



CAMPUS RESOURCES

**Investing in Social
Support Systems
will Enhance the Higher
Ed Experience for
Students Directly Affected
by Immigration**

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Background

For many years, immigrants and immigration advocacy groups, FWD.us included, have been focused on increased access to higher education for undocumented youth.

Much of our work has focused on the mechanisms that will increase access to higher education, such as in-state tuition and financial aid, but less attention has been paid to social support systems that will help undocumented students thrive as they pursue and earn their degrees.

We spent some time researching some of the social infrastructures at colleges and universities that go beyond fulfilling undocumented students' basic needs of financial support, food security, and academic advising.

We know that institutional support at colleges and universities must include resources that do more than just admit undocumented students to their campus. We have also learned that undocumented students and U.S. citizen students with undocumented parents [face very similar challenges](#) in higher education. In this guide, we will use the term "directly affected students" to refer to students who face particular challenges due to their immigration status or the immigration status of close family members. Students who are directly affected by the immigration system include undocumented students, both with and without DACA; Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) holders; and U.S. citizens with undocumented parents or immediate family members like a sibling. Frequently, directly affected students are also first-generation college students, often from low-income families. The social support systems we focus on in this guide specifically cater to these unique identities and experiences.

We began trying to determine what support systems could best benefit students who are directly affected by the immigration system by researching existing community-

focused programs at colleges and universities including institutional support for students of varying racial, ethnic, and social identities as well as scholarships and other [non-employment-based funding options](#) for undocumented students. Many of the programs spotlighted in the following sections stood out both as examples of existing community-focused support that could be replicated at other institutions, and as programs filling a unique niche for directly affected students. Interviewing current and recently graduated undergraduate and graduate students also played an essential role in understanding what type of resources students feel are lacking on their campuses and how holistic support for directly affected students can be improved. We wanted this guide to focus on aspects of holistic support, specifically, thinking beyond academic support to consider students' mental, physical, and social wellness that must be supported for students to thrive.

Based on the research outlined in the previous paragraph, we're proposing three types of social infrastructure that institutions should consider implementing to support their students who are directly affected by immigration more holistically: **peer support, mentorship, and family engagement**. Each of these support systems should be offered in a culturally responsive way — making sure programming is implemented with a keen consideration of students' varied backgrounds and experiences — which may include specific cultural understandings of topics such as mental health, interactions with the criminal justice system or [crimmigration system](#), family separation due to the criminal justice system or immigration enforcement, a history of cultural erasure, or living in an ongoing fight for legislation that will protect them and their families.

PEER SUPPORT

Peer support occurs when a group of individuals with similar lived experiences [comes together to give and receive help](#) based on the knowledge that comes from those lived experiences. Peer support groups allow individuals — in this case, students — to gain increased insight into the factors that have contributed to their current challenges and the strategies that seem to work best to help them move toward their goals.

MENTORSHIP

A mentor is defined as “an experienced and trusted adviser,” someone with whom an individual can develop a long-term relationship that is centered around building the mentee’s growth and development. Mentorship can be valuable to undocumented students and other directly affected students whether they are mentors or mentees. Students who are directly affected by the immigration system have unique experiences and knowledge, particularly when it comes to navigating higher education. Talking to others who have navigated similar situations can give them the tools they need to thrive.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Students affected by immigration frequently mention the desire for their families to be more engaged in their pursuit of higher education. Due to language barriers or a lack of institutional knowledge from parents who may not have had access to higher education, parents who have previously been involved in their child’s K-12 education may face obstacles in continuing to support their children’s education in the same way when they head to college. Creating opportunities for parents to understand higher education experiences and processes can help ease the burden of students feeling like they are alone in their education. In addition, offering resources to students’ undocumented family members can take some of the pressure off of students who are not only providing for their families financially but who are also mentally and emotionally taxed thinking about their families’ safety.

Each of the previously defined social support systems was identified as a key component of holistic support for students affected by immigration because each addresses mental and social wellness through community. The importance of community and familial support were recurring themes in our conversations with students and alumni. In addition, we know that it is especially critical to foster community for immigrants who are Black, Asian, and Indigenous, as the integrity of their communities were compromised due to the trauma caused by colonization and ongoing colonialism, and their communities and families continue to be broken due to family separation in our immigration system.

This guide is only a first step in identifying ways to support students holistically, and our goal is to continue to innovate and strengthen the types of support that colleges and universities can offer directly affected students. These students are the experts on what they need to succeed in higher ed and should be consulted before any social support systems are implemented.

Peer Support Groups



Peer-led initiatives [are proven to have a positive effect](#) on many factors that influence young people's health, such as their feelings of self-esteem and their processing of the emotions from past traumas. Peer support groups can provide outlets for exploring feelings and identities while also building a sense of community. In this resource, we outline two types of peer support initiatives: **open support groups and closed support groups**. Both types of groups allow for students with similar backgrounds to be able to celebrate their individual experiences and identities and learn from each other. Since a [foundation of shared circumstances](#) is so important to the success of peer support, it's imperative that peer support groups for undocumented and other directly affected students are culturally competent and affirm students' undocumented experiences, ethnic backgrounds, values, languages, and communities.

The open and closed groups *are not group therapy sessions*. Peer support groups are an opportunity to build a community focused on trust and shared experiences. They are an affirming space that allows students to share feelings and thoughts that they may not otherwise have the opportunity to process or share. When putting together peer support groups, staff should understand that while many students who are affected by immigration experience similar challenges, the reality of moving through the world with an undocumented status versus possessing

some type of immigration status or U.S. citizenship (even if the students have undocumented parents) is very different. Through peer support groups, care should be given to creating distinct spaces for individuals of varying migrant backgrounds and identities to gather and support one another. For example, while the experiences of undocumented students and students from mixed-status families may overlap when it comes to how they and their families are treated by law enforcement and the U.S. immigration system, undocumented students are more vulnerable to discrimination and violence within these systems than U.S. citizen students are. Therefore, undocumented students should have dedicated spaces where they can unwind and seek care amongst other students who experience the world in a very similar way.

To reach directly affected students that could benefit from peer support groups, universities should consider reaching out to student-led organizations that focus on marginalized communities. For instance, this might include immigrant-centered organizations, Black student unions, and LGBTQ+ groups. Students affected by immigration can and may be members of any of those communities, and these organizations may have resources that can further benefit the expansion and quality of these support groups.

FACILITATOR

The facilitator of both open and closed peer support groups should be representative of the group (ex: a person of color, Latinx, immigrant, and/or undocumented or formerly undocumented individual) and very knowledgeable of the realities faced by undocumented folks. Group facilitators can be a student, staff member, or expert from outside the school. While the facilitator does not have to be a licensed mental health educator or advocate, they would ideally have 3-5 years of experience in mental health support and/or be supervised by a licensed clinician.

Facilitators should be proficient in the following skills:

- Sitting comfortably with people who have been directly impacted or harmed by our immigration system
- Working from a cultural responsiveness lens
- Being able to name explicitly the foundations of the oppression that undocumented immigrants face, including racism, xenophobia, and colonialism
- Integrating a racial justice perspective and addressing the current context of racial awakening
- Moving away from “colorblindness” and promoting dialogue that addresses students’ racial identities
- Relating to students’ emotional and lived experiences as activists and community organizers
- Guiding meditation practices and other mindfulness techniques
- Teaching mental health concepts and tools
- Practicing trauma-informed care

FUNDING

If conducted in-house, there should be little expenses attached to these groups. However, any anticipated expenses should be supported by the university. In circumstances where student groups are taking the lead on creating these supportive spaces for students directly affected by the immigration system, the institution should actively support these endeavors through funding, approving budgets, sponsorship, and mentorship from a mental health provider. Providing financial assistance to student groups that are supporting directly affected students is vital to ensure that crucial resources can be accessed regardless of economic status.

OPEN PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

In open support groups, the key to building community is identifying a consistent time and place in which to host a meeting. These meetings can be in-person or virtual. While virtual meetings allow students to join from anywhere, some groups might prefer to build relationships in person, which also helps ensure a degree of confidentiality that cannot be guaranteed in online settings. Once a student is familiar with the group, they should know what to expect when showing up for future meetings. This consistency will help create comfort. Open groups should identify agreed-upon community guidelines to inform the conversation and create a respectful environment. Participants can expect to walk away from each meeting with new knowledge about a mental health concept or tool to add to their “toolbox,” such as meditation, breathing exercises, movement, or grounding.

- **Participants:** Unlimited
- **Attendance:** Not required
- **Time:** One hour (suggested)
- **Duration:** Unspecified
- **Format:**
 - Educational component focused on a mental health concept or tool
 - Open conversation
 - Facilitator may prompt the conversation with discussion topics
 - May include mindfulness exercises

CLOSED PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

Closed peer support groups build trust and community through a 4- to 6-week program focused on learning skills for managing stress, anxiety, trauma, and other challenges. Each week should focus on a specific mental health topic. Like the open support groups, closed support groups should have a set of community agreements for their sessions.

In closed groups, it's important to limit the number of participants to create an intimate environment where participants feel comfortable opening up about their feelings and being vulnerable. Participants should always speak from their own experience and should feel free to share whatever is coming up for them during the session. The goal of peer support is *not* to give each other advice, but to practice listening and hearing each other's stories. Facilitators should pay attention to red flags or warning signs from students who may need or could benefit from more formal mental health support, such as individual or group therapy or crisis support. Facilitators must have the training to recognize and escalate these [warning signs](#). By the end of the session, the group will likely have processed through overwhelming emotions that may bring up additional emotional, physical, or behavioral responses, so it is very important for the facilitator to end and close the session with a grounding exercise.

- **Participants:** 8-10
- **Attendance:** Required
- **Time:** One hour (suggested)
- **Duration:** 4-6 weeks
- **Format:**
 - Begin with a culturally affirmative grounding or mindfulness exercise
 - Educational component led by the facilitator
 - 15-30 minutes of open space for participants to reflect and share their thoughts and feelings
 - End with 10-15 minute culturally affirmative grounding or meditation to decompress

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS EXAMPLES

[UndocuMason At George Mason University](#)

UndocuMason, a student-run organization at George Mason University, hosts “UndocuTalks” centered around specific topics. UndocuTalks creates space for students to discuss how their immigration status affects their lives. These sessions are open to high school and college students who are “directly impacted by immigration policies.”

Check out their Instagram account for some examples of UndocuTalks topics:



<https://www.instagram.com/p/CGaiDTIHs2X/>



<https://www.instagram.com/p/CIBtHMPHeBM/>

[The Butterfly Network at Trinity Washington University](#)

The Butterfly Network is a student-led club at Trinity Washington University that “advocates on behalf of Dreamers and the undocumented community.” This club works to foster an atmosphere of communication and understanding throughout the Trinity community through informational, financial, and emotional support resources and events on campus. The Butterfly Network provides peer support through semesterly “sister circles,” events geared toward creating an open space for participants to share their thoughts and feelings surrounding news events on immigration, while also being empowered and supported by the club’s executive board leaders and faculty advisor.

Mentorship



Mentorship has a profound impact on students' [ability to thrive in college](#) and earn their degrees. The [2018 Strada-Gallup Alumni Survey](#) has linked meaningful mentoring relationships during college with positive long-term outcomes for alumni after college, including individuals' overall well-being. We know mentorship can be especially impactful for first-generation and low-income students who [trust relationships more than systems](#), and sometimes don't have access to the same information about higher education that their peers do.

We want to spotlight three types of mentorship that can offer unique support to students affected by the immigration system: **traditional mentorship, near-peer mentorship, and directly affected students as mentors.**

TRADITIONAL MENTORSHIP

Traditional mentorship in a college or university setting typically consists of students receiving guidance from an older professional who has navigated higher education and is familiar with higher education systems. According to the previously mentioned Strada-Gallup Survey, professors are the most frequent source of mentorship for undergraduate students, but minority and first-generation students are more likely than white and non-first-gen students to get mentorship from university staff and peers.

Structured traditional mentorship models at colleges and universities can also achieve a secondary purpose

of making faculty and staff allies more visible to students affected by immigration. In the advocacy workshops we run with students, they consistently focus their efforts on creating plans to make faculty and staff allies more visible and accessible on campus — it's clear that being able to easily identify allies on campus is a priority for students. Efforts like these can increase mentorship opportunities by university staff among traditionally underserved minority and first-generation students. Mentorship programs create an opportunity for educator allies to step up and serve directly affected students, as well as to be advocates for making change on campus.

NEAR-PEER MENTORSHIP

In college and university near-peer mentorships, older students or recent graduates provide advice and support to newly matriculated and younger students. We know that mentees frequently seek out [mentors with similar experiences and backgrounds](#) to their own. This remains true for minoritized students who feel more supported when their mentor is of the same race or ethnicity. Recognizing that Black, AAPI, and Hispanic scholars remain [underrepresented in higher education faculty positions](#), near-peer mentorships make it easier to match a student to a mentor with a similar background.

The near-peer mentorship model also has the possibility of becoming a self-sustaining mentorship program.

Mentorship

Individuals who benefitted from near-peer mentorship as first-year students are more likely to opt-in to being mentors as a senior or recent graduate themselves, creating an ongoing cycle of peer support and accessible mentorship to students who may be most in need of it.

DIRECTLY AFFECTED STUDENTS AS MENTORS

Undocumented students and other directly affected students also experience growth and benefits from serving as mentors in their communities. Acting as a mentor can build community, which is often cited as a critical factor in [student retention](#) and [graduation](#). Connecting with people of similar identities can be especially important for students attending college far from home. When universities

invest in their directly affected students as leaders, they create the conditions for these students to succeed.

One way that college students frequently fill mentorship roles is in partnership with local high schools, nonprofits, or community organizations. There is so much need for outreach and mentorship to high school students who are affected by immigration as they try to navigate higher education, especially those who are not eligible for DACA. Mentorship programs for local high school students in partnership with colleges and universities empower immigrant youth and also create a pipeline for all undocumented students to have the resources and support to be able to apply to your institution.

MENTORSHIP EXAMPLES

[Metropolitan State University of Denver Immigrant Services Program](#)

MSU Denver's Immigrant Services Program (ISP) supports more than 400 immigrant, refugee, DACA recipient, and undocumented students, many of whom participate in peer mentoring. At any given time, ISP employs 2-4 students who are directly affected by immigration as peer mentors who work with a cohort of 10-12 students, in addition to being available to other directly affected students who want to connect with peers. Peer mentors receive robust training that ensures their understanding of immigration-specific issues, university policies, and on-campus resources.

[First Year Student Enrichment Program at Dartmouth College](#)

Dartmouth College's First Year Student Enrichment Program (FYSEP) dedicated to supporting first-generation college students provides a dynamic example of near-peer mentoring. First-year students who enroll in FYSEP are matched with an upper-level student who provides support and guidance throughout their first year on campus.

Family Engagement and Support



It's widely acknowledged in higher education that students' success is tied to the well-being and economic stability of their families. When it comes to undocumented students or students from mixed-status families, we know that their families face higher barriers to safety, mental health, and financial stability. In addition, when students have to shoulder the constant worry that their parents or other family members might be deported, or that a change in legislation might harm them, it can hinder their success in school. Colleges and universities are in a position to help lower that barrier by extending particular resources to students' families and creating opportunities for families to share in students' educational experiences.

EXTENDING RESOURCES TO UNDOCUMENTED FAMILIES

Extending resources to undocumented families can create stability for students by lifting the mental burdens they face when constantly worrying about their families' immigration statuses and well-being. It can also ease the financial burden for students who must continue working while attending school to support their families and pay for necessities such as legal fees. Some opportunities for colleges and universities to extend resources to students **and** their families can include:

- **Offering legal support** to students *and their families* through on-campus legal clinics, an affiliated law school, or partnerships with local nonprofits and attorneys.

- **Designating funds to pay for immigration legal fees**, including DACA applications and renewals, of students and their families.
- **Extending college or university health insurance** to students' family members.

ENGAGING FAMILIES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

We know that students who are undocumented or have an undocumented family can also be first-generation college students, Black, AAPI, Latinx, and/or low-income. Systemic barriers such as poverty, racism, and lack of legal status can prevent students and their families from accessing the resources and information that they need and deserve when navigating higher education.

When colleges and universities make the college experience more transparent and easier to understand for students' families, those families will also be able to offer more meaningful support and understanding to students in higher education. Many parents who did not grow up in the United States or whose children are first-generation college students want to support their children, but feel ill-equipped to do so because they are not familiar with the systems or processes of higher education institutions.

Colleges and universities can help demystify higher education by:

- **Including families in first-year orientation programs** through virtual events hosted online and via conference calls. Accessible platforms make it easier for families without access to computers or internet service or who are unable to travel to campus to join.
- **Informing families about what on-campus resources are available** to support their students including first-generation student programs as well as undocumented and other immigrant student support systems.
- **Sharing information or hosting additional virtual events for families** that address other critical moments in the college experience such as midterms, finals, and applying to internships and jobs.
- **Integrating inclusive bilingual or multilingual resources and outreach** when communicating with students' families or hosting events.
- **Creating flexible opportunities for parents and families to visit campus.**
- **Ensuring that efforts to engage families are focused on multiethnic and multiracial experiences, including Black and Asian undocumented immigrants.** Undocumented students and their families have many different ethnicities, backgrounds, and countries of origin.
- **Acknowledging additional challenges that LGBTQ+ students affected by immigration may face,** including strained relationships with their families and the fear of life-threatening deportation.
- **Tracking immigration policy changes** and sharing updates with students and their families through university newsletters.

It's important to be mindful of consent when engaging students' families. We suggest a format in which students can opt-in to include their parents in university-run family engagement initiatives. We also suggest that institutions use inclusive language, for example, using 'families' instead of 'parents' since many students' support systems may not reflect the "traditional" nuclear family.

Children from immigrant families are increasingly the face of higher education in the United States. According to a study from the [Migration Policy Institute](#), 30% of all college students enrolled in 2018 were from immigrant families, up from 20% in 2000. This number will only continue to grow and encompass a significant percentage of first-generation students in the coming years. For these students to thrive, they will need more robust systems of social support. Engaging families in the higher education experience is one way to enhance support structures for undocumented students and students from mixed-status families.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT EXAMPLES

[The University of California](#)

The University of California Immigrant Legal Services Center provides free-of-charge legal assistance to undocumented students in the UC system and their immediate family members, as well as students who are U.S. citizens with undocumented family members.

[Northern Virginia Community College \(NOVA\)](#)

The Northern Virginia Community College connects undocumented students and their families to a plethora of resources in Northern Virginia. Their designated webpage for [“Resources for Undocumented Students and Families in Northern Virginia”](#) provides a list of immigration clinics and services that will support students’ families. NOVA has also designated DACA & Dreamer Advocates who work to mitigate any barriers that undocumented students and their families may face throughout the academic year.

Conclusion

The suggestions in this guide were informed by numerous conversations with students, alumni, and education and mental health professionals who are directly impacted by the immigration system, as well as faculty and staff advocating for undocumented students on campuses across the country. We believe that expanding social support systems is the next critical step for improving education equity for directly affected students. It's clear that many institutions are already moving in this direction, and we hope the examples included of these social support systems that are already in place at colleges and universities illustrate the vast possibilities in implementing them at your institution.

While peer support, mentorship, and family engagement have enormous potential to improve the success of students affected by immigration in higher education, investing in these social support systems should not be intended as a replacement for existing services on campus such as diversity centers, emergency funding, and food aid. These programs should supplement existing resources with an added focus on supporting directly affected students who are frequently unable to access or are excluded from information and services.

Lastly, directly affected students know what they need best and should be consulted about the programs and services that would improve their success in higher education. However, while student-led organizations can play a key role in connecting directly affected students to social support systems, higher education institutions should be extremely cautious not to put the responsibility of creating or implementing social support systems on students. Instead, campus-wide efforts and initiatives including input from directly impacted communities

should take place to ensure that well-built systems are developed that will best support students affected by immigration through their academic career and beyond.

We hope this guide is a helpful first step toward improving the holistic support for directly affected students on your campuses!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **FWD.us:**
 - [How Can Your College or University Protect & Support Undocumented Students?](#)
- **Immigrants Rising:**
 - [Wellness Support Groups](#)
- **Informed Immigrant:**
 - [How to Support Undocumented Students' Mental Health: Dealing with Trauma and Anxiety](#)
 - [Guide for Undocumented High School and College Students](#)
- **Harvard Graduate School of Education:**
 - [Supporting Undocumented Students and Mixed-Status Families](#)
- **Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction:**
 - [Funds of Knowledge](#)

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