

An Incomplete Dream:

Improving Harvard's Support System for Undocumented Undergraduates

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Executive Summary

Harvard University is among the few universities in the nation to offer undocumented students, children born abroad who are not United States citizens or legal permanent residents, admission under a full-need, need-blind policy. However, despite Harvard's stated mission of creating a level playing field of opportunity, undocumented students often face great difficulty in making themselves aware of the resources that are available at Harvard. Moreover, the manner in which these resources are currently developed and disseminated does not keep up-to-date with changes in national immigration policy. After numerous interviews with Harvard undocumented undergraduate students, administrators, proctors, tutors, and counselors, as well as research on policies employed by other universities, we have developed three proposals through which Harvard may create a more inclusive and supportive environment for its undocumented undergraduates:

- 1) Implement a trained, accessible point administrator to serve as a centralized contact for all undocumented undergraduates.
- 2) Update the manner in which proctors are currently trained on the needs and situations of undocumented students.
- 3) Improve the visibility of Harvard's undocumented student-specific resources and policies through online outlets.

By improving Harvard's current system in working with undocumented students, the College can more effectively work to diminish existing disparities in the student experience exacerbated by lack of U.S. legal residency or citizenship status.

1) Implement a point administrator

Recommendation

When compared with other institutions of higher education, Harvard has many resources in place for undocumented students. However, these resources are often underutilized due to the difficulties students face in making themselves aware of the existence of these opportunities. This disconnect is further aggravated by the fact that there is no systematized manner through which undocumented students are explicitly identified upon entering the College, making it nearly impossible for each student to be notified preemptively of the resources available to them.

In order to address these issues and the manner in which they negatively impact the students involved, Harvard should work to establish a centralized individual well-versed in undocumented student needs and available resources. Although the current committee on undocumented undergraduate issues attempts to fulfill a similar resource role, it is often difficult for students to reach these individuals. Indeed, most are unaware of the committee's existence. By consolidating to a single point person, resources would become vastly more accessible. This would minimize confusion and stress for students who seek assistance in obtaining employment, graduate school placement, information on legal services, and general help in areas such as mental health and financial aid.

The immense practicality of this proposal has already been established by other universities, who have utilized similar positions to specifically support undocumented students. For example, the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) has an "Undocumented Students Program" as part of its Bruin Resource Center that focuses on addressing the unique needs of

undocumented students. Through this program, UCLA students can get specific referrals to campus programs and student organizations in tutoring, community service, psychological help, and post graduate advice from Graduates Reaching a Dream Deferred (GRADD). These are all examples of similar services available at Harvard through the Office of Career Services, but these benefits are much less visible at Harvard than at UCLA.

Another example of this heightened visibility and targeted outreach is found at the University of California at Berkeley, who hired the school's first undocumented student program coordinator for the 2012-2013 academic year. Of course, California's more substantial immigrant, Asian-American, and Latino populations certainly influences this heightened visibility, but that does not mean Harvard cannot do more to welcome and support its undocumented students. As a role-model institution and leader in world-class education, Harvard has a responsibility to hold itself to the same standard. We recognize that many colleges and universities, notably those of California's public university system, face a very different demographic reality than Harvard, which has approximately ten undocumented students in each class. For this reason, such institutions often have elaborate student and administrative networks dedicated to undocumented issues. Our proposal, featuring one sole administrator, takes this into consideration. This advising figure can expose undocumented students to opportunities they would not otherwise encounter. Additionally, there is an immeasurable assurance that students would receive from having a university figure that more fully understands their own situation and can tailor advice to their needs.

Implementation

Current faculty members and administrators, especially those working on the committee for the needs of undocumented students, have dedicated their time to serving this population in an ad hoc manner. The collective expertise of these members, as well as a cooperative relationship with immigration specialists at the Harvard Law School's Immigration and Refugee Clinic, would provide the necessary base of expertise for the centralized resource administrator. Furthermore, given the demographic realities of Harvard's undocumented population, it may not be necessary to hire a new staff member in order to fulfill this role at this time.

2) Update proctor training

Recommendation and Implementation

While proctors are made aware of issues generally faced by incoming freshmen, most are not prepared to address more specific circumstances faced by undocumented students. Harvard can take simple steps to better equip these key mentors to incoming students. It is both useful and efficient to focus on proctors because, by doing so, students will immediately be provided an informed link to Harvard's resources as a freshman, setting them up for success in all four years and beyond.

Currently, the information with which proctors are provided is minimal and often outdated. Through the easy step of adding a fifteen minute or more training session dedicated to undocumented students' issues into the standard proctor orientation, a more effective system could be created to assist those in need of this expertise. Furthermore, a short, but up-to-date information sheet about resources for undocumented students offered by the College should be distributed to each proctor and made available online for easy access.

With the presence of a point resource administrator, this information would not need to be completely comprehensive, but would ensure that each undocumented student would be able to gain active practical support from their interactions with proctors.

Since these improvements utilize and build upon systems that are already in place, they will require little to no expenditure. At the same time, the benefits go far in ensuring an equal playing field for undocumented students at the very beginning of their Harvard journey.

3) Improve resource visibility

I. Updating admissions and financial aid websites

In order to make admissions and financial aid information more accessible to undocumented students, the University should add a section specifically for prospective and current undocumented students to both departments' websites. On these websites, there are already subcategories providing targeted assistance to international students, U.S. citizens and permanent residents, transfer students, and visiting students. By incorporating a section for undocumented students who are prospective, applying, and/or current students, undocumented students could acquire information discretely without having to disclose their status to a counselor or an admissions officer. Information provided on each website would simply include necessary forms and processes for undocumented students, as well as a basic question and answer component to address any remaining ambiguities. Relevant data could be obtained through members of the undocumented students' needs committee, as well as through pertinent student groups who provide support for undocumented students. This would require an investment of time but minimal financial costs to implement and maintain.

Through explicitly incorporating undocumented students into the admissions and financial aid websites, Harvard would provide a more equally navigable admissions and financial aid process for all applicants.

II. Providing an undocumented student resources webpage

In the interest of ensuring that Harvard provide the same quality of services to all students who need them, we suggest the implementation of a centralized online source of information for undocumented students. This should be in the form of a webpage similar to the one provided for international students. The website should organize all the information available for current undocumented students in order to increase the information's visibility. It should contain forms for financial aid; study abroad opportunities; relevant student support groups; available legal resources; graduate school opportunities; summer opportunities; and resources from Harvard University Health Services and the Bureau of Study Council. This information should also be provided through printed pamphlets available at the financial aid office, the admissions office, and the Office of Career Services detailing key resources available.

To make these proposals practically possible, a staff member would need to be responsible for compiling all the resources, enabling the website, and making the flyers available at different Harvard offices. This would entail a commitment of both time and resources for online updates and printing, but is not outside the scope of responsibility of current administrators.

III. Stating college admission policy regarding legal status

In addition to updating the websites above, we propose that an undocumented student policy statement be added to the "Applying to Harvard" page on the admissions office website. This

would clarify that students are eligible to apply to Harvard and receive financial aid regardless of their legal status. For example, the University of Chicago states on its website that “All students who apply, regardless of citizenship, are considered for admission to the University and for every type of private financial aid for which they may qualify.” While Harvard already has an admissions policy that makes it clear that the University does not discriminate on the basis of “race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age, national or ethnic origin, political belief, veteran status or handicap,” this does not meet the specific needs of undocumented students. Unlike these categories, being undocumented entails legal implications that leave students unsure of their ability to enroll, attend, or pay for college. While few would actually suggest that Harvard would discriminate against a student based on, for instance, their gender, undocumented status requires a different, explicit assertion of equality that addresses the legal complexities the label holds that the aforementioned categories do not.

Significance and Urgency

Now more than ever, undocumented undergraduates are caught in a legal tumult. While President Barack Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) provides a temporary alleviation to one aspect of an undocumented student’s situation by providing work authorization, there remain several issues that DACA is unable to address. Specific to the student experience, DACA does not remedy, to name a few, issues of financial aid, loan assistance, graduate school placement, mental health, and study abroad. Keeping student resources up-to-date, especially in the context of fluctuating national policy, is always urgent. Students are constantly entering, applying for internships and employment, and graduating. Time lost in implementing improvements equates directly to students who will not be able to take full advantage of legislative and university policies that could work in their benefit. Harvard has an obligation to take greater responsibility for its students, who deserve more from the institution than a fingers-crossed-for-reform approach. Through inaction, undocumented students are placed at a disadvantage at pivotal points in their lives: college application, college life, and job and graduate school placement. These issues threaten to be compounded as increased dialogue regarding DACA encourages more undocumented young people from across the nation to believe they can go to college, setting their eyes on institutions such as Harvard as they work to make the most of national policy initiatives. By preemptively addressing issues of how Harvard will be able to assist these students, Harvard will, in turn, be better prepared as needs increase. With immigration discussions at a national level opening dialogue on undocumented students’ issues, and with Harvard not currently holding itself to its ideal as a role model institution in meeting its students’ needs, there has never been a more consistent urgency to improve Harvard’s support structure for undocumented students.

Conclusion

By taking simple steps to centralize, update, and make visible Harvard’s already existing resources for undocumented students, the College can create an inclusive and supportive environment for all undergraduates, regardless of legal status. As a role-model institution, Harvard has a responsibility to do nothing less. By addressing undocumented-specific obstacles, Harvard is recognizing the passion, struggle, and contributions of these young people and their families, and investing in their potential to meaningfully serve their communities, both at Harvard and beyond.