

BALLARD BRIEF

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Barriers to Higher Education DACA Recipients Face in the United States

By: Natalie Porter



Key Takeaways

- Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a policy that provides temporary relief from deportation to young undocumented immigrants, opening opportunities for employment and higher education.²
- The UCLA Institute’s survey results showed that of 410 survey respondents, 90% of surveyed DACA recipients were worried about being able to use their degree and 78% believed that they would have to change their postgraduate plans if DACA was rescinded.³
- While it is relatively safe for undocumented students to be more visible within higher education, many still choose to be invisible on campus, leaving them to navigate their education in silence due to the wariness of sharing their immigration status.⁴
- School-led programs for student Dreamers are beneficial in fostering belonging and providing helpful resources for Dreamers.⁵

Summary

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a policy that provides temporary relief from deportation to young undocumented immigrants, as well as social security cards and legal work authorization to qualifying individuals. Students with DACA encounter a variety of barriers to completing higher education due to the nature of the DACA policy. DACA places restrictions on access to federal resources and state resources, inhibiting access to financial aid opportunities. DACA does not provide lawful status to recipients—this breeds uncertainty about the future, preventing DACA students from scholastic planning. The uncertainty of the future is exacerbated by the fact that DACA applications must be renewed and approved every two years.¹ While DACA opens doors for educational and professional opportunities during college, the temporary nature of the policy results in barriers to preparing for postgraduate plans. Students grapple with high levels of stress and uncertainty, as well as feelings of isolation as they navigate these challenges. Currently, the best intervention for DACA students, known colloquially as Dreamers, are school-led

programs that foster belonging and provide Dreamers with legal, financial, and emotional resources necessary to complete higher education.

Key Terms

Advance parole—A travel document issued by US Citizenship and Immigration Services that allows certain immigrants to travel outside of the United States and return lawfully.⁶

Internships—A three-way partnership among an institution of higher education, an employer, and a student. They offer the student an opportunity to apply classroom learning in a practical setting while engaging in a professional capacity.⁷

Deferred action—A discretionary determination to defer the deportation of an

Context

Q: What is Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)?

A: Deferred action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a policy that provides temporary relief from deportation to young undocumented immigrants.¹⁴ DACA has been in effect since June 15, 2012.¹⁵ According to

individual as an act of prosecutorial discretion.⁸

Employment Authorization Document (EAD)—A document issued by the government that proves an individual is authorized to work in the United States for a specific amount of time.⁹

Liminality—Between two different places, states, etc; within an intermediate, in-between, or transitional state, phase, or condition.^{10,11}

Somatic symptoms—The name for the group of conditions in which the physical pain and symptoms a person feels are related to psychological factors.¹²

US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)—A federal agency that oversees lawful immigration to the United States.¹³

DACA eligibility requirements, potential applicants must be at least age 15 to apply and have been under the age of 31 as of June 2012.¹⁶ This means that as of September 2023, the maximum age to qualify was 42 since the DACA program had been in progress for a little over 11 years. Applicants must also have entered the United States before 2007, which would make the youngest eligible applicants 16 as of

2023.¹⁷ Undocumented young adults who meet the criteria are offered the opportunity to apply for and obtain a social security card and legal work authorization.¹⁸ DACA does not provide permanent legal status to these individuals and it must be renewed and approved every two years.¹⁹ DACA's benefits derive from the legal distinction between lawful presence and lawful status. In many situations, an unlawful status equates to an unlawful presence, but DACA provides temporary authorization by the Department of Homeland Security for recipients to have lawful presence without complete lawful status.²⁰ When an individual's application is approved by the US Department of Citizenship and Immigration Services they will receive an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) and be able to apply for a social security card.²¹ This documentation is beneficial because it allows recipients to apply for jobs that require authorization, apply for higher education, and be temporarily protected from deportation.²²

Q: Who are Dreamers?

A: Dreamer is a term that commonly refers to an undocumented immigrant who came to the United States as a child. The term "Dreamer" comes from The Dream Act,

which was the first policy suggested in Congress to protect undocumented child immigrants.²³ In this brief, "Dreamers" will refer to undocumented immigrants who have qualified for DACA. DACA requires that individuals meet specific criteria to qualify for deferred action from deportation. US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) explains this criteria in seven points. For example, each individual must have been under the age of 31 on June 15, 2012, must have arrived in the United States before turning 16, and must be a continuous resident; this means they need to have lived in the US from June 15, 2007, up to the time that they file the request. They must currently be enrolled in school, have graduated and received a certificate of completion from high school, have obtained a General Educational Development certificate, or are honorably discharged veterans of the US Coast Guard or armed forces. Lastly, individuals must not have been convicted of a felony or misdemeanor, or pose a threat to national security or public safety.²⁴ According to the US Citizen and Immigration Services, as of June 30, 2021, there were 590,070 active DACA recipients and an additional 84,413 DACA recipients who had renewals pending and were not

classified as active.²⁵

Qualifications for DACA

- 1 Were under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012 (that is, you were born on or after June 16, 1981)
- 2 Came to the United States before reaching your 16th birthday
- 3 Have continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007, up until you filed your request for DACA
- 4 Were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012, and when you filed your request for DACA with USCIS
- 5 Had no lawful immigration status on June 15, 2012,* and when you filed your request for DACA, meaning that:
 - You never had a lawful immigration status on or before June 15, 2012, or
 - Any lawful immigration status or parole that you had before June 15, 2012, expired as of June 15, 2012, and
 - Any lawful status that you had after June 15, 2012, expired or otherwise terminated before you submitted your request for DACA
- 6 Are currently enrolled in school, have graduated or obtained a certificate of completion from high school, have obtained a GED certificate, or are an honorably discharged veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard or armed forces of the United States
- 7 Have not been convicted of a felony, a misdemeanor described in 8 CFR 236.22(b)(6), or 3 or more other misdemeanors, and do not otherwise pose a threat to national security or public safety.

Q: When did the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals pass and what was the intention behind this policy?

A: Throughout the last 24 years, multiple policies have been suggested to aid undocumented childhood arrivals. In 2001 the Dream Act, originally called the Development, Relief, and Education of Alien Minors, was brought to the US Congress; this is where the nickname “Dreamers” came from. The Dream Act never became law due to not getting enough votes in Congress after multiple presentations.²⁶ Eventually, DACA

was established on June 15, 2012, by the Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano under the Obama Administration through an executive order.²⁷ One of the key differences between the Dream Act and the current DACA policy is that the Dream Act included a path to citizenship for undocumented individuals who came to the United States as children.²⁸ The purpose of DACA was to provide legal protections and incrementally delay deportation, otherwise known as deferred action, to qualifying youth and allow them to obtain lawful status for two-year increments. Still, it did not provide an avenue for permanent lawful status. However, DACA protected these individuals and allowed them to pursue further opportunities in the United States like higher education or career advancement.²⁹

Q: Where do DREAMERS come from and where do they live?



Photo by [Naassom Azevedo](#) on [Unsplash](#)

A: Dreamers residing in the United States have a variety of backgrounds. The US Citizenship and Immigration Services provided the following demographic information of active DACA recipients as of June 30, 2021; the country of origin for the vast majority of DACA recipients, 476,780 of 590,070, was Mexico.

Contributing Factors

Lack of Financial Aid

DACA recipients are not eligible for federal loans or federal financial aid; this is a barrier to higher

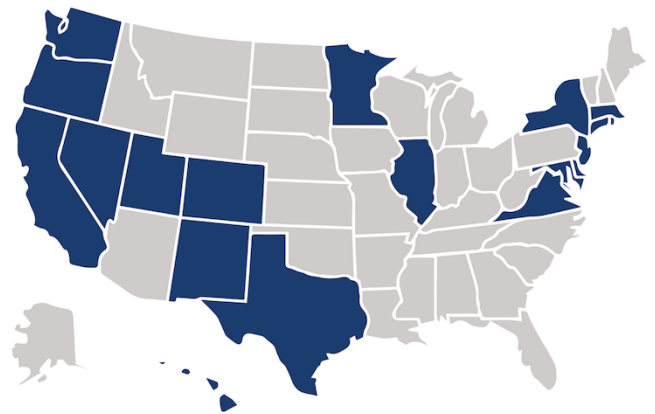
El Salvador (22,680), Guatemala (15,430), Honduras (13,980), South Korea (5,690), Peru (5,580), and Brazil (4,460) were also significant countries of origin for DACA recipients.³⁰ Dreamers are individuals who were brought to the United States as children by their families; these families have diverse reasons for choosing to immigrate, some of these reasons include, but are not limited to, searching for a job or economic opportunity, reuniting with family, escaping conflict or persecution, or environmental factors.³¹ Due to the difficulties in obtaining data regarding undocumented immigrant families, it is difficult to gather comprehensive demographic data on their backgrounds. The most lived-in states by Dreamers are California (168,000), Texas (97,970), Illinois (30,880), New York (24,570), Florida (22,550), Arizona (22,260), North Carolina (21,940), and Georgia (18,960) as of June 30, 2021.³²

education for Dreamers due to the costs of college and limited ability to pay.³³ Federal financial aid is financial assistance offered by the Federal Student Aid, an office of the US Department of Education, in the form of loans, grants, and work-study funds. This aid provides

approximately \$112 billion each year and assists more than 10 million students each year.³⁴ DACA is not an immigration reform law which means it does not override federal legislation that excludes undocumented youth from federal financial aid.³⁵ According to a study conducted by the President's Alliance in 2021, 181,000 of 427,000 undocumented students enrolled in postsecondary education are DACA eligible (meaning they either already have DACA or are eligible to apply).³⁶ Additionally, the Education Data Initiative reported that the average federal student loan debt balance was \$37,718 in 2023 and there were approximately 43.6 million borrowers of federal student loans.³⁷ These statistics identify that federal loans and federal financial aid were widely available and used by students, but highlight the impact of inaccessibility of available federal aid to DACA students. Because Dreamers do not have access to any federal financial aid, they must find alternative ways to pay for their education, often resulting in time and effort in place of the time that could be spent in the pursuit of their studies. Interviews with Dreamers from Ohio used the expression "grindin" to describe how they manage to pay for school without subsidies to mitigate tuition costs.³⁸ Most participants referred to working a full-time job or several part-time jobs just so that they could afford their

tuition. To them, "grindin" was symbolic of working beyond capacity and exerting themselves by working long hours under significant pressure. One student reported working long hours was not a choice but rather a response to being excluded from federal funding.³⁹ Other students conveyed similar opinions that because they could not access financial aid they had no other choice but to prioritize work over their school obligations.⁴⁰

Only 18 States Offer Comprehensive Financial Aid



As of 2023, 18 states and Washington DC offer access to comprehensive state financial aid for

undocumented students, including DACA recipients. Comprehensive access means that DACA recipients and other undocumented students have access to in-state tuition as well as some forms of state financial aid or scholarships.⁴¹ This equates to 36% of the United States; however, at this time, data does not exist to determine how much non-federal financial aid has been allotted to DACA recipients. The UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment conducted interviews and focus groups with 214 undocumented undergraduate students, including DACA recipients from the University of California, and an additional survey with 508 respondents. They found that 96% of survey respondents reported that they relied on grants and scholarship aid to cover their educational expenses.⁴² California is one of the 18 states that provide comprehensive access.⁴³ However, even students with tuition aid find that the costs of higher education are still prohibitive for many individuals.⁴⁴ The same interviews conducted at the University of California found that despite aid packages, one-quarter of the students reported taking out a loan, 3 out of 4 students reported using personal resources, and 2 out of 3 responded that they used family resources. Of these same respondents, 67% of the students came from a family whose annual income was less than

\$30,000 a year, and 64% reported that they earned their income, whereas a majority of them made less than \$5,000 a year.⁴⁵ This research indicates that while financial assistance is critical for undocumented students, Dreamers face financial obstacles when pursuing higher education even while living in a state with comprehensive access to state resources.

Due to financial barriers, DACA students often cannot afford not to work during school. Research reveals a pattern that undocumented students at four-year colleges are often required to make a binary decision about whether or not they can attend school full-time or choose to drop out to go to work. This decision seemed to depend largely on how the school would accommodate working students.⁴⁶ Focus groups illuminate the strain and difficulty that some Dreamers face due to financial barriers, especially regarding maintaining tuition payments.⁴⁷ Without financial aid, Dreamers must work long hours, taking away from study time; this decrease in study time inhibits their ability to perform well in school, especially when compared to their documented peers who do not face this added financial hardship.⁴⁸ While, as of 2023, quantitative data does not yet exist to compare the effects of financial strain on academic achievement for Dreamers versus non-

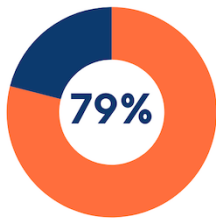
DACA students, qualitative data does show that Dreamers are at a disadvantage for success in higher education due to barriers such as financial aid inaccessibility.

DACA's Uncertain Legal Status Does Not Grant Full Lawful Status

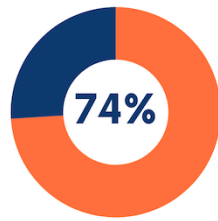
DACA does not provide lawful status to recipients; this is a barrier to students because if DACA is ever terminated, students would not be allowed to finish their studies.⁴⁹ Since DACA recipients are given lawful presence, they can safely reside in the country and be protected from deportation as long as DACA exists; without DACA they do not have lawful immigration status and are no longer protected from deportation.⁵⁰ This in-between status is detrimental when it is “extended indefinitely.”⁵¹ The uncertainty that comes with DACA status can cause anxiety in DACA students; in a survey of DACA recipients, 56% of respondents reported that they think about being deported from the United States at least once a day, or about being detained in an immigration detention facility.⁵² These concerns regarding DACA policy can significantly impact the academic experience of Dreamers. In a survey of 504 students attending the University of California, it was found that many students reported having experienced interference in their academic endeavors due to issues related

to their immigration status such as deportation threats to themselves and others, immigration-related appointments, and anticipated or actual changes to immigration policy.⁵³

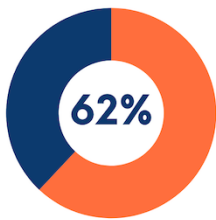
Due to these immigration concerns, 79% of the students reported being distracted in class, 74% lost needed study hours due to feeling distracted while studying, 62% did poorly on an exam, and 52% missed class.⁵⁴ In many cases, students felt that the sociopolitical climate was a huge contributor to these distractions, specifically during the 2016 presidential election when President Donald Trump promised to end DACA; with this announcement came multiple concerns about the general safety and well-being of DACA recipients as well as questions about what their futures would look like.⁵⁵ In 2020 the US Supreme Court overturned the Trump Administration’s termination of DACA, but this was not the last time DACA would be brought to Congress.⁵⁶ In September 2023 federal judge Andrew Hanen ruled DACA as illegal due to it violating immigration law. The long-term effect of DACA is still to be determined, but as of 2023, no new applications will be approved and existing applications can still be renewed. These examples are used to illustrate the unpredictability of DACA and how the uncertainty of the legal status it provides affects all recipients, including students.



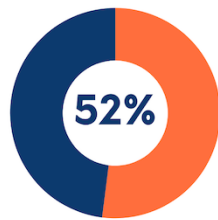
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Barriers to Scholastic Planning

DACA has increased opportunities for Dreamers in education and work spheres, but DACA's temporary nature and strict requirements also simultaneously present barriers to scholastic planning. As of 2023, DACA does not currently offer a path to citizenship, so recipients have to renew their application and wait for deferral approval every two years.⁵⁷ This renewal requirement means that this specific barrier will continue unless there is a policy change. Thus, students will continue to face uncertainty as they determine their academic path in hopes that

they will be able to complete their education under the safety of DACA.

As mentioned above, one of the biggest barriers to scholastic planning is the temporary nature of the policy. With an ever-changing sociopolitical climate, Dreamers do not know how far they can plan because plans for the future could change overnight. The DACA application needs to be renewed and re-approved every two years, but USCIS also reserves the right to terminate DACA at any time under USCIS' discretion.⁵⁸ These policies indicate that Dreamers are always at risk of losing their DACA status—they are at the mercy of USCIS policies. Dreamers feel a burden of insecurity while planning classes because they do not know if they will be able to finish school in the United States. In an interview one Dreamer stated, "DACA worries me for the long term. For the sake of when mine ends, will I be able to renew it? And why is it only two years instead of four years? With four years you can at least finish college."⁵⁹ The fear of being unable to complete college is stressful for students and affects what programs they choose to pursue. A DACA study conducted in California found that nearly every single participant shared their insecurities about the DACA program's temporariness and said that it was difficult to plan for the future because they could not be

sure what it would hold for them in terms of their legal status.⁶⁰

Some Dreamers have familial obligations that further complicate their academic path, perpetuating the difficulties of academic planning. Some potential students need to support their undocumented family members who are not able to obtain a work permit; this need takes priority over schooling.⁶¹ Interview data from a DACA study revealed that the temporary nature of the program was a key factor in student's decision to choose work over school. One respondent indicated that he dropped out of school after one year to work and support his family. He saw his life with small

Consequences

Isolation

Many students feel isolated as a consequence of DACA's temporary nature.⁶⁴ Dreamers recognize the possibility that DACA could be rescinded; if this happened, that would decrease the likelihood that Dreamers would seek help from nurses, educators, social workers, and others for fear of the scrutiny of immigration authorities.⁶⁵ Even with DACA currently intact students still face difficulty in finding allies they

deadlines; because he did not know what would happen in the future, he made sure his decisions would help him in the present.⁶² Another study of 44 interviews with DACA recipients who live in mixed-status families found that DACA recipients gained individually from DACA but that they also acquired new roles in their families, leading to greater familial dependence on the recipient. This accelerates the normative transition to adulthood to fill these roles.⁶³ Giving these young adults temporary status puts them in a position where they may be forced to choose between their family's well-being and their personal goals, educational or otherwise.

can reach out to for support. The literature on Latino and Mexican students suggests that cultural and class differences make it difficult to develop trust with educational institutional representatives. The fear of exposing undocumented status discourages students from close contact with counselors or teachers; this is detrimental as it deters Dreamers from accessing the resources they need to navigate college processes.⁶⁶ Additionally, due to ignorance or inaction on the part of peers, students may experience feelings of isolation within their school communities. During interviews with eight DACA recipients,

participants recalled feeling like they lived in liminality across multiple aspects of their lives such as at school, home, and within the community.⁶⁷ Each participant was born in Mexico, but most immigrated at a young age and had no memories of life in Mexico. Their whole lives had been in the United States, yet being undocumented left them feeling like they were foreign to the only home they knew.

Interviewees felt like they were trying to bridge a gap between two cultures while they did not have full membership in either one. Resources such as financial assistance, educational interventions (aimed at preparing both parents and students for the difficulties of college), culturally specific interventions, and trained faculty on the topics of immigration are the types of resources that were missing from these schools. Schools did not have resources that fit the specific needs of Dreamers and this fueled feelings of isolation, as that is where the interviewees spent the majority of their time.⁶⁸ While it is relatively safe for undocumented students to be more visible within higher education today, many still choose to be invisible on campus, leaving them to navigate their education in silence due to the wariness of disclosing their immigration status.⁶⁹

In a 2018 survey of undocumented students

attending the University of California including DACA students, two-thirds of survey respondents reported feeling that they needed mental health counseling in the past year; half of those students sought help.⁷⁰ Survey participants were concerned counselors would lack knowledge about immigration issues, leaving participants feeling uncertain about how counselors would respond to their undocumented status.⁷¹ This is an example of Dreamers self-isolating out of the assumption that mental health professionals would be unprepared to address their unique needs and concerns.

Dreamers do not always exhibit isolating behaviors because of a desire to keep their status a secret, but because of past negative experiences. In interviews with 21 DACA recipients, 100% of them described feeling pride around the intersectionality of their identity; Dreamers are resilient and proud of their intersecting identities which include being a recipient of DACA.⁷² Interviews with Dreamers in the state of Georgia found that some Dreamers did not want to disclose their status on campus because they did not want people to feel sorry for them; others shared instances where they disclosed their undocumented status and were met with silence or encouragement from their institution to remain silent regarding their

status.⁷³ These experiences support the research that undocumented students choose not to disclose their status due to the history of challenges in forming trusting relationships with administration and faculty, not due to a lack of seeking connection. When educational resources are sparse or unclear, students may choose not to reach out because of past experiences, fear, or rejection.



High Levels of Stress

Due to the uncertainty Dreamers face regarding their legal status, many endure high levels of

stress as a result of their college experience. A growing body of literature illustrates that undocumented students experience severe stress from a variety of sources outside of school including job insecurity, perceptions of discrimination, familial immigration status, uncertain immigration laws or policy changes, and ambiguous immigration status.⁷⁴ In interviews with eight DACA recipients, all reported the frustration and stress of the limited opportunities DACA provided because DACA does not create equal opportunities for undocumented students and youth with citizenship specifically in regards to financial assistance through scholarships and federal aid.⁷⁵ Funding college is a significant stress on many Dreamers and their limited access to funding assistance warrants that concern.⁷⁶ Other students reported that because DACA offers protection for only two years at a time, their identity felt precarious and stressful. One recipient stated, “When I think about DACA, I also have these feelings that I’m kind of just passing, that I’m not really a citizen...you’re not really there yet.”⁷⁷ Other recipients reported that since DACA is a temporary status, participants saw it as a short-term privilege that isolated and rejected them from other Americans over and over again.⁷⁸

Real Life Example

"I was trying to seek out resources 'cause everybody was like "oh there's so many resources out there, like if you're from a low income, first generation [family], then you **should have no trouble** getting some resources," but I find that there's always like that **extra barrier** set in front of those that are DACA."

Benuto, L. T., Casas, J. B., Cummings, C., & Newlands, R. (2018). Undocumented, to DACAmended, to DACAlimited: Narratives of Latino Students With DACA Status. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 40(3), 259-278.

Additionally, applying for DACA is a stressful process in itself for Dreamers because many Dreamers feel that DACA does not protect their family members. While the USCIS states that information included in DACA requests regarding family members will not be used for immigration enforcement purposes against said family members, that information may be shared with national security and law enforcement agencies.⁷⁹ As a result, potential Dreamers are weary of having their information on file with the government. In interviews, DACA recipients from mixed-status families reported feeling worried that they may have "outed" their undocumented family members and put them at risk for deportation.⁸⁰ In a different study among DACA respondents, 69% reported that they think about a family member being detained or deported at least once a day.⁸¹ In a focus group,

some students indicated that DACA had shifted their role in their family and many participants took an increased emotional responsibility for their undocumented family members. They felt worried that they were responsible for the survival of their family and that had mental health consequences of increased stress and anxiety.⁸²

These stressors can manifest as both emotional and physical health problems. A public university conducted a study where 424 college students completed an anonymous online survey containing self-reported measures of stress overload, symptoms, grades, and background characteristics. When DACA was first introduced, the stress levels of eligible recipients decreased dramatically; but when presidential campaigns promised to do away with DACA in 2016, the stress levels began to dramatically increase.⁸³ Of these students, 64 were Dreamers. The results showed that Dreamers reported significantly higher levels of stress and more somatic symptoms than their classmates, including other minorities and other immigrants.⁸⁴ This is detrimental to the well-being of these students, as research also shows that stress specifically associated with immigration status and immigration policy have direct impacts on mental well-being.⁸⁵ With an ever-changing sociopolitical climate, Dreamers continue to

battle these stressors, as well as the additional pressures already discussed in this brief, contributing to the stress they face while pursuing a collegiate degree.

Limited Postgraduate Preparation

DACA helps open the door for some educational and professional opportunities during college, but the temporary nature of the policy results in barriers to preparing for postgraduate plans. For example, college students can prepare for future career aspirations through internships or study abroad programs; DACA authorizes recipients to be able to get a work permit which opens up many of these kinds of opportunities, but the extent of these opportunities can still be limited. Interviews and focus groups with 154 undocumented college students and 32 college alumni in California demonstrated that Dreamers could pursue career-relevant jobs or internships because of their work permits, but were often denied because they lacked US citizenship or lawful permanent residency.⁸⁶ Interviews with students and alumni who attended California State University or a University of California campus highlight similar experiences. A third-year university student Dreamer shared his experience of pursuing an engineering internship; he was offered an aerospace internship, but once it was

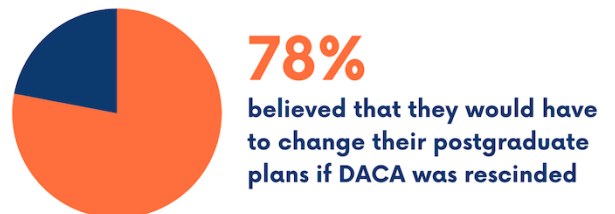
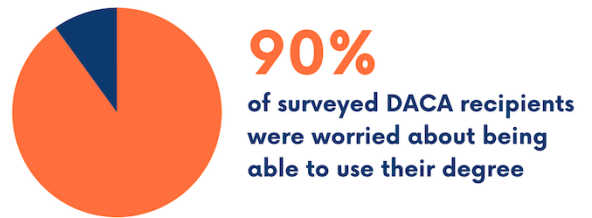
discovered that he did not have US Citizenship his offer was rescinded. Another Dreamer tried to volunteer at a medical center, but she was rejected because the center did not know about DACA and would not accept her due to her not being a citizen.⁸⁷

Study abroad programs allow students to travel internationally to develop their skills by experiencing new perspectives, learning to navigate new cultures, and working in more diverse circumstances.⁸⁸ DACA recipients must pay a \$575 fee to apply for advance parole to leave the country, but many choose not to take the risk because, according to USCIS the Department of Homeland Security may revoke or terminate your advance parole document at any time, including while you are outside of the United States. In this event, individuals would not be allowed re-entry. This stipulation warns Dreamers there is no guarantee that they will be let back into the country even after having obtained approved authorization beforehand.⁸⁹ Upon arrival at a port of entry into the United States, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) conducts an inspection to determine admission. Despite the legal return of DACA recipients, DHS holds the right to deny entry.⁹⁰ These kinds of barriers make it difficult for Dreamers to take advantage of opportunities while in school that would help prepare them for

their future endeavors after college. Additionally, a longitudinal study including graduated DACA recipients found that DACA beneficiaries continued to feel excluded by these restrictions after their college experience because they found their restricted ability to travel outside of the United States hindered their professional ambitions.⁹¹

The UCLA Institute's survey results showed that of 410 survey respondents, 90% of surveyed DACA recipients were worried about being able to use their degree and 78% believed that they would have to change their postgraduate plans if DACA was rescinded.⁹² Given the reality that DACA's rescission is a complicated legal possibility, it is suspected that anxiety regarding life after graduation is now even higher.⁹³ One Dreamer commented in an interview that he anticipates his lack of permanent legal status will complicate his future career plans. Because of this, he has designed two different career paths in the hope that one of them will be possible depending on what the future holds.⁹⁴ In establishing multiple plans, students such as this hope to manage the consequences of unpredictable changes to immigration laws. In this effort, students may spread themselves too thin in trying to prepare for all scenarios resulting in the inability to focus on the skills and opportunities that will most help them

achieve their primary career goals.⁹⁵ Dreamers also report feeling isolated as they navigate their post-graduate plans. In an interview with one Dreamer, she commented on feeling like she had to navigate the post-college transition alone. She spoke of a negative encounter with her school counselor, in which she felt the counselor was not only ignorant of the challenges faced by Dreamers but also of the resources available for undocumented students. Because of interactions such as this, the student chose to navigate her transition out of college on her own, without university faculty assistance.⁹⁶ Unless Dreamers are connected with educational resources in conjunction with properly trained faculty, they will continue to experience inhibited post-graduate planning.



Reduced quality of life due to the healthcare system can limit an individual's ability to participate in cultural and community activities,

which can have a ripple effect on the entire community's social fabric and cohesion. Bridging this cultural gap is crucial not only for improved health outcomes but also for fostering a

Practices

School-Led Support Programs for Dreamers



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School-led programs whose purpose is to both foster belonging and provide campus resources for Dreamers such as financial, legal, emotional, and social support are one of the best ways higher-educational institutions can support their student Dreamers. These types of programs are being offered in a variety of ways across the United States, varying by school. It can be inferred from research that the building blocks to a program that will successfully support Dreamers will focus on three main areas: 1)

healthcare environment that respects and embraces the diverse cultural backgrounds of American Indian communities.

opportunities to foster connection with peers and mentors, 2) training for faculty and staff on the current state of the DACA policy and its impacts on students, and 3) access to mental health, legal, and financial aid resources and counseling.⁹⁷

For instance, one practice that has been implemented among educators and supporters of undocumented peers to foster belonging is the use of a symbol of the monarch butterfly. Each year, monarch butterflies travel across borders to search for safer conditions. Immigrant families also choose to migrate to find better conditions for reasons such as economic opportunities, reunion with family members, escaping conflict or persecution, or in response to other environmental factors.⁹⁸ Thus, monarch butterflies have become a symbol for many undocumented people living in America.⁹⁹ Supportive staff display this symbol prominently, whether on online social media platforms or physically in a classroom or office window, serving as a symbolic gesture of support and reassurance for individuals who may feel uncertain or uneasy about disclosing their documentation status.¹⁰¹ This symbol

would notify Dreamers of the fact that they do have allies on campus to whom they can talk for support.

Such programs would also ideally employ trained professionals in the areas of immigration law and mental health counseling for undocumented students; this would be necessary so that students seeking help could find accurate and up-to-date help from an individual who understands their unique circumstances. Programs like this would also facilitate camaraderie with fellow students, both Dreamers and not, through activities, networking events, and socials. The purpose of these programs is to provide Dreamers with all the possible resources necessary to successfully navigate their educational goals so they may feel both supported and enabled to achieve their highest potential. Faculty members in charge of these programs would ideally recognize the barriers Dreamers face within higher education and use that knowledge to help individuals find the best path for their goals both academically and beyond.

Impact

It is difficult to measure the impact of these programs because there is no standardized structure for such programs among higher-

educational institutions as of 2023. Additional research is needed to show if Dreamers report these types of programs to be helpful. However, by analyzing similar types of programs among different minority groups on college campuses, it can be inferred that Dreamers would benefit similarly. For example, interviews of 51 college students from diverse, and at times marginalized, backgrounds reported that non-verbal support such as the public display of important symbols or distributing printed materials contributed to building a sense of belonging.¹⁰¹ Such symbols are a way for students to identify their allies on campus, and some students commented that seeing symbols on their college campuses generated feelings of comfort and solidarity.¹⁰² Because Dreamers are also members of a minority group on college campuses, it can be assumed that symbols such as the monarch butterfly and other supportive material would have a similar impact on Dreamers.

Similarly, reports of trained faculty and opportunities for peer bonding have proved successful among minority groups in higher education institutional settings. Interviews with 29 undocumented college students who did not yet have DACA found that teachers and counselors who were informed about the

circumstances of undocumented youth were significantly helpful resources because they were sympathetic enough to learn about what challenges undocumented students face. Students reported feeling more comfortable and less fearful to disclose their status and discuss unique circumstances.¹⁰³ Though these students did not have DACA yet, it can be inferred that Dreamers would experience similar outcomes due to the similarity of student experiences between Dreamers and undocumented students. This same study concluded that a variety of school-led programs that provide encouragement and resources to undocumented Latino students were helpful in their college preparation; therefore, it can be assumed the same measures would be helpful as those students progressed throughout their college careers. However, the study also found that forging trusting relationships with faculty and counselors is crucial in addressing issues unique to undocumented students.¹⁰⁴ Regarding peer bonding, a study based on 59 one-on-one interviews at three different institutions showed the positive effects of peer networks. The study demonstrated that peer networks can enhance students' learning and academic performances both in and outside of class through academic support, study groups, accountability partners, and peer mentoring.¹⁰⁵ From this research, it can

be assumed that Dreamers will have similar outcomes from school-led programs that create opportunities to build peer networks.

In the end, school-led programs would create an atmosphere of understanding and belonging by presenting Dreamers with the opportunity to connect with fellow Dreamers as well as other students and faculty who want to be a part of this program. By addressing the needs of Dreamers discussed in this brief, it is inferred that this type of school-led program would be successful in alleviating pain points and preventing consequences such as isolation, stress, and limited post-graduate preparation.

Gaps

There is a definite need for more research measuring the impact of school-led programs designed with Dreamers in mind. While there is a lack of data, the outcome goals that would be important to measure are levels of stress, feelings of isolation, and post-graduate preparation for DACA recipients in higher education institutions. For example, schools would hope to see decreased levels of stress in Dreamers due to access to legal and counseling resources. They would also strive to decrease feelings of isolation in Dreamers by providing an atmosphere of camaraderie and friendship, as well as access to faculty who are knowledgeable about immigration laws and compassionate about the difficulties surrounding Dreamers' unstable status. These outcomes could be measured using anonymous student surveys. This would help identify how student attitudes

and opinions change in tandem with the services they use. Since school programs would also intend to make a difference in helping Dreamers plan for their post-graduate lives, longitudinal research would help determine the most common needs of Dreamers, encouraging consistent alterations to the programs as the students' needs dictate. Additional qualitative evidence of individuals who benefitted would be integral as well. As school-led programs for

Dreamers continue to develop, the amalgamation of this data would both help the program know where to focus their efforts, and how to best assist Dreamers in their educational pursuits.

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Endnotes

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