

# 8

*This chapter introduces Institutional Undocu-Competence (IUC), an institutional capacity framework emerging from a critical analysis of cultural competence, aimed to inform community colleges' efforts to better support the growing undocumented student population.*

## Undocumented Students at the Community College: Creating Institutional Capacity

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As undocumented students become more represented on college campuses, there is a growing need to establish appropriate institutional practices to support them. Community colleges serve as the primary gateway to higher education for undocumented students due to the significant savings in tuition costs and the flexibility in enrollment options, yet few studies have examined how institutions can build capacity to support undocumented student enrollment, retention, and academic success (e.g., Chen, 2013). The unfair treatment of undocumented immigrants in their pursuit of higher education is well documented in prior research and thus will not be addressed in depth in this chapter (e.g., Pérez, 2010, 2011). Rather, the present chapter proposes clear steps toward strengthening what we call Institutional Undocu-Competence (IUC), an institutional capacity framework, to assess how well community colleges are serving this student population.

IUC emerges from a critique of cultural competence (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009). Cultural competence in higher education has largely focused on merely promoting awareness of diversity and equality while failing to hold institutions accountable for changes to improve equity for underserved populations with particular needs, such as undocumented students. IUC draws from social justice frameworks by demanding action from institutions serving undocumented students. Our previous research suggests that in order for institutions of higher education to build IUC they must

challenge themselves by training faculty and staff, advocating for students, building appropriate college outreach and recruitment procedures, increasing financial aid, supporting undocumented student organizations on campus, providing appropriate health and psychological services, and creating a visible welcoming campus environment. The following section provides a discussion of the necessary steps to develop IUC.

### **Why Are Undocumented Students an Equity Issue?**

The U.S. higher education system has made important progress in the past decade to increase the enrollment, retention, and degree completion of immigrant students. However, undocumented students continue to face campus marginalization and discrimination. To be fully inclusive of all immigrant students, higher education institutions need to focus on addressing the various challenges faced by undocumented students (Dozier, 1995).

The lack of federal immigration reform laws has resulted in a wide range of localized enforcement of immigration laws that vary dramatically from state to state. Whereas some states have adopted policies that extend the rights of immigrant communities including eligibility for drivers' licenses, student loans, and professional licenses, other states have adopted policies that are restrictive and punitive in nature, denying basic needs such as health care and education and criminalizing undocumented status. In light of the variability of contexts that undocumented students navigate, we call on institutions of higher education to consistently and openly support this underserved population.

### **Policy and Assessment Recommendations**

Given the risks associated with disclosing immigration status and the potential fear of retribution faced by students and their advocates and allies, campus policies should ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, institutions should make their position in support of undocumented students clear and visible through written policy so as to prevent stigmatization of undocumented students by deeming their presence a secret. Such policies would encourage students to seek necessary academic and social support and participate in campus assessment efforts without fear of disclosing their status.

IUC embraces an understanding of the resilience to the challenges faced by undocumented students. In order to better understand undocumented student needs, institutions must implement a campus assessment centered on the input of undocumented students while considering the experiences of advocates and allies. Various data collection methods should be implemented in order to obtain diverse input. For example, focus groups and one-on-one interviews may provide depth and breadth of data from students who feel comfortable sharing their experience with school staff, faculty, and administration. Anonymous online survey methods may

complement this information with input from students who either do not feel comfortable sharing their experiences openly or whose time demands do not allow for them to meet with school representatives beyond their academic responsibilities.

Institutional assessments should examine and modify administrative procedures that may inadvertently stigmatize students. For example, many undocumented students have been discouraged from applying to college or completing their degrees due to their status by recruitment or financial aid staff who are not properly trained to answer undocumented students' questions about the support available to them. Another example is when students find out an application for admissions does not allow for them to select "Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient" or "undocumented" as their legal status and they are forced to choose an option that does not accurately describe their experience and needs. Yet another example is when undocumented students are wrongfully classified as international students. These examples are a few of many processes that stigmatize students by not recognizing their unique circumstances in institutional policies or procedures to validate their presence within the student body.

Because immigration policies change constantly, IUC needs assessment should be a continuous and ongoing process. Although institutional assessment results may vary depending on local contexts, in the next section we provide several suggestions based on previous research as a starting point for institutions to gather baseline information. Undocumented students' needs include specifically tailored college outreach and recruitment, advocacy, financial aid, institutional support for student groups, and mental health services. IUC requires action on behalf of the institution and its representatives, placing training of college faculty and staff at the core of its execution. The importance of training college faculty and staff is discussed in the next section followed by an in-depth discussion of students' needs.

## Training College Faculty and Staff

Training college faculty and staff is one of the first steps toward IUC because it solidifies the institution's commitment to undocumented students. School personnel need to be knowledgeable about the unique circumstances that limit undocumented student enrollment, retention, transfer, and graduation. Once faculty, counselors, admissions staff, financial aid officers, and registrars are informed, they will be better able to establish institutional policies and procedures to reduce instances of exclusion and marginality. The risks and stigma associated with disclosing their undocumented status make finding allies an arduous process for undocumented students. Students may erroneously assume that professionals or faculty who share their ethnic background will be sympathetic to their situation only to find the opposite to be true upon disclosing their status. Undocumented students

are often scrutinized and humiliated by admissions and registrar office personnel when they seek services and as a consequence, they develop great anxiety. Furthermore, undocumented students often experience microaggressions in the form of intentional and unintentional everyday insults, indignities, and demeaning messages that perpetuate inequities by conveying oppressive ideologies. IUC training should include ways to identify and address microaggressions directed at undocumented students.

The more informed student affairs professionals are about the sociopolitical contexts of undocumented students' lives, the better they can meet their needs. IUC training should include information about the local, state, and federal laws that affect undocumented students at that particular institution. It is of utmost importance that IUC training highlights the value of undocumented students' contributions, their resilience, and their legal rights. When undocumented students see that student affairs professionals know about and demonstrate an ethic of care, it increases the likelihood of developing trust, which can result in higher use of student support services and further assist student affairs professionals in supporting students' academic achievement and personal growth.

### Visible and Open Advocacy

Colleges should establish visible networks of allies to facilitate information dissemination across the campus community. One of the best ways community college personnel can serve undocumented students is to become visible advocates for them. IUC calls for advocates and allies to make themselves visible to undocumented students because their risk of disclosure as advocate/ally is relatively lower than the risk of disclosure faced by a student as an undocumented immigrant. Self-identification as advocates and allies by campus personnel reaffirms the institution's commitment to serving undocumented students (Pérez, Munoz, Alcantar, & Guarneros, 2011).

Advocacy is central to student affairs work, and it should not be restricted to students' lives on campus. Rather, advocacy should include recognition of the ways that the legal and policy contexts off campus shape community college students' lives. Community college administrators can also work to build coalitions and partnerships with grassroots and community-based organizations (CBOs) that advocate for immigrants' rights. Principles of social justice counseling can also guide efforts to support undocumented students. These efforts should involve addressing issues such as poverty, pollution, health care access, street violence, and institutional racism through psychoeducational workshops and conferences in order to promote awareness and further encourage advocacy.

Community college advocates and allies should build trust with undocumented students by demonstrating an ethic of care, justice, and autonomy. Students share sensitive information with individuals whom they feel they can trust and who can provide honest, direct, and informed advice while

protecting their confidentiality. Therefore, it is important for faculty and staff to create safe environments for students by demonstrating an awareness of the challenges that undocumented students face. It is critical to be sensitive when a student chooses to disclose his or her immigration status and even more critical for school personnel to disclose themselves as advocates and allies. The training of school personnel that IUC calls for is a building block for establishing the trust necessary to identify students' needs, and advocate for students.

## College Outreach and Recruitment

College outreach and recruitment are other important areas that require new solutions to the admissions and matriculation difficulties faced by undocumented students. Effective college outreach and recruitment efforts need to consider the ways in which undocumented students are systematically excluded from participation in college-prep activities in high school. With a deeper understanding of undocumented students, community colleges can create more effective collaborations with high schools and baccalaureate-awarding institutions to substantially increase undocumented students' pathways to higher education (Pérez, 2010).

IUC sets the discussion of institutional support for undocumented students within specific local contexts and calls for active collaboration among institutions. A recommendation for establishing these collaborations would be to identify an IUC committee of staff, faculty, and students at each institution to meet on a regular basis with the IUC committees of nearby institutions to share their progress on strengthening IUC and ways participating institutions can support each other. The meetings of IUC committees should take place among and between high schools, community colleges, baccalaureate-awarding institutions, and graduate professional schools.

It is important to disseminate information about the matriculation process for undocumented students, scholarship and student services programs, and transfer information to high school educators and students. IUC requires that student affairs professionals expand their outreach and recruitment beyond the traditional mechanisms of college fairs, campus visits, and high school visits. Because undocumented students may be afraid to seek out information, it is imperative that they are provided with information on opportunities for legal employment, higher education opportunities, and funding for college. Outreach to undocumented students should also encompass a consistent and long-standing presence in the community to include schools and culturally relevant community locations. When undocumented students receive timely and accurate information about their postsecondary options, they are much more likely to prepare for and apply to college and complete their degrees. It is important to note that like all community college students, undocumented students enroll in community college for various reasons (Jauregui, Slate, & Stallone Brown, 2008). IUC

urges the institution to identify the goals of undocumented students upon enrolling to tailor student support services accordingly.

It is important to consider that many undocumented students are also first-generation college students. In general, first-generation students select institutions based on the availability of financial aid, proximity to home, and their ability to work while enrolled. Many first-generation undocumented college students feel conflicted between their own desires to pursue postsecondary education and their sense of duty to be an integral part of their family structures. Given these and other dynamics, student affairs practitioners must consider these overlapping factors to ensure that undocumented students succeed.

## Financial Aid

The financial difficulties that undocumented students encounter are among the most difficult obstacle to overcome (Chavez, Soriano, & Oliverrez, 2007). Due to the cumbersome nature of the college and scholarship application processes, undocumented students require significant individualized support. The support and information they receive at school plays a large role in determining whether or not they successfully apply to college and secure financial assistance. Even in states with in-state tuition policies that make college more affordable for undocumented students, many are still unable to afford higher education.

IUC is demonstrated when community college personnel are proactive in providing all available resources for undocumented students. Waiting for students to inquire about financial aid options places the largest amount of responsibility on the student. Recognizing the microaggressions and stigmatizing experiences that undocumented students face when seeking resources from financial aid offices, IUC calls for targeted dissemination of resources. One example is creating pamphlets with financial aid information specifically for undocumented students and distributing these in resource centers, cafeterias, classrooms, and bulletin boards outside of the financial aid offices.

IUC is also demonstrated when schools reach beyond their usual limits to raise funds and advocate for undocumented students outside of the institution. Schools should work together with local philanthropic organizations and businesses to develop scholarships specifically for undocumented students. Because scholarship providers are often unaware of the challenges to college access that undocumented students encounter, the role of campus-based advocates is crucial in educating scholarship providers about the importance of extending aid to undocumented students.

Furthermore, IUC calls for institutions to explore other nontraditional ways to provide financial assistance to students such as stipends for special projects or service and awards for books and materials. Because of the vulnerable financial state of undocumented immigrant households,

community colleges should provide specialized informational sessions on the pitfalls of the student loans for which undocumented students are eligible, which often involve predatory lending practices from private financial institutions and banks. IUC is defined by the institution's ability to provide necessary information and resources regarding financial aid to undocumented students and advocating on their behalf when working with philanthropic organizations.

### **Institutional Support for Student Groups**

Undocumented-student organizations are critically important sources of support for community college students. The general lack of information among school officials about undocumented students prompted the development of student-led campus groups that provide information about higher education access to students, parents, teachers and counselors. In California, student information sharing and advocacy within higher education settings are moving an increasing number of students through California's public college and university system by drawing on the resources in their student networks. These organizations have pioneered student-initiated recruitment and retention strategies that take into account the pre-college contexts of undocumented students. They draw on the wealth of assets that current and previous undocumented students share from their actual experiences as well as academic research, institutional resources, and the participation of other student and educator allies. By centering on the social contexts of undocumented students' precollege lives, college student groups validate students' struggles to persist in higher education as undocumented students.

Continuing to recognize and support the efforts of student-led initiatives demonstrates a high level of commitment on behalf of the school, strengthening relationships between the school and students, which in turn facilitates transmission of information and quality of assessments. Recognizing student groups as official school clubs or organizations legitimizes their cause and makes funding opportunities available to support their efforts, demonstrating an ethic of autonomy and justice. Including these student groups in orientation materials and presentations demonstrates to incoming students an ethic of care.

### **Health and Psychological Services**

Undocumented students may suffer from anxiety and fear and, as a consequence, are likely to develop mental and physical health problems that may place them at risk of dropping out if an effective support system is not in place. To strengthen IUC, the responsibility of training staff and faculty must be shifted away from the student and toward the institution in order to build trusting relationships, through which information can

be transmitted. In the case of relationships with general and mental health providers, this shift is extremely important, as it is one of the most vulnerable interactions that students must navigate in college.

It is essential that school health providers, including psychologists and counselors, receive thorough training on the socioemotional experiences of undocumented students (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). Workshops focusing on anxiety, alienation, depression, stress management, and posttraumatic stress disorder are just some of the services that can be tailored to undocumented students. Colleges should also facilitate student-led peer counseling and social support efforts and provide general information regarding access to health care for undocumented students. These efforts can help reduce student distress, anxiety, and other health concerns, thus reducing or eliminating a major barrier that prevents these students from applying to and persisting at the community college.

### **Creating a Welcoming Campus Environment**

Students who can access campus resources have more opportunities to develop personal and professional skills. Undocumented students need institutional supportive staff who are sensitive and empathetic to promote engagement and foster validation. IUC calls for visible support of undocumented students and their allies at all levels of interaction with the school. One way to ensure that resources are accessible to all and that the institution's support of undocumented students is visible is to establish an office of equal standing with other student resource offices where campus-specific resources are accessible to staff, faculty, students, and potential applicants.

Institutions should also help students transfer into accredited bachelor's degree-granting institutions and plan for life after college. The identification of role models and mentors is an important component in the career development process of undocumented students. In some fields or industries, finding these mentors is a challenge, especially with the compounded element of immigration status. Career center staff should work diligently to include allies for undocumented students in their professional networks so that they can refer students to professionals who are willing to help them navigate barriers and become career mentors. Some campus career centers ensure that career counselors are well versed in the needs of undocumented students in order to customize services. These efforts facilitate their full integration into campus life and reaffirm goals beyond community college.

### **Conclusion**

Previous research on 4-year colleges provides a good starting point for conceptualizing institutional capacity to serve undocumented students. Community colleges present a conflicting context due to substantially higher enrollment of undocumented students and disparities in the availability of



institutional resources. Our research suggests that although some community colleges have implemented various efforts to recruit, enroll, and support undocumented students, others have taken few efforts, if any (Pérez, 2011; Pérez & Cortés, 2011), to support this vastly underserved population. The IUC framework asserts that it is possible to build institutional support for undocumented students through an ethic of care, justice, and autonomy.

In order to exercise IUC, community colleges should demonstrate an understanding of the challenges that undocumented students overcome in order to access and persist in higher education. Institutions should carefully balance proactively reaching out to meet undocumented students' needs while recognizing and respecting their autonomy. To do so, institutions must strengthen and tailor existing resources such as mental and physical health, career advising, and financial aid services to serve undocumented students' needs. Institutions can genuinely reach out to undocumented students by reducing the perceived social stigma of their status on campus. To do so, institutions should highlight existing networks of allies and advocates by publicly affirming their presence through institutionalized training for all personnel and by creating IUC networks across institutions. Furthermore, institutions must recognize undocumented students' resilience by openly supporting platforms through which students can exercise self-advocacy.

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