

Empowering Undocumented Students *A Guide for Career Services*

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BACKGROUND

Introduction

Undocumented students frequently face significant obstacles when building a resume or starting a career because of their immigration status. This guide is a resource to help career service professionals at higher education institutions better support undocumented students as they grapple with these challenges.

This guide provides practical strategies and resources to help undocumented students achieve their career aspirations. Specifically, it focuses on identifying the assets and unique skills undocumented students bring to the table when they embark on their career path. It provides tips for tailoring some of the typical support career service centers offer—such as networking, resume building, and interview preparation—specifically to undocumented students. You will also gain insight into the political dynamics that impact undocumented students.

Support for undocumented students on campuses should be holistic. Career services are a hugely important part of creating a supportive environment. We hope that this guide provides career service professionals with the knowledge and tools needed to support undocumented students in achieving their full potential in the workforce.

Brief Overview of the Challenges Undocumented Students Face in Pursuing Their Career Goals

Undocumented students often encounter significant challenges when it comes to pursuing their career goals due to their backgrounds and immigration status. (See the next section for more details on who undocumented students are.) Many undocumented students are also first-generation college students, so they may not have the same base of knowledge that some of their peers possess when it comes to a job search, applying for jobs, salary negotiations, or workplace norms. In addition, legal restrictions may limit undocumented students' job opportunities, and discrimination in the workplace can hinder their advancement. These restrictions can implicate

the ability to access professional or occupational licensure to practice in the field of their choice, to be hired by state or federal government entities, or to participate in popular job search platforms such as Handshake.¹

Despite these obstacles, career service professionals can be instrumental in helping undocumented students end up in fulfilling careers. One of the simplest, yet often overlooked actions that career service centers can take is improving transparency. It's important to invite undocumented students in and to note clearly what opportunities are accessible to them. It can be extremely taxing for students to continue to try to land jobs or internships only to find out midway through the process that they are ineligible because of their undocumented status. Many students have noted that this is especially an obstacle at career fairs, where they are ineligible for many jobs, and where there is often little to no insight provided regarding what opportunities are open to them.

Naming up front that a position is accessible to “all applicants, regardless of citizenship status” or “U.S. citizens and permanent residents only” saves a lot of time and heartache. Read more about the importance of providing clarity in the Higher Ed Immigration Portal's [Career Counseling Support for Undocumented Students](#) resource.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS FACE

Who Are Undocumented Immigrants?

The term “undocumented” refers to individuals residing in the country without proper authorization, encompassing those who entered the U.S. without the government’s permission and those whose visas have expired. There are an estimated [11 million undocumented people](#) from all over the world currently residing in the United States.

Undocumented College Students

Undocumented college students often arrived in the United States as young [children under the age of 12](#). Despite growing up in the United States and considering themselves Americans, they lack a pathway to become U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents.

Some undocumented students at your college or university may be enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program. The DACA Program, created under the Obama Administration in 2012, provides temporary work authorization and relief from deportation for individuals who came to the United States as children and meet certain eligibility requirements. More than [900,000 K-12 and higher education students](#) are undocumented, yet only 140,000 of them are current DACA recipients. This means that *the majority of undocumented students at colleges and universities do not have DACA*. The DACA Program is now closed to new applicants due to ongoing litigation, meaning that many high school and college-aged students who otherwise would have been eligible cannot now apply.

Undocumented students without DACA do not have the same work authorization or protections from deportation that their DACA-recipient peers possess.

Navigating this complex legal landscape can be challenging for undocumented students. Career service professionals play an important role in providing information and guidance on the policies and programs that may impact their ability to pursue their career goals. By staying informed about the latest changes and developments in immigration policy and providing targeted support and resources to undocumented students, career services can help these students have the best possible chance to succeed in the workforce. You can stay informed by following Informed Immigrant ([Instagram](#)) and FWD.us ([Instagram](#), [Twitter](#)) on social media.

1 Jobs posted on Handshake and other popular job boards are almost exclusively available to individuals who are authorized to work in the United States, making this ubiquitous resource unavailable to undocumented college students and graduates without DACA.

Key Considerations for Undocumented Students When Pursuing Career Opportunities

Undocumented students face a number of legal obstacles when pursuing career opportunities, and it's important for career service educators to be aware of these issues and provide guidance and support to help students navigate them.

ELIGIBILITY FOR EMPLOYMENT

Undocumented students may be restricted from certain job opportunities due to their immigration status, even if they have employment authorization. These may include restrictions on government employment, jobs requiring a security clearance, or jobs requiring professional licenses. While some of these restrictions are determined by federal law and policy, others, including access to professional and occupational licenses, are determined at the state level. Examples include restrictions on becoming licensed nurses, teachers, and engineers, depending on the state and job requirements (for more information on professional and occupational licensure requirements, visit the [Higher Ed Immigration Portal](#)).

Only [six states](#)—California, Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Nevada, and New Jersey—have comprehensive access to professional and occupational licensure for undocumented individuals, with or without DACA, meaning that undocumented individuals can apply for and receive professional and occupational licenses for whichever industries they are required by these states.

Career counselors can provide guidance on career options that align with the student's immigration status and future plans, considering policy changes and discussing career paths that may be more accessible or challenging for undocumented students.

Below are a couple of examples of state licensing regimes that undocumented students must navigate. It is important to note that these laws and regulations are subject to change. Undocumented students should consult with legal and/or [professional organizations](#) for the latest information on licensure requirements in their state.

EXAMPLES:

- **Registered Nurses** - In all 50 states and DC, working as a registered nurse requires a professional license. However, despite being able to graduate with a nursing degree, undocumented people may not be able to work as nurses, depending on state policy. Unfortunately, many undocumented students have been unaware of the restrictions professional licensure may have on their careers until after they have already begun a nursing program.
- **Teachers** - Confusingly, even if an undocumented person can comprehensively access professional licensure in a state, they may not be able to teach. There are often additional requirements that individuals must meet to become teachers. In states that permit undocumented individuals to access teachers' licenses and certifications, they still may not be able to get a job at a school without work authorization. In addition, to become a certified teacher, individuals often must undergo a background check that may be difficult to obtain without a social security number. While DACA recipients possess a social security number, undocumented individuals without DACA do not.

DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS FOR EMPLOYMENT

Undocumented students may lack the documentation required for employment, such as a social security number or work authorization. *Undocumented individuals should never misrepresent themselves on any employment application or other official paperwork by claiming to be a lawful permanent resident or U.S. citizen.* Misrepresentation of their immigration status and/or engaging in "[unauthorized employment](#)" may jeopardize their ability to adjust their immigration status in the future. Undocumented students should seek legal advice if questions related to immigration status arise in the context of an employment application.

Employers are required to verify the identity and employment eligibility of all employees by completing [Form I-9](#), which requires documentation such as a driver's license, passport, or social security card. Undocumented individuals may not have access to these documents, which can make it difficult for them to secure employment.

Individuals with DACA will be able to use their Employment Authorization Document (EAD) to establish their identity and employment eligibility on the I-9 Form. This [DACA Guidance for Employers](#) from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) clarifies for employers ([List A, item 4](#)) that an EAD is an acceptable document for this purpose.

Career service counselors can play a critical role in helping undocumented students navigate these documentation requirements and identify strategies for obtaining the necessary documents. This may involve providing guidance on how to obtain a tax ID number or [Individual Taxpayer Identification Number \(ITIN\)](#), which may be used for [tax purposes](#) for individuals who do not have and are ineligible to obtain a social security number.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

Entrepreneurship and other non-employment-based opportunities may be appropriate for some students seeking work experience. Consider encouraging students to explore opportunities, such as:

- **Entrepreneurship**

Resources: ▶ [Spark](#)
▶ [Immigrants Rising](#)

- **Independent Contracting or Freelancing**

Resources: ▶ Immigrants Rising - [5 Tips for Educators to Help Students Get Started as Independent Contractors/Freelancers](#)
▶ Immigrants Rising - [Working for Yourself Guide](#)

- **Worker Cooperatives**

Resources: ▶ [Democracy at Work Institute](#)

While they are still studying, there are also ways for undocumented students to gain career experience through [fellowships and other non-employment-based opportunities](#). You can advocate for your institution to offer these types of opportunities.

DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT

Undocumented students may also face discrimination and harassment in the workplace, which can limit their opportunities for career advancement. Career services should provide guidance to help students understand their rights in the workplace and how to handle discrimination. Students should know that:

- [Federal law prohibits](#) discrimination on the basis of national origin and, in many cases, citizenship for people with valid work authorization in hiring and firing. According to the [Department of Justice](#) (DOJ), "Firing employees who have the legal right to work, such as DACA recipients with work authorization, based on their immigration status, national origin, or assumptions about these characteristics may violate federal, state, or local law." An individual with valid work authorization should consult with an attorney if they are fired or experience an adverse employment action due to immigration status or national origin.
- During the hiring process, employers are required to confirm the applicant's identity and work authorization, [not their immigration status](#).
- Employers cannot specify which documents an employee is required to use to establish employment authorization, and DACA employment authorization cards are [legally accepted](#) as proof of work authorization. However, some DACA recipients have reported challenges getting their new employers to recognize this document. If this happens, the person should consult a [licensed attorney](#).

DEVELOPING CAREER SKILLS

Identifying Skills and Building Up Students

Undocumented students, just like all students, can benefit from developing skills and practicing interviews through their career services center. Because many undocumented students are also first-generation college students, they may be coming to career services with a different baseline of knowledge about job searching and launching their career. When working with undocumented students, you may need to tailor your approach according to students' varying life experiences to meet students where they are and help them thrive in their job search.

NETWORKING

Career services can help undocumented students build their professional networks by connecting them with alumni, professionals, and other students who may be able to provide guidance, advice, and job leads. It can be especially helpful for undocumented students to connect with undocumented alumni or other alumni who have pursued entrepreneurial opportunities or self-employment. If your institution does not already have an established undocumented alumni association network, this can be an invaluable tool for current and future students. See the [Undocumented Alumni Association of UCLA](#) and [California State University, San Bernardino \(CSUSB\) Undocumented Alumni Chapter](#) for examples. Below are some examples of other professional networking opportunities.

- [UndocuProfessionals](#) - provides a mentorship program and leads to jobs at organizations that want to support undocumented professionals.
- [Pre-Health Dreamers](#) - promotes the inclusion of undocumented individuals in the healthcare and health sciences fields.

RESUME BUILDING

Due to non-traditional backgrounds and employment experiences, undocumented students may have unique skills and qualifications that they need assistance teasing out in their resumes.

- Find ways to amplify students' skills such as child care, translating, managing a budget, fixing cars, carpentry, farming, selling goods at flea markets etc. Immigrant students may have more non-traditional work experience than other students. It is important for educators to affirm these non-traditional skills and to find ways to help students amplify them in resumes.
 - ▶ Using the ["funds of knowledge" framework](#) can help educators and students identify the experience they are bringing to the table from contributing to their household and other work while they were growing up.
- [CareerOneStop](#) can also help identify students' applicable skills.
- Undocumented and other immigrant students may be more likely to have gaps in their resumes due to changes in their immigration status or for other personal reasons. Career services should help these students learn how to address these gaps in interviews and/or cover letters.

INTERVIEW PREPARATION

Undocumented students may feel more sensitivity than other students about entering interviews. Career services should provide some guidance to help students know what questions potential employers can and cannot ask during the job interview and how to respond when they are asked inappropriate questions. Career services should also make sure students are aware of what information they are required and not required to disclose when applying for a job.

- Potential employers have the right to ask if applicants are legally eligible to work in the United States and if they can provide proof of their work authorization.

- If an applicant has a valid employment authorization document (EAD) through DACA, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), or another immigration program they **are** legally eligible to work in the United States, and they do not have to provide any more details about their immigration status.
- Employers are **prohibited** from asking about an applicant's immigration history or status, including their country of origin or first language. However, if the job requires proficiency in a language other than English, employers can ask about the candidate's fluency in other languages.
- Disclosing one's immigration status is a deeply personal decision, and it's essential to know that it's never a requirement during job or client interviews.
- The Yale Office of Career Strategy [offers some options](#) for how job applicants can respond if they are faced with illegal interview questions.

In some cases, students may also want to identify immigrant-friendly businesses to apply to. [TheDream.US Career Connections List](#) provides the names of companies that have used their platforms to speak out in support of DACA and DACA recipients.

Professional Development Opportunities for Undocumented Students

INTERNSHIP AND FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMS

While internship and externship programs can provide undocumented students with valuable work experience and help them develop skills that are relevant to their career goals, they can also be particularly difficult to navigate. If a student does not possess a social security number, they may only be eligible for unpaid internships. It can be extremely difficult to choose between building up their resume and work experience with an unpaid internship or opting for another opportunity that provides income. If your institution does not already have them, developing funding sources that provide scholarships, stipends, or other aid to students participating in unpaid internships can help give undocumented and other low-income students a better chance to engage in the internship market.

Career service educators can support efforts to create inclusive fellowship programs in their institutions by partnering with other departments on campus and utilizing this tool: [Creating Fellowship Programs: For Educational Institutions](#). Other examples of internships and fellowships include:

1. [Labor Summer Internship - UC Berkeley Labor Center](#) (national)
2. [Dream Summer - UCLA Labor Center | Dream Resource Center](#) (national)
3. [Immigrants Rising's List of Scholarships and Fellowships](#)

Career service educators can help undocumented students identify and access these resources and programs by providing guidance on how to navigate eligibility requirements and application processes.

BUILDING A SUPPORT SYSTEM ON CAMPUS

In talking to students and educators at colleges and universities across the country, we have heard that many undocumented students are reluctant to engage with career service centers because they or their friends have been turned away in the past or discouraged when staff did not know how to support them. In addition to learning from and sharing the information in this guide, we want to provide some tips for fostering a sense of community and bringing undocumented students into your career service center.

1. Offer training and education for career service staff. Educate staff and faculty about the challenges that undocumented students face and how career services can support these students as they embark on internships and jobs. Include information on cultural competency and sensitivity to help staff and faculty better understand the lived realities and experiences of undocumented students.
 - ▶ Check out examples of “UndocuAlly” trainings from [Sacramento State University](#) and [Cuesta College](#).

2. Bring undocumented students to career services early. Run programming targeted at undocumented and first-generation students who are in their first and second years on campus to let them know what support the career service center offers.
3. Advertise through the undocumented student resource center and other student groups. If your college or university has an undocumented student resource center, collaborate with the coordinator to reach undocumented students. Intentional outreach to diasporic affinity organizations such as Black, African, Caribbean, Latinx, South Asian, Chinese, and other student associations can also be fruitful.
4. Facilitate access to legal assistance. Collaborate with other campus allies and/or legal clinics to provide legal consultations that can assess opportunities that individuals might have to adjust their status, including through employment-based options.
5. Create support groups. Encourage undocumented students to get together and share their experiences and trepidations applying for internships and jobs.
6. Visually show your support. Include visual markers of support for undocumented students in your career services center including [posters](#) and stickers.

CONCLUSION

Career service professionals play a critical role in equipping every student with the necessary tools and resources to excel in their desired professions. Given the unique obstacles that undocumented students encounter in their pursuit of employment and career growth, it is imperative that educators stay informed about their rights, available resources, and [career pathways](#). Through specialized career counseling, job search support, and access to alternative employment options, educators can empower undocumented students to navigate these challenges and pursue their career aspirations with confidence. Ultimately, by prioritizing career services for undocumented students, educators can help create a more equitable and inclusive workforce for all.

RESOURCES LINKED IN THIS GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

- [Higher Ed Immigration Portal - Career Counseling Support for Undocumented Students](#)

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS FACE

- [Migration Policy Institute | Unauthorized Immigrant Population Profiles](#)
- [Presidents' Alliance Breakdown of Dreamer Populations – Both With and Without DACA](#)
- [Presidents' Alliance Report: Undocumented Students in Higher Education: How Many Students are in U.S. Colleges and Universities, and Who Are They?](#)
- [FWD.us | Dreamers by the Numbers](#)
- [Informed Immigrant's Instagram](#) - for political updates and other resources
- FWD.us's [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) - for political updates

ELIGIBILITY FOR EMPLOYMENT

- [Higher Ed Immigration Portal - Portal to the States](#) - examines in-state tuition, financial aid, professional licensure, and driver's license policies by state

DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS FOR EMPLOYMENT

- [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services I-9, Employment Eligibility Verification](#)
- [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Guidance for Employers](#)

- [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Chapter 6 - Unauthorized Employment \(INA 245\(c\)\(2\) and INA 245\(c\)\(8\)\)](#)
- [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Form I-9 Acceptable Documents](#)
- [Immigrants Rising ITIN Guide](#)

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

- [Spark powered by Immigrants Rising](#)
- [Immigrants Rising's 5 Tips For Educators To Help Students Get Started As Independent Contractors/Freelancers](#)
- [Immigrants Rising Working for Yourself Guide](#)
- [Democracy at Work Institute - What is a Worker Cooperative?](#)
- [Presidents' Alliance Fellowships and Other Non-Employment Based Opportunities for Undocumented Students](#)

DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT

- [Department of Justice Immigrant and Employee Rights Section](#)
- [USCIS Form I-9 Instructions](#)
- [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Form I-9 Acceptable Documents](#)
- [Immigration Advocates Network - National Immigration Legal Services Directory](#)

DEVELOPING CAREER SKILLS

- [Undocumented Alumni Association of UCLA](#)
- [California State University, San Bernardino \(CSUSB\) Undocumented Alumni Chapter](#)
- [UndocuProfessionals Networks](#)
- [Pre-Health Dreamers](#)
- [Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms](#)
- [CareerOneStop](#)
- [Yale University Office of Career Strategy - Illegal Interview Questions](#)
- [TheDream.US Career Connections List](#)

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

- [Immigrants Rising's Creating Fellowship Programs: For Educational Institutions](#)
- [Labor Summer Internship - UC Berkeley Labor Center](#)
- [Dream Summer - UCLA Labor Center | Dream Resource Center](#)
- [Immigrants Rising's List of Scholarships and Fellowships](#)

BUILDING A SUPPORT SYSTEM ON CAMPUS

- [Sacramento State UndocuAlly Training](#)
- [Cuesta College UndocuAlly Training](#)
- [Immigrants Rising and ImmSchools Inclusivity Poster](#)

CONCLUSION

- [Presidents' Alliance Career Pathways for Undocumented Students With and Without Work Authorization: Income Generation](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Informed Immigrant - 5 Reasons Undocumented Immigrants Should Go Into Tech](#)
- [Informed Immigrant - How to Find an Immigration Lawyer](#)
- [Immigrants Rising Resources Overview](#)
- [Freelancers Union](#) - training and resources for freelancers
- [Small Business Majority](#) - resources for current and aspiring small business owners
- [Accion Opportunity Fund](#) - loans for small businesses
- [Parker Dewey Micro-Internships](#) - accessible to individuals with an ITIN