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# Getting, Staying, and Being in College: The Experiences of Students

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# 5 Getting, Staying, and Being in College

## *The Experiences of Students*

LAURA NICHOLS AND MARIA GUZMÁN

This chapter presents the experiences of undergraduate students at Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States based on interviews with twenty-five enrolled students at six of the twenty-eight private, non-profit Jesuit colleges and universities in the U.S. who were undocumented at the time of the interview. The six schools include two in the western region of the U.S., two in the Midwest, and two in the East. Together, the six institutions represent the breadth and diversity of Jesuit institutions, from a research university with undergraduate and graduate programs, a law school, and a medical school, to an undergraduate focused college with a large number of commuter and part-time students.

Research on the transition to adulthood for this population of immigrants, often referred to as the 1.5 generation because they were brought to the U.S. as children, is limited. A key issue that has been identified for this group is the change in legal status that occurs when students go from being legally enrolled in high school (because of protections provided in *Plyler v. Doe*) with access to the same rights and privileges of other students at the school, to having no protections once they graduate and turn 18 and their legal status becomes their own issue.<sup>1</sup> As Rumbaut and Komaie state, “Immigration to the U.S. is quintessentially the province of the young. Six out of seven immigrants arrive in early adulthood or as children” (p. 62).<sup>2</sup> To further complicate the issue of legality, many of the students we interviewed lived in mixed-status families, having younger siblings who were born in the U.S. and are thus citizens. As a result, the fear of deportation of one or both parents, and themselves, loomed over them not only as a personal fear, but also about what would happen to their younger citizen siblings if any of them were deported.<sup>3</sup>

This was not an abstract fear. Our interviews took place during a time of intensified frequency of deportations by the Obama administration,

increasingly restrictive laws in some states such as Arizona (a few students grew up in that state), and (another) failed DREAM Act in Congress. The interviews were conducted just before the passage of DACA, which allows current students who have been authorized with temporary work permits to be employed on campus, participate in internships, and work legally in the U.S., at least as long as the temporary order is in place.

In addition, students dealt with issues related to racism and their classmates' lack of knowledge about immigration laws and how citizenship was obtained. While these issues were persistent throughout their educational trajectories, they became more pronounced while in college and transitioning to adulthood.<sup>4</sup>

Thus students' experiences profiled here give us insight into the experiences of hard-working students pursuing uncertain futures and encountering career-limiting laws under the constant fear of deportation. We start with a discussion of students' experiences coming to the United States followed by a focus on college: getting in, challenges to staying in college, what it is like to be in college while undocumented, to thoughts about moving on after graduation. We end with suggestions for colleges from students themselves.

## Coming to the U.S.

Most students came to the U.S. with at least one member of their families. The majority came when they were toddlers or young children, while two of the twenty-five came when they were teenagers. Some came on tourist visas and others came to the U.S. illegally. Said Sandra, a student whose family initially came over on a visa when she was nine years old, "And we stayed here, and I think we came here early August, and then they just enrolled us in school. I was very confused; I thought we were going to go back. And we haven't gone back ever since."

While students grew up as fully American, one student Mara, reflected, "Everybody that moves here [from Mexico], when you're from a small town and you want to go back, it's always like, 'it's going to be short term, it's going to be short term' but then your kids start to grow up and their life is here, and you have an okay life here, and you do want to see your family members, but your life is already kind of here. It's harder to make the move to go back."

Because many students arrived to the U.S. as young children, they often did not understand their legal status. And every student had a different experience of finding out they were not authorized to legally reside in the U.S.; some students “always knew” in theory, but it was not until they wanted to go on school trips, get a driver’s license, or apply for college scholarships that it really sank in that their futures and options would be limited because of their status. In many ways our data mirror what Gonzales found with college-goers who were undocumented in the interviews he conducted from 2003–09.<sup>5</sup> Students usually found out or only truly understood their legal status while applying to college and/or for financial aid.

Patricia said, “It wasn’t until junior year when my mom, I was trying to apply to FAFSA and all that and then I realized that this was going to be a really big obstacle. Not having a social security number. That’s when I just started, for some reason I didn’t get depressed; I just kind of realized that I had to just keep going. I’d done so much work. I wasn’t just going to not go to college.” Supportive teachers helped Patricia work through the obstacles to applying. She said that although this situation did not depress her, she saw friends “when they found out they were undocumented, they weren’t driven, they actually got really depressed and they stopped going to school, and they stopped just caring about education.”

Patricia had the unique situation of both of her parents being residents, a younger sister who was a citizen, and only herself and another sister were undocumented. Her mom had been going back and forth to see her parents in her home country and Patricia happened to be born abroad. “Because most of my family is documented, we never talked about the issues because they can travel, they can get a job . . . when we were growing up my mom would coach me and tell me to tell people that I was born in this hospital in this city.” Patricia indicated that she thought on some level the story of being born in the U.S. at that particular hospital was reality and she believed it until her senior year in high school.

Two of the twenty-five students were completely unaware of their status until just before starting college. For Teresa, it was only after her parents had given her a tax identification number to put for her social security number on the federal financial aid form and she was notified that the number did not work, that her dad sat her down and explained her status. She explained,

So, I had to fill out the FAFSA and I was like late, and I'm like, how do you fill it out? I had already sent my information, and then I got an email sent back to me and they are like, oh, your Social Security number is not working, so I thought that was interesting, so I told my dad and he was like, oh, like print out that letter that they sent you, and he's like, oh, I'll talk to the lawyers and I was like, what? Why do you need to talk to them about it? And he just kind of just did his own thing and I didn't think anything of it, and like the following day he like sat me down and he was like, okay, well, this is the situation, like you don't have papers. And I was like, okay, like . . . It really did not hit me. And I was like okay. And he was like, so you can't apply to financial aid. So, I was like, okay. And he was like, well, he was like, don't worry, like we'll fix it, like you're fine, like he joked about it, he was like, you know the only thing you can do now is like wait until your sister turns twenty-one or go back or get married, in a very humorous way, so I was like, okay, well, I'm not going to get married or any of that, so I'll just wait, and so, and then my dad was like, you know, you are eighteen now so you are no longer considered under our care, so there is nothing we can do for you now that you are technically legally an adult. So, that was kind of how I found out. It was interesting . . . once my parents told me, like everything made sense. Like since I was very young like I would always be like, oh, can we go to Mexico? Like I want to see my family, and they were like, no, we can't. Or, when you turn sixteen and you want to get a permit to work with your friends at the mall, like they told me I couldn't because my dad was like, oh, the minute you start working you start getting money and you think that's all you want to do so you can't work. So, I was like okay. And the same thing with driving. I would always ask them like, oh, can I start driving, because I can get my permit, and he was like, no, we are not going to pay insurance for you, it's going to be too high. So, there was always a reason behind what I couldn't do and I just was like, my parents are strict, like I am not going to fight that. So, it wasn't until after that I started to realize like, oh, okay, they were doing all of this because they knew what my situation was.

Said Gabriel, who first came to the U.S. when he was two years old, then went back to Mexico and returned to the U.S. when he was five, "I always knew there was something, it's kind of like when you are a little kid and they tell you, well, you weren't born here, and you don't have the

same sort of stuff that other people do.” Gabriel came back to the U.S. using a cousin’s papers and was told that if anyone asked, that his uncle and aunt were his dad and mom.

The majority of the students attended elementary, middle, and high school in the U.S. All but two students attended public high schools, some with large proportions of undocumented students; others felt that they were the only ones who were undocumented in their whole school.

## Getting into College

All of the students found the college admissions process challenging. On top of their first generation college status, they were unsure whether or when to reveal their unauthorized status. As most Jesuit universities use the Common Application, which includes questions about citizenship and a request for a social security number, the presence of such questions (even though optional at most schools) intimidated students. This lack of knowledge about what was required for admission and uncertainty about whether they could safely ask questions about how to fill out the form created a dilemma for students, as indicated by Sandra: “It was a bit scary because once you start filling out the application and the first thing they ask you for is a social security number, it’s extremely intimidating because how can you leave that part blank?”

The college admissions process for undocumented students was primarily navigated through informal networks. Undocumented students relied on a wide variety of sources to obtain information about how to apply and then later how to make it through college. Some had knowledgeable high school admissions counselors who served as very important sources of support and encouragement to apply to college. They also were information brokers between the students and the universities to which they applied. Counselors and teachers in this role called the university admissions office and asked questions about how students should fill out the admissions applications without social security numbers and if there were possibilities for financial aid. These actions by counselors allowed the students to remain anonymous and to feel more confident and honest in the application process.

However, getting this help was not always easy. Some students stated that they had to “come out” as undocumented to their high school teach-

ers and counselors when being questioned about why they were not applying to high-ranking colleges. A few students said they had to “train” some of these advocates who said they had never worked with an undocumented student before and had no idea if they could go to college or not. However, some of these counselors became some of the strongest advocates for students, calling universities and asking questions on their behalf, and promoting the students’ cases, especially to financial aid officers. Some students formed very close bonds with their high school counselors or teachers through this process of revealing their situation and receiving support that resulted in the opportunity to attend college, a goal that they worried they could never accomplish because of their status and lack of financial resources. Talking about a counselor at high school, Reina shared, “Our relationship was more than student-counselor . . . when I got the scholarship I ran to her office and the entire office knew because I had been faxing papers for months right? So it was kind of like this celebratory moment. It was the most amazing thing. So, I mean, she cried. It was just, it was really powerful.”

As indicated by Patricia, encouraging teachers and counselors made a huge difference in students’ lives and their ability to go to college, “I had really encouraging counselors and teachers, and they really supported me, like they paid for my application fees, and they would drive me places, so . . . I still keep in touch with them, and I give workshops at the high school. I think that undocumented students need to have those mentors because you won’t go anywhere without the mentors. A documented person needs mentors too, but it’s really key for undocumented students to have them because you need that strong network and support.”

When applying to a scholarship program offered through a nonprofit organization, Sandra talked about the reaction when she hesitantly told the executive director of the organization of her status: “She was surprised because she said that she never really knew of this situation. She really took the time to listen to me because a lot of people just have this stereotype of immigrants being bad and things of those sort. I was very grateful because after that I thought she wasn’t going to like me anymore.”

Only one student had the experience of reaching out and then being told that he couldn’t go to a four-year school. Raul shared, “I talked to my guidance counselor, and when I told her that I was undocumented and I wanted to see if there was a way I could go to college at least, she said no.

She said that there is no way to go to college. Forget about it. There is no way because of my status . . . So that really brought me down. And from that point I did not talk to any guidance counselors; I just did everything through the people I knew through my pastor.”

Other students either didn't think anyone could help them and did not talk to anyone in their high schools about their status, or when they did, their questions were met with uncertainty. Students who received no support from teachers or high school advisors talked to other students “in my situation” who had graduated, or with whom they were currently in high school. In two cases, students had older siblings who were also undocumented, who told them how to fill out their applications and about scholarships and people to talk to in the university admissions offices.

A few students, including Irma, noted that when they called college admissions offices to ask questions about financial support for undocumented students or admissions they encountered people who did not know what undocumented meant. “I had quite an experience at [one Jesuit University], I was receiving information that they wanted me to apply and that they would even waive my fee for the application, and I had a couple of questions about my status, and I called them and they were a little rude. The person I talked to, they basically did not know what an undocumented student was, and they told me, well, if you are not a citizen, then why are you even going to a university?” The student did not apply there, but applied to another Jesuit university she identified as “welcoming.” In at least three cases students were asked by some of the schools to which they applied to fill out international student forms as part of the application process. Students were confused and sometimes scared by this request and did not follow through applying to those schools when that occurred. Uncertainty about how to navigate the process along with questions about what their lack of legal status meant for them in the future added to the typical stress of applying to college that most students experience. Said Mara about her last year of high school, “It was just up and down. It was an emotional journey my senior year.”

Once students figured out the application process, most students applied to many schools, both public and private, and got into most of them. The larger hurdle to overcome was financial. Most who were able to apply to public colleges were told they would have to pay out-of-state tuition, and they were not eligible for federal or state aid. As a result, students relied



mostly on merit-based scholarships to pay for college. Students applied for many, many private scholarships, sometimes unsure whether they were eligible or not. Some made it through multiple rounds of interviews, finding out at the end that they had not received the scholarship, and unsure if their status was the reason. When receiving scholarships, especially those that paid full tuition as well as room and board, students were ecstatic, not believing their luck, but they also felt guilty, knowing that some of their friends or others they had met at the interviews for the scholarships were just as worthy as them, but could not ultimately go to college because of a lack of money. As Javier says: “The interviews [for the scholarship for undocumented students] were pretty intense, because you are there in the room with like everybody that is applying for the same scholarship and you know just a limited amount of people are going to get it. So it felt really competitive and intense, because you saw all the people you thought maybe they deserved it more than you did . . . there was so much to lose, you have your future, it’s right there. There is nothing you can do about your situation.” Students also worried that once they were in college, other students who had taken out large loans to attend would resent them if they found out about their status combined with their scholarships.

Many students described very surreal experiences of finding out they had received scholarships that would allow them to attend a four-year college and then the disbelief of their families. When told he received a scholarship with full tuition, room, and board, Gabriel said he was ecstatic but unsure how to feel and that, “my dad was like, ‘you’re undocumented, how can you get a scholarship?’” One student’s mom thought that the whole scholarship process must be a scam. However, even with full or partial scholarships, undocumented students still struggled financially, with even modest costs such as food and books presenting additional financial strain.

## Staying In

### *Financial*

All of the students except one had families with limited finances. The struggle for students while in college was especially noticeable for students who did not receive full scholarships. “I always have a hold on my account

[at school]” because of financial reasons. Students coped with this by borrowing books and if they had access to a job that didn’t require papers, working up to thirty hours a week, mainly on the weekends in restaurants and babysitting or tutoring during the week. Commuter students often worked with their parents, helping to clean houses or do landscaping.

Some students also needed to financially contribute to their families, so they sacrificed buying books or eating on campus so they could help. Reina gave every other paycheck to her family. The threat of eviction and financial hardship was something that hung over the heads of students’ families as well. One student talked about finding all the free events with food on campus as her main way of eating, because her mom was laid off from her job and had little money to help her with grocery money.

Students also felt guilty for not contributing enough to alleviate their family’s financial hardships, as Gabriel shared: “And sometimes it’s kind of like you feel guilty for not, you might have twenty extra dollars, and you might want to save those, but at the same time your family is, you know? But the way I think about it is like, well, I am in school right now, I am trying to survive, trying to not ask that much from them, so when it’s my time to help them out I will help them out.” This student also talked about his scholarship covering the cost of his on-campus health insurance, as he did not previously have insurance. Four students explained that their families were contributing in some form to pay for their tuitions. One explained that his mom tried to send money when she could but he tried really hard to not need her money, knowing she did not have extra.

Two of the six universities had merit and need-based scholarships for students who were undocumented that covered full tuition, room, and board. These scholarships often also allowed students to use the money toward books, laundry, and other campus expenses. Other campuses gave partial scholarships and, not having access to state, federal, or many private loans, students and their families struggled to pay the rest. These students commuted to save money and worked a variety of jobs to make up for what was not covered by their scholarships.

Six students spoke of finding other ways to make money on campus outside of the traditional payroll jobs. Two students mentioned a research mentorship program where they received a small stipend and whatever

was necessary for their research including materials, books, and sometimes conference expenses. One of these students also spoke of participating in surveys in the Psychology department where he received gift cards for his participation, another received gift cards for being a research assistant. For one student, there were opportunities at the Jesuit office to make money working for special occasions. Finally, two students mentioned being an Orientation Leader and other activities where all students received a stipend rather than being placed on payroll. At some campuses students could work in the residence halls in exchange for room and board, but other campuses paid a small salary for such work and thus students who were undocumented were not eligible for those positions.

### *Transportation*

For students who commuted (most of the students except for those who received a full scholarship that covered room and board), transportation to school every day was a major form of stress. Because students were not able to legally get a driver's license, they relied on family or friends to take them to and from college, or they drove without a license and feared getting pulled over. As Mara shared, "I drive here (school), so it's the constant fear of getting pulled over. It's always in the back of my mind like, 'oh my god, what if I get pulled over today or tomorrow or the next day?'"

Or if their parents drove them without a license, they worried that that was putting their parents at risk. One student's dad drove her to school, a forty-minute drive, and she took the two-hour bus ride home each day from school. Another student talked about the hardship her family experienced trying to afford bus passes for every member each month since no one could drive because of their statuses. Students also mentioned fear of traveling alone on the bus and walking home from the bus in neighborhoods that felt unsafe.

In some states parents had initially been able to get a driver's license without a social security number or birth certificate, but recent changes in laws meant that they were no longer able to renew their previously legal licenses. A few students traveled to states near where they were attending school, which did not require strict documentation of status, and obtained legal (although out-of-state) licenses. Although a few were fined

when pulled over for not having an in-state license, they did not mind paying the fine and continuing to drive. But that was a strategy for only a few students we interviewed. Said Javier about it, “A lot of students try to go to another state and try to get a driver’s license over there, but even that’s really hard. I don’t know anybody in (that state) that could help me out and I don’t want to lie or anything like that and get in trouble for it.”

Students living on campus, but without an identification card, could not fly, and thus took the bus long distances each time they went home. Some students had passports from the country in which they were born, and used that to fly.

### *Campus Climate and Culture Shock*

Students experienced culture shock when first attending college because of the difference in demographics between the campus and their communities and high schools. “I come from a [high] school where over ninety-five percent of the students are Latino, so I was in culture shock for awhile,” said Irma, and Mara stated, “It was strange to go to high school with majority Latinos and then in college being the only Latino in class.”

Two students spoke of negative experiences with their roommates. One roommate made racist comments including that illegal immigrants should be deported. Said that student, “the culture shock aspect, no one told me about that part of college. It wasn’t because I was undocumented, I encountered a lot of racism. My roommate was racist, we would get Cesar Chavez day off and she would be like ‘why do we get this day off for a filthy Mexican?’” For another student the issue was documentation, and his roommate verbally attacked him when his roommate first realized he might be undocumented. Both spoke of the experiences with a tone of resiliency but were hesitant to share their status with others after these incidents.

Students also noted that there was a general difference in attitudes on campus from the communities in which they were raised, as Patricia indicated: “The way they (other students) talked and the things they talked about were a lot different from what I was used to talking about and, I mean, it was just different . . . I’m a Political Science major and we talked about immigration policy and there were a lot of students in the class who were like, ‘oh we should just deport them all, there should be someone

there just to shoot them.' I'd never been in a situation where they were talking about me in that way, because from the community that I come from, everyone is very aware of the issues and they wouldn't say anything like that." Ivan was hurt when a close friend started making jokes about immigrants, saying, "So we kind of got really heated in this situation where I was just like, I can't believe you said that. It was just the initial shock of how he found out [I was undocumented], because he was joking and I was like, 'that's not funny. You don't know who is around you; you don't know who you are offending, saying stuff like that.' And then I guess he put two and two together."

Sofia mentioned that such attitudes also existed with faculty, "Even with some professors, I don't know, sometimes I feel like it's like they have never seen a Hispanic person with an accent before. You get a different . . . it just feels weird sometimes." When this happened she reminded herself that she worked hard and got into the university just like everybody else.

Of the twenty-five students interviewed, six described specific negative experiences they had on campus regarding their status. Again, students explained experiences with a variety of people including other students, professors, and staff members. Five students said that the lack of knowledge among faculty and staff was problematic and left them trying to figure things out on their own very frequently. One student wondered if staff at a public university might be more knowledgeable because there were more undocumented students on the campus, making it easier to talk to people. Three other students explained experiences with staff and faculty members including the Dean of Students, an advisor, and the Internship coordinator, who were unable to help them because of their status. A dean repeatedly told a student asking about how to deal with future major requirements for which he was ineligible, "We'll deal with that when we get there." Students felt this lack of knowledge was challenging for them, and they were frustrated with the responses of university staff.

There were limits in the types of conversations that students were comfortable engaging in on campus, particularly around issues of immigration. Although some students felt more comfortable sharing their status with the peers they trusted, they feared sharing it with university staff, either because of the potential legal repercussions for themselves or their families, concern that staff would disapprove of them in general, or because

they found staff unhelpful or unable to provide assistance given their situation.

### *Support*

*Family support.* Most students relied on their families and sometimes friends for emotional support; however, they noted that their family often did not understand or know how to help them with school-related concerns. Nine students explained that their main source of emotional support was family. Mothers, sisters, aunts, dads, and whole families were mentioned as a strong source of support. Some students spoke about calling and video-chatting with their families, while others lived at home and received constant support as they saw their families every day. Family was the most frequent response when students were asked about who they went to for support, most stating that their family is “always there” for them.

*Peers.* Beyond family, peers were the next main form of support and information for most students. Of the twenty-one students that responded concerning peer support, all but one had positive remarks about receiving or giving support to and from their peers. More than half stated that their peers were their main source of emotional support. Oftentimes this emotional support came from other undocumented students who understood where they were coming from and could share their experiences. Other times students mentioned roommates and friends that they became comfortable enough with to share their status even though they were not undocumented. Two students spoke of documented students reacting supportively upon hearing about their undocumented status. All of the students who spoke about emotional support from peers expressed some sense of trust and vulnerability with their peers with whom they could talk about the struggles of being undocumented. Peers who provided support often met each other through scholarship gatherings, groups, and events related to their status while others met randomly and eventually it came out that both were undocumented. Interacting with other undocumented students seemed to be extremely important to all of the students who spoke about receiving emotional support because they felt these friends really understood where they were coming from.

Sofia described the importance of having support from others in the same situation: “My friends who are also in that same situation, just because, I don’t know, like I am a psychology major, so I am totally in support of like [off-campus programs] and stuff, but it’s really hard to go there when I feel maybe they are not used to, or trained to know how to deal with it. And because of all of my friends, we are all very, like resilient, we are all about okay, we need to go to school and we need to do this, because this is our situation, but yeah, that’s . . . I’ve usually been able to deal with it, but like sometimes if I’m like told, oh you can’t participate in this, or you are not getting this, it gets really difficult and it’s like, we just, among our friends, we are kind of our social support.” Ari mentioned the need to connect with peers in the same situation to get ideas about what to do in the future: “I would tell them to continue and to ask other friends who have been in the same situation—to look up to people, to kids that they know that have graduated from their high school or other high schools around them that are undocumented and are going to school. To search for them and ask them what they’ve done.”

Seven of the students spoke specifically about the experience of sharing their status with peers. Some students were very open and told peers soon after meeting them, especially in situations where they already knew others were undocumented such as in programs for first-generation college students or a club organized around the DREAM Act. Others told peers when they were confronted with challenges. For example, one student was not able to attend a school-sponsored trip to Mexico because of his status and explained that he did not know what to do, ended up sharing with a friend, and then found out that friend was also undocumented. One student spoke of a friend blatantly asking and being caught off guard, but later feeling comforted knowing that the friend knew. Few students described situations with peers where they disclosed their status and had a negative response; rather, students felt greater trust and understanding with friends once they were aware of their status.

Five students explained that they found out about important resources specifically for undocumented students from their peers. Two explained that they found out about their universities from undocumented students who had attended their high schools and through them realized that they could go to college. Others found out about scholarships, clubs, and other

support systems on campus from their undocumented peers. Reina described this support as, “It’s like a community, you know, you find out information, how to get a job, how to do this, how to do that, and you kind of just exchange it, because it’s so underground, like information.” Four students described receiving academic support from their peers. Students spoke of their peers helping them to choose classes, giving them information about specific professors and helping them with classes that they had taken. Academic support was much less frequently mentioned compared to emotional support, and it seemed that academic support came more from teachers and advisors. Still, some of the students felt their peers were an important support academically.

Four students specifically mentioned the importance of getting advice as well as a desire to help other undocumented students. Sergio said the advice he would give is, “Simply that [going to college] is possible because a lot of students don’t even consider it. Right away they begin to work and don’t continue their education because they don’t see why they should go.” Two others spoke of the importance of knowing that others are ahead of you completing college and finding jobs; they explained the importance of finding these people and felt that they could be that type of support for others.

Four students reported that they did not have much outside emotional support but rather were their own main sources of support. These students either felt that they were not close enough or did not trust others or just did not have others in their life that understood their situation. Feelings of disappointment and pride were mixed strategies of internal support for these students. One student explained that she ran and drew when she needed emotional support, habits she started in high school to lower her stress level after experiencing depression related to finding out about her status.

*Campus support.* In terms of support on campus, of the twenty-five students interviewed, nine spoke specifically of positive experiences where they received support from a variety of people on campus. Students talked of teachers, advisors, retreat leaders, Jesuits, and other students all as people from whom they had found support, both academic and emotional. Professors were most frequently mentioned as a source of academic support while retreat leaders, Jesuits, and staff connected to scholarships



or programs were more frequently turned to for emotional support. Students spoke of positive experiences both in relation to and completely separate from their undocumented status.

Patricia found two faculty members who were very supportive: “I came out to her [Psychology professor] and told her I was undocumented and she was like, ‘oh, we are going to help you in whatever way we can,’ and she helps me also when I am feeling really stressed out . . . and [another professor], he’s been really encouraging and supportive and just never gives up on trying to help you. If you need something, like, I needed a binder and he got it for me, just things like that.” At one campus, the admissions officer who helped Gabriel when he first applied continued to be the source of support during his whole time in college.

Two students explained that they had become more comfortable sharing their status, but were still very selective about whom they told. Teresa explained that she told “mostly people who I think could benefit from knowing that. So, like, I mentioned last week I did a program here on campus for high school students who are looking at going to college, but a lot of them have that same issue and don’t know how to do it. So I’m . . . I like, I am completely open to certain people, like even if I don’t know them, I will tell them, you know, this is what it’s like, and it’s rough, but you can do it.” The theme of how and if to tell people differed among the respondents but was something that students thought about a lot.

For some students, the Catholic affiliation of the institution helped them feel more supported. Carlos shared, “I feel like this school, maybe because of the Jesuits, and our motto, and what we stand for, we’re more like, we’re more helpful, and we’re more understanding of what’s going on, whereas just reading somebody based on their paperwork.” Similarly, Raul shared, “I am a religious person myself, so that’s why I applied here too . . . I also feel happy here because it’s a religious school, and I like that, it’s important.”

*Groups on campus.* For some students, groups for certain scholarships or first-generation college students served as sources of support and a means to meet their friends who ultimately became very important sources of support. The students spoke of finding others in their situation through sharing their stories in structured spaces or simply becoming more comfortable to share over time.

Students at a college that had a program that gave about five scholarships a year to students who were undocumented said that the program provided a means to connect with other students and was a support network to talk about challenges, frustrations, and options for the future. One student said that she was not part of a first-generation program at her university for undocumented students because she was unaware of her citizenship status when she applied to college. Once she better understood her status the student sought out other students who were also undocumented and then was made aware of many more resources, including access to help from an on-campus lawyer. But some students were wary of being associated with other students who were undocumented, or cautious about keeping the status of others confidential, stating, “We try not to spread it outside, like not say, Oh, we’re undocumented or something like that. And we really respect that, because we are not all feeling the same way. Some people feel more comfortable publicly saying, I am undocumented, and you know, that’s great, and there’s a lot of us who respect it, that don’t want to just tell everybody, but at least within ourselves we know, we kind of like give support to each other.”

## Being in College

### *On Campus Involvement*

Students mentioned the inability to participate in many activities on campus because of their status. These activities mirrored the limitations in participation also brought up in the interviews conducted with staff. The activities most mentioned included travel abroad (for study and/or alternative break trips), work on campus, and campus leadership positions such as Resident Assistant and student government when pay was involved. Students also mentioned limitations in participating in research, attending academic conferences, certification to be an Emergency Medical Technician on campus, and completing internships required of their majors, especially if government funding supported the activity. Many students participated in programs and opportunities for which other students received stipends, but because students we interviewed could not get paid, but wanted the experience, they convinced university personnel to let them “volunteer.” At one campus, a faculty member raised money from other faculty to pay students who were undocumented for research

positions that the university provided as paid positions for documented students.

Students in majors that oriented them toward careers in healthcare, social work, engineering, accounting, and teaching attempted to get internships and find out about requirements for certification, and talked about being blocked because of a lack of a social security number. University staff were unable to help students around such barriers. Some students changed their majors, realizing that they would not be able to complete the requirements embedded in the major or work in that field after graduation. Others waited, hoping something would change by the time they reached that part of their degree program or graduated. While some students were practical in choosing fields most likely to orient them toward graduate or professional school and delay dilemmas about how to obtain professional jobs, other students were passionate about the fields they wanted to pursue and kept doing so, even if they thought it would work against them later. Like Reina shared, “I think that there is a huge pressure for a lot of undocumented students to do something that will get you a job. I think kind of ignoring your passions, a lot of the time. I think that I am going to end up choosing something that will help, whether that’s Sociology for the community organizing kind of understanding, social structures and doing community organizing kind of just something like that. I am very passionate about politics and community organizing, so I feel like that is probably going to end up being what I end up doing, regardless of what people kind of say, like, well, you have a scholarship, do something practical, or whatever. But I feel like there is never a right answer and there is never something practical you can do, because regardless of what you major in, it is going to be difficult to get a job. So, you might as well do something that you are passionate about while you have this funding.”

*Travel as a major barrier to participation in activities.* Many students said that if they heard that travel or pay would be involved in a co-curricular activity they were interested in, they did not even try to apply. For example, Juan Carlos shared, “Model UN, I have hesitated going to most meetings and actually becoming a really active member because I know that they take trips outside of the country and I don’t want to be in that position to explain or have an excuse every time, so if I actually take a really active role, and I know that they participate in competitions, so if I

become a good candidate for the competitions, I am going to have to explain, come up with some kind of an excuse as to why I couldn't go. So it's kind of a sticky situation for that, and I hesitate participating in some of those . . . Yeah. And the service trips are something that I really, really want to do, and I was even considering going to either New York, New York wouldn't be too bad, but I wanted to be able to go to New Orleans, and it's always a risk to leave the place, to leave [this state] and get on a plane, it's always a risk. So I kind of hesitated doing it."

Said Ivan, "I would have loved to have studied abroad or alternative spring breaks. My friend just got back from El Salvador doing work with Engineers without Borders and I was like, that's so cool! Not only did you embrace another culture, you are coming back and helping them out, and I wish I could be a part of that kind of change." Not being able to participate as well as having to come up with an explanation for why they were not going bothered students, as Carlos stated: "People are asking 'how come you never go abroad, why don't you take advantage of your resources?' It hurts."

Sandra expressed not only hesitation but fear related to participating in activities that required travel: "I don't know I just kind of feel I have this trauma that I can't do these things because I'm afraid something is going to happen." Missing out on things that other students were able to do and they could not took an emotional toll, as Sergio shared: "I always knew that I didn't have papers, but I never knew that I would be missing out on so much, especially to go to college."

*Limitations in staff being able to help.* A few students, like Sergio, tried to be more involved in co-curricular activities, but became disappointed when university staff could not help them figure out if they could participate or not:

Well sometimes when they have meetings/presentations with various companies for internships—I can go but it's almost impossible for them to give me an internship. The majority of them ask for a social security number so it's not that they prohibit me, but almost because of the social security number requirement. That has been a challenge for me. I've emailed [internship staff coordinator] about it. I could tell she wanted to help, but at the same time, they're very misinformed so it was like, "oh, you look on your own." I was getting a few emails about

internship fairs and I emailed her: “I don’t have a social security number, what can I do? Could I enter through the school, as a student so they wouldn’t have to ask for my social?” First she sent me a message saying, “Let me research and I’ll give you a response within a week.” And then she responded “I couldn’t find much information but I encourage you to apply.” I mean, my mom could tell me that, “work hard.” So it was kind of like, “You apply by your own means.”

*Inequity in participation.* As stated earlier, some students “volunteered” for positions for which they knew that other students were paid. But some opportunities that had to be paid in some way did not have even this as an option. As mentioned, on some campuses students can apply to be a resident assistant in the residence halls as it comes with free room and board, but at other schools the position is only available to students who qualify for work-study, and thus is not an option for students who are undocumented. This really frustrated Gabriel who wanted to have the leadership experience that the position brings: “We got to a school where it’s all about social justice, but within the school we face these barriers. And what makes that person more valuable than I am?” Students who commuted said that this was their main barrier to participation in campus activities and did not link their lack of participation to their undocumented status.

### *Privacy, Secrecy, and Living a Dual Life*

Students spoke of feeling very conflicted about their situations and living the life of a carefree college student along with the realization that they were very different from their fellow classmates. The need to hide their status while growing up—not just for themselves, but also for their families—dominated their thoughts. The fear of parents is very real for Beatriz: “My parents, after they told me (of my status), they were like you can never tell anyone. This is very dangerous. You could put the family at risk”; and Sam said, “See, growing up with this situation, I really learned to be a private person. I keep everything to myself. Knowing that everything you have worked for could be taken away from you at any second, and I could be sent back at any second makes you really want to shut up about everything.”

Telling can also be emotionally draining, as Mara, who used to share her story more but doesn't so as not to "break down" said, "I'm completely comfortable with saying to you or anyone else that I'm undocumented, but I don't want to go into my life story and I went through this. I feel like that's something I just deal with within myself."

Students who came to the United States as babies can't imagine living anywhere else and are fearful of all they know being taken away if their status is found out. Sam, who couldn't remember anything before being in the U.S., explained: "I don't remember anything else. I only remember being here. It terrifies me to know that that can be taken away from me. I just wish it wouldn't be."

A few students, like Reina, said they had learned from experience that "I don't come out to a lot of people." One student had a bad experience in high school that made him wary of telling college officials about his status, and he worried that once people knew they couldn't get past knowing that information to help him: "How do you get over this kind of stuff (own political/personal opinion) and counsel a student?" Marvin said that in college, "One professor that I had in class, he said something about 'I don't think immigrants should be getting scholarships' and stuff like that . . . so I'm not going to him with my problems." Comments such as this and the ignorance of documented students about immigration issues and how citizenship was granted caused many students to be very careful to hide their status, and even to be prepared with answers that did not reveal their statuses if asked why they were not working or studying abroad, and so on.

The two students who had had experiences with almost being deported were more open about their statuses, figuring that officials already knew them and it was now their responsibility to speak out for others who could not. But they were still selective. Said one of the students who was almost deported just before coming to college, "I'm open about it if people want to talk about it, but I don't go around shouting it on the mountain tops either."

*Reactions to telling.* When students did decide to reveal their status to college officials or friends, the reactions were often mixed and unpredictable. As mentioned earlier, more than one student described university staff and college friends as being "shocked" when they told them about their status.

Students also spoke of being tired of having to tell people everything about their histories, just to get some help for a current problem. Heidi shared, “It’s a long story to tell. I tell people and they say, ‘well, couldn’t you just do this and that’ and I’m like, ‘no, no you can’t’ and they say they didn’t know. So it’s good to see that you are educating them in a way.” When Beatriz finally told her research professor, the professor said, “I don’t know what to do.” Said Beatriz, “If he doesn’t know what to do, how am I supposed to know what to do?”

Many students, like Ari, feared the reactions of their friends: “I think they wouldn’t respect me. I feel like if they knew that I didn’t have papers they would probably say ‘what a waste of a student. Another student could be in her place with this scholarship taking the classes.’ That’s how I feel.” This led to isolation for some students, as Sofia stated: “I am not really open about my situation. Like even with my friends, I don’t say anything about my situation, so I like to just keep it to myself, so that’s why I don’t talk to people.” Charlie also shared, “My parents would always tell me that I shouldn’t tell people, that something could happen, you never know like they are going to turn against you.” The same student talked about finding out a year after he met one of his good friends, that the friend was undocumented as well, which felt like a relief.

As in high school, some students had good experiences with people after revealing their status. Ivan “took a chance” which resulted in a scholarship for \$10,000 in cash he could use for books which was a “huge help.” He indicated, “You kind of learn to pick up who you can and cannot trust. Even within my friends.”

*Living a dual life.* Students talked about what it felt like to be living a dual life, on the one hand a dream life of being a full-time college student with no cares in the world, and then the life of an undocumented person who could be found out and whose life could change dramatically any minute, as Reina shared: “It’s like you live kind of a dual life, like you are a student and you are responsible for keeping this high GPA to maintain your scholarship, which is kind of your anchor, your life support, emotional to your family, it can also be financial support to your family, and you also kind of have to look out for yourself in a lot of different ways. It’s like I’m doing my club stuff or I’m riding my bike around campus going to class, whatever, having a great time laughing and getting coffee with friends, and then you go to your room, close the door, and then your lawyer

calls you . . . And it's just kind of a strange kind of binary to be in, like you are in a very, you are tied to your legal status, but you are also free." Javier noted, "I wish I could always be a student and not have to worry about, after your four years, you are done. I wish this could last a little longer, because it keeps your mind off of being . . ." As a result of being in this situation, students saw some of their friends who were undocumented become depressed during their last year of college.

Encounters with law officials and legal problems while a student also exacerbated students' feelings of living a dual life. For some students this happened even before they started college: When coming to visit the college after being accepted, Gabriel flew using his school identification card which was not accepted by the airport and he was pulled aside, "and all I could think about was losing my scholarship and having to go back to Mexico . . . I was really traumatized by that," so now he takes the bus.

Another student and a sibling were arrested for not having proper papers when traveling on the train from their college to visit a friend at another college during spring break. Said Sandra, "It's a daily worry [deportation] because I don't know if today might be my last day. I don't know if I'm coming back home. Even driving—we even fear getting pulled over by the cops because we have heard of them asking for your status. We're more apt to being asked because we look Hispanic. It's a struggle every day. We [family members] just go out for the necessary things."

While it was tempting to just forget one's status in the college context, Patricia encouraged students to never forget their status while also savoring the college experience, "Just not isolating yourself, because sometimes it's easier just to isolate yourself. Especially here [at college] because you have all the resources, you can forget sometimes that you are undocumented. And it's essential for someone not to forget that, and to always try to build those relationships with faculty and staff too, because they can help you, start early, in freshman year." Said Mara about being in college, "I'm enjoying this while it lasts. Like I said, it's my little bubble. I'm going to college and it's free. But I know that a lot of people don't get this opportunity, that's why I'm grateful."

Students wanted to live in and fully appreciate the experience of having the opportunity to go to college. They expressed gratitude and the realization that being able to be in college was a "dream come true," something they and their parents never thought could actually happen.



Carlos shared, “To me it’s a privilege and an honor to be in college.” From Sam, “I’m so grateful to the college for helping me . . . I couldn’t be more grateful.”

## Moving On

In some ways, asking students about their future plans was the most stressful part of the interviews for students. Students were extremely uncertain about their futures; Fabiola was hopeful, but very uncertain: “But I know that after I graduate from here, it’s like, what am I going to do next? It’s hard because . . . I don’t know . . . Sometimes I’m discouraged, too, like, oh, why am I doing this [going to college]?” Students mentioned many fears about facing their post-graduation lives and each student experienced it differently. The fears ranged from emotional stress to increased family pressure and uncertainty about confronting their legal status as an adult.

## *Employment*

Overall the greatest barrier facing students after graduation was employment. Many discussed feeling trapped, having spent so much time studying only to return home to jobs like babysitting, working in restaurants, and cleaning. With many doubting their ability to get jobs in their fields, similar to students facing a challenging job market, almost all of the students we interviewed strongly considered going to graduate school, but worried about how they could afford it. Teresa, for example, stated, “So, I’m like, well, hopefully when I’m getting my PhD, like, things turn around. At the same time that there is a lot of frustration, there is also a lot of hope. So, it’s just about kind of finding those people. You know? Who are in your boat and who are able to just guide you, you know? Through the process. And, just waiting.”

Students’ career choices were heavily influenced by their immigration status. While they expressed interest in careers such as teaching, accounting, engineering, and health or in being involved with internships or on-campus leadership, they realized that those choices required some sort of identity verification that they were unable to apply for because of their status.

Students like Irma also heard stories of immigration status blocking career choices for students who graduated before them: “I heard of an accounting major who was also undocumented, and I think she was working at a fast food restaurant after she graduated. She couldn’t get her CPA (license) because she couldn’t take the test as it required a social security number.” Students had specific questions about whether they should go on interviews or reveal their status on job interviews. Career Center staff were not helpful to students in regards to these questions. So students worried about if or when they should tell others. A number of students mentioned hoping that the DREAM Act would eventually pass, thus changing their employment prospects.

### *Emotional Stress*

Dealing with emotional stress around current and future plans was a constant issue for students. Sandra shared, “Sometimes it really depresses me a lot because I feel like I’m not valued as an individual because of that—like I’m not worth as much as everyone else because of this. I can’t do this because of that or I’m not deserving so it makes me feel depressed because I want to do stuff that everyone else is doing, and I can’t . . . I’m pretty much stuck just waiting for my chance, waiting for my opportunity.”

Sofia said, “I feel like I’m working so hard and I feel like sometimes it’s just going to be for nothing. Even though I know that’s not true, but sometimes I do think that way. Because you know, I see all the things happening right now and it’s like the thing in Arizona [referring to anti-immigration laws], things like that that makes me feel scared and worried because I don’t know what’s coming . . . . So I feel sad every day.”

### *Legal Status*

Most students’ prospects for legal status in the United States under laws at the time of the interviews were dim. Only one student was on a path to citizenship. Most of the students had talked to lawyers at some point, and were told that they had no path to citizenship, unless maybe another member of their family could sponsor them if they themselves first

received citizenship. A few students, like Javier, reflected on the fact that once they turned 18 or 21, they were “on their own.”

Because most students had lived so many years in the United States without authorization, their chances for citizenship through sponsorship without leaving the U.S. were unlikely. Those who were in relationships and considered marriage to a citizen were told by lawyers that they would have to return to their home countries for a number of years and apply for sponsorship after the period of time was over. Two students had citizen children and said that leaving was not an option for them.

One student, Irma, mentioned the example of her brother, who was also undocumented and went to college in Mexico, but now that he left could not come back to the U.S. In wondering if she would ever see him again, Irma also reflected on what the experience was like for him and by extension what it could be like if she also went that route: “It’s kind of a weird experience [for him, being in Mexico], because it’s his native country, but he’s more of an American, so it’s weird because there is a saying in Spanish that you are not from there, but you are not from here, so you are stuck in between . . . He does have those privileges of being able to drive around and not be worried about being asked for his license or anything, but then again, he misses everything.”

## Student Suggestions for Institutions

Students had many suggestions about what colleges could do to improve the experiences for students who were undocumented. The suggestions ranged from help for students during the application process, to improving experiences on campus, and helping with issues related to career development pre- and post-graduation.

First, students wanted campuses that accepted and provided funding for students who were undocumented to better advertise their openness to applicants, as Reina suggested: “It’s hidden, you know. I am sure there are many students going to school not having all their legal documents.” The combined data from students and staff revealed the importance of social capital and the very informal and ad hoc nature of the admissions process for undocumented students, many of whom made it to college only because of the luck of speaking to the “right” person in the admissions

office or knowing people who had already navigated the admissions system at that school and could refer them to specific people for help, or having an assertive and persistent high school advisor or teacher.

Once on campus, students wanted an advocate they could go to who understood their story and could help them with a variety of issues, including navigating the system and processes, so that they would not have to tell their stories over and over again to different people. Students experienced a long process of trying to figure out, on their own, whom they could trust to tell their stories, and then hoping that it would be worth it in the end because the person actually had the ability to help them. So students wanted one person or one office on campus to go to for any questions they had that involved their undocumented status. Most campuses are not set up to provide such support, with people knowledgeable about all the different departments and programs. In one case, the admissions officer who helped undocumented students during the application process became their go-to person on campus. Presumably this was not in that person's job description.

In the absence of one person who was trained to help students, students suggested more training for university staff so they would be more informed when students discussed their situations. Students hoped that such training might reduce the likelihood of students encountering blank stares or comments such as "I've never heard of that before" or "I am not sure."

Similarly, for academic help, students like Beatriz said things such as, "If there was a way to know which professors to go talk to, like which professors we would feel comfortable going up to . . . people always say, go to your professors, go to their office hours, talk to them, get to know them, and that's really difficult when you don't want to share that part of your life." One student, who helped start a club for students who were undocumented on campus, said that there was conversation on campus about providing stickers that could be put on faculty and staff offices to signal that the person was comfortable and knowledgeable about the issues and was safe to talk to and ask for help as well as put together a list of faculty and staff allies that students could go to.

One college had a lunch for all undocumented students the first semester so students could meet each other, and this became an important support group during their time at the college. One student mentioned that

having lunch each semester with his advisor who knew his situation was helpful, and another student talked about how much she appreciated the quarterly talks with the Jesuit in charge of the scholarship program who provided both tangible, instrumental, as well as emotional support.

Many students, such as Ivan, commented on how important it was for students to reach out and ask for help. “It just takes some courage and being brave.” The need for encouragement was also mentioned by students like Marvin: “I would have liked for somebody to tell me to not be afraid, like don’t see this as some kind of barrier. You could still do what you want to do. It’s going to be harder, you’re going to have to work harder, but you can eventually get to where you want to be.”

Because financial stressors were such an everyday part of college, and students wanted to be more involved in campus life, students hoped for creative ways that they could be involved on campus in positions for which they could receive pay. Some campuses appeared to have figured out ways to legally provide assistance through setting up their scholarships in ways that allowed students to pay for their books and other daily needs.

Of course, students also wanted assistance being able to obtain internships off campus, as stated by Juan Carlos: “I don’t know if it’s possible, but to have a partnership with a company where I could work as part of the university so they wouldn’t have to ask for my social. Simply that as a [partner university] student, with good grades, and will do good work instead of concentrating on the fact that I don’t have papers. I don’t know; an association with a company [names company] who I know helps in a lot of that. They’d be supporting their students and allowing us to enter the workforce, even without a social security number.” Some students also said that access to a lawyer while a student to better understand their undocumented status and potential legal work opportunities would be helpful.

And although some students did not want to think about graduation and the next step, many students had suggestions related to how others could help them with the question of what to do post-graduation. Nico suggested help getting connected to a network of people who have already navigated after college issues (graduate school, financial aid, applying for jobs, post-college service, and so on): “I would like a little guidance. Maybe like, knowing my options would be really good. It’s sort of a gray area right there, I don’t know what’s going to happen after these four years.”

## Conclusion

Overall, we found that both institutionally and for students, informality was peppered throughout students' experiences and the ways that most campuses responded to the presence of students who were undocumented in their admissions process and existence on their campuses. The consequence of this wide array of informal procedures is inconsistency and a lingering perception among undocumented students that they are not fully supported at Jesuit institutions.

Students provided several recommendations on how colleges can better support those with undocumented status, including advertising funding opportunities, creating opportunities for deeper awareness of the issues at the staff level—from the admissions office to professors—providing support in obtaining internships and work experience, and providing on-campus advocates for undocumented students to approach comfortably. Despite the many challenges that students faced in being in college, including a hostile climate in some cases and financial barriers, students thrived and did well academically. Colleges that are able to assist these high-achieving and determined students will be able to play an important part in fulfilling their missions. However, for students to fully realize their potentials, especially after graduation, federal laws and policies will need to change.

## Notes

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