

Dreams Delayed: Barriers to Degree Completion among Undocumented Community College Students

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Community colleges in the United States (US) remain relatively accessible to students from immigrant families. However, undocumented immigrant students encounter difficulties in staying continuously enrolled in community colleges because they contend with multiple disadvantages. These students often ‘stop out’, or withdraw with intentions to return. This mixed-methods study explores the non-continuous enrolment of students from immigrant families. Drawing on survey data from a randomly selected sample of community college students in California, logistic regression results indicate that although the children of immigrants exhibit an ‘immigrant advantage’ with respect to staying continuously enrolled in community college, those who remain undocumented stop out at disproportionately high rates. Through a comparative analysis of 80 semi-structured interviews with undocumented immigrants and US citizens, I outline the multidimensional ways in which a precarious legal status interferes with students’ postsecondary schooling. Specifically, I suggest that undocumented students’ legal status often leads them to stop out due to corresponding financial hardship, sub-standard employment options, the precarious legal status of other undocumented family members who rely on their earnings, and excessive stress. This study offers evidence that the condition of ‘illegality’ functions as a ‘master status’ that has an overpowering effect on students’ college pathways.

Keywords: Undocumented; Immigrant; Postsecondary Education; Community College

Introduction

Over the last few decades, undocumented migration has posed an increasing challenge to wealthier nations. Social, political and economic conditions, along with restrictive migration policies, have contributed to the growth in the number of undocumented

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immigrants (also sometimes referred to as unauthorised or irregular migrants) who are granted limited or no social and civil rights by their host countries (Bloch, Sigona, and Zetter 2011; Cvajner and Sciortino 2009; Parrenas, *forthcoming*; Sigona 2012). This problem has received significant attention in the United States (US), home to an estimated 11.7 million undocumented immigrants (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2013), including 2.2 million children and young adults who arrived in the country as minors (Batalova et al. 2013).

Undocumented children in the US have the right to enrol in the nation's K-12 education system. However, their access to higher education is less certain as they transition to adulthood and encounter legal, economic, social and other barriers to enrolling in college (Abrego 2006; Greenman and Hall 2013). When they do manage to pursue higher education, they are likely to concentrate in the nation's relatively accessible and comparatively affordable community colleges, which offer vocational training and associates degrees, rather than in more costly 4-year institutions that grant bachelor's degrees (Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, and Suarez-Orozco 2011). A growing body of scholarship has provided important insights into experiences of undocumented college students in the US (Contreras 2009; Enriquez 2011; Gonzales 2011; Perez and Cortes 2011), yet we still know very little about the persistence and degree completion of undocumented community college students, especially as their experiences compare to those of US citizens and legal permanent residents (LPRs). The problem is twofold: available data on randomly selected college students do not typically identify those who lack legal documentation (Greenman and Hall 2013; Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, and Suarez-Orozco 2011), while studies of non-randomly selected undocumented students rarely contain comparison samples (for exception, see Dozier 2001).

Drawing on random sample survey data, as well as semi-structured in-person interviews, this study contributes to the research on how legal status shapes students' pathways through college by focusing on a key determinant of degree completion: continuous enrolment in college courses. Students who maintain continuous enrolment in college, rather than 'stop out' (i.e. withdraw with intentions to return), are considerably more likely to complete their certificates, earn degrees or transfer to a 4-year university (Crisp and Mina 2012). Unfortunately, community college students stop out at high rates (Crisp and Mina 2012; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). This investigation examines whether or not and why undocumented students are more likely to stop out than other students, including the children of immigrants who are LPRs or citizens, as well as those of US-born parentage. Results show that even though, in the aggregate, the young adult children of immigrants are more likely to maintain continuous enrolment when compared with US citizens, those who are undocumented tend to disproportionately stop out. Findings highlight the multidimensional ways in which the precarious legal status of otherwise relatively high-achieving undocumented students interferes with their postsecondary schooling. This study suggests that the condition of illegality functions as a 'master status' (Engel 1999; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012) that has an overpowering effect on students' college pathways.

The Problem of Poor Student Retention and Degree Completion in Community Colleges

To understand the persistence and degree completion of undocumented students in community colleges, it is important first to recognise that most students in the US who enrol in these relatively accessible schools fail to complete their intended degrees and certificates in a timely manner (Crisp and Mina 2012; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). National data from 2010 indicate that approximately 1 in 5 students at public community colleges completed their programmes within 150% of normal time (Chronicle of Higher Education 2012). Community colleges (especially public colleges) often lack the necessary resources and structures to ensure that students effectively integrate into the school, receive proper guidance and counselling, and obtain other academic support that they may need. Without a strong institutional connection, students may feel compelled to withdraw when they encounter challenges (Crisp and Mina 2012; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006).

Students' academic achievement often predicts college persistence and degree completion (Adelman 2007). Due to the open-access nature of community colleges, many students enrol despite being unprepared to succeed academically. As a result, a significant proportion of community college students perform poorly in courses or are placed into remedial coursework, prompting some to give up or withdraw (Crisp and Mina 2012; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006).

Student demographic characteristics also tend to correspond with enrolment patterns. A significant proportion of community college students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and such students tend to stop out at higher rates than their more privileged counterparts (Goldrick-Rab 2006; Terriquez and Gurantz 2014), perhaps because students with less-educated parents do not obtain the same level of academic guidance in high school and beyond, as do those with more educated parents (Lareau and Weininger 2008). Additionally, students from lower income backgrounds cannot rely on their parents' financial resources to support their academic development as children (Farkas 2011) or pay for their school-related expenses when they reach adulthood (Huang et al. 2010).

Other key demographic characteristics tend to shape whether or not students maintain continuous enrolment in US postsecondary institutions. Older students stop out at higher rates because they tend to have more family and work commitments than do younger students (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Men are also more likely than women to take breaks from school, largely because of their relatively poorer academic performance in both high school and college (Ewert 2010). Some studies also demonstrate racial differences in students' persistence in college (Goldrick-Rab 2006; Moore and Shulock 2010); this might be expected because racial inequality and discrimination continue to negatively impact educational opportunities for Black and Latino students (Kasinitz et al. 2008).

Immigrant Incorporation and College Persistence

When it comes to college persistence, the immigration literature currently suggests distinct and contradictory possibilities that postsecondary students from immigrant families are, on the one hand, *more likely*, and on the other hand, *less likely* to remain continuously enrolled in school than are their peers from non-immigrant families. It is possible, for example, that the children of immigrants may benefit from a 'second-generation advantage' (Kasinitz et al. 2008) that facilitates their degree completion, and therefore may be more likely than their US-born counterparts to maintain continuous enrolment. In other words, they may draw on their families' high expectations for success in the US, or 'immigrant optimism' (Kao and Tienda 1995), as well as strengths of both immigrant and US cultures and networks to help ensure their educational success. However, it may also be possible that the children of immigrants stop out at higher rates owing to their tendency to assume more family financial responsibilities than their native-born peers (Fuligni and Pedersen 2002), potentially hampering their ability to focus on their studies (Sy and Romero 2008). Additionally, those children of immigrants whose parents remain undocumented may further encounter financial, social and emotional hardships that limit their educational attainment (Bean et al. 2011). This study considers the roles of parent nativity and legal status in shaping community college student persistence, given the instrumental support that the children of immigrants sometimes provide their families (Fuligni and Pedersen 2002).

However, the primary focus of this investigation is on the ways in which legal status shapes students' enrolment behaviour. As suggested earlier, the US primary and secondary school systems are fairly inclusive of undocumented students, granting those without legal documentation the same rights as US citizens. However, as young people age out of this system, they 'transition to illegality' and encounter a range of legal barriers that limit educational, employment and other opportunities (Gonzales 2011; Terriquez 2014). As such, undocumented students graduate from high school at rates comparable to their citizen peers, but they enrol in postsecondary education at considerably lower rates (Greenman and Hall 2013). We know very little about whether or not those undocumented students who do go to college remain enrolled in college at rates comparable to their citizen and LPR counterparts.

Yet evidence suggests that some encounter a fundamental bureaucratic challenge to enrolment and to accessing financial resources when college institutions require them to submit a social security number, which they may not have (Perez and Cortes 2011). But perhaps most importantly, undocumented students may encounter a host of financial barriers that other students do not face in paying for school. To begin with, they often come from poor families, partially because many of their undocumented parents work in very low-wage and unstable jobs (Donato and Armenta 2011). Paying for school, especially on a continuous basis, may prove cost-prohibitive for many, especially for those who reside in states where their status renders them ineligible for more affordable in-state tuition (Flores 2010).

Furthermore, these students can access neither federal financial aid nor (with some exceptions) state-provided financial aid (Flores 2010). Until the fall 2012 implementation of the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy—which provides temporary work permits and a stay of deportation for eligible undocumented youth—covering the costs of college tuition was difficult because undocumented students were not legally able to apply for jobs. As a result, those who did work often found themselves taking jobs offering very low pay and sub-standard working conditions (Gonzales 2011).

Additionally, the legal status of undocumented students leaves them vulnerable to social stigmatisation and discrimination, to say nothing of the real possibility of deportation, all of which potentially induce high levels of psychological stress (Gonzales, Suarez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013; Perez and Cortes 2011). Given the record number of deportations under the Obama administration, some of these young people also have had to cope with the fear that additional family members may be deported (Dreby 2012) as well as the actual deportation of family members or other acquaintances. This stress, complicated by poor access to health care (Ortega et al. 2007), could negatively impact students' mental health (Gonzales, Suarez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013; Perez and Cortes 2011), thus potentially contributing to disruptions in their education.

The extant research suggests that the negative impacts of illegality are multi-dimensional, creating bureaucratic, financial, social and health-related challenges that might interfere with students' ability to stay in school. As such, students' condition of illegality may function as a *master status* that outweighs and overpowers other social characteristics (Enghceren 1999; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012). In other words, being undocumented could shape many aspects of students' lives, restricting their social mobility and life chances.

At the same time, studies also point to the possibility that the group of students who do manage to enrol in postsecondary education tend to be highly motivated and resourceful. Research has long demonstrated that high educational aspirations positively correlate with educational attainment (Deil-Amen and Turley 2007), and recent studies on undocumented college students suggest that members of this group tend to hold exceptionally high aspirations, in spite of the challenges posed by their legal status (Contreras 2009; Perez and Cortes 2011). Additionally, undocumented students who do attend college appear to benefit from the extensive assistance of mentors, as well as broad networks of support (Enriquez 2011; Gonzales 2011). These students might be academically prepared to enrol in more selective institutions, but may elect to attend a community college because it is more affordable. Moreover, the extensive activism of some of these undocumented students seems to suggest that at least some have developed a wide range of civic and other leadership skills (Nichols 2013) that may enable them to access information and other resources that facilitate their postsecondary success. To a certain degree, undocumented students who overcome the barriers to college enrolment may represent a self-selected fraction of

undocumented youth who possess the academic preparation, resilience, networks and civic skills to reduce challenges posed by their legal status.

Yet much of what we know about the experiences of undocumented youth comes from non-random samples of college students and activists; it is difficult to determine to what degree such findings reflect the experiences of students in the broader undocumented community college population. Thus, it remains unclear whether or not undocumented students disproportionately experience discontinuous enrolment. Furthermore, the degree to which legal status shapes the experiences of these likely accomplished, often well-connected students merits exploration.

Present Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the persistence of undocumented community college students in California, the state in the US with the greatest number of undocumented students and one in which the young adult children of immigrants outnumber those with native-born parents. Undocumented young adults in this context share demographic characteristics with the types of students who are at a high risk of stopping out, namely those from lower socio-economic and Latino backgrounds (Goldrick-Rab 2006; Moore and Shulock 2010). While undocumented students encounter a range of additional challenges related to their legal status, these students may be better academically and socially prepared to succeed than some of their peers. I therefore ask: Do undocumented students disproportionately stop out of community college? If so, how does their legal status shape their pathways through college? I question whether or not a student's condition of illegality functions as a master status that creates extraordinary challenges not experienced by her peers. Unlike most other studies of college persistence or of undocumented students, this study uniquely focuses on the effects of legal status while accounting for other individual and family-level correlates of students' postsecondary school enrolment patterns.

Notably, this study features the experiences of students in California, a state with 112 public community college institutions, the largest such system in the US. Thanks to the passage of state Assembly Bill 540 in 2001, undocumented students who have attended high school in California can access in-state tuition rates that are on par with those available to legal California residents and are much lower than those available to out-of-state and international students. This in-state tuition policy boosted the number of undocumented youth in California's public colleges, which facilitated the development of undocumented student organisations in at least a quarter of community colleges state-wide. Responding to pressure from these student organisations and their allies, the state legislature approved the California DREAM Act in 2011, granting students access to some forms of state financial aid. The DREAM Act and high levels of undocumented immigrant youth activism in California likely make the state's community colleges more welcoming to undocumented students than similar institutions in many other states,

especially those states that deny the undocumented access to public higher education institutions.

Data Sources

Telephone survey and semi-structured interview data for this analysis come from the California Young Adult Study (CYAS). This mixed-methods investigation includes landline telephone and cell phone interviews with 2200 randomly selected youth, aged 18–26 years, who attended school in California at any point before the age of 17. Telephone survey data, collected in 2011, are weighted to represent the racial/ethnic and immigrant composition of the state's population, excluding adult immigrants and foreign college students (Terriquez 2014).

I restrict the sample to 744 students who attended a community college at some point, but exclude students who also attended a 4-year college.¹ I label immigrant students who lack citizenship and LPR status as 'undocumented', although I recognise the possibility that some might have a form of temporary legal status. Based on this operationalisation, my sample includes 18 likely undocumented Latino students.² Somewhat reflecting the gender imbalance in the postsecondary educational attainment exhibited by the children of immigrants in the US (Feliciano 2012), women outnumber men in this undocumented sample, comprising 10 and 8 respondents, respectively. I distinguish between students who remain continuously enrolled and 'stop-outs', meaning those who withdraw from school at some point (not including summer break). The stop-out category includes both students who returned to school after a break and those who were not enrolled at the time of the interview. Needless to say, students may start and stop school multiple times, as well as change institutions, for a complicated set of reasons (Johnson and Muse 2012), but my purpose here is not to account for the entire range of student enrolment patterns. Rather I am concerned with identifying how legal status is related to whether or not students take a break for at least one term at some point while pursuing a degree or certificate at a community college. Notably, the survey data used for this study lack the large sample sizes and the longitudinal design of many national education data-sets. However, a key strength of this study is that the randomly selected sample of study participants accounts for students' legal status.

Additionally, my investigation draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with a total of 80 community college students. This sample includes 50 citizens and LPRs who answered the telephone survey, as well as 10 who are undocumented. Attempts were made to interview the remaining undocumented community college students in this survey sample, but either their telephones were disconnected by the time they were invited to participate in an interview or they declined an in-person meeting. This is not surprising; legal vulnerability and high levels of poverty render undocumented immigrants a particularly hard-to-reach population (Bloch 2007). Therefore, to supplement the small sample of undocumented community college students, another 20 interviews were conducted with undocumented community

college students who participated in parallel non-random surveys of members of activist undocumented youth organisations in California (hereafter sometimes referred to as the 'activist' sample). Combined, the undocumented interview samples include 28 Latinos and 2 Asian Americans, and 17 women and 13 men, again reflecting a broader gender imbalance in postsecondary attendance.

Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 3 hours. Three-fourths of interviews were conducted between May 2011 and July 2012, prior to the implementation of DACA, and the remaining were conducted later. Respondents were asked about their family background, high school experience, college enrolment history and other topics related to the broader research study. When appropriate, respondents were also asked about the impact of DACA on their lives, as well as the role of the California DREAM Act in determining their ability to pay for school.

Methods

I first present descriptive statistics for the student survey sample. I then share results of logistic regressions, with attendance pathway as the dependent variable (continuously enrolled vs. stop-out). The first model consists of a simple bivariate analysis that shows the relationship between legal status and stopping out. Due to the potential role of immigrant family background in determining college pathways, in Model 2 I identify as coming from 'immigrant families' those students who have one or more immigrant parents. I also control for two variables that measure the socio-economic background of respondents: (i) parent education, determined by whether or not the respondents have a parent with a bachelor's degree and (ii) low-income background, defined either as receiving free or reduced-price, government-subsidised lunch in high school or as coming from a household that received government public assistance. As Latino and African American students sometimes disproportionately stop out of college, logistic regressions control for race/ethnicity, using Latinos as the reference category because they comprise the plurality of the community college population. Model 2 includes other predictors of educational outcomes including gender, age and overall high school academic performance, measured by grade point average (GPA).

The third model attempts to further control for potential differences in the financial circumstances between undocumented and other students. I account for citizen and LPR students' use of government financial aid, but unfortunately my data do not allow me to distinguish between these types of aid. The model includes a measure indicating if students or their families found it 'very difficult' to pay for college. Finally, I aim to account for current poverty by including a measure indicating if students or their households were unable to fully pay utility bills at some point within the last year.

After discussing results of regression analyses, I share descriptive statistics of self-reported reasons for stopping out of college. These results provide further insight into how undocumented students who stop out might be similar or different from their

citizen and LPR peers who also withdrew from school. Next, I summarise results from in-depth interviews. Fully transcribed interviews were coded in a deductive manner based on broad topics. Data excerpts covering broad topics were then recoded inductively using more specific themes that emerged from the data. In this analysis, I sought to explore how the experiences of undocumented students were similar to or different from those of other community college students. I was attentive to how undocumented students who were randomly selected to participate in the telephone survey differed from those in the non-random sample of activists.

Results from Survey Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

Weighted results in [Table 1](#) show that over half of community college students (52%) stopped out at some point. Although the majority come from immigrant families, only 3% are undocumented. Latinos comprise the plurality of community college

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for California community college students (California Young Adult Study, 2011).

Weighted results	%
<i>Outcome variable</i>	
Discontinuous enrolment	52
<i>Immigrant background</i>	
Undocumented	3
Immigrant family	53
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>	
Latino	48
White	35
Asian-Pacific Islander	7
Black	7
Other	3
Male	51
Average age	21.3
<i>Socioeconomic background</i>	
Parent has a bachelor's degree	29
Low income	40
<i>Grades in high school</i>	
1. Mostly D or lower	1
2. Mostly C and D	5
3. Mostly C	8
4. Mostly B and C	36
5. Mostly B	15
6. Mostly A and B	28
7. Mostly A	5
<i>Current financial circumstances</i>	
Obtained government financial aid	53
Very difficult to pay for school	18
Could not pay utility bills	21
Sample size	744

students (48%), while Whites make up just over a third. About half are males; respondents average 21.3 years of age. Twenty-nine per cent of the sample has at least one parent with a bachelor's degree, and 40% come from a low-income background. About a third of the students obtained either 'A' or 'A and B' grades while still in high school. Results also show that 53% receive some form of government financial aid, 18% reported that it is very difficult to pay for college and 21% belong to households that could not fully pay their utility bills.

Although not shown in [Table 1](#), it is worth noting that 13 out of the 18 undocumented students stopped out of college. The members of this sample of 18 undocumented students belong to social groups at risk of stopping out: all of the undocumented students are Latino, only one has a college-educated parent, and 16 come from low-income backgrounds. However, these undocumented students averaged higher grades in high school than their counterparts, indicating that they are better prepared to succeed academically than many of their peers. At the same time, these students encounter greater economic hardship, as the majority of undocumented students come from households unable to pay utility bills at some point within the previous year.

Logistic Regression Results

[Table 2](#) shows results from logistic regressions that examine differences in characteristics between stop-outs and continuously enrolled students. All regressions analyse the odds of stopping out of college (vs. staying continuously enrolled). Model 1 simply features the results of a bivariate analysis examining the relationship between legal status and withdrawing from school. Undocumented students display five times higher odds of stopping out ($p < 0.01$). However, given the small sample size of undocumented students, this odds ratio should not be interpreted as a population estimate.

Model 2 controls for immigrant family origin, race/ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic background and high school GPA. Again, undocumented students are significantly more likely than their peers to stop out (odds ratio: 7.04, $p < 0.01$), after controlling for other factors. Interestingly, an odds ratio of 0.588 ($p < 0.05$) indicates that the children of immigrants are less likely than those from non-immigrant families to withdraw from school, lending support to the 'second-generation advantage' or 'immigrant optimism' hypothesis (Kao and Tienda 1995; Kasinitz et al. 2008). Latinos are about as likely to stop out as other racial/ethnic groups. Meanwhile, students from low-income backgrounds and those who are older are more likely to stop out, while those with higher GPAs are less likely.

The third model accounts for additional financial considerations that might structure differences in enrolment patterns by legal status. Results indicate that students from immigrant families are less likely to exhibit non-continuous enrolment than those from non-immigrant families ($p < 0.05$), net of these additional correlates. At the same time, the inclusion of financial aid, difficulty in paying for school and inability to pay for utilities in the model reduces the odds ratio for undocumented

Table 2. Logistic regressions of stopping out, weighted results.

	<i>b</i>	SE	Exp (<i>b</i>)
<i>Model 1</i>			
Immigrant background			
Undocumented	1.625	0.618**	5.077
Intercept	0.021	0.095	1.021
<i>Model 2</i>			
Immigrant background			
Undocumented	1.951	0.639**	7.036
Immigrant family	-0.531	0.244*	0.588
Race/ethnicity: ref. Latino			
White	-0.200	0.279	0.819
Black	0.125	0.435	1.133
Asian-pacific Islander	-0.006	0.393	0.994
Other	-0.494	0.571	0.619
Male	0.414	0.223 ⁺	1.513
Age	0.412	0.053***	1.510
Socioeconomic background			
Parent with bachelor's degree	-0.237	0.253	0.789
Low income	0.740	0.243**	2.096
High school GPA	-0.195	0.088*	0.827
Intercept	-7.935	1.309***	0.000
<i>Model 3</i>			
Immigrant background			
Undocumented	1.508	0.734*	4.518
Immigrant family	-0.555	0.249*	0.574
Race/ethnicity: ref. Latino			
White	-0.277	0.278	0.758
Black	0.096	0.488	1.101
Asian-Pacific Islander	0.031	0.417	1.032
Other	-0.555	0.562	0.574
Male	0.499	0.233*	1.648
Age	0.415	0.052***	1.514
Socioeconomic background			
Parent with bachelor's degree	-0.172	0.237	0.842
Low income	0.710	0.256**	2.035
High school GPA	-0.159	0.088 ⁺	0.853
Received financial aid	-0.155	0.246	0.856
Difficulty paying for school	0.752	0.290**	2.121
Could not pay utility bills	0.533	0.270*	1.703
Intercept	-8.301	1.283	0.000

Two-tailed test.

+ $p \leq 0.10$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq .001$.

students from 7.04 to 4.52 ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that some of the disadvantage these students encounter stems from their financial situation. Findings show that receiving financial aid negatively correlates with stopping out, but the results are statistically insignificant. Not surprisingly, students who experience financial hardship paying for school or utilities tend to stop out at higher rates—odds ratios equal 2.12 ($p < 0.01$) and 1.70 ($p < 0.05$), respectively.

Notably, findings indicate that women are less likely to stop out than men. This female advantage may be driven by mechanisms within families and schools that facilitate comparatively higher academic achievement among women (Feliciano 2012) by either encouraging men to contribute to family earnings at the expense of schooling (Bachmeier and Bean 2011) or criminalising young men within an educational context (Cammara 2004).

Overall, logistic regression results suggest that even though students from immigrant families appear to disproportionately maintain continuous enrolment, those who are undocumented are more likely to stop out. Students' legal status remains a key determinant of student withdrawal from college even after accounting for other key demographic, academic and financial predictors of continuous enrolment. Findings from this and other models should be interpreted with a substantial degree of caution given the small sample sizes and data limitations.

Reasons for Stopping Out

To further explore how undocumented students might differ from their peers, I share self-reported reasons why students withdrew from school. The results for the undocumented students should not be interpreted as population estimates because they reflect self-reports from just 13 individuals who took a break from school. In comparison, findings for citizens and LPRs come from 376 individuals who stopped out, offering a more reliable representation of these students' experiences.

Weighted results, shown in Figure 1, illustrate the top five reported reasons for leaving school. Students could report more than one reason for withdrawing. Overall, the most common reason for withdrawing was not being able to afford college; this value was notably higher for undocumented students (81%) than for their peers (43%). These findings further reinforce the important role of financial considerations in shaping students' pathways through college, particularly for those students who lack legal documentation. Among citizens and LPRs, a significant minority (37%) listed travelling and/or pursuing other interests as reasons for leaving school, while only 13% of the undocumented offered these reasons. Thirty-six per cent of citizens and LPRs (also) reported leaving because they did not know what they wanted to

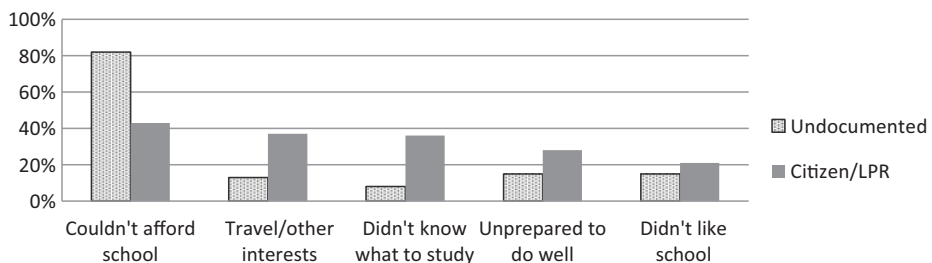


Figure 1. Reasons for withdrawing from school.

study; this was the case for only one undocumented respondent (8%). Other reasons for taking time off included not feeling prepared to succeed or not liking school. In both cases, the citizens and LPRs were more likely to report these as reasons for withdrawing from school. Overall, findings point to the possibility that undocumented students disproportionately encounter financial strains as they proceed through college, and that other students, while also facing financial difficulties, are more likely to withdraw because of personal interests and poor academic preparation. The below interview findings further illuminate the multidimensional ways in which a precarious legal status shapes students' decisions to withdraw from school.

Semi-structured Interview Findings

In this section of the paper, I share results from a comparative analysis of semi-structured interview data. The findings highlight how the condition of illegality functions as a master status that has an overpowering effect on undocumented students' ability to remain continuously enrolled in school. Illegality magnifies the financial- and employment-related challenges that undocumented students encounter; it is also connected to stress- and health-related problems that further render their continuous college enrolment difficult.

Academic Preparation

Community college students stop out at high rates, in part because many lack the academic preparation to succeed in college coursework (Crisp and Mina 2012; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). Poor academic preparation or skills seemed to pose a challenge for a number of citizens who received poor grades in high school. Meanwhile, undocumented students tended to be academically prepared for community college coursework. Students' self-selection into community colleges differs by legal status, and this pattern of self-selection helps illuminate the unique challenges that undocumented students must confront in order to stay in school.

Specifically, citizens who are high academic achievers tend to enrol in 4-year colleges after high school, especially if they have the means to pay for a postsecondary education (Deil-Amen and Turley 2007). Consequently, citizens who opt to enrol in community colleges often have less than stellar grades, and a significant proportion struggle academically. This was the case for some citizens in the sample, including Richard, a US-born son of Central American immigrants who quickly learned he had not been well prepared to pursue his career interest in computer programming when he enrolled in a college calculus course. Initially, Richard devoted a lot of time and effort into keeping up with required coursework. Yet, he explains, 'It was so intense, I asked myself why am I doing so much? I just stopped going to class'. Like Richard, some other citizens expressed frustration with their performance in community college coursework and reconsidered their career aspirations.

It is possible that undocumented students with below average academic achievement view joining the labour force immediately after high school as a rational

decision when compared with the cost and effort required to obtain a college degree that would be of little use in obtaining legal employment. This may help explain why undocumented interviewees were often high achievers who had been academically eligible for acceptance into 4-year universities; these students tended to encounter few academic difficulties with their college course work. The story of Carlos, an aspiring biochemist, was common among the undocumented. Carlos had been among the top of his class in high school and applied to selective colleges. He explained, 'I got into the schools that I wanted to attend, but my situation as an undocumented student didn't give me many options. I chose East LA Community College, mainly because it's close to my house and I can afford it'. Given their strong academic record, Carlos and several other undocumented students tended to receive encouragement from teachers and other mentors to pursue higher education. The comparatively strong academic record of these undocumented students underscores the central role that their legal status plays in determining their ability to stay in school.

Financial Strains

Many students, regardless of their legal status, discussed the financial challenges they or their families experienced that made staying in school difficult. The effects of the recent economic recession likely worsened students' financial concerns (Terriquez and Gurantz 2014). However, undocumented students encountered more extreme economic hardships than their citizen counterparts.

Over half of citizens and almost all undocumented interviewees in this study came from low-income backgrounds. This meant that most had to pay for school without major parental assistance and live within the limits of constrained budgets. However, many (but not all) of the low-income citizens applied for and received financial aid, reducing the financial burden of going to school despite rising tuition costs. For example, Lupe, daughter of a single mother who worked at Walmart, believed that 'the price of classes going up is not too much of a problem for me because financial aid helps me out'. Meanwhile, Peter, also raised by a single mother, asserted that financial aid enabled him to pay for tuition and books, and still left him some money to cover his utility bills and other expenses.

Undocumented interviewees were not so lucky, especially before the passage of the California DREAM Act. These students typically lived in families that endured high levels of poverty. It was often difficult for undocumented students to save enough money for tuition, let alone cover the costs of books, transportation and personal expenses. With few exceptions, undocumented students had to pay for school themselves, often with little or no assistance from parents. As Claudia explained:

It was so difficult to make the transition from being a high school student who doesn't need to pay for schooling. I need to pay for everything else now. I had to pay tuition, plus books, supplies, and the bus pass. All those things added up, and I ended up paying a lot of money out of my pocket.

Undocumented students commonly found themselves facing financial dilemmas that Zulema aptly summarised: ‘If I spend my money on school, then what about the bills?’ Paying for everyday living expenses was often difficult for these students, for whom the cost of school was sometimes prohibitive. Raul, age 25, was one of many students who attended college intermittently because of financial hardship. Describing his spells of disenrollment in school, Raul said: ‘I take two or three semesters off, go back to work to scrounge money together, and then go back to school. When I could, I would enrol in one class’.

Financial strains did not simply stem from students’ responsibilities to cover their own school and personal expenses. Some students, including those who were citizens, also assumed the financial burden of assisting parents and siblings. The story of Gerardo, son of a Guatemalan single mother, reflects that of several citizens. When asked to describe the biggest challenge to re-enrolling in college, Gerardo responded: ‘Trying to work and go to school, because my mom doesn’t have a job and I’ve been supporting us for two years’. Yet this need to support family members was a more common trend among the undocumented, who typically came from much poorer families—in part because the legal statuses of their undocumented parents and other family members curtailed their family’s earning power.

For example, 18-year-old Regina was enrolled in her first semester of community college at the time of her interview, but was uncertain if she would be able to re-enrol, because her family needed her to find full-time work: ‘My mom lost her job, and then my dad’s about to lose his job, too, so I’m worried about what’s going to happen next semester’. This pattern of stopping and starting enrolment was familiar to 23-year-old Sandra, who was regularly called upon by family members to respond to crisis situations, impeding her ability to stay in school. She described the most recent time she withdrew from school: ‘My grandmother passed away, so I had to spend the money that I had saved for tuition to send to Mexico for the funeral’. On other occasions, the hospital bills or unemployment spells of an immediate family member led to Sandra’s decision to withdraw from classes. ‘Every time I go back to school, something happens’, she lamented. For undocumented students, the problems posed by the precarious legal status of family members repeatedly placed their education plans in jeopardy.

Unequal Employment Opportunities

The type of jobs that undocumented students were able to find in order to support themselves and their families often posed additional challenges. Indeed, the majority of interviewees worked, but citizens’ employment situations tended to be more conducive to attending college than did the work opportunities of undocumented students. This is not to say that citizens were always able to find jobs easily, or that they were paid well. Most citizens who worked were employed in retail, restaurant and other near-minimum-wage jobs. While these types of jobs can often grant workers limited control over their schedule (Lambert, Haley-Lock, and Henley 2012), citizen students generally reported that their jobs offered them enough scheduling

flexibility so that they could attend class. Additionally, a handful of citizens found themselves in entry-level jobs in industries related to their career interests, such as schools, architectural firms or major corporations. Kevin, an aspiring engineer, was able to find a job as a customer service representative at Chevron. ‘They’re giving me hours and they’re trying to work with my school schedule’, he said. ‘Not only do they help out the students, they have field engineers in their company. So, I’m looking at the big picture for the long run’. Such paid opportunities were not typically available to the undocumented students.

Unable to work legally in the US, undocumented students’ job options prior to DACA remained notably more restricted than those available to US citizens, making it difficult for several of the interviewees to achieve a school-work balance. To begin with, finding a job proved to be a frustrating and time-intensive process. Joaquin recounted his recent job search:

I wanted to work at Auto Zone, but of course they asked for a social [security number],³ so I couldn’t apply. Then I tried to work at Subway, but I couldn’t either, so I ended up working as a dishwasher—under the table.

With most official channels closed to them, some of these US-raised, English-speaking undocumented high school graduates assumed exploitative ‘immigrant jobs’ that required little or no formal schooling or English language proficiency. ‘You gotta do what you gotta do’, said 21-year-old Tomás, who worked as a street vendor. ‘I’ve got skills and know a lot of stuff, and I can’t use it’. Other undocumented students’ occupations included housekeeper, nanny, seamstress, gardener, farmworker and construction worker. Due to inflexible or inconsistent work schedules, undocumented students’ jobs were sometimes not conducive to regular school attendance. Poor pay, sometimes below minimum wage, on occasion forced a handful in this sample to work 40 hours or more in order to make ends meet. Finally, work conditions could take a toll on these students as they sometimes accepted employers’ unfair demands for fear of losing their jobs. For example, Maricela, who worked at a Laundromat, explained, ‘There was a time where my boss didn’t give me a break, and so I was standing on my feet from 7 a.m. to 9 at night. And, I was like, “All right, I’m just going to be quiet and not say anything”’.

Stress and Negative Health Impacts

Clearly, some undocumented students experienced high levels of stress because of the financial hardships and employment conditions noted above. Some felt added stress caused by bureaucratic challenges in accessing in-state tuition and other resources, perceived discrimination, or burdensome public transportation. However, the general threat posed by record-level deportations during the Obama administration, as well as direct experience with the deportation of immediate family members or others who were close to them, particularly heightened the stress some experienced.⁴ Non-activist students who lacked a campus support network expressed the most concern

about their own possible deportation. For example, 21-year-old Lisa worried about unsympathetic individuals learning her legal status: 'If somebody finds out, they might report me [to Immigration and Customs Enforcement], and say, "Oh, this person, she doesn't have papers. Go deport her"'. She therefore kept her status hidden from peers, educators and others, making her feel like she was 'hiding a bomb'.

Students' legal status appears to have contributed to stress as well as other health problems that interfered with the education of a small number of undocumented students. Raul was one of those students whose health likely suffered as a result of the multiple challenges brought about by his legal status. Son of an undocumented father who had at one time been deported, Raul worked many hours to support himself and contribute to his family's income. Raul felt overwhelmed by school, work and his family's financial problems; he began to experience anxiety attacks and could not sleep. 'I got to the point where I really had to just take a break and just not do anything that was stressful because it was really impacting my health', he said. Around the same time, Raul also developed a throat infection that made it difficult for him to breathe, yet he did not know enough about his medical condition. 'Having no health care prevented me from going to the doctor. It's really expensive', he explained. Raul, like most other undocumented students, did not qualify for government-subsidised health care and could not afford it. Although—likely due to their young age—physical problems were not key concerns among the majority of undocumented students in this study. Nonetheless, in the case of a medical emergency, having to pay for large medical bills out of pocket could make college cost-prohibitive for some of these uninsured youth.

Discussion

In the US, community colleges remain relatively accessible postsecondary institutions for students of diverse backgrounds, including immigrants. However, students who enrol in these schools tend to face academic, financial and other personal challenges to staying in school. This study adds to the literature by demonstrating how students' immigrant backgrounds, and in particular their legal statuses, shape their pathways through community colleges.

Findings suggest that the young adult children of immigrants are more likely to maintain continuous enrolment in community colleges when compared with students from non-immigrant families. These findings lend support to prior research that suggests a 'second-generation advantage' (Kasinitz et al. 2008) or an 'immigrant optimism' (Kao and Tienda 1995) enables the children of immigrants to draw on strengths of US and immigrant cultures to facilitate their educational success. At the same time, immigrant youth who arrive in the US as minors and remain undocumented appear to be especially vulnerable to stopping out. As perhaps the first multimethod, comparative study that identifies the legal status of randomly selected community college students, this study offers empirical evidence that even among relatively high-achieving and well-networked undocumented

students, illegality functions as a 'master status' (Enghceren 1999; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012) that often disrupts their postsecondary education. I therefore add to prior work highlighting the disadvantages experienced by undocumented college students (Perez 2012; Perez and Cortes 2011) by showing that these students disproportionately exhibit non-continuous enrolment, even after controlling for financial factors and other predictors of persistence.

While survey findings show that legal status is a strong determinant of stopping out, interview data illustrates the multidimensional nature of the disadvantages undocumented students experience due to their status. In line with prior work (Flores 2010; Perez and Cortes 2011), these students clearly encounter significant financial barriers, as findings show that most come from households where utility bills—to say nothing of college tuition—represent a financial burden. Tuition is a challenge for many low-income students, but undocumented students' ineligibility for financial aid puts them at further disadvantage relative to their low-income peers who have access to government subsidies for tuition and living expenses. To further complicate matters, these students, like other young adult children of immigrants, feel compelled to provide financial support to their families of origin (Fuligni and Pedersen 2002). However, as this study suggests, the financial needs of undocumented students' families tend to be extreme given a shared precarious legal status among various family members.

Not being able to work legally worsens undocumented students' economic circumstances. English-speaking, US-raised students with strong academic skills must often resort to assuming jobs similar to those obtained by other undocumented immigrants with less human capital. As demonstrated in prior research, these jobs sometimes subject workers to sub-standard working conditions (Milkman 2011) and sub-minimum wages, which add hardships that citizens and LPRs are less likely to endure.

This study offers support for prior work that indicates that undocumented youth experience high levels of psychological stress (Gonzales, Suarez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguinetti 2013; Perez and Cortes 2011). Financial difficulties, in addition to bureaucratic annoyances and transportation issues noted here and in other research (Perez and Cortes 2011), reflect some of the demands that can take an emotional toll on undocumented students. Additionally, the fear of deportation, sometimes brought about or exacerbated by the deportation of family members, compounds the stress that these students experience. Consequently, students—particularly those who are not connected to activist circles—must carry the burden of hiding their legal status to avoid potential deportation. Although not systematically measured here, but suggested by other research, stress that is magnified by students' legal status could lead to mental health problems and make these young people more susceptible to other physical health problems (Gonzales, Suarez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguinetti 2013; Perez and Cortes 2011). Because individuals without legal status can rarely afford health care out of pocket, as they often remain ineligible for government-subsidised health care (Ortega et al. 2007), undocumented students may not receive

the medical care they need when they become ill. This study points to the possibility that poor access to health care also contributes to the inability to remain continuously enrolled in school for a small proportion of the undocumented student population.

Implications

This research attends to the experiences of undocumented students in California prior to the implementation of DACA and the California DREAM Act. Importantly, DACA improved employment opportunities for some undocumented youth (Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszcyk 2014), while the California DREAM Act made college more affordable for undocumented students. Together, this federal directive and state legislation likely facilitate continuous enrolment, and consequently degree completion, among these immigrant students. However, absent a pathway to legalisation for their parents and other family members, students who are called upon to support their families at the expense of their education are likely to continue facing barriers to continuous college enrolment.

Future research can therefore build on this study in at least a few ways. Given the findings presented here, US-based studies with larger sample sizes should aim to account for the role of legal status, including the role of DACA and state and local immigration policies, in predicting whether or not young people stay enrolled in college. Since undocumented, 1.5-generation immigrants seeking higher education tend to concentrate in community colleges, studies of community college enrolment patterns should take into consideration the multidimensional impacts of legal status. Additionally, because state policies within the US play an important role in determining the types of opportunities and challenges immigrants experience in their new homeland (Flores 2010; Varsanyi 2010), future studies should aim to compare undocumented youths' postsecondary pathways across state contexts. Such future scholarship can further inform immigration policies that seek to support the successful incorporation of young undocumented immigrants in the US, as well as in other countries with large undocumented populations.

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Notes

- [1] Because a very small proportion of disadvantaged students transfer to 4-year colleges, larger sample sizes are needed to effectively examine enrolment patterns among students who successfully transferred.
- [2] The survey does not contain a measure that identifies students with temporary legal documentation. However, it is worth noting that 10 of these 18 'likely undocumented youth' from the survey sample participated in a follow-up interview, and all 10 lacked legal documentation.
- [3] A government issued social security number is required for legal employment.
- [4] A few citizens with undocumented parents also shared concerns about family members' deportation.

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