

JUST THE BEGINNING

Undocumented students face complex barriers when applying to UW-Madison.

By: Camila Rivero

For most students, going to college is a stepping stone in life, but the journey to get there isn't always so simple. Generally, undocumented students have to rely on themselves for advocacy and dig to find accessible resources.

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. She is a certified social worker and is completing her Master of Social Work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

As a first-generation college student, Torres faced challenges when applying to graduate school at UW-Madison.

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Torres was applying to be a part-time graduate student but since international students have to be full-time with their student visas, Torres was denied this option. Torres had to make her situation public on her personal social media pages, utilize her UW-Madison networks and fight for herself to finally be given a chance to apply for the graduate program. "It was a mess," Torres said.

For undocumented students, the challenges do not stop there. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) beneficiaries, either from Wisconsin or from another state, have to pay out-of-state tuition, according to Torres. Along with this, they do not have access to federal financial aid. In other words, DACA students,



The UW-Madison Law Building sits on the side of Bascom Hill in Madison, Wis., pictured on March 11, 2022. Photo by Camila Rivero.

along with the general undocumented population, have to find ways to fund their entire college expenses.

Universities will often require students to apply for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Students then have to have conversations with the school where they have to explain that they aren't eligible for FAFSA and cannot provide that certain information.

"We're expected to pay out-of-state, we don't have financial aid, then we have issues applying for school...it's a lot," Torres said.

Torres recognized that it also involves the university acknowledging that some aspects of their college process may be causing barriers for students. In California, undocumented students pay in-state tuition and are provided a financial assistance program, according to Torres.

"In reality, I don't think that the university is vocally or actively encouraging this specific population to apply to the university," Torres

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Torres is currently working on trying to implement a study abroad program for local Dane County DACA recipients with the Center for DREAMers. She is hoping to give students the opportunity to study abroad in partnership with the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and grant them safe re-entry to the United States.