

# UC Irvine

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Advancing Research on Undocumented College Students in California through a UC and CSU Collaboration

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## **Introduction to Special Issue**

### **Advancing Research on Undocumented College Students in California through a UC and CSU Collaboration**

Guest Editors: Laura E. Enriquez, Sharon Velarde Pierce, Enrique G. Murillo Jr., Cecilia Ayón, and Zulema Valdez

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the first state laws that began opening up higher education to undocumented youth. In 2001, Texas and California each passed laws that allowed undocumented youth who attended high school in the state to pay in-state college tuition rates. Since then, state and institutional policies have been critical to advancing undocumented students' educational access and promoting their inclusion. California has established state laws that provide financial aid and expanded eligibility for in-state tuition rates. California's public higher education institutions also lead the nation in their provision of undocumented student services. Still, there is much work to be done to ensure equitable and inclusive educational experiences for undocumented youth.

This special issue presents findings from studies conducted by the UC Collaborative to Promote Immigrant and Student Equity (UC PromISE) and the Undocumented Student Equity Project (USEP) to delve deeply into the current experiences of undocumented students in California. The majority of articles in this issue draw on survey data collected in the spring of 2020 with 1,277 University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) undocumented students. The survey effort, led by Dr. Laura Enriquez, was initiated under UC PromISE as part of a larger study examining how immigration policies disrupt the educational experiences and wellbeing of UC college students from immigrant families. Dr. Enriquez expanded this effort to also survey CSU undocumented students under the auspices of USEP and in collaboration with CSU faculty members. These efforts produced one of the largest datasets on undocumented students with unique opportunities to evaluate a number of educational, wellbeing, and political and civic engagement outcomes. Items also delved deeply into the perceptions of legal vulnerability, immigration policy effects, and the institutional context at the university. Two additional articles draw on earlier qualitative interview projects conducted by USEP with undocumented UC students.

Importantly, USEP and UC PromISE both explicitly aim to impact policy and practice. They are also both collaborative projects that aim to support the professional development of early-career scholars in the field, from undergraduate students to junior faculty. To advance these efforts, authorship teams were built with the intention of creating mentored publication opportunities. As Principal Investigator on the studies, Dr. Enriquez was involved in all aspects of the research and contributed to many of the papers. Similarly, co-PI Dr. Cecilia Ayón contributed to several papers.

Collectively, the articles in this issue delve deeply into the experiences of undocumented students. They interrogate the processes through which immigration policies constrain undocumented students' education and assess how universities can intervene. The first article, written by Laura E. Enriquez and her collaborators, provides a descriptive analysis of key items from the 2020 survey. Their results document the heterogeneity of undocumented student

experiences that have emerged in California's increasingly inclusive policy context. They make a case for future research to advance more nuanced and contextualized analyses.

The next three articles unpack undocumented students' legal vulnerability in the context of educational, mental health, and political engagement outcomes. Karina Chavarria and colleagues identify wide variation in the frequency of immigration-related distractions due to both students' own and their parents' immigration-related issues. These differences are consequential as students in more frequently distracted profiles are more likely to report more frequent negative academic behaviors. Sharon Velarde Pierce and colleagues examine multiple dimensions of legal vulnerability to establish that discrimination, social exclusion, threat of deportation, and financial insecurity are associated with more severe depression and anxiety symptomology among undocumented students. Social support only partially moderates this relationship. William E. Rosales and colleagues advance a nuanced assessment of the immigration policy context to show that perceived discrimination and threat to family are positively associated with all forms of political engagement, but social exclusion has a negative association. Importantly, these effects differ for students who have no legal status and those who have a liminal legal status.

The next two articles dig deeper into the role of institutional context. Mercedes Valadez and colleagues examine the institutional context to reveal the sustained role of campus environment on undocumented students' positive and negative engagement. Heidy Sarabia and colleagues examine factors that affect students' use of academic support services and show that campus integration plays a significant role in increasing the odds of use.

The final two articles draw on interview data to probe undocumented students' lived experiences of immigration policies. Daniel Millán illustrates how undocumented students develop unique perceptions of their legal status, which has implications for how they navigate college. Martha Morales Hernandez and Laura E. Enriquez show that receiving benefits through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program has supported the post-college transitions of undocumented young adults, but its effects are substantially constrained due the fact that it is an increasingly compromised form of liminal legality.

In closing, we would like to recognize all of those who have participated in these collaborative studies. UC PromISE and USEP are both led by Laura E. Enriquez. UC PromISE co-Principal Investigators include Cecilia Ayón, Jennifer Nájera, Annie Ro, and Zulema Valdez. Research collaborators on the 2020 survey include Karina Chavarria, Basia Ellis, Melissa J. Hagan, Julián Jefferies, Jannet Lara, Martha Morales Hernandez, Enrique Murillo Jr., Carly Offidani-Bertrand, Maria Oropeza Fujimoto, Victoria E. Rodriguez, William Rosales, Heidy Sarabia, Ana K. Soltero López, Mercedes Valadez, and Sharon Velarde Pierce. Mariel Calva Hernandez and Evelyn Sanchez Aguilar provided research assistance for the 2020 survey. USEP co-founders include Edelina Burciaga, Miroslava Guzman Perez, Daniel Millán, Martha Morales Hernandez, and Daisy Vazquez Vera.

We hope that these articles inspire new lines of research in this area, as well as inform policy and practice to improve educational opportunities and experiences for undocumented students in and beyond California.

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