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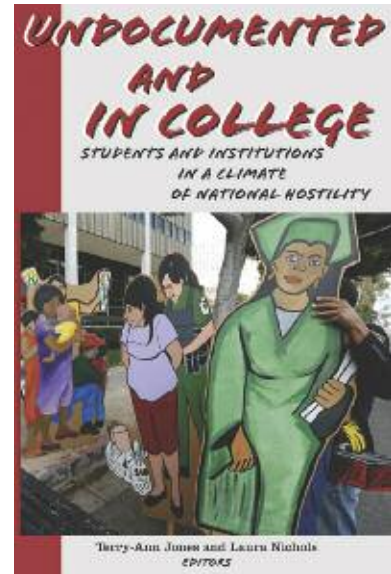
# Undocumented: The Stress of Status

By Terry-Ann Jones and Laura Nichols

*I go through certain stages, phases; every now and then, I become extremely depressed because of this. I block out everything and everyone because I don't want to tell them... I can't explain it to my friends because I don't want them knowing, I can't talk to my family because I don't want them to get upset with me, for me, and I just keep it to myself and keep everything bottled up inside. And this thing just happened to me, actually, when the Dream Act wasn't passed... I had my plans, I had dreams, again, and that was crushed, and I think every time it gets crushed, I get crushed with it, I just don't know what to do anymore.*

These are the reflections of "Sam," a first-year college bio-chem major who came to the United States when he was nine. At that time he did not understand the terms "undocumented" and "status." He excelled at school and was very involved in outside activities. Not until he tried to get his driver's license did he fully understand "my situation." Then the moderation of his dreams, the uncertainty, and fear became constants in his life.

From 2010 to 2012 researchers from Fairfield University, Loyola University Chicago, and Santa Clara University talked to students who were undocumented and attending Jesuit colleges. The project culminated in a book, *Undocumented and in College: Students and Institutions in a Climate of National Hostility* (Fordham University Press, 2017). At that time, there was no Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, and managing fear was a part of the students' daily lives: fear of being stopped by police, fear of their own or their family members' deportation, fear that the wrong people would find out their status and report them, and a heavy heart about the future. Most of the students lived in mixed-status families with younger siblings who were born in the U.S.,



and they contrasted the freedoms of their siblings to their own but also worried about who would take care of them if their parents were deported. Many students also struggled financially, unable to work legally.

Students who are undocumented are, of course, prone to experiencing the various forms of challenges to mental well-being of any college student. Further, at age 18, students who do not have legal status in the United States suddenly face additional stressors and daily realities that they must balance along with everything else they experience as college students.

The political climate of our campuses is an additional stressor. Many students said they

were shocked and dismayed at the conversations they would overhear in the dorms, in classroom discussions, and in the dining halls, “things you would never hear in our home communities,” which revealed ignorance about immigration. And there was the tacit assumption that no one was undocumented *here*. But the sheer number of undocumented persons graduating from U.S. high schools means that likely all of our colleges have students in similar situations.

Students found support from having at least one knowledgeable person on campus who could point them to trusted people and resources. They also benefited from legal assistance and

connection to graduate and professional schools where they could continue their schooling as they awaited an always hoped-for pathway to citizenship.

DACA, although temporary, reduced stress by offering students who were eligible (and able to afford it) a temporary reprieve through the ability to work legally, travel more freely, take internships, and imagine a future where they would be able to actualize their learning and successes in their chosen majors and professions. With the revocation of DACA, students are back to dealing with old fears with the added worry that by having revealed their status and provided information about themselves to apply

for DACA they have put other family members at risk of being identified and deported. Compassionate, humane federal policy has the ability to reduce unnecessary stress and contribute to the well being of our students and alumni so they can thrive.

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*Laura Nichols is an associate professor of sociology at Santa Clara University. Together they co-edited Undocumented and in College: Students and Institutions in a Climate of National Hostility. (Fordham University Press, 2017).*

