



Physical Space and Expert Staffing: Undocumented Student Resource Centers at Community Colleges

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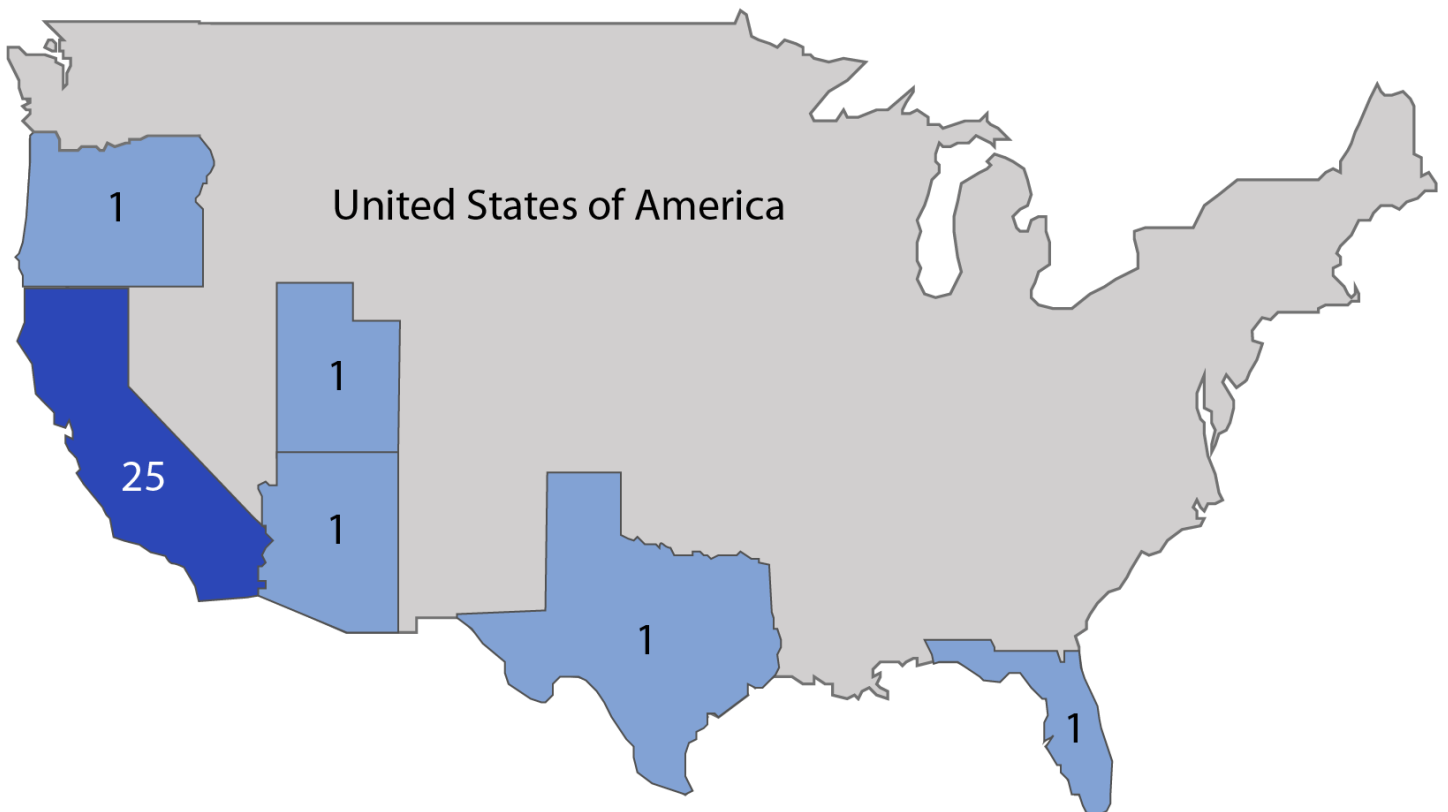
Community colleges are important spaces for advancing educational equity for undocumented communities, as the majority of undocumented students attend community colleges.¹ Restricted access to in-state tuition, state-based financial aid, and admission to public four-year institutions contribute to undocumented students' choice to enroll at community colleges.² Undocumented community college students and allies have been fierce advocates for the development of equitable programs for undocumented students.³ In this brief, we focus on Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs), physical spaces on college campuses that provide resources, information, and mentorship for undocumented students and members of mixed-status families.⁴ Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, when many colleges transitioned online, USRCs provided virtual spaces for support. For example, USRCs across the Los Angeles Community College District hosted online meetings for undocumented students to build a sense of community.

With support from The UndocuScholars Project out of the Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education at UCLA, we conducted an in-depth qualitative research study to better understand the role of USRCs in working with and for undocumented students. Our data is drawn from a larger study, where we conducted interviews with staff and students who facilitated USRCs at 49 higher education institutions. A research brief in 2018 described this data in aggregate form.⁵ In this article brief, we highlight the data from USRCs at community colleges, specifically, with the aim of informing equity-minded approaches toward supporting undocumented community college students.

Of the more than 1,500 community colleges across the country, we identified 30 colleges that had established a USRC as of 2018. These colleges can be found in California, Utah, Arizona, Oregon, Texas, and Florida. We spoke to students and staff coordinating the work of USRCs at 19 of these 30 colleges. Our team has worked with undocumented students in numerous capacities, and we advocate for the development of equity in higher education for undocumented students. As a team, we are DACAmended individuals, citizen allies, community organizers, and educators.

List of Colleges

1. Berkeley City College
2. Cabrillo College
3. Canada College
4. City College of San Francisco
5. College of San Mateo
6. Cosumnes River College
7. De Anza College
8. East Los Angeles College
9. Evergreen Valley College
10. Fresno City College
11. Glendale Community College
12. Grossmont College
13. Hartnell College
14. Los Angeles City College
15. Los Angeles Harbor College
16. Los Angeles Mission College
17. Los Angeles Trade Technical College
18. Los Angeles Valley College
19. Mountain View College
20. Mt. San Antonio College
21. Palm Beach State College
22. Pima Community College
23. Portland Community College
24. Salt Lake Community College
25. San Bernardino Valley College
26. San Diego City College
27. Santa Rosa Junior College
28. Sierra College
29. Skyline College
30. West Los Angeles College



Combination of Physical Space and Staffing

USRCs represented an important form of institutional support because of the combination of physical space and key staff and students who facilitated these spaces. A physical space provided 1) a visible symbol of support, 2) a “one-stop shop,” or hub, where students could access resources, and 3) opportunities for students to meet each other. Key to facilitating these spaces, staff and students played an important role in providing mentorship. Staff and students who facilitated the work of USRCs often identified as undocumented themselves or members of mixed-status families. Such identification enabled them to relate more closely with the students they served. As Miguel,⁶ a staff person at one USRC, described, “I think I’m able to give them insider knowledge, because I was there as a transfer student, I was there as an undocumented student, and I think I’m able to pass down the lessons that I learned.”

Support with Transfer and Certificate Programs

USRCs at community colleges were distinct from USRCs at four-year institutions in their focus on community college students’ particular needs and experiences. Ivan, for example, a staff person at one USRC, shared how he provided guidance for students interested in transferring to a four-year institution; such guidance included advice as to whether or not to disclose their immigration status in applications. Similarly, Daniela, a staff person at another USRC, shared, “[Say] they go through their education and want to be an electrician. We talk about electrical engineer[s] transferring to [a four-year university], but very rarely do we talk about the electrician that wants to be an apprentice.” USRCs at community colleges provided undocumented students with access to opportunities, including certificate and apprenticeship programs (a program where workers train on the job while taking courses), otherwise not available at four-year institutions.

Student Leadership and Engagement via Internships

Some USRCs provided internship positions that enabled undocumented students to develop leadership skills and pursue work opportunities, given some undocumented students’ ineligibility for work authorization. Tanya, a staff member at one USRC, described how her USRC created a program that offered internships for students who did not qualify for work authorization: “Basically we offer them a scholarship but there’s a 75-hour

community service requirement to the scholarship. In essence, it’s an internship, but we call it a scholarship.” USRC staff expressed the importance of undocumented students’ expertise in building spaces and programs for other undocumented students. In some cases, USRCs were fully student-led, where staff played more of an advisory role.

Even though USRCs in our sample performed important work for supporting undocumented community college students, they were also often not fully sponsored or supported by the institution. Several centers relied on temporary sources of funding and contingent or part-time positions, if any. Furthermore, when USRCs were fully student-run and operated, compensation for students’ labor was not provided. As changes in law, policy, and popular culture threaten to impose additional barriers to undocumented students, community colleges must invest in long-term efforts to sustain the work of USRCs.

Recommendations

1. To honor undocumented students’ contributions to the development and sustainability of USRCs, community colleges should create internship and scholarship opportunities that compensate students for their service and labor. Institutions must continue to think creatively about ways to compensate undocumented students, regardless of work authorization.
2. Community colleges across the country should dedicate resources towards developing physical space and staff positions for supporting undocumented students. Even if community colleges do not have the resources to allocate an entire room, it is still essential to create a physical space on campus where undocumented students can find community and feel safe. Some USRCs started as a desk and grew to a full room. However, a space is not enough without the important role of a full-time staff person to facilitate the work. Even beyond a full-time position, further staff and students are important for presence and visibility beyond the traditional workday and work hours since undocumented community college students often take night or weekend classes.
3. It is critical for community college administrative leadership to not only support the establishment of USRCs, but also make this support part of the institution. For example, instead of USRCs relying on part-time positions and temporary funding sources, community colleges should allocate resources for permanent funding streams and full-time staff positions.

Endnotes

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- 6 All names of staff and students are pseudonyms.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Jennifer Galvez, Director/Consulting Instructor with the Dolores Huerta Labor Institute at the Los Angeles Community College District, for her insight and suggestions for this research brief.