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Equity and Empowerment: The Professional Development Experiences of Undocumented Students Without DACA

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# EQUITY AND EMPOWERMENT: THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES OF UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS WITHOUT DACA

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Addressing the professional development challenges and limitations undocumented students without DACA face and how we can create inclusive opportunities, leading to a more equitable future for all.



## Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) Policy and Undocumented Scholars in the U.S

In 2012, the Secretary of Homeland Security announced that immigrant people who came to the United States as children and meet other criteria may apply and be considered for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival program (DACA) (UCSCIS, 2022). Deferred Action recipients qualify for work authorization, social security, and some form of legal protection. DACA does not provide citizenship status.

Immigrant students have made contributions to the U.S education. First-generation students born abroad and immigrated to the U.S comprise 15% of the student population enrolled in higher education. Over the years we have seen a significant increase of immigrant students in both the classroom and the workforce. There are 82,933 undocumented students in higher education and 44,327 are non-DACA eligible students in higher education. These students are actively preparing themselves to address critical skill shortages and improve their ability to contribute to their families, communities, and the overall U.S. economy through their pursuit of higher education.

### Recent Policy Changes to DACA

In 2021, the DACA program was halted and affected 90,000 new applicants. On October 5, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit upheld the decision made in July 2021 by the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas, which declared the 2012 DACA policy as unlawful. Despite this, the Fifth Circuit maintained the partial stay that was issued by the district court in July 2021 and sent the case back to the district court for further proceedings regarding the new DACA rule.



On October 14, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas extended its injunction and partial stay to the DACA final rule. As a result, while the stay remains in effect, current grants of DACA and related Employment Authorization Documents (EADs) are still valid, and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) will continue to accept and process renewal DACA requests and requests for employment authorization under the final rule. Additionally, applications for advance parole for current DACA recipients will continue to be accepted by USCIS, while initial DACA requests will be accepted but not processed during this time.

## Undocumented Status and Career Challenges: Barriers, Uncertainty, and Mental Health Impact

Undocumented students without DACA face significant challenges in pursuing their careers due to their undocumented status. They experience difficulties in obtaining internships, facing barriers in the tech industry, and feeling excluded from certain opportunities.



Undocumented scholars express their career goals and aspirations, such as working in academia, higher education, journalism, STEM fields, and more.

They also mention their desire to give back to their communities and support other disadvantaged students. Students expressed an interest in pursuing careers that address social justice issues that create a positive social impact on their communities. Empowering students to pursue such careers can lead to a meaningful contribution to society. Undocumented students without DACA have motivating factors in their career choices which include financial stability to support their families. Enabling students to achieve financial independency will benefit them and their families and communities.

The emotional toll of being undocumented while facing limited professional opportunities weighs heavily on these individuals. Undocumented scholars also expressed emotional distress, feelings of anger, disappointment, and vulnerability they experience due to their undocumented status and limited professional opportunities. Undocumented scholars in STEM fields often encounter racism and the necessity to "code switch" to navigate professional spaces successfully. Addressing these challenges will foster a more inclusive and diverse STEM workforce.

### Hope and Optimistic Views

Despite the challenges and barriers, undocumented students feel optimistic about their future and career goals. There also mentioned internal and external motivations to help the push forward. Support and guidance from allies and experienced undocumented individuals play a pivotal role in bolstering their confidence and outlook.

Undocumented Student Centers in higher education have played a crucial role in the academic and professional development of undocumented



students. These Student Centers were also able to help students navigate their career development without having to figure it out themselves alone. They provided access to various resources such as scholarships, mental health support, internships, and research opportunities for undocumented students.

Existing programs in Bay Area such as SEEDS and Dream SF Fellowship have proven valuable in supporting and creating opportunities for underrepresented students. Expanding and enhancing such initiatives can significantly contribute to empowering undocumented scholars in their career pursuits. Undocumented students also emphasize the significance of networking with faculty, relying on personal projects to gain experience when opportunities are challenging to obtain.

### **Policy Solution: Pathway to Citizenship and Resource Expansion**



Several steps must be taken to empower undocumented students in continuing their education and pursuing professional careers. First, we must implement a policy reform that will provide equal access to internships and job opportunities for undocumented students, despite their legal status. This will enable them to contribute their talents and skills to various sectors. Additionally, we must establish specialized mental health programs for undocumented students to address the emotional distress they experience. These services should be confidential and culturally sensitive. Financial assistance should also be provided, offering additional financial aid and scholarships specifically designed for undocumented students to alleviate financial burdens and promote career choices based on passion and interest. Career counseling services tailored towards undocumented students can also support their professional development by providing guidance and mentorship, helping them navigate their chosen fields successfully. Furthermore, efforts to promote social justice careers could be encouraged through initiatives and partnerships to reach a broader population of undocumented students.