



# Recommendations for Effective Advising of Undocumented Students

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## Be Present

The stakes for college-going undocumented students are high and it's understandable that you want to do no harm. As a counselor and a professional, you don't want to give out any wrong information. This concern often stops counselors from offering the foundational support undocumented students need and deserve—but it doesn't have to be this way. A counselor's primary role is to be present in supporting an undocumented student. You don't have to know everything; you don't have to have all the answers. While it's ok not to have the answer to a question, you always want to be able to say, “I'm not sure, but I'm here; let's find out.” That's presence.

## Communicate Your Presence

- Start at day one. Be sure to let everyone know that you're present. Be clear about who you are and what you can do. Communicate your role clearly and often. Be honest with students that while you don't have all the answers, you are someone who can help find them. More importantly: you know the right questions to ask!
- Counselors play a vital role in the college-going process because they know which questions to ask. Vocalizing your support is important. Say to all students (in your own words), “*I support all students regardless of race, gender, or immigration status.*” This message will go a long way. Undocumented students will hear you and give you their attention. Students may watch and listen for additional signs of support before they are comfortable reaching out, but this is undoubtedly the first step in communicating your presence.
- Counselors can be especially effective in communicating student circumstances with college admissions and financial aid officers, questioning policies and procedures, and assisting students with college requirements, policies, and decisions. Counselors speak both “student” and “college,” making them excellent sources of support for undocumented students.

- Honesty is essential. Do not give false hope when you're unsure. It's important to balance optimism with realism. Say (in your own words): *"It will be challenging, there will be obstacles, but it's better that we're working as a team. No matter what, I'll be here to help determine the next steps."*
- Encourage students to talk to their family and friends about their goals and to seek out support from them in whatever way they can.

## Be A Witness

If students are communicating with a financial aid officer or an admissions representative at a college, offer to attend a meeting with them or offer to be copied on e-mails. Sometimes if student finds a response from a financial aid representative inadequate, you can help students identify other professionals in the financial aid office or admissions office who can assist the student more effectively. Be present and serve as a witness, but let students lead.

## Contextualize Information and Timelines

Let students know which information is relevant to them. For example, if you're announcing FAFSA information, and you know that undocumented students are ineligible for federal and state financial aid in Missouri, be sure to mention that completing the FAFSA is not the only application for financial aid available to them. Ask undocumented students to speak with you or another experienced financial aid professional to determine what forms of aid they may be eligible to receive. Reiterate this point each time you talk about the FAFSA, whether you think undocumented students are in the room or not.

Once you communicate your presence and role, students (when they're ready) will identify themselves as needing guidance or support. When this happens, start by asking them what they already know, what questions they have, and let them know what you know and ways you can be of support now and as the school year progresses. Let them know where they might find support after high school graduation, and always let students lead.

## Holding Space

Be student focused. Undocumented students face many obstacles at school. Some are indescribable. Resist asking students for personal background or history surrounding their immigration status. Students may choose to share stories or background information with you. Listen attentively to this sensitive information and protect it at all costs, sharing it with no one, as it is not yours to share. "Holding space" for students refers not only to the physical space and time in the moment, but it also includes all the space and time that follows the moment. Make room for students to feel safe and, of course, let them lead.

## Follow Up & Follow Through - Consistency is Key!

- Unfortunately, many undocumented students are accustomed to a degree of invisibility by the time they reach senior year of high school. It's likely that students may not expect counselors to be thinking of them when it comes to the college-going process. Make sure to verbalize that you support undocumented students as often as you can. Even if you think no one in the room is an undocumented student, you never know who's listening for a friend or loved one.
- If a student does reveal their immigration status to you and you begin to work together, be sure to follow up with them after your first meeting. Often, students will let themselves fall off your radar. Don't let them! Even if a student doesn't come to see you as scheduled, send them an e-mail or a note to let them know you are there. Don't make them feel bad about missing an appointment, but reiterate that you're there to support them and that you'll be available when they're ready. Be mindful to not overwhelm students with encouragement, resources, and information.
- Don't take it personally if a student chooses that they are not ready to take the next step toward higher education. Honor students wherever they are in their process, acknowledging that there may be costs (not just financial) associated with proceeding that are simply too high. Recognize that there are many ways forward. Communicate your appreciation of the student, their accomplishments, and let them know how to find you in the future.

## Remember The Role of Family

Encourage students to talk to their families about their plans to be more public about their immigration status in seeking support towards and in higher education. It's important for undocumented students to make their own decisions, but with consideration and conversation with others who may be directly affected.