

SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH AMID UNCERTAIN IMMIGRATION STATUS

A Higher Education Guide

GERMÁN A. CADENAS, BRYAN O. ROJAS-ARAÚZ, SAIPRIYA IYER, & OSWALDO MORENO

October 2025



ABOUT THE PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE

Founded in 2017, the **Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration** is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that mobilizes college and university leaders to address immigration issues impacting students, campuses, and communities. We believe that a central mission of higher education is to educate and equip individuals from all backgrounds to unleash their talent and potential. Our national membership has grown to more than 580 two-year and four-year public and private institutions serving more than 5 million students. Our members represent a broad and diverse coalition committed to ensuring that immigrant-origin, refugee, and international students can access, succeed in, and contribute to higher education and the workforce.

ABOUT THE HIGHER ED IMMIGRATION PORTAL

The **Higher Ed Immigration Portal** is an initiative of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. The Portal integrates data, policies, and resources about DACA and undocumented, other immigrant, international, and refugee students to support immigration reform and federal policymaking, fuel change at the state and campus level, and build a diverse movement of partners and stakeholders advocating for these students.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL LATINX PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

The **National Latinx Psychological Association** (NLPA) is a professional psychological association dedicated to advancing psychological education, training, science, practice, and organizational change to enhance the mental health and well-being of Latinx populations. Committed to cultural responsiveness, equity, and social justice, NLPA promotes the development and dissemination of Latinx Psychology both in the U.S. and globally. The organization fosters culturally responsive psychological services, supports the academic and professional growth of Latinx psychologists and students, and recognizes professionals who demonstrate sustained commitment to the field. NLPA also encourages collaboration with Latinx communities and leaders, promotes awareness of issues affecting Latinx mental health professionals, and advocates for public, institutional, and systemic policies that support the psychological health and well-being of Latinx populations at all levels.

ABOUT THE LAB FOR IMMIGRANT RIGHTS AND MENTAL HEALTH AT RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

At the [Lab for Immigrant Rights and Mental Health](#), we believe that immigrants are deserving of humane policies, programs, and services that affirm their dignity. We partner with immigrant rights advocates and organizations to conduct action research that highlights the cultural strengths of the immigrant community. We develop, pilot, and assess interventions and strategies to support the well-being of immigrants across a diversity of settings and contexts: education, higher education, career/work, mental health, and health. We support educators and mental health service providers in developing competencies to serve immigrant youth and families.

ABOUT LA ESPERANZA RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE AT VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

At [La Esperanza Research Collaborative](#), we are dedicated to advancing culturally responsive mental health science and practice through the development, dissemination, evaluation, and implementation of innovative solutions. We collaborate with community groups, institutions, and grassroots organizations to conduct action research that centers the cultural strengths of marginalized communities, such as immigrant communities. As we honor the ongoing contributions of these communities to mental health advocacy, we also celebrate the strength, resilience, and cultural wisdom that have driven our progress. At the same time, we recognize that much work remains. Ensuring equitable access to mental health care, increasing cultural understanding, and building robust support systems within these communities are ongoing priorities. Together, we will continue to make a future where everyone, regardless of background, has access to the mental health resources and care they deserve.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Purpose of this guide	page 5
Recommendations:	
a. For Directly Impacted People	page 6
b. For Vicariously Impacted People	page 7
c. For Mental Health Service Providers	page 8
d. For Higher Education Leaders and Policymakers	page 10
Authors	page 12
Acknowledgments	page 13

DISCLAIMER: *The guide does not constitute psychological advice and is intended as a framework of topics to consider in the context of mental health, immigration, and higher education.*



SUGGESTED CITATION:

Cadenas, G.A., Rojas-Araúz, B., Iyer, S., & Moreno, O. (2025). Supporting mental health amid uncertain immigration status: A higher education guide. Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration and National Latinx Psychological Association. https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/effective_practice/supporting-mental-health-amid-uncertain-immigration-status-a-higher-education-guide/

© Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration



www.presidentsalliance.org



www.higheredimmigrationportal.org



PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide emerged from a collaboration among the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, the National Latinx Psychological Association, the Lab for Immigrant Rights and Mental Health at Rutgers University, and La Esperanza Research Collaborative at Virginia Commonwealth University. It was created in response to a **policy climate regarding immigrant rights** that has become exceedingly uncertain and perilous in 2025. New immigration policies have impacted students, scholars, educators, and practitioners in higher education, as well as the communities they come from. A climate of uncertainty is creating heightened distress among people of all statuses in higher education. Examples include ICE raids, suspension and changes to international students' visas, detention of student activists and scholars due to their speech and ideology, attempts to end in-state tuition for undocumented students in some states, among others.

Through this guide, we aim to:

1. Provide support to students, scholars, educators, and practitioners in higher education institutions as they seek to protect their mental health in an uncertain climate of immigration policy.
2. Encourage higher education leaders and policymakers to strengthen policies and programs that support the mental health of integral members of these institutions.
3. Provide recommendations that are grounded in science and that apply to people across immigration statuses, from U.S. citizens to those without status.



(A) FOR DIRECTLY IMPACTED PEOPLE: STUDENTS, SCHOLARS, EDUCATORS AND PRACTITIONERS

- 1. Leverage social and family support networks:** One crucial strategy for **immigrant students in higher education** is to seek and utilize strong social and family **support**. Including **emotional support** (family, friends, and professionals such as **affinity groups or therapy**), **institutional and instrumental support** (Identify tangible resources that support areas such as employment, education, and child care), **informational support** (staying up to date with what's real and what is noise including additional support such as mutual aid, scholarships, and changes to immigration policy from trusted sources).

Newsletters to join to receive immigration and higher education-related updates:

- a. Presidents' Alliance **Member Update**
 - b. The Higher Ed Immigration Portal **Monthly Newsletter**
 - c. Foundation for California Community Colleges **Monarch Connection Newsletter**
 - d. Immigrants Rising **UndocuDigest Newsletter**
- 2. Reconnect to cultural, spiritual, and community practices “La Cultura Cura:”** Another key strategy for **resilience, healing, and identity strength** is to reconnect with **cultural, spiritual, and community** practices. These practices anchor us in something larger than ourselves, providing continuity, meaning, and collective care, including **cultural practices**. These cultural ways of healing are grounded in tradition and ancestral wisdom. Examples of **cultural practices** include celebrating cultural holidays, foods, storytelling, learning or preserving native language, art, music, and dance. **Spiritual practices** may include nourishing the inner self through prayer, meditation, ceremony, ritual, mindfulness, or spending intentional time in nature. Additionally, **community practices** may include attending community gatherings, joining advocacy or grassroots groups, participating in healing circles, volunteering, sharing **resources**, or building intergenerational connections with elders and youth.
 - 3. Remember and identify community strengths:** Building resilience also means recognizing and drawing from the **strengths that already exist in our communities**. These strengths are often hidden in plain sight and become powerful resources when we name, celebrate, and use them intentionally. Researchers have documented the psychological strengths among minoritized communities, such as **Black, Latinx, and Asian** individuals. It is important to reflect upon the cultural strengths that you identify within yourself and your community.
 - 4. Cultivate creative resourcefulness and future-oriented thinking:** Develop and utilize creative problem-solving skills to maneuver the current political climate. Maintain a strong future orientation, focusing on **educational goals** and the steps needed to achieve them, even in uncertain times. By doing this, individuals maintain a “Luchando Hacia Adelante” (“fighting forward”) mindset while **connecting** with fellow students, faculty, and staff for safety and support.



5. **Engage in activism (if suitable).** As much as one is comfortable, participating in student activism, community organizing, civic engagement, and policy advocacy can be a protective factor. In addition to advancing the plight for immigrant rights, research has also shown that activism is linked to **greater networks of community support**, **coping skills**, and **lower mental health distress**. It is important to consider one's safety, potential risks, physical and mental capacity, and **monitor burnout** when engaging in activist efforts.

(B) FOR VICARIOUSLY IMPACTED¹ PEOPLE: STUDENTS, SCHOLARS, EDUCATORS AND PRACTITIONERS

1. **Lean on community.** Utilize existing community support as needed. **Research among individuals who experience vicarious trauma** related to immigration and violence found that developing authentic support structures and integrating systemic support offer opportunities for vicarious growth.
2. **Use your voice.** Research has found that **engaging in critical conversations and uplifting immigrant voices** are some ways to continue supporting advocacy efforts. Engaging in intentional dialogue, collaboration, and action-oriented initiatives between vicariously impacted and directly impacted individuals promotes healing from policy-based harm and trauma.
3. **Continue to raise your awareness of current issues.** Utilize advocacy resources available to you to inform yourself of helpful practices and ways of engaging and supporting others. Trustworthy resources specific to colleges and universities have been developed and gathered in the **Higher Ed Immigration Portal**. Broader community tools and resources are available in the **Informed Immigrant hub**. Lastly, the **National Immigration Law Center** is a reliable source for tracking shifting policies and accessing resources regarding legal rights.
4. **Engage in mindfulness practices.** Offer time and space to check in with yourself. Research has noted that **mindfulness can help reduce experiences of burnout and also support advocacy efforts**.
5. **Participate in collective care.** This practice encourages a collaborative approach to self-care and acknowledges the power of community. Collective care strategies can be embedded into the classroom and learning spaces. An example of this is the use of **trauma-informed approaches** in higher education.

1 Vicarious impact (psychological distress from witnessing the distress of others)

(C) FOR MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE PROVIDERS:

- 1. Gain competency in mental health services for clients with liminal immigrant status.** Mental health service providers can invest in ongoing training to develop competency in **providing services for immigrant communities**. An essential component of this competency involves developing a thorough understanding of ongoing immigration policy changes, executive orders, and the importance of seeking legal counsel, particularly as these factors impact the mental health of immigrant communities. For instance, providers must become familiar with the nuances of **liminality**, which refers to the experience of “legal nonexistence” by individuals who have uncertain legal statuses and are not provided legal pathways to regularize their status. **Ongoing training opportunities** can include intentional collaboration with immigrant communities, highlighting current policies that impact immigrant communities, and incorporate culturally adapted **intervention strategies** that aim to both advocate for and dismantle systemic oppression.
- 2. Evaluate and incorporate immigration-related factors into the treatment plan.** Mental health service providers can include immigration-related factors into the intake form (e.g., see the **Cultural Formulation Interview** and the **Supplementary Model on Immigration**), and if pertinent, include them in the treatment plan. These **immigration-related stressors** may consist of (but are not limited to) fear of deportation, **immigration policy uncertainty**, **immigration-related racism**, and challenges with **mixed-status families**. These immigration-related factors are shaped by historical and recent events, such as the increased national ICE raids, which continue to **impact the mental well-being** of families with liminal immigration status.
- 3. Establish institutional (i.e., counseling center, mental health clinic) reform to affirm the concerns of clients with liminal immigrant status.** Given the ongoing shifts in executive orders and immigration policy, individuals with liminal immigration status may experience heightened concerns regarding their physical safety within mental health settings and clinical environments. Therefore, providers must establish institutional (i.e., clinic) reform that affirms and protects clients with liminal immigration status. This may include having clear policies, guidelines, signage to clarify **private versus**





public areas, and visible flyers that state their immigration rights and how they are being protected while receiving services. Berkeley's **Undocumented Student Program** (Sanchez & So, 2015) is an excellent example of an approach that focuses on safety and is attentive to the location of clinical services, including financial factors.

- 4. Incorporate liberatory practices that center on ancestral wisdom and teaching.** Many mental health frameworks and approaches are historically understood by Western frameworks that have invoked more harm than help to immigrant communities. These frameworks have **marginalized and often pathologized** many communities that immigrants may identify with (i.e., Black, undocumented, LGBTQ+; Adames et al., 2022). Therefore, mental health service providers can incorporate more liberatory frameworks and practices that emphasize their community assets, critical consciousness, ancestral wisdom, indigenous teachings, and recognize that a significant root of their experiences is due to **oppressive policies and structures that harm them**. Incorporating these frameworks also provides space for advocacy and more culturally adapted approaches to the theoretical modality used in these mental health treatments.
- 5. Engage in cultural humility, understanding that this is an ongoing process and not a final destination of competence.** Mental health service providers must also refrain from aiming to achieve full competency within these communities. As evidenced by the rapid and ongoing executive orders and immigration policies at local, state, and federal levels, mental health service providers must stay proactive and continuously engage in cultural humility in the areas of **knowledge, attitudes, awareness, and skills**. Mental health service providers must remain active in gaining knowledge of laws, the community, the culture, and their overall effect. Mental health service providers must also reflect on their awareness and attitudes, considering their potential privilege, **bias, and blind spots**. Finally, mental health service providers can continue to build their clinical skills for clients with liminal immigration status, but also build skills in advocating for systemic reform, especially in policies that are having an impact on immigrant communities.

(D) FOR HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS AND POLICYMAKERS:

- 1. Establish and reaffirm policies that welcome immigrant students.** As the national and local policy contexts continue to shift, it is key that higher education institutions establish or reaffirm their internal policies regarding immigration. This is particularly important in relation to institutional responsibilities when U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or other federal immigration authorities are present on campus, and how institutions of higher education can protect their campus communities — including safeguarding tuition and **data privacy policies**. It is key that these policies are widely communicated and understood by all members of the institution, from students to scholars and administrators. Research has shown that **institutional policies and practices can buffer against the negative effects of anti-immigrant policies** and play a key role in creating a **welcoming climate for mental health equity**.
- 2. Support immigrant student leaders and advocates.** Research has suggested that campus advocacy and activism are linked to **greater educational persistence** and **mental health** among immigrant students. However, the shifting policy climate and its precedent for targeting student leaders and DACA recipients may inhibit students' civic participation. Higher education leaders can address this issue by emphasizing the importance of relevant institutional protections for academic freedom and freedom of speech. It is also important that students have access to free or low-cost legal services to help them determine the risks of advocacy, of **disclosing their status**, and in engaging in ways that are safe for their individual situation.
- 3. Offer ongoing legal education on immigrant rights and legal services.** Civil rights and legal protections vary significantly based on an individual's immigration status. Navigating this complexity in a rapidly shifting legal landscape may be daunting, especially for individuals who experience barriers to accessing legal resources. Higher education institutions may help to ease anxieties regarding immigration processes by offering ongoing **legal education workshops** ("**know your rights**") that demystify relevant laws and equip individuals and families with information about their rights if targeted by enforcement. A further step is to provide direct legal services through **campus-based legal clinics using established models**.
- 4. Enhance the competencies and capacity of all staff, students, and scholars.** Research has shown that educational offerings, such as undocu-ally programs, help to **enhance competencies, boost agency, and reduce immigration anxiety** among higher education practitioners and students to better support immigrants on campus. These programs can be brief and take many forms, such as four-hour workshops or brief documentaries. It is important that **these programs are centered on real-life narratives** of those impacted by immigration, facts regarding the immigration context and relevant laws in higher education, and best practices for inclusivity. For undocu-ally trainings, see **First Gen Empower**.

- 5. Invest in student affairs’ centers, resources, and programs for immigrant and undocumented students.** Leading higher education institutions have responded to unfavorable immigration climates by creating **designated spaces and specialized programs** where immigrant students can be welcomed and affirmed. Competent staff in these programs offer a wide range of services and institutional advocacy. Some of these efforts have taken the form of undocumented student resource centers (**USRCs**), which have been found by research to be **transformational** to students, staff, and faculty alike. Higher education leaders may direct resources and investments toward **establishing and bolstering these spaces** and programs at times of peak need for dedicated and competent support.
- 6. Establish specialized mental health resources for noncitizen students.** Undocumented students often face unique psychological and emotional challenges, yet many hesitate to seek support from **campus mental health services due to concerns** about cultural competency and a lack of understanding of their lived experiences. To address this gap, institutions should develop targeted mental health resources tailored to the needs of noncitizen students. Strategies may include partnering with mental health service training programs (e.g., for psychologists, counselors, and social workers) to place graduate-level interns who are trained to support undocumented students in **specialized clinics**. Institutions can also organize **support groups or wellness events** that are responsive to student-identified needs. Lastly, consider hiring a full-time therapist with expertise in working with immigrant and undocumented populations to provide consistent, culturally informed care and build trust within this community.



AUTHORS

Germán A. Cadenas, PhD, Rutgers University

Dr. Germán A. Cadenas is an Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology in the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology (GSAPP) at Rutgers University. He also serves as inaugural Associate Director of the Center for Youth Social Emotional Wellness (CYSEW) and leads the Lab for Immigrant Rights and Mental Health. His academic work is community-based and focused on the psychology of immigration and on critical consciousness as a tool for social justice. This includes the development and validation of strategies to support the psychological well-being, education, career/work, and health of immigrants and other underserved communities. His advocacy and research have informed the implementation of policies and programs to support undocumented students in higher education at major universities. At the national and global levels, his research and testimony have reached the policymaking process at the legislative, executive, and judicial levels. He is the recipient of the American Psychological Association (APA) Award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest.

Bryan O. Rojas-Araúz, PhD, In Lak'ech Counseling, Education, & Consulting

Dr. Rojas-Araúz is a bilingual, bicultural Afrolatino immigrant of Costa Rican and Panamanian descent. Raised in the Bay Area, CA, he began his journey as a community organizer and DREAM activist. He earned his PhD in Counseling Psychology with a specialization in Spanish Language Psychological Services and Research from the University of Oregon, where he received NLPA's Outstanding Dissertation Award for his work on the psychological strengths of undocumented students (Rojas-Araúz, 2021). He is a licensed psychologist, author, speaker, and founder of In Lak'ech Counseling, Education, & Consulting (InLakechCEC.com), where he provides trauma and culturally responsive psychological services, immigration evaluations, training, consultation, and speaking engagements. He is an assistant professor in the International Disaster Psychology: Trauma and Global Mental Health program at the University of Denver. His current research focuses on Latine and Indigenous wellness, particularly by addressing social determinants of health and creating spaces of belonging, community, healing, and inclusion. His professional interests also include immigration psychology, Global Majorities' access to mental health and education, critical consciousness, and the development of trauma and culturally responsive practices. Dr. Rojas-Araúz co-authored *The Workbook for Social Action for Counselors, Psychologists, and Helping Professionals* (June, 2025). Beyond academia, he is also a Hip Hop educator, slam poet, documentary filmmaker, and scholar-activist.

Saipriya Iyer, PsyD, Post-Doctoral Fellow, Cambridge Health Alliance

Dr. Saipriya Iyer is a post-doctoral fellow at Cambridge Health Alliance/Harvard Medical School. She is passionate about actively participating in decolonizing research methodologies and collaborating directly with communities to advance community-based participatory research. Her clinical and research interests revolve around community healing, social justice, trauma-informed care, and initiatives that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Saipriya earned her undergraduate degree from Hunter College, her master's degree from Teacher's College, Columbia University, and her doctorate from the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology (GSAPP) at Rutgers University.

Oswaldo Moreno, PhD, Virginia Commonwealth University

Dr. Moreno is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and Director of La Esperanza Research Collaborative. His research interests are centered at the intersection of clinical health science, social determinants of health, and mental health disparities. Specifically, Dr. Moreno focuses on understanding how social determinants, including structural and systemic factors, contribute to physical and psychological health outcomes such as stress, internalizing disorders, and addictive behaviors. Dr. Moreno's work explores the role of healthcare behaviors and examines the unique challenges faced by marginalized populations in accessing culturally responsive mental health services. Dr. Moreno has received numerous awards and recognitions for his contributions to the field, including Virginia's Persona de Poder ("People of Will and Power"), the National/International Scholarship Recognition Award, the National Latinx Psychological Association Presidential Citation, and the Melba J.T. Vasquez Research Award for Outstanding Scientific Contributions and the Application of this Knowledge Toward the Improved Mental and Physical Well-Being of People of Color from the American Psychological Association.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to TheDream.US, Immigrants Rising, and Informed Immigrant for their contributions to this guide. We also thank Felecia Russell, Luz Bertadillo, and Ivana Lopez Espinosa at the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration for their essential contributions to the research, review, editing, and design of the report.