



Asian Pacific Islanders Knowledge Community

A MINORITY AMONG MINORITIES: THE ROLE OF ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CULTURE RECEPTIVE TO UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

Tracy Lachica Buenavista

Associate Professor in Asian American Studies
California State University, Northridge

Angela Chen

Undocumented Student Program Coordinator
University of California, Los Angeles

Meng So

Academic Counselor/Undocumented Student Program Coordinator
University of California, Berkeley

Advising and Helping



There are more than 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S., and more than 1.2 million are from Asian or Pacific Islander (API) backgrounds (Hoefer, Rytina, & Baker, 2012). Undocumented APIs are a minority within a minority, and there is little research on their experiences (Buenavista, 2013; Buenavista & Chen, 2013; Chan, 2010). We are educators who work directly with API students who have undocumented status and, just as important, we are also members of ethnic communities (Filipino, Taiwanese, and Cambodian) largely affected by undocumented immigration and deportation. Based on the dearth of research on undocumented API students and on our professional and personal experiences with this community, we offer a brief overview of key issues affecting this segment of the undocumented population and ask student affairs practitioners and administrators to consider how they can create a culture receptive to undocumented students that addresses the diversity of this group.

Undocumented API students face similar social, economic, and political barriers as their Latino counterparts. Due to legal constraints related to employment, undocumented APIs are subject to poverty, which severely impacts their ability to access quality K–12 schooling, higher education, health care, and social services intended to mediate challenges associated with low-income status (Ahuja & Chlala, 2013). The intersection between poverty and lack of legal status also constrains undocumented API students and families to live in areas with higher rates of policing and potential threats of deportation. Such stressors, in addition to lack of financial aid, are detrimental to college access and retention of undocumented API students, and are exacerbated by their racialization.

The criminalization of undocumented immigrants has conditioned a practice of “nondisclosure” in which undocumented API students do not reveal their status

to avoid detection and deportation risks (Buenavista, 2013; Chen & Buenavista, 2012). However, this protective practice only perpetuates racial stereotypes of undocumented API students as ashamed of their status, academically sufficient, and having no interest in or need of educational support services. The misconception that API students do not face challenges in higher education represents and facilitates an onslaught of microaggressions directed toward those with undocumented status, including marginalization from programs and services designed to ameliorate undocumented student issues. For example, in our experience, it is not uncommon for APIs to lack a sense of belonging in undocumented student spaces that highlight or emphasize Latina/o cultural practices, migration stories, and community service opportunities.

There have been more attempts to address educational barriers for undocumented students, but there remains a need to develop more aggressive markers of an undocumented student-receptive culture within colleges and universities. For example, the University of California (UC) system has demonstrated a consistent enrollment of undocumented API students (UCOP Students Financial Support, 2012), perhaps due in part to the institutionalization of undocumented student programming. This article's co-authors Angela Chen and Meng So both hold the title of undocumented student program coordinator for the Undocumented Student Program (USP) at UCLA and UC Berkeley, respectively. In their positions, they are central advocates for undocumented students and play an integral role in translating the ever-changing federal, state, and institutional policies into programs and practices that centralize and honor undocumented students.

The USP at UCLA (formerly known as the AB 540 Program) was created in 2009 under the direction of the vice chancellor of student affairs as a response to the organizing efforts of undocumented students and faculty and staff allies, and is strategically situated in the campus resource center (Bruin Resource Center). The USP at UC Berkeley was established in 2012 based on recommendations of an institutional task force and is an integral facet within the campus' Educational Opportunity Program. Although they were developed independent of each other, each respective USP encompasses a holistic approach to service that asserts that undocumented student access and retention are directly related to their sustainability out of school. USP works in partnership with various campus departments to provide academic and financial aid assistance and advisement, mental health services, legal support networks, and programs related to housing and food security for undocumented students and their families.

The establishment of such professional titles and spaces has signaled to undocumented students an institutional commitment to serving their needs and has communicated to the larger community that students with undocumented

status are important members of the campus. Chen and So's positions also reflect a related higher education issue, which is the significance of institutional leaders from diverse backgrounds. While the institutionalization of undocumented student support services has helped reach API students who do not often participate in student-initiated programs, we cannot dismiss the fact that as Asian American practitioners, Chen and So's presence is a notable representation of the ways that API perspectives and experiences inform how outreach is conducted and support services are provided to undocumented API students. Thus, developing an undocumented student-receptive culture is necessarily tied to larger commitments to increasing diversity at all levels of higher education—from student, faculty, and staff representation to academic and student services development and programming.

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