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IS Main Story Draft

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Story angle: The process of getting into college as an undocumented student.

Communication Values: proximity and relevance.

Barriers to Break: Undocumented students suffer from a lack of support and resources.

During the 2016 election, talk about undocumented immigrants and immigration policies was everywhere. Now, six years later, the once ‘hot’ political topic has begun to fade, but the issues surrounding this topic haven’t gone anywhere.

In an academic article by Marco A. Murillo, he stated that while around 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school each year, only half enroll in college or earn a college degree.

Although progress has been made by enacting Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), undocumented students still face disproportionate disadvantages when applying to higher education.

Murillo states that undocumented students who navigate the ropes to get to college and graduate school “demonstrate a high level of resilience as they often do so with little support.”

Karen Suárez Jiménez, a first-generation graduate law student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is an indigenous Mexican woman from Oaxaca, Mexico. Jiménez came to the United States with her family when she was three years old and has spent most of her life in Wisconsin.

Jiménez always had an inkling but first learned of her residential status when she asked her father if she could get her driver’s license. Jiménez and her father had a conversation where he told her she couldn’t get a license because she wasn’t a citizen. Luckily, Obama had just enacted DACA so Jiménez applied and was granted the protection.

Although Jiménez noticed she was fortunate enough to be a DACA recipient, she said, “that’s when it really started to set in that I don’t have any actual status, It’s just this temporary protection from deportation.”

One of the biggest barriers remains the cost of higher education. Financial support from the government is halted for undocumented students because of their residential status, so they need to find other ways to fund the high expenses of college and graduate school.

“Being undocumented, there's no government funding available for me and a lot of scholarships are pretty limited, because they do require some sort of status component. So going to college would have meant that my parents or I had to pay out-of-pocket for everything that wasn't covered by a special scholarship” Jiménez said.

Yesenia Villalpando Torres, project assistant at the Center for DREAMers was born in Mexico City, Mexico, and moved to Madison, Wisconsin when she was five years old. Along with Jiménez, Torres noted a lack of support from the university and other resources is lacking.

Finding a safe and comfortable community for undocumented students is rare and sparse but fortunately, the Dreamers of UW-Madison is a student-led club and chapter that addresses the issues undocumented individuals face on campus. Torres stated that these student organizations are created by students themselves because the university wasn't providing them with those spaces.

“Students created those spaces for themselves and I think it's important to recognize that. That these have been for students, by the students that needed them,” Torres said.

Additionally, the Center for DREAMers was recently launched in October 2021 through the UW-Madison Law School. Erika Rosales, Director of the Center for DREAMers at UW-Madison, is a first-generation college graduate and DACA recipient. Currently, the center essentially serves the entire state of Wisconsin along with the students at UW-Madison, according to Rosales.

With huge responsibilities, the center needs full financial support in order to continue with the work they are doing. The Center for DREAMers is currently part of a two-year grant, meaning that when the two years are over, they will need to find other ways to fund the center.

Rosales said that ideally, they would like the center to be institutionalized, meaning direct funding and support from UW-Madison. This would allow the center better capacity to provide training for faculty and administrators and also allow Rosales to dedicate 100% of her time to her position.

“It [would] be wonderful for us...to train everybody on campus that has any contact with students, so that everybody knows and has some idea how to support DACA and undocumented students, no matter what [their] position is,” Rosales said.

Rosales noted that since anything to do with immigration can be quite political, another barrier is the stigma and misinformation surrounding undocumented students. Often, undocumented students are categorized as international students consequently causing more issues surrounding financial aid, health insurance and the application for college or graduate school.

“I understand that it gets very political yet, we're human beings and it's hard to be...a college student as it is and then to feel like you don't have any support is really difficult,” Rosales said.

College in itself can already be a hard transitional period. Leaving your family, occasionally moving states and having to navigate the world on your own for the first time is scary. Undocumented students face this challenge disproportionately juggling their constrained financial support, work opportunities and exclusion from activities that require legal status such as studying abroad.

“If you don't have the support systems in place to support you while you're actually studying or continuing your education, then what, right? You are left without feeling like you're supported,” Torres said.

With the center's two-year grant looming in the future, support and advocacy for undocumented students are needed at all times. The Center for DREAMers now plays an imperative role in both students' lives and the general undocumented population of Wisconsin. As both Rosales and Torres stated, the Center for DREAMers must be institutionalized to continue being a hub for student support and information and a safe space for undocumented individuals.