



California  
Community  
Colleges



California Community Colleges  
Toolkit: Unlocking the Potential of  
Undocumented Students

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# Part I. Introduction & Overview

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Like all students, undocumented students are builders of possibility. They bring resilience, determination, and a richness that strengthens California’s community colleges. When we support undocumented students, we uphold the very mission of higher education: to uplift, to empower, to ensure that every student—not just some—has the chance to rise and thrive. This toolkit is here to help you deliver on that promise by enhancing your understanding of the unique challenges faced by undocumented students, both inside and outside the classroom. Along the way, you’ll have access to a range of trauma-informed, evidence-based strategies and resources to guide you in effectively supporting undocumented students as they navigate the path to achieving their goals.

## Key Terms: Migrant, Refugee, Undocumented

**Migrant:** The term “migrant” is a broad descriptor, not formally defined in international law, that reflects the everyday understanding of someone who relocates from their habitual residence, be it within their country or across an international border. This relocation can be temporary or permanent and undertaken for a multitude of reasons (Amnesty International, n.d.).

**Refugee:** A refugee is a person who has been forced to leave their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution or serious human rights violations. Recognizing that their own government is unable or unwilling to protect them, they seek safety and international protection in another country (Amnesty International, n.d.).

**Undocumented:** Defined broadly, term refers to all immigrants who reside in the United States, but who do not have legal status (Immigrants Rising, 2023). A person who is “undocumented”, is a migrant or refugee who has entered without authorization, entered with a visa and overstayed their visa, or is currently in the process of legalizing.

## Understanding the Undocumented Student Experience

- Approximately **408,000 undocumented students** are enrolled in postsecondary education, with community colleges serving as the primary entry point for many (Presidents Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2024).
- **California has the highest number of undocumented students** in higher education in the U.S., with an estimated 87,000 undocumented students enrolled (Presidents Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2024).
- A significant portion of undocumented students are **first-generation college students**, meaning they are the first in their families to pursue higher education.
- **DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals)** recipients make up a large segment of undocumented students, although not all undocumented students are eligible for DACA protections.



- Undocumented students come from **a variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds**, with the majority originating from Latin America, followed by Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa (Presidents Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2024).



# Part II. How do Migration Trauma and Cultural Transitions Impact Students?

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## Cultural Adjustment and Identity Development

To provide effective and compassionate support, it's critical for community college supportive services practitioners to understand the complex realities of these students' journeys and the impact on their well-being and academic success.



Undocumented students navigate new environments while maintaining connections to their heritage—retaining memories of home through familial connections, cultural traditions, and language. In educational settings, students may encounter curricula that do not reflect their experiences and communication styles that differ from their own. As they adapt, these students learn to navigate different social contexts, balancing assimilation with the preservation of their individual identities.

This adjustment process involves finding a sense of belonging and recognizing the value of their unique backgrounds. While some may feel pressure to conform, others find strength in community engagement and the realization that they are part of a larger narrative. Support from mentors, educators, and peers can foster a sense of inclusion and belonging, reinforcing their place within the community and offering encouragement as they navigate their individual journeys. To learn more, you can watch the recorded webinar, [Supporting Undocumented Students in Uncertain Times: Addressing Challenges and Fostering Allyship](#), and view the accompanying [slide presentation](#).

## The Role of Trauma and Its Effects on Learning and Well-Being

Undocumented students may experience challenges stemming from traumatic experiences, including anxieties related to personal safety and well-being. These experiences can impact their academic performance, leading to difficulties with concentration, sleep disturbances, and feelings of insecurity. The effects of these challenges can manifest in the classroom, potentially affecting their sense of belonging and academic achievement.

However, students possess inherent strengths and potential. When educators acknowledge the impact of these challenges and cultivate supportive learning environments that prioritize well-being, positive outcomes can emerge. Creating safe and inclusive classrooms, providing mentorship opportunities, and fostering a sense of belonging can help students thrive. Explore the [Undocumented Students Support Handbook](#) to learn about promising supportive practices across the California Community Colleges System.



# Understanding the Journey: Displacement, Migration, and Resettlement

## Displacement: Leaving Home Under Uncertain or Forced Conditions

- Many undocumented students (or their families) have **fled violence, political instability, climate disasters, or economic hardship** in their home countries.
- The process is often **unplanned and traumatic**, leading to **fear, grief, and uncertainty** about their future.
- Some students arrive as **unaccompanied minors**, experiencing additional vulnerabilities such as **exploitation, family separation, and legal obstacles**.

## Migration: The Challenges of the Journey

- Migration is often **long, dangerous, and unpredictable**. Many undocumented students have crossed borders through extreme conditions and have witnessed or endured **trauma** during the journey.
- Upon arrival, they face **barriers to stability**, including:
  - **Fear of deportation** and family separation.
  - **Economic hardship** and the need to work while studying.
  - **Language barriers** that affect learning and belonging.
  - **Limited access to financial aid**, safety net programs, and college resources.

## Resettlement: Adjusting to a New Reality

- Even after arriving in the U.S., undocumented students continue to navigate uncertainty, systemic barriers, and identity shifts.
- Many experience **“survivor’s guilt”**—feeling responsible for family members left behind or struggling with the pressure to succeed.
- Many also experience **“impostor syndrome”**—constantly doubting their abilities, feeling out of touch or like they do not belong, and worrying others will see them as a “fraud”.

Institutional and community support play a crucial role in academic retention and mental well-being. Learn more about helping undocumented students recognize and overcome impostor syndrome by reviewing [Beating Impostor Syndrome](#) – a slide presentation from the eighth annual [California Community Colleges’ Undocumented Student Action Week \(USAW\)](#).



# What are Common Stressors and Barriers Faced by Students?

## Mental Health Challenges

### 1. Anxiety and Stress:

- Fear of deportation or family separation due to immigration status.
- Uncertainty about post-graduation options, particularly regarding career paths or graduate school.
- Navigating systemic barriers, such as limited access to financial aid or employment opportunities.

### 2. Trauma:

- Experiences of trauma related to migration journeys, family instability, or prior adverse experiences.
- The chronic stress of living under policies that may not protect them or their families.

### 3. Mental Health Stigma:

- Reluctance to seek mental health support due to cultural, linguistic, or systemic stigma.
- Lack of culturally competent mental health resources on campuses.

## Social-Emotional Challenges

### 1. Isolation and Loneliness:

- Feeling disconnected from peers due to fear of disclosure about their undocumented status.
- Difficulty forming trusting relationships because of previous experiences with instability or discrimination.

### 2. Self-Worth and Identity:

- Struggles with self-worth, feeling like imposters in academic or social spaces.
- Challenges in navigating identity as an undocumented student while striving for academic and personal success.

### 3. Sense of Belonging:

- Difficulty finding a sense of belonging on campus, especially in areas where undocumented students are underrepresented or lack institutional support.
- Fear that sharing their status may lead to discrimination or judgment.



## Recognizing Signs of Stress and Trauma in Students

Students facing difficult circumstances may exhibit subtle signs of stress or anxiety. These can include hesitation when discussing financial matters, concern about the future, or tension when talking about family situations. Paying attention to these indicators can help educators and support staff better understand and address the needs of individual students.



### Here are some of the many ways stress and trauma can manifest:

- **Silence:** the student stops raising their hand and misses class but never asks for help.
- **Fatigue:** signs of exhaustion from sleepless nights, often from working shifts that don't fit neatly around education, or from carrying the weight of a future that feels uncertain.
- **Becoming distant:** pulling away from classmates, mentors, and resources meant to support them.
- **Pushing themselves to the brink:** perfectionism and overachievement to mask fear and anxiety.

### Recognizing stress and trauma isn't just about seeing—it's about responding with care:

- **Proactive Engagement:** Educators and advisors can initiate supportive conversations by asking how they can assist the student, rather than focusing solely on identifying problems.
- **Creating Safe Spaces:** Providing a supportive environment where students feel comfortable sharing their concerns and do not feel isolated in their struggles.
- **Holistic Support:** Recognizing students as individuals with multifaceted needs, rather than focusing on their academic performance, can promote well-being and facilitate their potential for growth.

This [Quick Guide and Mental Health Grounding and Reflection Toolkit](#) offers strategies to support undocumented students who may be struggling with anxiety and/or trauma. For more tips and resources to support students who may be experiencing distress, review [Election Stress and Discriminatory Rhetoric: Responding with Psychological First Aid \(PFA\)](#), a guide from the Center for Adjustment, Resilience and Recovery (CARRE).

# Part III. Building Trauma-Informed Support Systems & Practices

## Trauma-Informed Approach to Support

A trauma-informed approach shifts from “What’s wrong with this student?” to **“What has this student been through, and how can I support them in a way that honors their strength and affirms their power?”**

### Key Components of Trauma-Informed Support

Principle	What It Means	Practical Application
<b>SAFETY</b> Creating a Secure Environment	Students need to feel physically, emotionally, and culturally safe. A predictable, supportive setting reduces stress and anxiety.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Use welcoming language in syllabi and advising materials.</li> <li>✓ Ensure confidentiality when discussing immigration status. Consider refraining from writing student immigration status in case notes.</li> <li>✓ Example: A counselor reassures a student that mental health services are private and do not affect their status.</li> </ul>
<b>TRUST</b> Building Honest Relationships	Trust comes from clear, transparent, and consistent communication. Students need accurate information about policies and resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Be honest about what you can and cannot provide.</li> <li>✓ Offer written resources to avoid misinformation.</li> <li>✓ Be patient and know that it may take a long time for a student to trust you.</li> <li>✓ Example: A financial aid advisor clearly explains how undocumented students can apply for California Dream Act aid.</li> </ul>
<b>EMPOWERMENT</b> Giving Students Agency	Students should have control over their education and see their strengths.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Use empowering language (e.g., “You’ve overcome so much—let’s find a way forward”).</li> <li>✓ Provide multiple support options let students choose, and help them create individualized action plans.</li> <li>✓ Example: A liaison asks what support feels most helpful –peer mentoring, legal aid, or mental health resources</li> </ul>
<b>COMMUNITY</b> Reducing Isolation & Fostering Belonging	A sense of belonging is key to student success. Schools must create networks of support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Connect students with cultural centers, student groups, and mentorship programs.</li> <li>✓ Example: A college organizes student-led support groups where undocumented students connect with allies.</li> </ul>



## Example: Trauma-Informed Support in Action

An undocumented student, recently arrived in the U.S., is struggling academically and frequently misses class. When approached by a faculty member, the student is hesitant to share personal information and seems withdrawn.

### Trauma-Informed Response:

- The faculty member does not assume the student is lazy or uninterested. Instead, they gently check in:
  - *“I’ve noticed you’ve missed a few classes. I want to make sure you have what you need to succeed—would you be open to talking about what might help?”*
- They avoid pressuring the student to disclose details and instead offer multiple options for support: tutoring, a flexible deadline, or connecting with a student resource center.
- If the student shares that they are struggling with stress or financial insecurity, the faculty member validates their experience:
  - *“That sounds really difficult. You’re not alone—we have resources that may help, and I can walk you through them at your pace.”*
- Instead of forcing solutions, the faculty member follows up with encouragement:
  - *“I appreciate you sharing that with me. Here’s a campus center that works with students facing similar challenges. If you ever want, I can introduce you to someone there.”*
- The faculty member avoids retraumatizing the student by prioritizing the use of a single application for resources that does not ask them to keep repeating difficult circumstances.

### Key Takeaway



A trauma-informed approach helps students feel physically, emotionally, and culturally safe by fostering open communication, empowerment, and belonging. It shifts the focus of the conversation away from discussion of what is “wrong” with the student to working to understand what this student been through, and how we can support them in a way that honors their strength and affirms their power.

For more trauma-informed support resources, explore the California Community College Chancellors Office’s curated collection, [Resources to Support Undocumented Students](#).

## Fostering Supportive Learning Environments

Community colleges should provide an environment where students, regardless of their background or circumstances, can thrive and reach their full potential without undue hindrance. A supportive learning environment aims to mitigate obstacles and foster pathways to success for all students. It communicates a message of inclusivity and value, ensuring that institutional policies and practices support student well-being and academic progress.

### Example Scenario & Practitioner Suggestions Scenario:

Ana, a first-year community college student, stops attending class regularly. She used to participate in discussions and submit assignments on time, but now she seems withdrawn and disengaged. One day, she visits the counseling office and hesitantly asks about dropping out. When the counselor gently inquires what has brought this about, she admits she's struggling to balance school and work, fears that her immigration status will block her future opportunities and feels isolated because she doesn't know who she can trust.

### How a Practitioner Can Provide Support

#### 1. Acknowledge and Validate

- Instead of saying, *"Why are you thinking of dropping out?"*, a practitioner can say: *"That sounds like a lot to carry. I want you to know that you're not alone, and we have resources that can help."*
- This approach normalizes struggle while showing that help is available.

#### 2. Offer Concrete Resources

- **Academic Support:** Suggest flexible class options, tutoring services, or professors who allow extensions when needed.
- **Financial Support:** Provide information on state aid, scholarships, or emergency funds that do not require a Social Security number. View the slide presentation, [Unlocking Financial Aid Opportunities: Maximizing State Financial Aid Programs](#) for more information on financial support for undocumented students.
- **Mental Health Support:** Connect Ana with counselors who have experience working with undocumented students and understand trauma-informed care. Explore this [Mental Health – Undocumented Students](#) resource for more guidance for supporting the mental health of undocumented students, particularly strategies to address status-related stress and connect them with resources.

#### 3. Build a Sense of Belonging

- Introduce Ana to campus organizations, peer support groups, or mentorship

programs where she can connect with others who share her experiences. [fwd.us](http://fwd.us) offers a comprehensive guide for supporting undocumented students to achieve their career aspirations in California, "[Empowering Undocumented Students: A Guide for Career Services.](#)"

- Create and publicize safe spaces on campus where students like Ana feel seen and supported. The [Campaign for College Opportunity](#), which convenes the California Undocumented Higher Education Coalition, offers information about campus centers for undocumented students, support programs, website addresses with relevant information, and contact information of undocumented allies/liaisons in postsecondary education settings.

#### 4. Empower with Language

- Shift from fear-based to strength-based dialogue:
  - Instead of *"You need to figure out a way to stay in school,"* say *"You've already come this far—let's find ways to make this work for you."*
- Instead of *"This situation is really tough,"* say *"I see your resilience, and I believe in your ability to succeed with the right support."*

### Key Takeaway

A supportive learning environment is not just about offering resources—it's about helping students see that they belong, that they have options, and that their dreams are worth pursuing. Sometimes, the most powerful thing a practitioner can do is believe in them until they believe in themselves.





## Providing Emotional and Academic Support

Academic support encompasses adaptability, empathy, and guidance—providing alternative solutions when financial assistance is insufficient, fostering classroom environments where participation is encouraged without penalizing students for challenges they may be facing, and connecting students with scholarships, mentors, and resources that acknowledge their individual needs and potential. It also includes emotional support—listening without judgment, offering a supportive space without preconceptions, and reminding students of their inherent value beyond any difficulties they may encounter. When staff and faculty recognize the potential and invest in the future success of all students, education transforms from a system into a vital source of support.



### Example Scenario & Practitioner Suggestions

David, an undocumented student in his second semester, excels academically but recently started missing assignments and skipping office hours. When his professor emails to check in, he replies with a vague response: “Just dealing with some things, I’ll try to catch up.” Later, in a quiet moment after class, he shares that his work hours were increased unexpectedly, and his family is struggling financially. He’s worried he might have to drop out but doesn’t know where to turn for help.

### How a Practitioner Can Provide Support

#### 1. Show Up with Awareness and Advocacy

- Instead of saying, “You need to keep up with the coursework,” say: “I see how hard you’re working. Let’s figure out a way to keep you moving forward.”
- Offer flexibility in deadlines and participation, knowing that undocumented students often have unpredictable life demands.

#### 2. Provide Concrete Academic & Financial Guidance

- Offer alternatives such as extensions, asynchronous learning options, or reduced course loads without penalty.
- Connect him with campus resources:
  - Scholarship lists that don’t require a Social Security number.
  - Emergency aid programs specifically for undocumented students.

- Community-based support networks offering financial assistance.

### 3. Create a Culture of Safety & Belonging

- Professors can include inclusive statements in syllabi, such as:  
*“This is a space where all students—regardless of immigration status—are valued and supported.”*
- Advisors and staff can be trained in the California Dream Act and other state policies, ensuring they give accurate and up-to-date information.

### 4. Emphasize Emotional Well-Being

- Sometimes, listening without rushing to solutions is the most powerful support. A counselor or mentor might say:  
*“I know this is a lot. You’re not alone. There are people here who care and want to help.”*
- Encourage peer connections—a support group or mentor relationship can help students feel less isolated.

## Key Takeaway

Supporting undocumented students is not just about knowing the policies—it’s about being the person who stands beside them in a system that often pushes them to the margins. When liaisons, professors, and advisors believe in them, advocate for them, and remind them of their own power, education stops being just a requirement—it becomes a bridge to possibility.

## Practical Strategies for Supporting Students with Refugee/ Migrant Trauma

- Acknowledge the **emotional toll of displacement** and provide a **trauma-informed approach** to support.
- Connect students with **mental health resources, legal aid, and peer support networks**. Telehealth or other online support services may be a better fit for undocumented students balancing school with other responsibilities. View [Mental Health for Undocumented Students](#) for more information.
- Provide clear **guidance on educational rights**, such as AB 540, the California Dream Act, and in-state tuition policies. Learn more about [Legislation Impacting Undocumented Students](#).
- Ensure a welcoming campus environment by advocating for **safe spaces, legal workshops, and culturally-responsive counseling**. View [Enhancing Culturally Competent Mental Health Care Access in the Undocumented Community](#) for more information.



- Promote **peer support programs** where students can connect with others who have shared experiences.
- Recognize that resettlement is an ongoing process, not a single event. Provide **long-term support rather than one-time interventions**.
- Validate their experiences while **encouraging hope, empowerment, and goal setting**.
- Advocate for institutional policies that remove barriers, such as **access to emergency funds, career counseling, and flexible academic options**.

## Supportive Practice Resources

- **Consider an [UndocuAlly training](#)** to gather skills and knowledge about undocumented students, communities, and students from mixed-status families. UndocuAlly trainings support faculty, staff, and administrators in learning about the unique obstacles faced by these communities and how to effectively advocate for their needs.
- **Join The President’s Alliance on Higher Education** in advocating for undocumented students at a national level and familiarize yourself with the [Higher Ed Immigration Portal](#).
- **Dive into the [Undocumented Students Support Handbook](#)** to learn more about promising practices across the California Community Colleges System to provide undocumented students with holistic support and resources.
- **Browse the [FindYourAlly website](#)** for free immigration legal services and case support for students, staff, and faculty on California community college campuses statewide or virtually.
- **Explore [Resources to Support Undocumented Students](#)**, curated by the California Community College Chancellors Office
- **[Find your nearest UndocuLiason](#)**. These California Community College on-campus resources in provide a safe community for UndocuScholars and a judgement free place that makes it easier for students to focus on school and know they have support.





# Appendices

## Trauma-informed and Strengths-based responses a practitioner/ liaison used with Ana and David:

- *"I've noticed you've missed a few classes. I want to make sure you have what you need to succeed—would you be open to talking about what might help?"*
- *"That sounds really difficult. You're not alone—we have resources that may help, and I can walk you through them at your pace."*
- *"I appreciate you sharing that with me. Here's a campus center that works with students facing similar challenges. If you ever want, I can introduce you to someone there."*
- *"That sounds like a lot to carry. I want you to know that you're not alone, and we have resources that can help."*
- *"I know this is a lot. You're not alone. There are people here who care and want to help."*
- *"I see how hard you're working. Let's figure out a way to keep you moving forward."*
- *"You've already come this far—let's find ways to make this work for you."*
- *"I see your resilience, and I believe in your ability to succeed with the right support."*

## Glossary of Terms

- **AB 540:** California's AB 540, commonly known as the Nonresident Tuition Exemption, allows certain students to pay resident (lower) tuition rates and/or access state financial aid at eligible California public and private colleges.
- **DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals):** Established in 2012, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) offers certain undocumented immigrants who arrived in the U.S. before their 16th birthday a temporary reprieve from deportation. DACA provides a renewable two-year period of deferred action, work authorization, and the opportunity to obtain a Social Security number, though it doesn't create a path to permanent residency.
- **Migrant:** The term "migrant" is a broad descriptor, not formally defined in international law, that reflects the everyday understanding of someone who relocates from their habitual residence, be it within their country or across an international border. This relocation can be temporary or permanent and undertaken for a multitude of reasons.
- **Refugee:** A refugee is a person who has been forced to leave their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution or serious human rights violations. Recognizing that their own government is unable or unwilling to protect them, they seek safety and international protection in another country.
- **Resilience:** Resilience is the ability to keep going despite barriers. Undocumented students have already demonstrated resilience by adapting to new environments, balancing responsibilities, and finding ways to thrive against the odds. Practitioners can help nurture resilience by offering resources, validation, and a sense of belonging.

- **Stress:** *Stress is the mental, emotional, and physical strain that undocumented students experience as they navigate uncertainty—about their education, finances, family stability, and future. It shows up in exhaustion, difficulty concentrating, anxiety, and even physical symptoms. Chronic stress can make learning harder, but the right support can help lighten the load.*
- **Trauma-informed Approach:** *A trauma-informed approach shifts from “What’s wrong with this student?” to “What has this student been through, and how can I support them in a way that honors their strength and affirms their power?”*
- **The California Dream Act:** *The California Dream Act provides state financial aid to undocumented and other eligible students who meet AB 540 requirements, enabling them to access Cal Grants, UC Grants, and other scholarships.*
- **Undocumented:** *Defined broadly, term refers to all immigrants who reside in the United States, but who do not have legal status. A person who is “undocumented,” is a migrant or refugee who has entered without authorization, entered with a visa and overstayed their visa, or is currently in the process of legalizing.*
- **UndocuAlly:** *A term adopted to refer to allies for undocumented students.*
- **Well-Being:** *Well-being is more than survival—it’s feeling safe, supported, and seen. It includes emotional stability, academic confidence, social connection, and access to basic needs. When students have a strong foundation of well-being, they can engage fully in their education and move toward their dreams.*

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