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## Working Papers

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Undocumented and Distracted: How Immigration Laws Shape the Academic Experiences of Undocumented College Students

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## Undocumented and Distracted: How Immigration Laws Shape the Academic Experiences of Undocumented College Students

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“There was this one time there was a reten [raid] in [the city where I’m from]. And I was calling my mom because I know that she goes in that street to buy stuff for her tamales that she sells. And she wasn’t answering so I was really worried. I was like, ‘Oh my god, what if she got detained!’ It turned out that she was just asleep. But I remember I had bio after that, so I wasn’t paying attention in class. That’s all I was thinking, my mom, my mom, my mom.” – Cassandra

Cassandra is an undocumented student who grapples with her immigration status and its effect on her everyday life and opportunities. Immigration laws and policies can restrict access to higher education and limit opportunities by introducing barriers to access. Undocumented students are ineligible for federal financial aid funding and unlike a K-12th grade education, access to college depends on state and institutional policies.

California is the second state to introduce in-state tuition for undocumented students with the passage of Assembly Bill 540 in 2001 for students who attended a California high school. This period resulted in some undocumented students attending higher educational institutions when they had sufficient familial or private scholarship support, however barriers to access and retention persisted. A decade later, the CA Dream Act provides students access to state and institutional aid across public universities, making college more affordable. Further, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, introduced in 2012, provides undocumented young adults who qualify, apply, and are granted DACA, two-year access to a work permit and protection from deportation. DACA is associated with college enrollment because



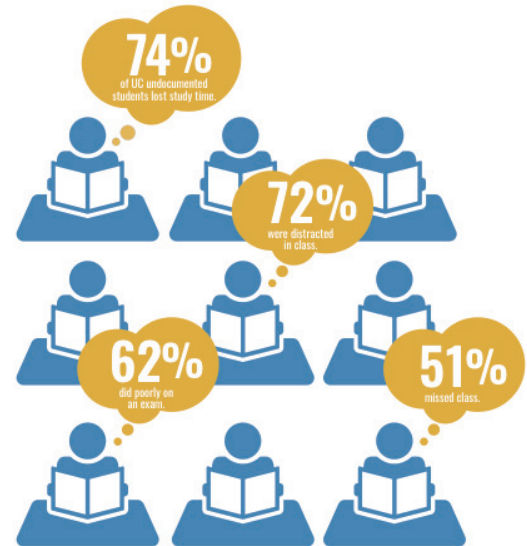
it provides undocumented students access to employment opportunities to cover educational costs. Lastly, the University of California has dedicated funding and implemented programming targeted at undocumented students. Enrollment across the UC system increased year over year with approximately 500 undocumented students enrolled in the 2010-2011 academic year and approximately 4000 enrolled in 2017-2018.

In Cassandra's case, her undocumented status was still operating in an explicit but less visible way. Specifically, Cassandra worried for the safety of her mother to an extent that limited her ability to focus in class. This instance is one of the many moments when illegality negatively shapes the academic experiences of undocumented students as immigration distractions. Despite a relatively positive California state and university context, Cassandra and her undocumented peers grapple with the consequences of illegality in their daily academic experiences. How does illegality manifest in the day to day lives of undocumented immigrants? How are immigration distractions an example of this manifestation among undocumented college students? I draw on interview and survey data from the Undocumented Student Equity Project (USEP) with undocumented college students at a UC campus to answer these questions.

USEP is a collaboration of undocumented and allied undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty that examines undocumented students' experiences to develop equitable educational practices. The first wave of USEP data included focus groups and interviews with 154 students and an online survey with 525 students over 2014-2016 across all 9 UC undergraduate campuses. I analyze a second wave of 30 interviews conducted in Spring 2017 that focused on students' academic experiences and barriers to academic achievement at a single UC campus. Participants were recruited via personal networks, snowball sampling, and the listserv managed by the campus' undocumented student services staff. Interviews lasted an average of one hour. Participants were also asked to reflect

on relevant descriptive data from the UC-wide survey. All participants received \$20.

### Undocumented students experience immigration-related distractions that hurt their academic performance.



 Undocumented Student Equity Project

[undocequity.com](http://undocequity.com)

## UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS EXPERIENCE IMMIGRATION DISTRACTIONS

Undocumented students report being distracted in academic settings by a variety of issues related to their immigration status, including deportation threats to themselves and others, immigration-related appointments, and anticipated or actual changes to immigration policy. These feelings were heightened following the 2016 election of President Trump who had vowed to rescind the DACA program.

Most USEP survey respondents reported experiencing immigration status related distractions: 51% reported missing class, 72% being distracted in class, 74% losing needed study hours, and 62% had done poorly on an exam because of issues related to their immigration status (Figure 1).

## DISTRACTIONS NEGATIVELY IMPACT ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

Students reported missing class to attend meetings and appointments related to their immigration

status – DACA biometric appointments, meeting with lawyers, or attending immigration court meetings. For instance, Dolores remembered, “I did miss school because after Trump became president, my family and I went to see a lawyer just to see what our options were.” These encounters with immigration institutions were infrequent but represented large investments of time and energy.

In most cases, the changing socio-political context led students to be distracted in class and while studying, which contributed to losing needed study hours and doing poorly on exams. Given the timing of our interviews, the candidacy, election, and inauguration of President Trump often emerged as a salient source of distraction. Amy explained,

“For the first two weeks after [the election results], I was really, really distracted because I was like shit, what’s going to happen? And even just like the night of, I stayed up late to watch it. And then I stayed up even later because I was crying. And then the next day, I was dead. So it took a few days to like, level off. But even after that, I was still distracted. It took a while for me to get back on track.”

For many students, the 2016 Presidential election disrupted their academic performance for that term. Other students explained how learning about immigration announcements, such as the future of DACA, became distracting and resulted in missing classes or assignments. These events have proliferated in the past year as immigration policy rumors and announcements abound.

The general safety and wellbeing of undocumented family members can also foster distraction. Alyssa explained what she does to check-in with her family back home:

“They [my friends] would put [on Facebook, posts about] a lot of raids and oh, there’s a checkpoint here and there. So I would be like checking and screen shot it and send it to my mom and my dad and be like oh, pay attention. And sometimes it would be like really close to my house. And I was like oh shoot, you know. So then I’d try to go back to class

and I’d be like shoot, I just missed ten minutes, what’s going on?”

Students reported similar distractions when studying. Increasing media coverage of federal immigration enforcement further contributes to students’ worry and distraction. Repeated exposure to such distractions can have a cumulative effect as students struggle to balance concentrating on their academics with monitoring the wellbeing of themselves and their family.

### **DISTRACTIONS AND LONG TERM EDUCATIONAL CONSEQUENCES**

Undocumented students explicitly and implicitly spoke about how their lack of engagement impacted their academic performance, indirectly resulting in poor test scores, low grades, and GPAs that do not reflect their academic ability. For example, Stephanie explained that she had been talking to an attorney on campus and had to make several appointments to explore legalization options: “Yeah. It’s been kind of taking up a lot of my mental space. And I think also, when I get stressed, I tend to not care much about the classes. I don’t study as much as I normally would.” The mental space that Stephanie refers to is reflective of a preoccupation with short-term and long-term immigration issues that take away time and interest from their academics and negatively impact academic outcomes.

Distractions are not experienced uniformly but can accumulate and may have lasting consequences for undocumented students’ educational performance and mobility. Students can be advocates for themselves and their families, be highly informed, and aware of how immigration developments can shape their lives. However, this comes at a cost to their day to day academic engagement and performance. Future work should continue exploring how immigration laws and policies shape the day to day academic experiences of undocumented college students.