

California Community Colleges **Dreamers Project**

Strengthening Institutional Practices
To Support Undocumented Student Success

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Project funded by



The James Irvine
Foundation

In partnership with



California
Community
Colleges



FOUNDATION *for* CALIFORNIA
COMMUNITY COLLEGES

**IMMIGRANTS
RISING**
TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

A collaborative effort funded by The James Irvine Foundation¹, the California Community Colleges Dreamers Project lays the groundwork for a longer-term program or initiatives to meet undocumented students' needs. The project includes a landscape analysis, as well as guidance from an Advisory Group and this final report submitted to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO).

In the full report, Immigrants Rising and the Foundation for California Community Colleges present identified, shared challenges in serving undocumented students. Recommendations about how to better serve undocumented students, paired with promising practices underway, are provided for implementation at the individual, group, and institutional levels to create systemic change that benefits California.

Serving more than 2.1 million students, the California Community College (CCC) system is the largest system of higher education in the nation, and it is designed around the idea that higher education should be available to everyone. An estimated 50,000 - 70,000 undocumented students are enrolled at CCCs, and an estimated 80% of undocumented adults in California have not attended college. The system has an opportunity to meet its workforce demands and better serve its communities by improving enrollment, retention, and graduation of undocumented students.²

The original purpose of the Dreamers Project was for the CCC system to effectively respond to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) policy's impact on undocumented students. But undocumented students face multiple system barriers beyond the threat of losing DACA protections, necessitating a more comprehensive approach. Therefore, the project broadened to identify and address the most pressing challenges facing undocumented students' ability to pursue and continue their postsecondary education. It also directly aligns with the CCC system's *Vision for Success*, to increase the number and percentage of students who reach a defined educational goal while decreasing the time and costs to do so.

The CCC Dreamer Project consisted of:

1. creation of a Dreamer Advisory Group (DAG);
2. development of a quantitative, online survey; and
3. regional meetings across the state with CCC undocumented student advocates.

1 The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The James Irvine Foundation.

2 Campaign for College Opportunity, Higher Education Affordability for Undocumented Students in California, 2018.

Findings

The survey and regional meetings findings showed that there are six main categories of challenges related to colleges serving undocumented students, including:

1. Inadequate ability to outreach to undocumented students and protect student data
2. Insufficient institutional support/campus-wide trainings
3. Need for dedicated stakeholders, staff, and space at each campus
4. Need for better access to financial support
5. Need for increased student engagement and direct services to increase student retention
6. Need for definitive guidance from the CCCCCO

To build systemic solutions, understanding of both the challenges undocumented students face in earning certificates, associates degrees, and/or transferring to a four-year university as well as challenges educators face in best serving these students is imperative. Following that understanding comes development and implementation of processes and policies to reduce institutional roadblocks to increase enrollment and graduation rates.

Survey and regional meeting findings illustrate the importance of conducting cross campus events, showing that several challenges had been addressed, at least to some level, by other campuses. However, even institutions that have built creative solutions are still struggling to ensure those solutions are both scalable and sustainable. Therefore, each challenge is paired with recommendations in the report that were developed through careful data analysis and refined by the Dreamer Advisory Group. In addition, promising practices from the field are highlighted to provide possible solutions. To create systemic change, collaboration is necessary between the CCCCCO, legislators, philanthropic organizations, administrators, faculty, staff, and student leaders, thus the following recommendations are directed to the spectrum of stakeholders to collectively move colleges to the next level.

Overview of Recommendations

1. Improve identification, student data protection, and outreach

Reduce equity gaps in undocumented student enrollment by building pathways that increase service awareness and reduce fear.

2. Increase staff training and support

Ensure all CCC personnel are adequately trained to build institutional practices that promote compliance with California state laws and educational codes.

3. Formalize support for dedicated stakeholders, staff, and space at each campus

Expand and formalize campuswide support and retention of undocumented students through the creation of a task force, a dedicated position, and measurable benchmarks.

4. Improve access to financial support for all undocumented students

Increase undocumented students' ability to receive all financial aid and scholarships for which they are eligible.

5. Expand strategies to promote student retention

Promote undocumented student certificate or degree completion through increased opportunities for student leadership, as well as access to credible legal and mental health services.

6. Ensure CCCCCO's statewide guidance and policy support

Provide systemic oversight regarding equitable implementation of state laws, alignment with CCCCCO initiatives, and sustained advocacy to improve all campus climates for undocumented students.

Undocumented students should be given the resources and support needed to pursue higher education, which is a requirement for both economic and social mobility in the state and the country. With collegiate microcredentials, certificates, and degrees, undocumented students can pursue a wider range of and higher paying employment opportunities, to in turn better support their families and contribute more substantially to California's tax base. By providing undocumented students with the means to pursue higher education in alignment with the *Vision for Success*, the CCCs are building on existing primary and secondary educational investments and positioning them to contribute meaningfully to California's economic, social, and cultural fabric.

While the status and support of undocumented immigrants wavers federally, California continues to lead the way in serving this vulnerable population. Individuals, groups, and institutions within the CCC system have made great strides toward serving the largest number of undocumented students in California with limited funding and resources. It is important to recognize the work done thus far, and encourage all key players to take necessary steps to continue improving how undocumented students are served. Future research and reports would serve the field by highlighting institutional challenges and documenting the growing number of resources available at all of California's higher education institutions.