

## UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS AND THE COLLEGE PIPELINE

An estimated 98,000 undocumented students graduate from high school every year.<sup>1</sup> However, these students face significant barriers to postsecondary education.

### BARRIERS TO AFFORDABILITY

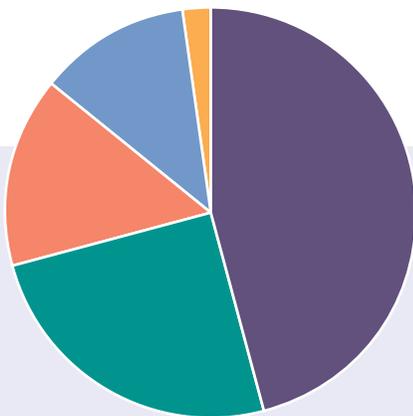
- No access to federal financial aid
- Limited to no access to state financial aid

### BARRIERS TO ACCESS

- State policies that prohibit the enrollment of undocumented students in public institutions
- Lack of expertise among K12 and college practitioners on college opportunities (e.g. financial aid, college admission requirements, etc.) available for undocumented students

### BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

- Psychological and social burdens related to immigration
- Lack of access to many public benefits, such as federal means-tested benefits (e.g. SNAP and TANF)
- Lack of access to or awareness of professional and occupational opportunities upon graduation.



## DEMOGRAPHICS OF UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Of the 454,000 undocumented students estimated to be enrolled in postsecondary education nationally, 46% are Latinx, 25% are Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), 15% are Black, 12% are White, and the remaining 2% include biracial and multiracial students.<sup>2</sup>

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## WHY IT MATTERS

Given the substantial number of undocumented high school graduates as well as the racial and ethnic diversity of undocumented students in postsecondary education, policies that promote postsecondary affordability, access and completion for these students can contribute to the advancement of race-conscious postsecondary attainment goals.

## CURRENT POLICIES SUPPORTING UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

- Eligibility for in-state tuition,
- Access to state-funded financial aid and/or institutional aid, and
- State loan programs.

States can implement policies to expand access to higher education to undocumented students. Offering in-state tuition and state financial aid to undocumented students increases college enrollment and improves academic achievement, credits attempted, and first-semester retention.<sup>3</sup> These state policies can be a crucial foundation to expanding access to higher education for undocumented students, but more work is needed to ensure that state policies improve degree completion.<sup>4</sup>

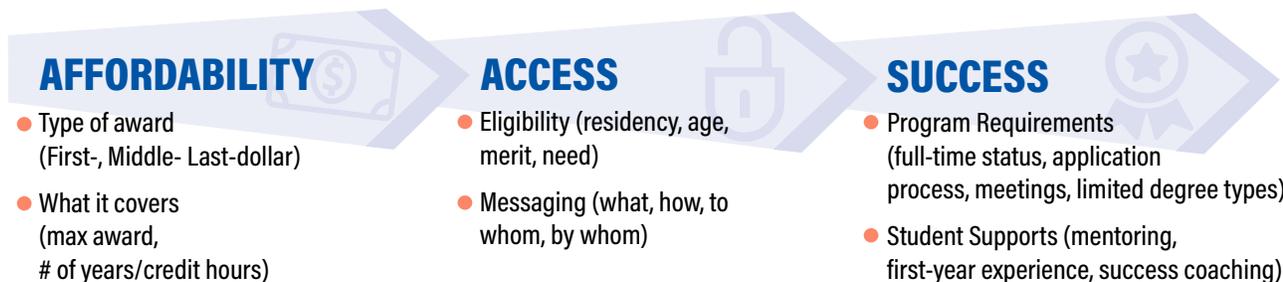
## A "PROMISING" SOLUTION

Some states have used Promise programs to increase postsecondary opportunities for undocumented students. Typically comprised of a scholarship that covers tuition and mandatory fees after all other federal, and state aid is applied, Promise programs are often the only financial aid available to these students, and therefore provide their only affordable pathway to a postsecondary degree. By the academic year 2018-2019, undocumented students who meet state residency requirements were eligible for Promise programs in 7 of 21 statewide Promise programs.<sup>5</sup> Further, Promise programs that offer non-monetary supports have the potential to increase their retention and graduation. You can find additional information on Promise programs [here](#).

## PROMISE PROGRAMS AND UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

Research for Action has identified six programmatic components of statewide Promise programs that have the potential to affect college affordability, access, and success.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1. Promise program components and their implications for affordability, access, and success for undocumented students



## PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

RFA has identified the following opportunities and challenges for supporting undocumented postsecondary students:

### AFFORDABILITY

**FINDINGS:** Because undocumented students are ineligible for federal aid, **Promise scholarships play a key role in improving affordability for undocumented students** by covering, at minimum, tuition. To award the scholarship, states assess the financial need of undocumented students via a financial aid form alternative to the FAFSA administered either at the state or institution level.

**RECOMMENDATIONS.** Given the importance of undocumented students to advance race-conscious postsecondary attainment goals, states should consider Promise programs as a policy option. States where tuition for undocumented students is already covered by other state aid should consider offering [middle-dollar or last-dollar plus Promise scholarships](#) which award additional dollars for unmet expenses like books or transportation. Colleges and universities can [take additional steps](#) to establish funding and experiential learning options for undocumented students.

### ACCESS

**FINDINGS:** **How Promise programs are described and promoted can determine whether undocumented students take advantage of the program.** Whereas some programs are promoted via statewide promotional campaigns, other states rely on high school counselors to ensure that students and their families are aware of Promise programs. This approach can lead to inconsistent and inaccurate information for all students, but it is particularly problematic for undocumented students who tend to be unaware of college opportunities available to them.

**RECOMMENDATIONS.** States should consider how to effectively promote Promise programs to undocumented students. For example, the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission publishes numerous **materials on their website in both English and Spanish and has developed a communications tool kit** for Oregon Promise practitioners and advocates in their state.<sup>7</sup>

### SUCCESS

**FINDINGS:** **Promise programs that also include students supports typically do not address challenges specifically related to immigration.** Undocumented students face a range of obstacles that can threaten persistence and completion including immigration stressors, lack of access to public benefits, and barriers to obtaining employment upon graduation. Moreover, **states do not always consider the interplay of postsecondary education policy with other state policies** that may promote or hinder undocumented students' employment opportunities upon graduation, such as access to drivers' licenses or professional/ occupational licenses for undocumented individuals.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Statewide Promise programs can support undocumented students **by including student supports offered by institutions or through partnerships with immigration organizations.** For example, public colleges and universities in California offer undocumented students Dream Resource Centers, free legal services, and ally trainings. Immigrant organizations offer guidance on careers including access to licensing, employment through worker cooperatives, entrepreneurship, etc.<sup>8</sup> **States should also consider offering access to drivers' licenses and occupational and professional licenses** to remove opportunity barriers for undocumented students as they enter and compete in the workforce.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Zong, J. and Batalova, J. (2019). How Many Unauthorized Immigrants Graduate from U.S. High Schools Annually? Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/unauthorized-immigrants-graduate-us-high-schools>
- <sup>2</sup> Feldblum, M., Hubbard, S., Lim, A., Penichet-Paul, C. and Siegel, H. (2019). Undocumented Students in Higher Education. How Many Students are in U.S. Colleges and Universities, and Who Are They? New American Economy and Presidents' Alliance for Higher Education. Retrieved from <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/pahei-nae-undocumented-students/>
- <sup>3</sup> Flores, S. M. (2010). State dream acts: The effect of in-state resident tuition policies and undocumented Latino students. *The Review of Higher Education*, 33, 239-283.
- Flores, S. M., and Horn, C. L. (2009). College Persistence Among Undocumented Students at a Selective Public University: A Quantitative Case Study Analysis. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 11(1), 57-76.
- <sup>4</sup> Darolia, R. and Potochnick, S. (2015). Educational “When”, “Where”, and “How”. Implications of In-State Resident Tuition Policies for Latino Undocumented Immigrants. *The Review of Higher Education*, 38(4), 507-535.
- <sup>5</sup> Delaware, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island & Washington.
- <sup>6</sup> Research for Action. State and Local College Promise Programs: Examining Policy and Practice. <https://www.researchforaction.org/projects/state-local-college-promise-programs-exploration-policy-practice/>
- <sup>7</sup> Oregon Promise Communications Toolkit <https://oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise-toolkit.aspx>
- <sup>8</sup> Immigrants Rising Educational Partnerships <https://immigrantsrising.org/educational-partnerships/>
- Immigrants Rising Resources for Entrepreneurship <https://undocuhustle.org/>

