

Undocumented and Greek: What Does Support Look Like?

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Over the past few months, I have been reflecting on how I can better work with and for undocumented students on my campus, especially in light of the presidential election and changes in federal immigration policy and enforcement. Undocumented students across the country have expressed varying degrees of uncertainty related to their immigration status and their continuation as students on our campuses. The heightened level of activism during the presidential election, coupled with the subsequent flurry of events aimed at securing sanctuary campuses, have all impacted undocumented students and allies, including members of fraternal organizations, in varying ways. As professionals, we need to be able to support all members of our communities, including undocumented students. With this in mind, I started to consider whether we as professionals have the tools to support students who “come out of the shadows” and are undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic. Do we know what to do when one of our students says, “I’m undocumented and Greek”?

The following questions highlight what the undocumented student population looks like, including their involvement with fraternal organizations, and closes with a list of questions you should ask yourself and undocumented students as well as questions you should NOT ask when a student discloses their immigration status.

What does the current undocumented student population look like?

Annually, nearly 65,000 undocumented students graduate US high schools with only 7,000 to 13,000 enrolling in colleges (Passel, 2003). There are approximately 28,000 to 55,000 undocumented students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the United States (Passel, 2003). Approximately 57% of undocumented students are Latino; however, the largest growth of undocumented students is occurring in the Asian community (Passel, 2003). Undocumented students come from mixed status families, with their parents being undocumented and their siblings perhaps having U.S. citizenship. A large portion of undocumented students came to the United States at an early age, never knowing their home country. Some of these students were valedictorians, community leaders, and student athletes, as well as average students – all types of students fraternal organizations seek.

These students continuously confront structural social, socioeconomic, political, and legislative barriers, such as lack of employment opportunities, having to pay out-of-state tuition in some states (or being completely barred from attending at all), and racist nativism. Yet, there are various external resources available to them to aid in their academic success, including several states that have provided in-state resident tuition benefits, financial aid and scholarships, and specific personnel and DREAM centers on campuses to support these students’ specific needs. Undocumented students have internal resources, including funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth. Moreover, there is a form of executive relief for these students through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. The DACA program, enacted by President Obama in 2012 and still in effect, provides relief from deportation, a work permit,

and authorizes these students to receive a driver's license. There is no current pathway towards citizenship for these students, although there have been several unsuccessful attempts, including the passage of the DREAM Act.

What are some of the ways undocumented students interact with fraternal organizations?

Latinos and other minoritized populations are entering into postsecondary institutions at higher rates and need outlets to remain engaged and retained at institutions. One outlet for these students can include culturally-based fraternal organizations (CBFOs). Membership in CBFOs fosters success in adjusting to college (Garcia, 2005; Kimbrough, 2003) and assists these students' pursuit of their educational (Cruz 2013) and personal leadership goals (Atkinson, Dean, & Espino, 2010). Membership in CBFOs increases peer support and motivation, self-awareness (Guardia & Evans, 2008), a sense of belonging, and campus involvement (Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013), all which benefit undocumented students. As more undocumented students attend postsecondary institutions, some naturally choose to join fraternal organizations, including CBFOs.

Over the past seven years, fraternal organizations have seen an increase in the number of undocumented students who join their ranks. Here at Washington State University, the undocumented student population fluctuates between 3-5% of our Multicultural Greek Community; however, undocumented students do not solely join CBFOs. They also join Panhellenic and Interfraternity fraternal organizations. The addition of undocumented students as brothers and sisters has added to the complexity of issues facing our fraternal organizations, leading to an increase in activism and awareness related to issues facing this population. The following are just a few examples of ways in which undocumented members have interacted with fraternal organizations over the past few years.

- In early 2010, Jessica Colotl, a member of Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority, Inc. at Kennesaw State University in Georgia was detained and nearly deported by immigration officials (Jordan, 2017). Her sorority sisters activated around her release. This incident led the Board of Regents for the University System of Georgia to institute various policies prohibiting undocumented students from attending one of the top five public institutions and prohibited them all from qualifying for in-state tuition. These two policies impacted other members of fraternal organizations, including Jesus Arroyo, a member of Phi Iota Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (Elvira, 2010) at Armstrong State University.
- In December 2010, Mario Perez, a member of Iota Mu chapter Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. at Stephen F. Austin State University, was pulled over for a routine traffic stop, resulting in his arrest given his undocumented status (Kennedy, 2011). His fraternity brothers came together and raised nearly \$1,500 needed to release him from jail while they also found him another brother who provided pro bono legal services. In 2011, the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. moved their summer convention from Arizona to Nevada in the wake of Arizona's passage of SB 1070, a law that invites rampant racial

profiling against Latinos, Asian-Americans, and others presumed to be “foreign” based on how they look or sound.

- In Spring 2014, six undocumented students started a chapter of Lambda Theta Phi Latin Fraternity, Inc. at Johnson C. Smith University, a HBCU in Charlotte, N.C. (Stewart, 2014). The chartering of a Latino fraternity at a HBCU by only undocumented students is quite unique and demonstrates the breadth of undocumented students’ experiences with fraternal organizations.
- In Spring 2016, members of the Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority, Inc. colony at Valparaiso University started an initiative to support undocumented immigrants of Flint, Michigan who were unable to obtain clear water without proper identification (Tweeten, 2016).
- In Spring 2016, the Omicron Delta chapter of Sigma Lambda Beta International Fraternity, Inc. at Washington State University, in conjunction with NASPA Region V and Washington State University, co-sponsored the first Undocuqueer Conference which discussed the intersectional identities of being undocumented and LGBTQ*.
- In Spring 2017, Texas State Representative Ana Hernandez, alumna of the Theta chapter of Kappa Delta Chi Sorority, Inc. shared her experience as an undocumented child who had overstayed her visa leading to a vote on sanctuary jurisdictions (Alguilar, 2017).

There are countless other stories related to the intersections of students’ undocumented identities and their identity as members of fraternal organizations. As such, it is important to know how to support an undocumented student should they choose to disclose their immigration status.

How can I support undocumented students?

Undocumented students have various forms of capital they utilize to navigate through structural barriers; however, you as a professional are also able to assist them. Armed with knowledge, you will be able to remove some of the structural barriers at their institutions, increase undocumented students’ participation in fraternal organizations, and provide a better overall experience for undocumented students. Below are some questions to ask yourself or an undocumented student, as well as some questions to NOT ask.

Questions to ask yourself:

- “Can I divorce my political beliefs from my obligation to serve all students?” Regardless of your political beliefs, these students require our unconditional support.
- “Do I know the policies, laws, and practices at my institution that affect undocumented students?” It is very important to become aware of these to better support students.

- “Am I willing to intervene when I see an injustice?” Recognize that others may be intolerant of undocumented students and by intervening you may become a target as well.

Questions to ask an undocumented student:

- “What level of confidentiality do you expect from me?” They may not want you to tell anyone.
- “How is your experience as a fraternity/sorority member going?” These students need to have their lived histories and experiences validated. As such, we should inquire about their time as members in our community.
- “What can I do to support you?” Undocumented students face different barriers and pointing these students in the right direction for additional support is important.

Questions to NOT ask:

- “Tell me about your immigration status.” Don’t assume a student is undocumented. If a student reveals that he or she is undocumented, do not interrogate them about their immigration status. Listen attentively.
- “Are you illegal?” Do not ask questions that would be considered rude.
- “Can’t you just apply to be a citizen?” Do not ever give immigration advice, or suggest that one can identify himself or herself as a U.S. citizen, drive without a license, or use false identification.

Until legislation is passed that fixes the broken federal immigration system, there will continue to be undocumented students at our institutions, both public and private. It is important that, as professionals charged with supporting the growth and development of all our members, we must continue to educate ourselves on how to best work with and for undocumented students, which includes knowing what questions to ask and not ask.

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