





By H. Kenny Nienhusser, Blanca E. Vega,  
and Mariella Saavedra Carquin

# BRIDGING THE GAP:

## Guiding the College Search of Undocumented Students

In recent years, the issue of higher education access for undocumented and, more recently, DACAmented (see definition on page 32) students has grabbed the attention of policymakers, educational practitioners, and most certainly high school guidance and college counselors.

This consideration is imperative given a mere 25 percent of undocumented immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64 have either attended college or received a postsecondary education degree, compared to 53 percent of documented immigrants and 62 percent of individuals born in the United States.

Yet few studies have examined the role high school staff—in particular, school and college counselors—play in shaping the college choice process of undocumented students. This article reflects on research we conducted in an attempt to help fill that knowledge gap.

For our study, funded by the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, we interviewed 15 undocumented immigrants from New York City about the informational and emotional support they received from high school staff during their college search.

The college-choice process can be overwhelming as students are challenged with acquiring information and making decisions that will shape their educational trajectories. Undocumented and DACAmented students often face an especially difficult college search given the numerous barriers that come with their precarious immigration status.

And as our research shows, many such students fail to encounter appropriate guidance and encouragement from counselors in their college search.

## "I HAD TO EDUCATE THEM"

Accessing information about postsecondary options is a critical part of the college choice process. Yet our research suggests that the assistance undocumented students receive from their high school counselors is uneven at best.

Only five respondents—a third of our total sample—reported that their school counselors were very involved in their college search process. The counselors helped students develop lists of colleges to apply to, learn about schools, and collect information about how to finance college.

One interviewee described a largely positive experience, working with a counselor who "always" answered questions and "made appointments to see every (student)."

On the other hand, six respondents received minimal or no information from counselors in their college search. One interviewee reported having no recollection of dealing with her school's guidance counselor. Another student said he found the process of getting information from his counselor frustrating.

"You have so many questions but (counselors) are out of time to answer all of your questions," the student recounted. "And at the end, you

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## UNDOCUMENTED AND DACAMENTED STUDENTS **i**

Undocumented students are individuals who are not US citizens, do not hold current permanent resident visas, and have not been granted admission to the country through longer-term residence or work permit programs.

DACAmended students are young people who have been given a reprieve from deportation through President Obama's prosecutorial discretion program—Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Immigrants that obtain DACA status receive a Social Security number, as well as the capability to legally work and live in the US.

While DACA does not guarantee postsecondary education benefits (e.g., federal financial aid) it has prompted some states and counties to provide some higher education benefits (e.g., in-state resident tuition and in-district tuition rates) to DACAmended students.

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are left with: 'Wow, like I need to know more? Is there any way...? What should I do?'"

Four interviewees reported feeling discouraged about the lack of information they received from counselors. Undocumented students were often presented with general college search information, which was not specific to their needs given their immigration status.

Yet, as one student noted, a lack of documentation—"that's one of the big challenges that comes, that's the hurdle." When counselors fail to take into account (immigration) status, it's difficult for students to fully access their educational options.

That was the experience of another student we interviewed, who noted, "I needed more detail." She added, "[My counselor] had in mind that I was undocumented, that she couldn't help me a lot."

In a few cases, respondents reported receiving incorrect college search information.

Three interviewees described instances when they were provided with erroneous information. Specifically, their counselors told them they were not eligible to attend college because of their immigration status.

One research participant recalled: "[Counselors] asked me what my Social Security number was, and I said that I don't have one. They were like, 'How do you plan on applying (to college)?'"

"...It was as if I had to educate them, instead of them helping me," he noted.

### EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IS KEY

The levels of emotional support students reported receiving also varied.

Three interviewees said counselors provided a largely emotionally supportive environment for them during their college search. One respondent shared a positive experience she had with a school counselor who told her: "I believe in you and I know that you believe in yourself, so I'm going to put all my effort (into helping you)."

In contrast, four interviewees described a largely unsupportive environment created by their school counselors. Respondents recalled situations in which counselors were not empathetic to students' needs and/or failed



to make an effort to seek information that would assist them with their college search.

“(Counselors) didn’t go and search for more information or ask around or expose my case... it wasn’t much help,” one interviewee reported.

Some respondents shared how counselors communicated pessimistic sentiments to students, such as, “Well you know you’re going to have problems getting into all of the schools because how are you going to pay for it?” and “You know, you are undocumented, therefore there’s nothing really we can do for you.”

In addition, some students felt their counselors were apathetic about intervening in situations when they needed help. One interviewee described how the college search process, which often requires a Social Security number, triggered anger for him—an emotion counselors failed to address.

“I would just get upset (not having a Social Security number to place on the forms) and I would just get up and leave the office... and no one would stop me,” the student recounted.

Other interviewees reported feeling supported—but only up to a point. “(My counselor) told me, ‘You can go to college, but you have to pay everything. ...and college is really expensive,’” one research participant said.

The interviewee said the counselor went on to tell him: “Most of the (undocumented) kids, they don’t do it, it’s really hard. ... you will have to work and study at the same time, and it’s not going to be easy.”

In this situation, the counselor did inform the student he was eligible to enroll in college. But he did not encourage or provide the support necessary to help this student through a rather important decision: post-high school plans.

## **BUILDING BETTER SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS**

Our research shows it is essential that high school and college counselors recognize the complexities associated with the college search process of undocumented and DACAmented students.

This understanding can aid efforts to identify and/or develop initiatives and programs to provide the informational and emotional support these students need to make decisions involving college attendance.

This support should be available regardless of the number of undocumented and DACAmented students present at schools.

Through our research, we discovered many respondents surmised counselors’ lack of information was due to the seemingly limited number of these students enrolled at their respective schools. One respondent recalled working with a counselor who appeared overwhelmed at having to obtain information that was only relevant to undocumented students.

“It’s like: ‘I have to find out this for you? Well I have other people to worry about,’” said the student, recalling his interactions with the counselor.

Yet to address these populations’ needs, all counselors—no matter where they work—need to understand the federal, state, and local (e.g., county and institutional) policies that impact undocumented and DACAmented students’ college access.

It is essential that high school staff familiarize themselves with federal policies (e.g., ineligibility for postsecondary benefits) and state laws (e.g., eligibility or denial of in-state resident tuition and financial aid). High school staff must also understand how local postsecondary institutions handle applications for admission from both undocumented and DACAmented

students and how, if at all, these colleges award institutional aid to these students (e.g., do they have a separate aid application).

Several community-based organizations, such as Educators for Fair Consideration and the New York State Youth Leadership Council, offer resources that can provide information to counselors as they guide undocumented students through their college search. Materials such as these provide easy-to-understand information about complex federal and state laws regarding postsecondary education benefits for undocumented and DACAmented students. The groups also provide information about private scholarships.

Given counselor workloads—often driven by high student-to-counselor ratios—counselors can partner with local community-based and/or university student organizations (e.g., DREAM teams) to provide additional guidance to undocumented and DACAmented students during college search process.

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## ABOUT THE STUDY

The central research question our study sought to answer was: What role do high school staff have in the college search process of undocumented students?

Fifteen undocumented immigrants who were 18 years or older and completed high school in New York City were interviewed between October 2012 and April 2013. Twelve participants identified as Latino and three as Asian. Ten were female, and the average age was just over 22 years old.

In terms of their educational attainment, two participants never enrolled in postsecondary education. Of the 13 participants who enrolled in postsecondary education, 12 enrolled in a New York State public institution and one attended a public out-of-state university.

Nine of the interviewees initially attended a four-year college, while four originally enrolled in a two-year institution.

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## THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS

Researchers describe a three-phase college choice model: aspirations, search, and choice.

The first stage, aspirations, typically begins in the seventh grade and follows through until the ninth grade. It refers to plans that students envision for themselves after high school; these intentions are often shaped by encouragement they receive, aspirations they develop, and college-related information they acquire.

The next stage, search, which this article focuses on, usually occurs during the 10th and 11th grades, and is when students begin to seriously examine their postsecondary options. They learn about college characteristics (e.g., two-year versus four-year, public versus private, majors offered) while simultaneously pondering which postsecondary institution to seriously consider attending. It is during this stage when students acquire college-related information (e.g., materials about the college application process, how to finance college, which schools to apply to, how to complete scholarship applications).

Finally, the college choice stage typically occurs during the 11th and 12th grades and happens when students select a postsecondary institution.

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Our research also shows it is essential that counselors are cognizant of the emotional supports undocumented and DACAmented students may require during the college search process.

Some students carry significant psychological strain associated with their immigration status. Thus, counselors must be conscious of the ways (both verbal and nonverbal) they communicate college search information to undocumented and DACAmented students. Awareness can lessen the microaggressions experienced by undocumented students during their college choice process.

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# EMOTIONAL SUPPORT MAY TAKE THE SHAPE OF ADVOCATING FOR ...UNDOCUMENTED AND DACAMENTED STUDENTS.

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In many cases, emotional support may take the shape of advocating for or empowering undocumented and DACAmented students to obtain accurate college search information.

These students may have limited access, if any, to individuals who are familiar with the US higher education system. As a result, they put their faith in counselors to guide them through this complex process.

By providing targeted information and encouragement, high school counselors can help expand the college opportunities of undocumented and DACAmented students. 

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**H. Kenny Nienhusser**, EdD, is an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Hartford (CT). His scholarship focuses on the implementation of public and institutional policies that impact underserved minority students' access, with an emphasis on their high school to college transition.

**Blanca E. Vega**, EdD, earned her doctorate from the higher and postsecondary education program at Teachers College, Columbia University (NY). She recently defended her dissertation, "Beyond Incidents and Apologies: Toward a New Understanding of Campus Racial Conflict." Her work centers on access to, persistence in, and completion of postsecondary education for underserved populations, with a focus on race and higher education.

**Mariella Saavedra Carquin** earned her master's of education and master's of arts in psychological counseling at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is a mental health counselor at the Corona Clinic of Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens. Her research interests include identity development and the psychological impact of undocumented immigrant status.

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The US Education Department has released its *Resource Guide on Supporting Undocumented Students in High School and College*, available at [www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/supporting-undocumented-youth.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/supporting-undocumented-youth.pdf).

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