

Mental Health – Undocumented Students

Text “COURAGE” to 741-741 to speak with a 24/7 confidential mental health counselor from Crisis Text Line.

Setting the Stage

California Community Colleges have been and will continue to explore how to meet the health and wellness needs of students. The Chancellor’s Office works in partnership with other state agencies on early intervention initiatives, faculty and staff training, suicide prevention, and peer-to-peer programs. The Vision for Success encourages us to provide students with robust and varied support to meet them where they are. For undocumented communities, mental health resources are vital. This resource will introduce various perspectives and promising practices currently used to respond to undocumented students’ unique mental health needs.

Mental Health for Undocumented Students

It is clear from the case of undocumented students that sociopolitical factors, such as immigration policies, have a significant impact on mental health. Therefore, practitioners should avoid individualizing undocumented students’ psychological concerns (i.e., treating them as if they arise solely in the individual) and instead evaluate their well-being in the context of social and political factors. As status-related stressors and struggles cannot disappear without a permanent solution to their immigration status, it is important to evaluate undocumented students’ mental health and to give them realistic options for addressing them.



Status-Related Stressors

Developed by sociocultural psychologist Basia Ellis, the [Undocumented Stress Cycle](#) helps explain how undocumented immigrants experience recurring patterns of stress. Status-related stressors trigger undocumented stress cycles by generating acute fears and concerns, reminding students of their precarious and/or excluded positions.

Common examples of status-related stressors that impact students:

- Applying for a driver’s license or driving without a license
- Seeking employment
- Paying out of state tuition
- Learning about requirements to study abroad
- Hearing/Seeing immigration-related newscasts or social media posts
- Immigration-related questions from strangers (e.g., “where are you from?”)
- Seeing/encountering police or ICE authorities
- Seeking medical services
- Unable to leave the country to visit family
- Being asked for ID at a bar/club
- Providing documentation at various institutions
- Applying for Financial Aid and disclosing parents’ status



Everyday Manifestations of Chronic Fears and Concerns

The fears and concerns of undocumented students go beyond status-related threats. [Enriquez et al. \(2018\)](#) discuss the everyday manifestations of immigrant “illegality” via four dimensions: academic concerns, financial concerns, deportation concerns, and future concerns.

Academic Concerns

Status-related worries connected to undocumented students’ capacities to access to higher education and complete their degrees.

Financial Concerns

Worries and thoughts related to either students’ own or their family’s financial status.

Deportation Concerns

Worries connected to the potential of deportation of oneself or one’s family members.

Future Concerns

A result from all three of the dimensions above—as they refer to feelings of precariousness and uncertainty about the future.

These concerns are tied not only to fears about the possibility of deportation and family separation but also concerns about the value of obtaining a college degree with no certainty that it will allow for better work opportunities after college.

Supporting Undocumented Students Mental Health

Three-Step Approach

Undocumented students can seek help at various stages, but often it is when they are facing adversities that they find the courage to seek support. The following practices draw from the framework of “Psychological First Aid,” originally developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and tailored to community college practitioners.

Listen and comfort to reduce initial distress

Step
1

- Listen openly and compassionately to understand students’ concerns
- Speak calmly, provide safety, convey interest & care
- Acknowledge trust and courage needed to ‘come out’
- Ask questions about students’ experience & gather information about the issue/stressor to assess its quality (e.g., immediate, severe, dangerous, chronic)
- Comfort students by validating the impact of status-related stressors and communicating your support
- Know your boundaries & avoid false promises (e.g., if you cannot be there at every hour, don’t say that you can)
- Be aware of your own cultural biases and limitations (cultural competency requirement)
- Check in about mental health even if it’s not an expressed concern & be prepared with resources

Address immediate practical challenges with resourcefulness and advocacy

Step
2

- Discuss options and strategies available to improve the situation
- Allow students to decide on their next steps (i.e., avoid ‘taking over’ or attempting to resolve the situation independently)
- If you don’t know, research, reach out, and/or advocate for student needs
- Empower students by engaging them in the research and advocacy process
- Avoid discouragement & misinformation

Address long-term challenges with long-term supports

Step
3

- **Create a triage referral process and emergency plan to refer students to mental health services or health centers**
- Determine what on-campus services are available and have a list of off-campus services
- Connect students to support others to ensure access to long-term support and community (e.g., Undocumented Student Resource Center, basic needs Liaisons, immigrant rights organization)

System of Referral to Mental Health Services

Prioritize referring individual students to mental health services.

It is important to understand the role that CCC practitioners have when supporting undocumented students' mental health needs. Every college receives funding dedicated to mental health, in addition to AB1645 funds available to serve the needs of Undocu students. These services either exist or are being developed on campus where collaboration among mental health services and UndocuLiaisons is critical to meet undocumented student needs. In addition, faculty, staff, and counselors should triage undocumented students to mental health professionals on and off campus. Most counselors at CCCs have graduate degrees in career counseling and are not licensed professional counselors.

Points of consideration

- ✓ Create a referral list for your students to a professional mental health therapist in your college or region.
- ✓ Not all mental health professionals are knowledgeable about and able to adequately address the needs of undocumented students, so prescreening might be helpful.
- ✓ Be mindful of the importance of UndocuAlly trainings and the use of inclusive terms during trainings.
- ✓ Promote UndocuAlly trainings among mental health professionals and basic need centers at your local college.
- ✓ Assure a referral list exists for mental health therapists with expertise around undocumented communities.
- ✓ All Undocumented Student Center staff should be familiar with the campus system of referral and what to do in case of an emergency.

Take into account your student's needs, the method of providing services, if you have a central location that provides services, if you already have campus resources in place, etc.

Guiding Questions for Undocu Friendly Mental Health Services

- > What type of Mental Health Services exist on your campus?
- > Do you have a referral list for undocumented mental health services?
- > Have you connected with the Health and Wellness Center on your campus to create a partnership with the UndocuCenter to coordinate mental health services?
- > How can you collaborate with the other equity programs to strategize about addressing student mental health needs?
- > Have the mental health practitioners on your campus participated in an UndocuAlly Training?
- > Have you hosted any mental health and wellness events?
- > How can you help your students to identify their needs with regard to mental health?
- > Does Umoja, Puente, or LGBTQI+Services need funds to provide culturally sensitive mental health services?
- > Collaborate with other programs such as Disability Services Program (DSPS) to utilize existing resources for mental health and tailor them to undocumented students?
- > Are there non-profit organizations in your area that accept referrals for undocumented mental health services? Are there any opportunities to apply for grants supporting mental health on your campus? Can your college use mental health services budget to refer students to mental health services that specialize in immigrant communities?

Undocumented Student Center Support Activities

Below are some promising practices to guide UndocuLiaisons/Undocu Centers in collaborating with mental health services on campus. Collaborating with the college's mental health services is crucial, regardless of whether you contract out. The mental health services lead on your campus is the expert and may know of resources, networks, and funding available to help undocumented students.



Wellness Sessions

Provide space for students to come together and build community in non-therapeutic support groups.



Group Therapy

Another opportunity to support your students is for Undocumented Student Centers to partner with off-campus organizations to either provide services on campus or some sort of referral system. The purpose of this type of therapy is to learn emotional management skills and find support in community.



Non-clinical support groups

Led by trained mental health providers or registered clinicians, these groups are designed to help undocumented people feel less alone and more understood. The goal is creating a confidential space where participants can feel grounded, find community, and share their unique experiences, challenges, and successes with one another. Note: though participation can be therapeutic, the groups are not a form of therapy.



Individual Therapy

Serving the unique needs of undocumented students' mental health should be addressed in collaboration with the mental health department and the undocumented student centers or UndocuLiaison on campus.

The tools and resources discussed above are intended to provide you with the strategies and insight to better support students with undocumented legal status. We encourage you to visit the additional resources page in the [Undocumented Student Support eHandbook](#) to learn more about promising practices and specific examples for support activities.