocumented students from enrolling in state universities (National Conference of State Legislators 2019).
4. Most undocumented students are ineligible for a pathway to citizenship through marriage or employment sponsorship because of the three- and 10-year immigration bars. Undocumented students who have resided unlawfully in the United States for less (more) than a year must leave and wait three (10) years before being allowed to reapply for entry. In practice, this means that an undocumented student would have to live abroad for 10 years before being allowed to reenter through family or employment sponsorship.
5. I counted only those centers or working groups with a devoted staff. I excluded universities that rely solely on student-run groups. Although student-run groups can provide information, their ability to enact institutional change without institutional allies is limited (Rojas 2007).
6. The acronym stands for California, Harvard, Yale, Michigan, Princeton, Stanford.
7. As of July 2020, renewals are issued in one-year increments.
8. Due to data limitations, I assumed that the national-origin composition of the DACA-recipient population mirrors the composition of the undocumented-student population.

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