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## Catalyzing Change for Undocumented Students at Post-Secondary Institutions in California

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# Best Practices: Catalyzing Change for Undocumented Students at Post-Secondary Institutions in California



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## ABSTRACT

This article highlights learning lessons and best practices from the California Campus Catalyst Fund (CCCF), a unique three-year, \$14M grant and technical assistance initiative, which supports programs for undocumented students at 32 campuses within each of the public higher education segments in California (University of California, California State University, and California Community Colleges). The article focuses on three essential components of substantive changes for undocumented students attending CCCF campuses: 1) access to financial aid, 2) knowledge about income generation through entrepreneurship, and 3) student leadership development. Recommendations stemming from best practices and implementation of the CCCF are provided for multiple audiences, including postsecondary educators, policymakers, and the philanthropic sector, focused on increasing access and success of undocumented students.

**Keywords:** Undocumented students, undocumented, immigrants

## Introduction

There are an estimated 450,000 undocumented students enrolled in higher education throughout the U.S., with approximately 20 percent in California (Feldblum et. al., 2020). As the number of undocumented students entering California colleges and universities grows (Zong & Batalova, 2019; Feldblum et. al., 2020), it is vital that statewide initiatives

catalyze institutional change to meet the state's need for an educated workforce. In-state tuition and state-based financial aid have been in place for many years in California, however, due to a sizable rift between legislative policy and institutional practices, large numbers of undocumented students are still unable to achieve their educational goals or access valuable opportunities. The resulting loss of intellectual capital ultimately limits California's potential economic growth.

During the past decade, many institutions of higher education in California have begun to move from an "underground" piecemeal approach to supporting undocumented students, to one focused on building institutional competency (Valenzuela et. al., 2015). However, lack of training and targeted funding has prevented the kind of change necessary to implement institutionalized programming, specialized training for student services professionals, and designated safe spaces for undocumented students. Furthermore, constant changes in national policy have impacted undocumented students' postsecondary aspirations,

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<sup>i</sup> CA AB540, passed in 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> CA AB130-131, passed in 2011.



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particularly with respect to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). These changes highlight the importance of identifying pathways for educational access and success for undocumented students (with or without DACA), as well as career and income generating opportunities which build on these students' dedication, resiliency, and commitment to their communities.

### **Immigrants Rising**

The authors are practitioner researchers at Immigrants Rising (IR), an organization that for over 15 years has worked to support undocumented youth by empowering them to achieve educational and career goals through personal, institutional and policy transformation. Central to IR's approach, is the design and dissemination of programs and resources in a wide variety of topics that include access to higher education, income generation through entrepreneurship, legal services, mental health and leadership development. A few of our resources are highlighted in the sections below.

### **The California Campus Catalyst Fund Initiative**

In 2018, Immigrants Rising, in partnership with postsecondary leaders and staff, and with the support of immigration-focused private philanthropic funding to stimulate the sustainable expansion of services, the California Campus Catalyst Fund (CCCF), was introduced. The CCCF is a unique 3-year,

\$14M grant and technical assistance initiative which supports programs for undocumented students at 32 campuses within each of the public higher education segments in California (University of California, California State University, and California Community Colleges). The overarching goal of the three-year initiative was to expand the role of California's public higher education segments to support undocumented students and families by making services for this population part of a powerful paradigm shift through an examination of institutional policies, practices, and procedures. In addition to the grant support provided to CCCF partner campuses, staff and faculty also receive tailored technical assistance in a range of capacity areas that encompass the support and resources needed for undocumented students to enroll and succeed in higher education.

### **Areas of Focus**

This article highlights three essential components of substantive changes for undocumented students attending CCCF campuses: 1) access to financial aid, 2) knowledge about income generation through entrepreneurship, and 3) student leadership development. Our years of direct services provision to undocumented students and our strategic partnerships with postsecondary educators inform our assessment that undocumented students' unique challenges call for a holistic approach to addressing the barriers they face and also present unique

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opportunities to streamline facilitators to their success at postsecondary institutions.

### **Facilitating Access to Post-Secondary Financial Aid for Undocumented Students**

A lack of access to financial assistance is repeatedly identified as the primary barrier for undocumented students to enter and succeed in higher education (Serna et al., 2017; Ballerini & Feldblum, 2021). For this reason, the CCCF sought to build or expand institutional practices at each campus with the goal of increasing access to in-state tuition, state-based financial aid, and scholarships for undocumented students. This goal has been implemented through targeted programming for community college and university personnel in the form of regional trainings, monthly coffee talks, and documenting promising practices that increase institutional support for undocumented students. Specific focus was placed on improving and streamlining practices within key campus departments such as admissions, financial aid, and undocumented student services to resolve common barriers to accessing financial aid among undocumented students (Perez, 2010). Feedback from the thirty-two campuses pointed to a collective impact that has allowed colleges and universities to build better practices to decrease the number of students paying out of state tuition and

increase award rates for the CA Dream Act<sup>iii</sup>. One particularly effective intervention was the, “Bridging Financial Aid and Admissions to Support Undocumented Students” training. This day-long regional training allowed 147 participants from key departments to work collectively in identifying, and subsequently reducing roadblocks that significantly decrease access to financial resources in higher education. The training included self-assessments, action plans, sharing of key resources and the elevation, as well as documentation of promising practices. Topics covered in the training included: expanding recognition of non-Latino communities (Chan, 2010); updating informational materials and websites to include the latest legislation on in-state tuition and financial aid policies; developing targeted outreach strategies while protecting student data; and the inclusion of procedures to increase interdepartmental communication (Perez, 2010).

Another important intervention was a dedicated effort to increase the availability and accuracy of information for undocumented students on campus websites. Although websites are often the first place that many prospective or current students learn about the existence of and procedures required to access financial resources, research has shown that despite having access to technology and internet, low-income students have a difficult time accessing this information online (Venegas, 2006). Immigrants Rising used a rubric to undertake a detailed analysis of each CCCF campus

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<sup>iii</sup> California Dream Act is a law passed in 2011 that allows undocumented individuals who meet certain eligibility requirements to receive state based financial aid.

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website and evaluated the accuracy and inclusion of important elements that pertain to admissions, financial aid, and undocumented student pages. Each campus received a detailed report with specific recommendations, coupled with specialized training and one-on-one coaching to improve virtual access. Building on knowledge gained through this analysis, Immigrants Rising created the comprehensive guide, “Strengthening Your Campus Website for Undocumented Students: Guide for California Colleges and Universities” that included suggested language and resources to support the improvement of campus websites. The results of these efforts will ensure that more undocumented students receive the full financial benefits and security as set forth by federal and state laws. The guide was released prior to COVID-19, but its importance grew exponentially as websites became primary sources for undocumented students to learn about available resources and key deadlines.

### **Income Generation Within Undocumented Communities**

While undocumented immigrants face significant barriers to pursuing employment in the U.S. due to lack of work authorization, any immigrant, regardless of legal status, can legally earn a living through entrepreneurship (IRCA, 1986). This is because self-employment and business start-ups do not require having work authorization or a Social Security Number (SSN). Instead of a SSN, individuals can use an Individual Tax Identification Numbers (ITINs), issued by the

IRS, to pay taxes. Thus, entrepreneurship is an alternative to employment, and an avenue for undocumented people to generate income legally (Lee, 2018).

Immigrants Rising promotes knowledge of entrepreneurship models for individuals enrolled at CCCF campuses with the intention of ensuring that all students with and without DACA understand income generation options that do not require work authorization. Through in-person presentations, webinars and 1-on-1 meetings, staff, faculty and students across CCCF campuses work to identify opportunities to collaborate and create new entrepreneurship programming at their campuses. These models and strategies are discussed in more detail below.

Within the CCCF, a technical/trade college in Los Angeles launched an Entrepreneurship Certificate Program for their undocumented students, as well as for community members. The program was created in partnership between Student Affairs and the Business Department. The program curriculum consists of a series of classes focused on the fundamentals of entrepreneurship (from the Business Department) with content specific to the undocumented community (from Immigrants Rising). The classes also include hands-on activities on developing a business idea based on skills, ability, experience, and going through the permit and licensing process at City Hall from start to finish. The program works toward building efficiencies, so students have opportunities to combine technical training with entrepreneurial

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concepts and be prepared to enter the workforce, regardless of immigration status.

Other CCCF colleges have partnered with local business training centers to offer workshops and one-on-one support for their undocumented students. One college incentivized their students to participate in entrepreneurship programming with pitch competitions in which students received feedback from a panel of judges and had the possibility to secure funds to launch their business idea. Other colleges included entrepreneurship training in the undocumented students' first-year experience and as part of their workshop series, with training offered by business faculty, community members, or community-based organizations. Incorporating entrepreneurship training and exploration early on allows for undocumented students to be able to take advantage of the business training and support on campus, as a complement to their desired field of study. Entrepreneurship training and support in school can help students realize that work opportunities do exist and see the value in completing their higher education goals.

### **Undocumented Student Leadership Development**

Research has shown higher civic engagement participation among undocumented students (Perez et al., 2010). As such, the CCCF facilitated leadership opportunities for undocumented student leaders so they can be

instrumental and active members of their campus' efforts to support them and their peers. The underlying aim of the CCCF Fellowship was to ensure that undocumented students had access to paid professional development, while gaining greater visibility, knowledge and a voice to help them advocate for themselves and others on and off campus. Since the inception of the CCCF, students from the 32 partner campuses have been identified and selected to become Catalyst Fellows. The Catalyst Fellowship is anchored in the notion that undocumented students' unique lived experiences and perspectives are not only invaluable assets for college educators to understand but are equally important strengths for Fellows themselves to leverage for their own leadership development (Andolina, et. al., 2003). Catalyst Fellows in Years One and Two received a \$1,500 stipend and \$3,000 in Year Three, throughout the course of the academic year in recognition of their active participation. They also received trainings on a myriad of topics to support their professional development, engagement on campus, and personal growth. Catalyst Fellows in the Year One and Year Two cohorts attended day-long, in-person convenings with other fellows, administrators and staff from their campuses where they grappled over critical issues of access to resources and services for undocumented students at their institutions, and designed action plans to make improvements. In Year Three of the initiative, the Fellowship was adapted to incorporate a hands-on project to forward Fellows' own academic or

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professional pursuits. In all, over 150 undocumented Fellows have participated in three annual cohorts of the Catalyst Fellowship.

Personal reflections from the Catalyst Fellows showed evidence of greater confidence to share their story, acquisition of new knowledge about services and programming available for undocumented students, and increased desire to engage in advocacy efforts on campus and in their communities. Where undocumented students may experience a sense of isolation from their mainstream peers (even before COVID-19's impact), the Catalyst Fellowship provided an infrastructure for fellows to become part of a learning community that transcends the classroom. Fellows developed skills to connect their *already* demonstrated resilience and learned to apply it toward navigating novel tasks at their institutions and beyond.

### Recommendations

Recommendations stemming from best practices and implementation of the CCCF are provided for multiple audiences, including postsecondary educators, policymakers, and the philanthropic sector, focused on increasing access and success of undocumented students. The authors draw from organizational knowledge of institutional best practices (Jodaitis et al., 2016; Ortiz Cerda, 2019) by working in a sustained and systematic partnership with colleges and universities from across

California over the course of 20+ years. Lessons learned through the CCCF initiative add to the growing body of knowledge about building sustainable institutional practices that support undocumented students, driven by a commitment to equity.

### Recommendations for Educators at Institutions of Higher Education

- Prioritize regular departmental and cross departmental trainings to ensure that key staff are knowledgeable about admissions, state financial aid, scholarships and fellowships, and ways to generate income through entrepreneurship.
- For over 15 years, content experts at Immigrants Rising (that include undocumented youth, educators, and other allies) have developed an extensive library of resources on a myriad of topics related to the undocumented experience. Resources such as “Strengthening Your Campus Website Checklist<sup>iv</sup>,” can serve as blueprints to help staff and faculty learn about and implement strategies to empower undocumented young people to achieve their academic and career goals.
- Incorporate entrepreneurship training in programming for undocumented students. Establish partnerships with the business department on campus and local non-

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<sup>iv</sup> <https://immigrantsrising.org/resource/checklist-for-strengthening-your-campus-website-for-undocumented-students/>

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profit business/entrepreneurship centers to get support with training and curriculum development. Use Immigrants Rising's Entrepreneurship Hub<sup>v</sup> as a starting point.

- Create paid fellowships (available to all students, regardless of immigration status) within institutions of higher education, as a way to prevent isolation and foster leadership development from an asset building perspective.

### Recommendations for Policymakers

- Use National Immigration Law Center's model language<sup>vii</sup> to create tuition equity laws, expand in-state tuition and state financial aid opportunities for undocumented students across all states.
- Create accountability metrics to ensure equitable implementation of undocu-friendly legislation, including access to sufficient funding and training for campus personnel.
- Pass legislation across all states to allow anyone, regardless of immigration status, to be eligible for professional licensing, business permits, apprenticeships, and workforce development training.

- Reinstate and expand DACA and ultimately provide permanent relief to the undocumented population in the U.S.

### Recommendations for the Philanthropic Sector

- In states where legislation has made in-state tuition and financial aid possible for undocumented students, foundations can partner with education policymakers and campus leaders to ascertain the extent to which such statewide policies are operationalized and undocumented students are able to avail themselves of those resources.
- Leveraging their role as conveners and funders, foundations can stimulate collaborations between immigrant advocates and postsecondary leaders to identify and build institutional best practices and efficiencies at colleges and universities.
- Philanthropy's support for undocumented students and the organizations that serve them is strongest when it is informed by individuals from this population. Foundations can create or incentivize channels to elicit input from undocumented individuals who have benefited from their support and to learn about intersecting needs they face in school and local communities.


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<sup>v</sup> [spark.immigrantsrising.org](http://spark.immigrantsrising.org)

<sup>vi</sup> National Immigration Law Center. Tuition, Model Language: Tuition Equity. [nilc.org/issues/education/eduaccesstoolkit2b/#model](http://nilc.org/issues/education/eduaccesstoolkit2b/#model)



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- Foundations can spur innovations and encourage new and nascent programming for undocumented students. While bureaucratic processes, institutional budgets, or a challenging campus climate might hinder innovations in student support services for undocumented students, Foundations can invest in emerging promising practices, including in the evaluation of such efforts. 

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