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School Counselors Working With Undocumented Students

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Abstract

Undocumented students and their families constitute a large segment of the U.S. population. Research has shown that these students face many obstacles, especially as it relates to their academic, socio-emotional and career/college advancement. The authors discuss the various obstacles faced by undocumented students as they pursue public K–12 education and college access. School counselors are critical to undocumented students' success; therefore, the authors describe several strategies to use when working with this population.

Keywords: undocumented students, immigrant families, college/career access, immigrants' academic and socio-emotional issues

It is projected that by the year 2040, one in every three children in the United States will grow up in an immigrant household (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Several authors estimated that in 2015 immigrant children would represent 30% of all students in the United States (Fix & Passel, 2003; Perez, 2010). Based on recent immigration data, approximately 5.5 million children under the age of 18 live in an undocumented household and an estimated 1.5 million undocumented school-aged children (under 18) live in the United States (American Immigration Council, 2007; Passel & Cohn, 2009). Regardless, the increasing number of undocumented children within our schools, along with the distinct barriers they face, makes it essential for school counselors to be ready and willing to learn how to systematically handle their inimitable circumstances (Gonzales, 2010). School counselors need to know that not all immigrant children and families enter the United States legally. In fact, there are a number of families with undocumented status; that is, foreign persons who entered the United States with fraudulent documents or who entered legally as non-immigrants but violated the terms of their visa status and remained in the United States without authorization (National Immigration Law Center, 2011). There is a misconception that most, if not all, undocumented immigrants/students are Latinos/Hispanic; however, immigrant families are from various ethnicities, and their undocumented status affects them just as much as those in the Hispanic/Latino population (Chan, 2010).

The school system is the most important institution in the lives of undocumented immigrant children, where students' experiences can either mimic the negative social inequalities faced outside of school or equalize them (Bruno, 2011; Morrison & Bryan, 2014). Additionally, the school is the place where adolescents experience the developmental stages where they gain independence but still require guidance from adults (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010). Schools are the first place in which students develop relationships with adults other than their families (Gonzales, 2010). School counselors are critical in providing services to undocumented students. They are the main individuals who will have the necessary skills to attend to the academic, socio-emotional, and career advancement services given to undocumented immigrant families and children. However, school counselors who work with undocumented students may not be aware of the challenges that these students face or of the options available to them (Lad & Braganza, 2013). Given the centrality of family to a students' lives, counselors may not be skilled in the area of family counseling. According to the *20/20 Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession* (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011), counselors must be committed to being culturally competent. Therefore, school counselors need to have knowledge of the varied issues and challenges faced by undocumented immigrant families, in addition to the specific challenges faced by undocumented immigrant children.

Unfortunately, much of the literature on how school counselors work with undocumented immigrant children is limited, and up to this point, there are no studies directly focusing on school counselors' role in meeting the needs of undocumented children and families. This paucity of literature suggests that school counselors have little information to guide them in addressing the needs of undocumented immigrant children (Chen, Budianto, & Wong, 2010; Morrison & Bryan, 2014). Further, it is imperative that school counselors are aware of the various options available to undocumented students, especially as it relates to career/college attainment. This article introduces some of the

academic, socio-emotional, and career-related challenges faced by undocumented immigrant children and provides strength-based strategies for school counselors who work with them. First, we discuss academic, career/college and socio-emotional challenges faced by undocumented students. Second, we examine pertinent state and federal laws impacting undocumented students. Finally, the article concludes with a brief overview of the school counselor's role and provides strategies for working with undocumented students.

Challenges Faced by Undocumented Students

Academic

Education is the path to prosperity and many times the only means out of poverty for undocumented youth, yet their educational journey is filled with obstacles and challenges (Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Nienhuser, 2013). Many undocumented immigrant families come to the United States based on their need for educational and economic development (Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Morrison, Steele, & Henry, 2015). However, undocumented students have arguably greater needs and are predominantly vulnerable to legal and financial constraints (Gonzales, 2010). A circumstance unique to undocumented families is the educational attainment level of parents' ages 25–64 years. For instance, 29% of undocumented parents have less than a ninth-grade education, compared to 2% of their native counterparts, while 18% of undocumented parents have some high school education compared to 6% of their native counterparts (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Although they often see schools as a refuge (Hooker, McHugh, & Mathay, 2015), many parents with limited education cannot advocate for their children's education (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010) and may be afraid to seek assistance from school counselors because of their immigrant status (Fix & Passel, 2003).

Another issue that is important to note is that some parents of undocumented children seldom speak American Standard English or understand the American education system (Pang et al., 2010). Lad and Braganza (2013) noted that most undocumented immigrant students report having difficulty completing homework due to the fact that parents are unable to help due to language barriers or having no formal education. The lack of guidance through important transitions has potentially disastrous effects (Gonzales, 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Parents' educational level is related to their family's poverty level. Importantly, undocumented students often face increased chances of living below the poverty level. In 2007, 32% of undocumented children with unauthorized parents were living below the poverty line, compared to 10% of U.S. born children and their parents, while 45% of undocumented children did not have health insurance (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Children living in poverty is attributed to physical and behavioral health problems and school difficulties (Rank, 2010). Furthermore, children living in poverty are more likely to attend schools that lack resources and rigor, have fewer opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities or to take advanced level classes, become teen parents, and earn less or be unemployed as adults (UNICEF, 2000; Webb & Thomas, 2015). Thus, poverty and undocumented status is an overarching issues that impacts the academic, socio-emotional, and college/career advancement of undocumented students.

Secondary school. According to Fix and Passel (2003), there are more undocumented immigrant children in our secondary schools than elementary schools. However, secondary schools are most times less prepared to and/or less equipped to teach content, language, and literacy (Hooker et al., 2015). Based on this issue, it is important that school counselors understand these deficiencies, because the high rate of dropouts among undocumented students has significant impact in adulthood. For example, 40% of undocumented immigrants aged 18–24 have not completed high school, compared to 15% of legal immigrants and 8% of those born in the United States (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Passel and Cohn (2009), further argued that the age of arrival of undocumented immigrant children to the United States correlates to the likelihood of higher educational attainment. While older children between 18–24 years have high dropout rates, younger children have a higher chance to graduate high school and attend college. Diaz-Strong, Gomez, Luna-Duarte, and Meiners (2010) also noted that although undocumented children struggle academically, they often demonstrate high interest in their education, as well as demonstrate interest in various aspects of their community and school activities. Further, as a result of poverty and lack of resources, many times students not only have responsibilities with school, but also significant responsibilities at home that impact their educational attainment (Perez, 2009).

College/Career

The *Plyer v. Doe* case of 1982 determined that all children, including undocumented children, are entitled to access K–12 public education (Lopez, 2004). Although undocumented students have access to K–12 education, many find themselves immobile with uncertainty regarding their future and higher education (Perez, 2009). It is estimated that about 65,000 undocumented students who have lived in the United States graduate from high school, but due to the many barriers, only a fraction attend college (Cortes, 2013). Of all high school undocumented graduates between the ages of 18–24, only 49% attend college, compared to 71% of their native counterparts (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Admirably, research shows that college-eligible undocumented students exhibit academic achievement, leadership, and civic engagement levels that are often greater than their U.S. born counterparts (Perez, 2010).

Although no federal law prohibits undocumented students from continuing on to higher education, their circumstances make it nearly impossible to feel at ease when thinking about college (Diaz-Strong et al., 2010). Thus, poverty places limits on what they can do. For example, one of the most cited reasons why undocumented students do not attend college is based on their financial circumstances (Lopez, 2004). Several researchers mentioned that undocumented students do not qualify for financial aid, loans, and many scholarships (Gonzales, 2010; Nienhusser, 2013; Perez, 2010). It is important that school counselors are aware of these financial limitations in order to provide responsive services that can give undocumented students access to postsecondary education.

Socio-Emotional

As stated earlier, undocumented students need support and assistance with regards to their academics and career/college success. Lack of support (Gonzales, 2010), environmental circumstances, and poverty exacerbate one's mental health well-being in

schools (Walley, Grothaus, & Craigen, 2009). One impact on their social well-being is the fact that most undocumented immigrant youths tend to grow up thinking of themselves as Americans, yet live as outsiders without basic resources such as driver's licenses, opportunities for legal employment, and financial aid (Perez, 2009). Furthermore, they live in constant fear of deportation (Perez, 2010), and most often live in hiding. They tend to hide their immigrant status from school personnel due to fear of repercussions (Chan, 2010). The unique experiences faced by undocumented children outside of the school building may shape their lives and affect their academic and career advancement as well. Further, many times undocumented immigrant students face racism and poverty throughout their precollege experience, which exacts a toll on mental health and contributes to higher academic costs (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010; Walley et al., 2009). According to Dougherty, Nienhuser, & Vega, (2010), students often feel afraid to share too much information due to being afraid of deportation.

Most times, undocumented immigrant students feel as if they are unable to participate in society for a number of reasons. They feel hopeless about their future and do not have the self-efficacy that is necessary to continue on to college. They feel a great sense of loneliness because they lack the social capital to develop relationships outside of their circle (Kim, 2010). Therefore, if they are a newcomer undocumented immigrant, especially for those who do not speak Standard American English, making new friends presents obvious difficulties (Morrison & Bryan, 2014). As a result, undocumented immigrant children limit their contact only to students from their own country of origin (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Furthermore, they feel unable to obtain desirable employment and fully plan for the future, which contributes to students disengaging from their academic careers (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2011).

Laws Impacting Undocumented Students

There are a few laws that impact undocumented students' academic, socio-emotional, and career/college futures. First, the Higher Education Act (1965), the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA; 1996), and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA; 1996) all put constraints on undocumented students and their families. These laws prohibit undocumented students and families from receiving any form of federal funding (e.g., financial aid, work study, grants, loans, food stamps, health care, etc.; NCSL, 2011). Thus, the lack of financial aid and other federal resources creates a burden on families who may already be within the clutches of poverty. However, in response to these laws, tuition equity legislation has been passed around the country (Nava, 2013). Second, tuition equity laws are intended to extend in-state tuition rates to undocumented students based upon high school graduation versus residency and immigration status (Nienhuser, 2013). Currently, 20 states have made important steps to lessen the financial burden leveled unto families regarding college tuition. Thus, in-state tuition gives undocumented students the opportunity and possibility of going to college as well as lessening the financial burden placed upon families. However, in order for students to take advantage of tuition equity policies, they typically must be a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient (Hooker et al., 2015).

Third, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is another policy that has implications for undocumented students and families. This deferred action policy was first introduced (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2015) after the DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act) was not passed in Congress. Deferred action refers to the use of prosecutorial discretion to defer immigration removal actions against individuals who meet specific criteria for a limited period of time. School counselors should be aware of the following DACA requirements, since most undocumented students qualify:

- be under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012;
- came to the United States before reaching the age of 16;
- continuous residence in the United States since June 15, 2007, up to present time of application;
- be physically present in the United States June 15, 2012, and at the time of application;
- have no lawful status on June 15, 2012;
- be currently enrolled in school, graduated, or received a general education development (GED) certificate, or received an honorary discharge from the military; and
- have no felonies, or significant misdemeanors. Applicants must be able to provide evidence for all these guidelines, proof of identity, and be at least 15 years old at time of application (unless they are in removal proceedings). Additionally, they must pay an application fee (USCIS, 2015).

Currently, over 600,000 undocumented persons have been approved for DACA (American Immigration Council, 2014). Those who are granted DACA receive work authorization and can apply for a social security number. It must be noted that the social security number is only for employment and cannot be used to apply for federal or state financial aid.

Role of the School Counselor and Strategies for Working With Undocumented Students

Role of the School Counselor

According to the American School Counselor Association (2013), being aware of the national, state and local requirements and programs that impact future endeavors are one aspect of the school counselor's role. School counselors are obligated to provide comprehensive services to all of their students, including those who may be undocumented (Mainer, 2013). School counselors have an important role in the academic, socio-emotional, and career success of students; they have the unique opportunity and ability to shape underserved students' school experience, academic success, and their college choice process (Nienhuser, 2013). Furthermore, school counselors are the frontline mental health professionals for all of their students and families (Borders, 2002; Walley & Grothaus, 2013). The networks between peers, school officials, and students have the potential to empower minority students to access essential social capital plus give access to necessary resources for school success (Gonzales, 2010). It is important for school counselors to be involved and proactive with helping and

guiding undocumented students. This makes it particularly important for school counselors to be ready and willing to learn about and help undocumented students in their schools.

Strategies for Working With Undocumented Students

In order to effectively help undocumented immigrant students in the school setting, school counselors must understand the daily struggles that undocumented students and their families face. Due to the limited literature regarding school counselors working with undocumented students and families, the following recommendations have been compiled and developed to assist school counselors as they attend to the academic, socio-emotional, and career/college needs of undocumented students.

There are a few academic recommendations that the authors believe can be helpful to school counselors when working with undocumented students. First, school counselors can become mentors (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010); they can engage students by using active listening skills and providing pertinent information to students about academics and career. Second, school counselors can pay extra attention to students transitioning out of the safety of their ESL classes and into rigorous programs. School counselors should ensure there is extra support provided to students such as tutoring by teachers, homework assistance and/or test modifications (Hooker et al., 2015). For undocumented students who speak varied dialects from their native country, yet do not qualify for ESL (e.g., some students from English speaking Caribbean countries), school counselors can advocate for academic and community support such as partnering with organizations and individuals who can mentor and provide tutoring, so that students can learn American Standard English (Morrison & Bryan, 2014). School counselors can provide one-on-one counseling with undocumented students and families (Perez, 2010), as well as group counseling designed specifically to help undocumented students process their experiences as immigrants and minorities. For example, a group comprised of undocumented immigrant students with similar experiences would provide opportunity for self-disclosure, catharsis, and an experience of universality (Glasgow & Gouse-Sheese, 1995). Further, group counseling is ideal to ease some of the marginalization and create a support setting (Chen, Budianto, & Wong, 2010).

When working with parents, school counselors can teach parents about the differences between the U.S. educational system and that of their home countries and the importance of education in order to gain wealth (Lad & Braganza, 2013; Morrison & Bryan, 2014). Since undocumented youth may have difficulty planning for the future, counselors should work with students to address long-term as well as short-term goals with students, educating them on available resources. In addition, counselors should make students aware of the resources available to them today and educate them on how to advocate for a better tomorrow (Diaz-Strong et al., 2010). By catering to all immigrant families, school counselors can provide for undocumented immigrants, regardless of whether the families come forward. Building an environment that is friendly to undocumented immigrants could open the door for these families to feel safe and trust the school counselor (Morrison & Bryan, 2014). In the situation where school counselors are aware of these families, it would be beneficial for school counselors to take on the role of mentors for undocumented students. In almost every case of academic improvement, a mentor was involved in helping to change the student's academic trajectory (Kim, 2010).

These individuals who become mentors bridge the gap that is created between home and school and at times help transition into the new country (Lopez, 2004). School counselors need to encourage parents' confidence by providing orientation to the U.S. school system. Mitchell (2005) argued that many undocumented immigrant families see school counselors and teachers as surrogate parents and may not want to intervene if a decision has been made about their children. School counselors must teach parents advocacy skills to boost their confidence in taking a proactive role in their children's education (Mitchell, 2005; Morrison & Bryan, 2014).

Regarding the socio-emotional recommendations, school counselors must aim to be culturally competent in order to attend to the individualistic needs of students. School counselors, in their efforts to become culturally competent, must examine their biases and prejudices about immigrant children and families to appropriately help undocumented students (Morrison, Smith, Bryan, & Steele, in press). School counselors should be sensitive to the needs of undocumented students (Perez, 2010). They should provide services to undocumented students, such as psychoeducational workshops that focus on anxiety, depression, alienation and stress management, and create an environment where students feel free to open up about their personal issues (Navarrete, 2013). In addition, since many undocumented youths do not learn of their status until high school, school counselors may encounter cases where the students are unaware of their immigration status; in these cases, school counselors may help students to discuss their status with their families (Mainer, 2013). If school counselors are aware of undocumented students' status, they should speak to undocumented students who normally would not seek guidance due to being afraid of coming out as undocumented for fear of being deported (Dougherty et al., 2010). Since mental health is considered a crucial component of a school counselor's role, especially during secondary school (Walley et al., 2009), counselors must be aware of students' fears and must spend time explaining and reassuring undocumented youth about confidentiality (Chen, Budianto, & Wong, 2010).

Lastly, there are several college and career strategies that school counselors can employ to support undocumented youths. School counselors are in a critical position to both provide career and college resources and support these students. Further, providing information and support for this population can lead to good mental health (Hooker et al., 2015). School counselors who work on college transition must make their students and their families aware of their rights, resources available, as well as responsibilities. It is important for school counselors to be aware of situations undocumented students and their families might face in their transition out of high school and form strength-based conversations of post-secondary transitions (Mainer, 2013). School counselors could also encourage high performing undocumented students to take as many advanced placement (AP) courses, or others similar, to fulfill college general requirements and alleviate future costs (e.g., dual enrollment; Perez, 2010). Undocumented students are continuously discouraged by the lack of job opportunities available to them after graduation. School counselors may also take on the role of institutional agent (Perez et al., 2010). This role may include organizing civic engagements, multicultural services, political coalitions, and support programs. School counselors must be aware of resources available to undocumented students and provide such information to them, as well as provide support during their college choice process (Perez, 2010). Additionally, school counselors should set up workshops and/or conferences for undocumented students and their families to

learn how to get into college, navigate college, and hear stories of other undocumented college students (Perez, 2010). Thus, starting this process early in the students' educational program (e.g., elementary school) could be beneficial, especially as their parents learn about the U.S. educational system. Lastly, and very importantly, as stated earlier, school counselors should link students to outside/community agencies that can provide further resources (Nienhuser, 2013). DACA is time limited and once the Obama Administration leaves office, there is no guarantee what will happen with the deferred action. Nevertheless, there are many benefits for obtaining DACA status for students and family members. Obtaining a social security number and a work permit opens many doors for undocumented youth, creating opportunities that could potentially change a person's future. According to Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszczyk (2014), DACA status beneficiaries take steps to becoming more economically and socially integrated into the United States. In addition, recipients obtain new jobs and increase their earnings, obtain internships, open bank accounts, obtain credit cards and driver's licenses, and are able to submit applications for health care. Furthermore, DACA may ease some of the negative aspects of illegality, thus relieving anxieties, decreasing fear correlated to deportation, positively affecting their emotional well-being (Navarrete, 2013), and increasing the possibility of more undocumented youth enrolling in postsecondary education (Cortes, 2013).

Conclusion

Undocumented students face unique obstacles to access of academic, career/college, advancement and socio-emotional well-being. This article discussed relevant information pertaining to the challenges faced by undocumented immigrant students in the United States. It is important to understand that undocumented status exacerbates challenges that are experienced by undocumented immigrant students and contributes to their poverty level. Challenges include low socioeconomic status and lack of parental educational attainment and support. Additionally, high dropout rates and current policies and laws put considerable constraints on undocumented students and their families. Although the issues discussed in this article are by far not the only ones that challenge this particular immigrant group, this article serves as a starting point to educate and more fully engage school counselors. The strategies provided herein are rooted in multicultural and social justice counseling principles and are used to garner increased awareness and support for undocumented immigrant students' and parents' needs. It is hoped that school counselors will use these strategies as guidelines for work with an increasing influx of undocumented students and families with varied needs.

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