

# **UNDERSTANDING THE RESOURCE BARRIER FACED BY UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS AT OUR UNIVERSITY AND HOW TO BETTER OUR SYSTEMS**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Undocumented people consistently face barriers when attempting to provide for their families. These barriers come as a result of not having opportunities afforded to them regardless of the conditions of their arrival. They are frequently forced to pursue any alternative path to find work, and one of these paths is to pursue a higher education in the hope of finding a better-paying job. This, however, is a privileged opportunity that not many undocumented people can even consider. Even after going through all the hurdles required to consider higher education, they will still face obstacles when trying to get a job since many employers are not even aware of their existence.

This is an issue currently in institutions like UVA, which provide little to no assistance for undocumented students to navigate these systems paved without them in mind.

Undocumented students currently need more structured support in finding success after graduation. They currently can only take on jobs if they are unpaid or if they take part in micro internships, which are internships that only last for a couple weeks and work much like contracting. Things like career fairs, which are events where students can speak to recruiters from many companies, and even being able to work successfully with career center staff are some things that undocumented students can not currently fully participate in. This information is also not made aware to undocumented students on the university website, instead students either learn the hard way that some of these resources are not available to them or try to seek guidance from the nearest faculty member, but, often, the faculty member is not even aware of the existence of undocumented students. This interaction creates difficulty in trying to navigate career choices as well as cultivating a feeling of exclusion. Undocumented students should be afforded the same opportunities as their peers or at the very least should be informed about what options they have. I want to better understand why there are not systems in place to help these

students. Is it lack of coordination? Funds? If we can understand what our institution is missing, we can better equip ourselves to help our students succeed. No student should be excluded from the opportunity to succeed.

## **Background**

In the summer of 2020, the University of Virginia allowed undocumented students to get accepted at the university. Prior to this policy change undocumented students could go through the entire process of the college application and meet all the requirements but, it would not matter since UVA did not allow undocumented students to attend the University. When I say undocumented students, I am referring to students who have no form of legal status in the United States. This excludes DACA which is a policy that allows a certain demographic of immigrants to apply for a work visa and social security number through an application and renewal process. So, with this policy change UVA introduced a new demographic of students without any proper resources to help them. Most of the resources provided to UVA is through MSS, Multicultural Student Services, which is a branch of Student Affairs that aims to promote inclusion and engagement for historically underrepresented students, and the resources they have for undocumented students are meant mainly for students with DACA. UVA's resource system did not receive the major update it needed for these students, and when conversing to Dean Gist, the Dean of Student Affairs, I found out that the reason was because the focus was simply trying to get undocumented students to be a part of the university first. Any resources like academic or financial came after the policy change. To combat the lack of resources, Dean Gist is a main source of contact for undocumented students, and she does her best to redirect them to whatever resources they may need.

## **Other schools**

Other institutions have been able to do what UVA seems to not be able to, they provide their students with as many resources as they can and inform them about these resources existing. These institutions have systems in place that allow for their student body to interact and get connected with the people they need. My goal is to try to understand how their systems differ from the one we have here at UVA. What is the major difference between us and them? Is it the amount of time that students have been able to attend these other institutions as opposed to how little it has been since undocumented students are allowed on Grounds? Or would that even be an important factor since these schools already did some work in collecting the resources and UVA would only need to analyze it and use implement it through the systems it already has such as the career center, admissions offices, and MSS.

## **Methods**

The methods used for gathering information for this research paper include secondary sources such as articles and scholarly sources, and primary sources such as interviews with UVA faculty. The method for finding the articles was done through a search of several university websites and understanding of how their support for undocumented students has been different from our own. To understand this, I looked through as much history available of the founding of undocumented support and searched for any legal policies that made this support easier or harder to establish. The interviews on the other hand were informal one on one interviews. These questions for each interview were specific to the position of the interviewee. For example, when interviewing the Assistant Director of the Engineering Career Center, which is responsible for providing UVA students with job/internships opportunities and information, the questions were

focused on why there aren't many options available for undocumented students and about what work is being done to address problems. The interview with the Dean of Student Affairs, Dean Gist, was focused more on the history of undocumented resources in the University and where the state of support lies.

## **Results**

The interview with Dean Gist revealed that undocumented individuals had little to no resources specifically tailored to them. For the most part all resources available to UVA students are also available to undocumented students until it comes to the resources provided by the career center. The reason being that there is an issue when it comes to the legality of how a state university can help undocumented students with their professional career. State universities like UVA cannot simply provide things like financial aid due to state legislature or allow undocumented students work through conventional means. Other states however like California have policies in place that increase a student's access to not only financial aid but, also gives undocumented students the ability to acquire professional licenses that would help them obtain a job. To combat this however, there are organizations that certain faculty members, mainly student affairs, are already aware of that can provide them with more information on how to best support undocumented students. The two mentioned during my conversation with the dean were ACPA, The American College Personnel Association, and NASPA, National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. Both resources are curated for faculty and professionals in the field of student affairs. This poses an issue due to this information being specific to what a member of Student Affairs would need, making it less accessible or useful to those not in Student Affairs. Dean Gist also pointed out that out of all of the committees members can join, there was only one which dealt with undocumented training. When I asked if there would be anyone else that I could converse with in order to

understand more about any work being done involving undocumented students, it was revealed to me that there are many people whom I wasn't aware of that have been working to make changes for undocumented students. Among these people, however, it was also stated that none of them would be considered an expert. Essentially meaning that there wasn't a specific role that focused on undocumented students outside of Dean Gist in Student Affairs. Dean Gist is meant to oversee MSS services not run events or any programs that would uplift a marginalized student group. Other student groups have access to a plethora of events throughout the school year that aim to focus and support their individual identities. Another example would be the QC, Queer Center meant for queer students, the LSC, meant for Latinx students, and the MSC, meant for students of several multicultural backgrounds, and their respective faculty that help run events and are a source of information. This difference in support highlights the need for something to change. Other students have access to a plethora of support options both among each other and within the institution but, undocumented students fall short on both of those accounts.

This sentiment of not being an expert and gathering more and more information was also prevalent in my interview with Heather Palmer, The Assistant Director of the Engineering Career Center. Heather stated that “the challenge for almost all of us career advisors at UVA at the moment is not having any professional training [...] to know, how can I not just respond to an undocumented student when I meet with them? But what are resources that already exist?” Heather essentially made it clear that the career center currently does not know how to help undocumented students in their career path. Although there is currently a lack of knowledge and resources from undocumented students, there does seem to at least be support that is continuously growing. Heather made it clear that once she had interacted with an undocumented student she urgently began to research as much as she could so that she could be used as an avenue for support. Her

efforts didn't just end there however because she also began having conversations with other faculty members which created a greater sense of urgency to create more support for undocumented students after graduation. I later expanded on this urgency, and we discussed the benefits of establishing a new job position that would gather information on undocumented resources and disseminate it throughout the faculty members who would benefit from it. Essentially it would be a way to train faculty on how to help and support undocumented students. Another potential resource that was discussed was the existence of fellowships and internships that are few but are specific to undocumented students. To provide more of these resources the university itself could create these fellowships or internship opportunities. This would not only create more resources for students but, it would also serve to improve the sense of community among undocumented students. If UVA is creating resources that undocumented students would begin to feel directly supported by the university.

Finally, my research of other universities mainly focused on public institutions since they are bound by the law more so than a private institution is. The universities I looked at are UCLA, SDSU, George Mason University, and Cornell. My research for Cornell consisted of reading through the school's identity resources, which are resources designed to support students that are part of marginalized groups. UVA also has identity resources under MSS. These resources may not be called identity resources, but they do serve the same purpose to uplift marginalized communities. When looking at the undocumented resources however, Cornell provided more information and direct support from the university. These resources included a fellowship and direct contact with a graduate student and a dean whose role was to support undocumented /DACA students (Cornell, n.d.). Having dedicated roles of support available on the school website sends a message that Cornell will do their utmost to support the undocumented

community, since even if these faculty members leave, the position is already established within the university. This is something that UVA is currently missing. I wanted to know more about the specifics of the help they provide to potentially learn how these positions were established but, unfortunately, I did not hear back from the faculty.

When looking at George Mason University much of the information was important since they are also a public university within the state of Virginia. When researching information from Mason's website I encountered links which led to outdated information or to nothing at all. Showing some neglect within the site. However, I also found a page dedicated undocumented resources which fell under Mason's First Gen Center. Within this resource I uncovered that George Mason has clear information about what opportunities are available for undocumented students when it comes to employment. Within the First Gen Center there is a career section which redirects students to a section within George Mason's career services. This section gives a thorough explanation of where students can find work, when they should disclose information regarding their immigration status, how to get financial support, and how to build a network(First-Gen+ Center, n.d.). All of this information is currently lacking within UVA's own career services. This is however can be changed because as demonstrated by George Mason, a public institution in Virginia is capable of having this level of support for its undocumented students.

As for UCLA and SDSU, both of which had their own support systems embedded within the university, the support they provide expands further than what George Mason currently has. For UCLA the university has an established center to house the universities program for undocumented help. This resource allows students to drop in with the program coordinator, learn about campus and community resources, get information on academic and financial options,



connect with student support groups, and participate in workshops and events scheduled throughout the year (UCLA, n.d.). I also found an article written by a DACA student which describes their experience with the system in place at the university. It touches on not only the access given to them through the university website and networks but, it also talks about how even as a DACAmented individual within a state that has much better laws supported undocumented folk, they were still afraid. This is a huge factor to consider when creating our own resources at UVA. Currently, undocumented students have only one point of contact for support. And much of that support is done through conversations they seek out. This is difficult for undocumented students to do currently since there is not much access to solid sources provided by the university. With all the resources being outside resources, our institution is failing to address how undocumented students are navigating the day to day at this university. If we are to not only provide them with the resources they need, but also making those resources come from our institution then, we could solve not only the lack of resources but, also help minimize the fear felt by undocumented students. With this fear minimized we could spark conversations with undocumented students that would address exactly what needs to be done to provide tailored support for our undocumented student body.

Finally, for SDSU I found that they also had a center for undocumented students. The undocumented resource center at SDSU has a plethora of support that none of the other schools showed. They had faculty, student staff, volunteers, and plenty of resources both on campus and off campus. The main benefit that SDSU showed compared to all other schools is that they had not only established a community like UCLA but, they also have frequent events that aim to inform their students as well as create belonging. These ranged from professional development, undoc-Ally training (Training undocumented allies by informing them of what it means to be

undocumented and how to help, these training sessions are also held at UVA through the undocuUVA organization led by students), receptions for newly undocumented students, self-care events, and other events that focus on the undocumented identity (SDSU, n.d.). Many of these programs can be adopted into our university through MSS but, it would be more beneficial if there was also some way to introduce a resource center for undocumented students.

## **Discussion**

Looking through all the research done on this subject and the conversations I've had with the faculty who are currently doing the work to bring more resources, it seems that the current state of undocumented resources at UVA is not where it should be. Other universities may have had an undocumented student body long before UVA but, the resources and opportunities these other schools have should be used as a framework as to what UVA should be doing. Many schools have at least a sense of community which allows undocumented students to comfortably interact with the systems placed at schools. We do offer some resources, but we are not building this sense of safety and community. This can be seen with how undocumented students are currently interacting with the sociotechnical systems at UVA. Currently undocumented students are not reaching out for help which was seen in my interview with Heather. If students are not reaching out, then there must be some reason for it. The lack of resources is just one of the many things that is contributing to this issue. The other aspect is that on the outside it seems that UVA is not doing much to make change for its undocumented student body. Many of UVA's resources for these students are mainly external which sends a message that UVA cannot help these students and requires outside support.

The inadequate resources coming from UVA also harm the community's sense of safety. Undocumented students deal with the constant fear of deportation. This fear stems from ICE,

which is the US's Immigration and Customs Enforcement that deals in deporting undocumented immigrants. Having this constant fear looming over you based simply on your immigration status, makes it extremely difficult to try and ask for support based on that status (Beiglari, 2022). That's why it is vital for UVA to support students more directly through programs and resources created by the university.

Now that we know the state of our resources and what others have done before us, we now have a path in which we can provide support even though we may be limited by legality. First, we should address problems within our current resources. Many of the resources that are currently provided to undocumented students are disorganized. This needs to change to establish a sense of safety and belonging. Having the first form of contact with students be one of disorganization shows neglect. To fix this we need to update information and make sure that no information is repeated throughout our undocumented support resources provided by MSS.

The next thing we need to do is to introduce new resources to the university. Even within our own legal binding we can still offer university resources. And it is vital for these resources to mainly come from our university since, that is what will mainly fix the cultural issue that makes it difficult for undocumented students to ask for help. This cultural issue stems from the fear associated to the undocumented identity. As shown within the experience of several undocumented or DACAmented students at UCLA, having a sense of community helps mitigate the fear felt and allows students to prosper (Beiglari, 2022). Through university fellowships or a more centralized source of undocumented help led by the university, taking inspiration from Cornell's fellowship and SDSU's resource center, we can begin to fix the sociotechnical system that undocumented students are forced to navigate in and create a community of safety for them.

This will also uncover more gaps within university help. As students begin to feel safer, they will begin to ask more questions and work with faculty to find solutions.

Finally, as for other resources that can be afforded to these students would be through an expansion of the current network of help here at UVA. There used to be two main people that led the conversations of help for undocumented and DACAmented students but, recently one of them, Susan Davis, left our university. Susan was the vice president of Student Affairs who took on the role informally alongside Dean Gist. Now there is only one person and most of the focus of this network has been on the admittance and financial help for undocumented students. We need to focus on how to help students succeed outside of the university. To do so we may see several benefits from either introducing an undocumented resource help position or moving to create a resource center like SDSU and UCLA. With an official position students will be able to contact a specific person within the university before and during their time here at UVA. This will create a sense of community long before these students even get admitted to UVA. This position also makes it so that whenever the faculty member who was in that position leaves, someone else can fill in their role since the position makes it so that there is always a need for someone to be knowledgeable on how to help undocumented students. This would also open the avenue for supporting roles that could help in specific areas, for example, having a role meant to support undocumented students in finding work after graduation would be extremely beneficial. This role could be someone who trains every career center or have several people in these roles for each career center across the university. The other option we have would be to create a resource center (SDSU, n.d.). This resource center could host events that will inform undocumented students about university opportunities, work opportunities, educated them on their rights, building a network, and even social events. They could also create a mentorship

program like PMP, peer mentoring program for Latinx students, and PAFN, peer advising family network for

Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American, which are mentoring programs run by MSS. This would create a better sense of community and help undocumented students navigate day to day life within UVA. The downside to the resource center however, is that the university would require time in establishing a place where the resource center can be located. The resource center would also help create a location on Grounds where students can feel that they belong. Having a space dedicated to the existence of undocumented would solidify their place at this university.

### **Conclusion**

UVA may not have the desired state of undocumented resources currently but, it has definitely shown that it is capable of making efforts to fix this. The faculty and students that are currently doing the most in trying to alter the sociotechnical system that is UVA resources and its interaction with undocumented students, have shown that they are dedicated to supporting these students. Bridging the gap between resources available to undocumented resources and their peers has become the focus of the faculty currently doing work. Finding the resources has proven to be difficult because there is already a lack of resources afforded to undocumented students. In order to overcome this the university needs to create space and resources from scratch. It needs to create a system in which undocumented voices aren't afraid to participate and help the university grow. The work is not easy but other universities have already taken the steps we are striving for; we just need to adapt it to fit our own institution. To do this the work that needs to be done is to have conversations with those in power here at UVA. This can come through student activism, conversations with professors/faculty, and conversations with peers. By having more people informed, these conversation will eventually spread to where change can occur, for

example the conversations I have been having have already been spreading within the engineering school and change is being talked about. If these changes eventually get implemented, then we can make it so that our undocumented students are not left to struggle by themselves and can use the same resources that their peers have access to.

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