UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS AND THE COLLEGE PIPELINE
An estimated 98,000 undocumented students graduate from high school every year. However, these students face significant barriers to postsecondary education.

BARRIERS TO AFFORDABILITY
- No access to federal financial aid
- Limited to no access to state financial aid

BARRIERS TO ACCESS
- State policies that prohibit the enrollment of undocumented students in public institutions
- Lack of expertise among K-12 and college practitioners on college opportunities (e.g. financial aid, college admission requirements, etc.) available for undocumented students

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS
- Psychological and social burdens related to immigration
- Lack of access to many public benefits, such as federal means-tested benefits (e.g. SNAP and TANF)
- Lack of access to or awareness of professional and occupational opportunities upon graduation.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION
Of the 454,000 undocumented students estimated to be enrolled in postsecondary education nationally, 46% are Latinx, 25% are Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), 15% are Black, 12% are White, and the remaining 2% include biracial and multiracial students.

WHY IT MATTERS
Given the substantial number of undocumented high school graduates as well as the racial and ethnic diversity of undocumented students in postsecondary education, policies that promote postsecondary affordability, access and completion for these students can contribute to the advancement of race-conscious postsecondary attainment goals.

CURRENT POLICIES SUPPORTING UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS
- Eligibility for in-state tuition,
- Access to state-funded financial aid and/or institutional aid, and
- State loan programs.

A "PROMISING" SOLUTION
Some states have used Promise programs to increase postsecondary opportunities for undocumented students. Typically comprised of a scholarship that covers tuition and mandatory fees after all other federal, and state aid is applied, Promise programs are often the only financial aid available to these students, and therefore provide their only affordable pathway to a postsecondary degree. By the academic year 2018-2019, undocumented students who meet state residency requirements were eligible for Promise programs in 7 of 21 statewide Promise programs. Further, Promise programs that offer non-monetary supports have the potential to increase their retention and graduation. You can find additional information on Promise programs here.
PROMISE PROGRAMS AND UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS
Research for Action has identified six programmatic components of statewide Promise programs that have the potential to affect college affordability, access, and success.6

Figure 1. Promise program components and their implications for affordability, access, and success for undocumented students

AFFORDABILITY
- Type of award (First-, Middle- Last-dollar)
- What it covers (max award, # of years/credit hours)

ACCESS
- Eligibility (residency, age, merit, need)
- Messaging (what, how, to whom, by whom)

SUCCESS
- Program Requirements (full-time status, application process, meetings, limited degree types)
- Student Supports (mentoring, first-year experience, success coaching)

PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS
RFA has identified the following opportunities and challenges for supporting undocumented postsecondary students:

AFFORDABILITY
FINDINGS: Because undocumented students are ineligible for federal aid, Promise scholarships play a key role in improving affordability for undocumented students by covering, at minimum, tuition. To award the scholarship, states assess the financial need of undocumented students via a financial aid form alternative to the FAFSA administered either at the state or institution level.

RECOMMENDATIONS. Given the importance of undocumented students to advance race-conscious postsecondary attainment goals, states should consider Promise programs as a policy option. States where tuition for undocumented students is already covered by other state aid should consider offering middle-dollar or last-dollar plus Promise scholarships which award additional dollars for unmet expenses like books or transportation. Colleges and universities can take additional steps to establish funding and experiential learning options for undocumented students.

ACCESS
FINDINGS: How Promise programs are described and promoted can determine whether undocumented students take advantage of the program. Whereas some programs are promoted via statewide promotional campaigns, other states rely on high school counselors to ensure that students and their families are aware of Promise programs. This approach can lead to inconsistent and inaccurate information for all students, but it is particularly problematic for undocumented students who tend to be unaware of college opportunities available to them.

RECOMMENDATIONS. States should consider how to effectively promote Promise programs to undocumented students. For example, the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission publishes numerous materials on their website in both English and Spanish and has developed a communications tool kit for Oregon Promise practitioners and advocates in their state.7

SUCCESS
FINDINGS: Promise programs that also include student supports typically do not address challenges specifically related to immigration. Undocumented students face a range of obstacles that can threaten persistence and completion including immigration stressors, lack of access to public benefits, and barriers to obtaining employment upon graduation. Moreover, states do not always consider the interplay of postsecondary education policy with other state policies that may promote or hinder undocumented students’ employment opportunities upon graduation, such as access to drivers’ licenses or professional/occupational licenses for undocumented individuals.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Statewide Promise programs can support undocumented students by including student supports offered by institutions or through partnerships with immigration organizations. For example, public colleges and universities in California offer undocumented students Dream Resource Centers, free legal services, and ally trainings. Immigrant organizations offer guidance on careers including access to licensing, employment through worker cooperatives, entrepreneurship, etc.8 States should also consider offering access to drivers’ licenses and occupational and professional licenses to remove opportunity barriers for undocumented students as they enter and compete in the workforce.
REFERENCES


5 Delaware, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island & Washington.


7 Oregon Promise Communications Toolkit https://oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise-toolkit.aspx

8 Immigrants Rising Educational Partnerships https://immigrantsrising.org/educational-partnerships/

Immigrants Rising Resources for Entrepreneurship https://undocuhustle.org/