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**UNDOCUMENTED, STUDIOUS, BUT  
PESSIMISTIC:  
PERSPECTIVES OF UNDOCUMENTED LATINO  
STUDENTS IN CHICAGO**

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## **Executive Summary**

The ongoing debate over the Dream Act continues to complicate the legal status of undocumented youth in the United States. Because of their immigration status, they are unable to easily attend college, or even find work after that allows them to apply their education in their profession. And while some believe President Obama's "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals" program is a step in the right direction, the two-year program, which provides relief from deportation and the opportunity for a temporary work visa, is not a comprehensive change in immigration law and offers a temporary solution that some believe has complicated long-term comprehensive immigration reform. In the meantime, undocumented youth can only look forward to limited jobs paid "under the table." To illuminate this problem, this study explored the perspectives of undocumented Latino youth at a largely immigrant Chicago Public High School. Students were surveyed about their perspectives on academic engagement, work ethic and success, as well as their optimism about and plans for the future. The results demonstrate that undocumented students are significantly more engaged in their education, but also more pessimistic about their future. They also want to become US citizens, and plan on staying in the US as undocumented adults if they are unable to complete college. Failure to address this issue will inevitably result in a growing "underclass" who will not only remain in the United States, but will have children that will be US citizens and attend public schools, access public health care, and obtain other public welfare programs because of the economic limitations facing their undocumented parents. Just as importantly, the majority of those students who struggle, but finish college, plan to take their education, skills, and higher taxable income out of the country, further resulting in negative economic and social drain for the United States.

## **Introduction**

Throughout the history of the United States, conflict over immigration has plagued American society and politics. The focus on who was acceptable to immigrate has constantly shifted as domestic and international politics also changed. Today, the debate over immigration remains one of the more difficult and divisive issues, especially as the number of undocumented residents approaches 12 million (Preston, 2011). US immigration law struggles to balance the complicated opinions and needs of businesses, citizens, undocumented residents, and prospective immigrants. Even more complicated is the status of the 2.5 million undocumented youth in the United States (UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, 2007), children whose parents brought them to the United States in hopes of a better future, children who did not voluntarily immigrate or break any immigration laws.

Every year, 65,000 undocumented students matriculate from high schools across the country and plan a life complicated by their immigration status (UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, 2007). Many of those students want to continue their education, largely because college graduates make hundreds of thousands of dollars more in lifetime earnings compared to high school graduates (Pilon, 2010). For these students, awareness of the importance of their education goes hand in hand with their knowledge of the importance of their immigration status.

Unfortunately, serious legal and economic barriers limit their ability to fulfill their dreams. While they are able to attend and graduate from high school, undocumented students face several barriers to their post-high school success. Undocumented students are unable to receive most financial aid, including FAFSA related aid. They are not eligible for most scholarships because of their immigration status. That makes affording college very challenging

for undocumented students; they often have to pay for their education without taking loans, which essentially means paying “cash.” These barriers help explain why only 5 percent will go to college (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011).

The Dream Act is intended to address this issue. The Dream Act would provide a path to citizenship for undocumented children who were brought to the United States by their parents. Those students, after completing high school, would have an opportunity to attend college or the military, and then obtain citizenship after graduation or completion of service (Miranda, 2010). Supporters argue that the Dream Act is the a more fair way to handle the complicated status of undocumented youth, creating an incentive for them to be educated or serve in the military, and later contribute to American society by working and paying taxes. Opponents generally argue that it would incentivize illegal immigration and reward the illegal actions of parents.

Regardless, without the Dream Act, undocumented students are left to navigate a complicated social, economic, and legal landscape. The effects of their current legal status and corresponding challenges leave open many questions addressed by this study, which sought to understand how undocumented legal status affects students’ academic engagement in school now, as well as their hopes, fears, and plans in the future. Just as importantly, this study examined what undocumented youth will do if they are able to get through college, but unable to find work afterwards.

## **Review of Literature**

Every year, undocumented students across the country wake up and go to school. Their parents brought them to the United States in hopes of a better education. In many ways, the opportunities are better. Those students largely share their parents' dreams of opportunity. They work hard in school, plan on attending college, and hope to stay and work in the United States after college. They dream of being engineers, doctors, and teachers. Overall, those children know and appreciate their parents' sacrifices. (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008)

Theoretical models and a long history of research have detailed the social and economic engagement of immigrants. However, the experiences and diversity of Latino immigrants have complicated these models. And the lack of research surrounding undocumented Latino students until recently has limited the understanding of a more complicated immigrant experience. Overall, first generation Latinos highly value education, largely because they see it as a mechanism through which they can avoid the struggles facing immigrant communities. Undocumented students highly appreciate the importance of education, but because of the barriers they face because of their legal status, often grow pessimistic and suffer from limitations to their desired educational attainment. (Abrego, 2006)

The context of increasingly hostile discriminatory policies, undocumented Latino immigrants begin to shy from an identity of engagement to a more complex identity that may include rejection of the traditional assimilation perspective (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011). For undocumented students, the transition to a post-high school life is challenging and difficult. In many ways, undocumented students struggle to enter, pay for, and complete college. They cannot vote. They also cannot get identification such as a driver's license. With the help of states that offer undocumented students in-state tuition, some undocumented students are now

successfully completing college (Gonzales, 2011), though again, only 5 percent are doing so (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). Unfortunately, even with the college degree, finding legal work in the United States remains a barrier. (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011)

As those immigrants face ever increasing barriers to employment and participation in the American social and economic fabric, they begin to lose hope and instead frame their experience within a shifting identity based on rejection and pessimism. Research of former-youth, now-adult undocumented residents highlights the consequences of their immigration status on their life chances and pessimism of their future. (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011) While these barriers cause many to reject assimilation, limitations further create a greater sense of pessimism about the future (Massey & Sanchez, 2009). Undocumented young adult residents out of high school demonstrate “low expectations for the future...” Even those who go on and complete college are left to deal with the fact that their future is limited, and that they will be unable to pursue their dreams. (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011)

Outside of the negative consequences for the undocumented themselves, there are significant consequences for the exclusion of undocumented youth on society. If these youth remain in the United States, they will become an excluded underclass, unable to fully participate in the social, economic, and political fabric of society (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011). Moreover, because they will be relegated to lower-paying “under the table” work, they will not contribute as much in taxes. They will have children who will be US citizens, and who, because their parents are limited socioeconomically, will rely more heavily on social welfare programs. As their pessimism grows, so may the other negative effects on society.

## **Methodology**

To understand the perceptions of undocumented students, this study administered a survey to the entire population of one small high school in Chicago's Little Village community, a largely immigrant Latino community on Chicago's Southwest Side. Survey questions were designed to quantifiably measure students' backgrounds, work ethic and engagement in school, as well as perceptions of and plans for their future. Response options for non-background questions were predominantly discrete ordinal-level data with an inherent order (i.e. "very optimistic" to "very pessimistic").

Working with teachers, researchers arranged days and times to administer the surveys. Students individually took surveys during classes or homeroom. All surveys were anonymous to protect the identity of students as well as to ensure students honestly answer. All four grade levels of students were surveyed while ultimately sophomore, junior, and senior surveys were used. Because the surveys were given at the beginning of the school year, freshman surveys were incomplete because they did not have certain academic performance outcome data such as grade point averages. Freshman students also had received little feedback about their academic performance, which may affect their perceptions about their academic ability in college as well as other related questions.

## **Data**

Overall, this exploratory analysis is of a survey that analyzed the responses of 273 Latino students, comparing responses between the 226 documented and 47 undocumented students. For this survey pool, 16 percent of students indicated that they were undocumented. The results of their responses to survey questions were analyzed using both t-tests and Chi-Square significance tests. There has been some debate over the appropriate significance test for discrete ordinal-level data with an inherent order (i.e. “very optimistic” to “very pessimistic”). Data here will be analyzed primarily using Chi-Square Test. Some questions were analyzed after the combination of categories with low-response rates. T-tests will also be employed when appropriate. (Romano, Kromrey, Coraggio, & Skowronek, 2006)

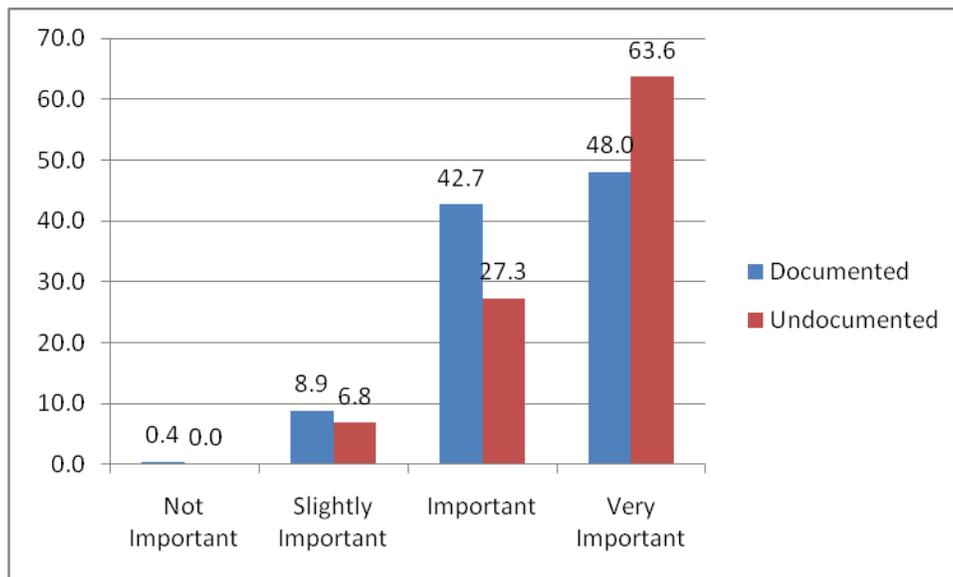
## **Background Factors**

Students were asked a variety of background questions to gage the similarities and differences between documented and undocumented students. For both groups, 98 percent of students indicated that they received free or reduced lunches, the primary indicator of “low income” status. Students were all Latino, all lived in the same neighborhood, had similarly sized families, and other background factors. However, documented and undocumented students differed on some background factors. Documented students were significantly younger, on average, at 15.6 years old compared to undocumented students who were 16.0 years old ( $p < 0.05$ ). Documented and undocumented students significantly differed in the rate of having had any family member who has attended college (63 percent versus 34 percent;  $p < 0.01$ ) and any family members who graduated from college (37 percent versus 14 percent;  $p < 0.01$ ).

## Educational Engagement and Achievement

Students were compared on a variety of factors measuring academic success, and work ethic and engagement. First, documented and undocumented students had identical self-reported grade point averages. Approximately 90 percent of both documented and undocumented students hoped to attend college, in some capacity. However, documented students spent less time doing school work at home, 69 minutes, compared to undocumented students at 82 minutes. Undocumented students more significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) valued the importance of their schooling and grades (See Graph 1)

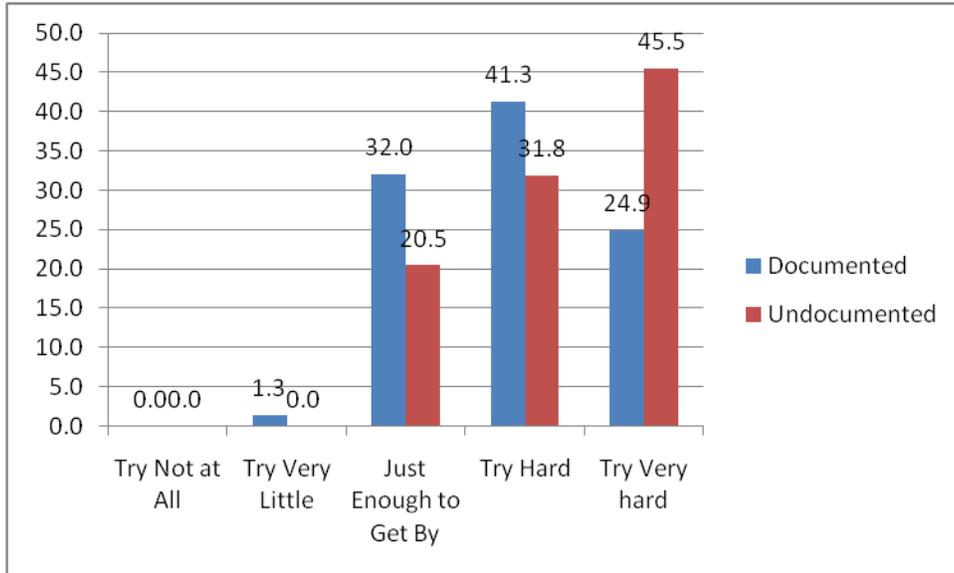
Graph 1: How Important Grades are to Students:  
Documented versus Undocumented



\* significant at  $p < 0.05$

Undocumented students also reported trying significantly harder ( $p < 0.05$ ) in school compared to documented students (see Graph 2)

Graph 2: How Hard Students Try in School:  
Documented versus Undocumented

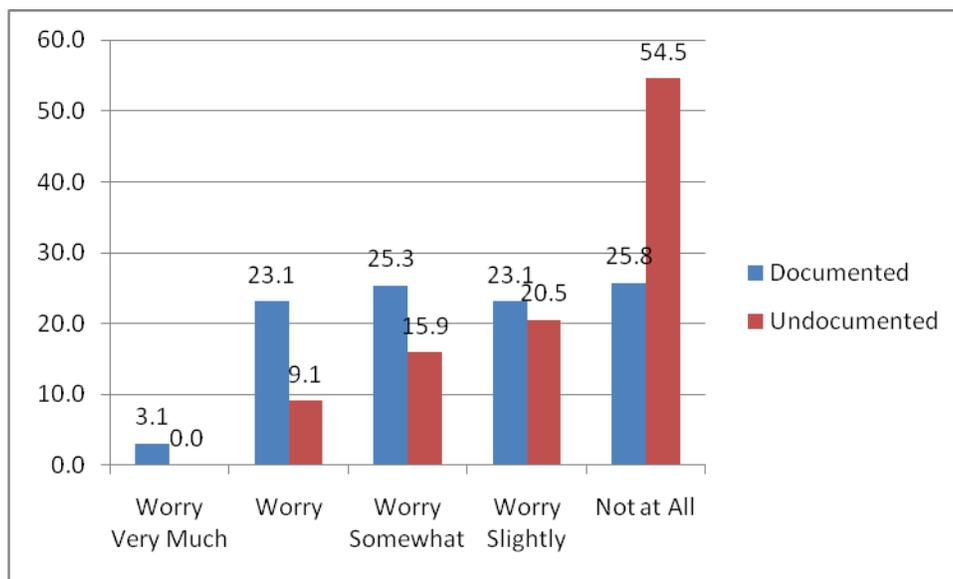


\* significant at  $p < 0.05$

## Optimism about the Future

Documented and undocumented students both answered questions about their optimism for the future. Undocumented students are much more confident in their academic prospects in college. Undocumented students were significantly less likely ( $p < 0.001$ ) to worry about being able to succeed academically in college compared to documented students (see Graph 3)

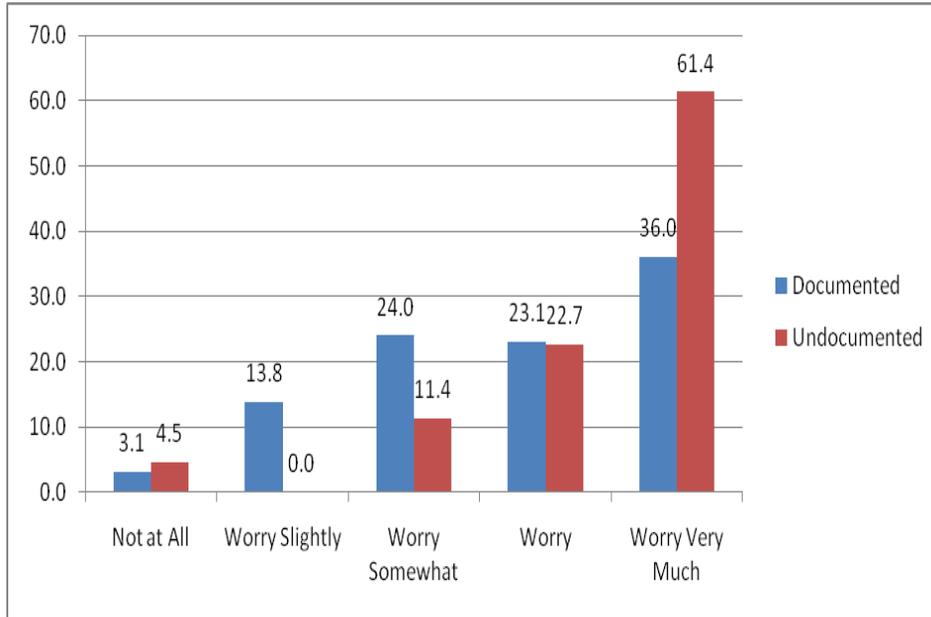
Graph 3: How much students worry about being to succeed academically in college.



\*\*\* significant at  $p < 0.001$

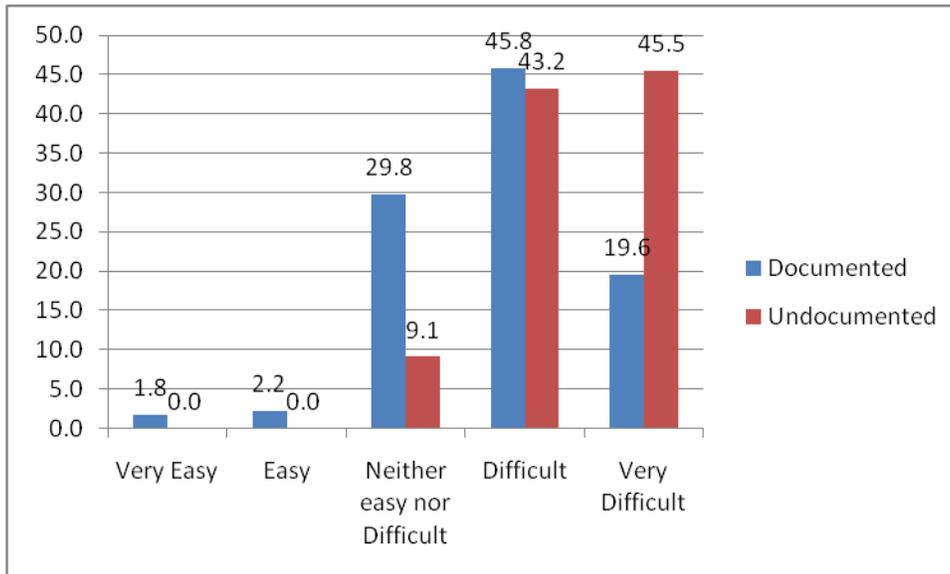
Documented and undocumented students were also asked about paying for a college education. First, as seen in Graph 4, undocumented students worry about affording college significantly more than documented students ( $p < 0.01$ ). Second, as seen in Graph 5, they also believe that affording college will be significantly more difficult compared to documented students ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Graph 4: How much students worry about affording college?  
Documented versus Undocumented



\*\* significant at  $p < 0.01$

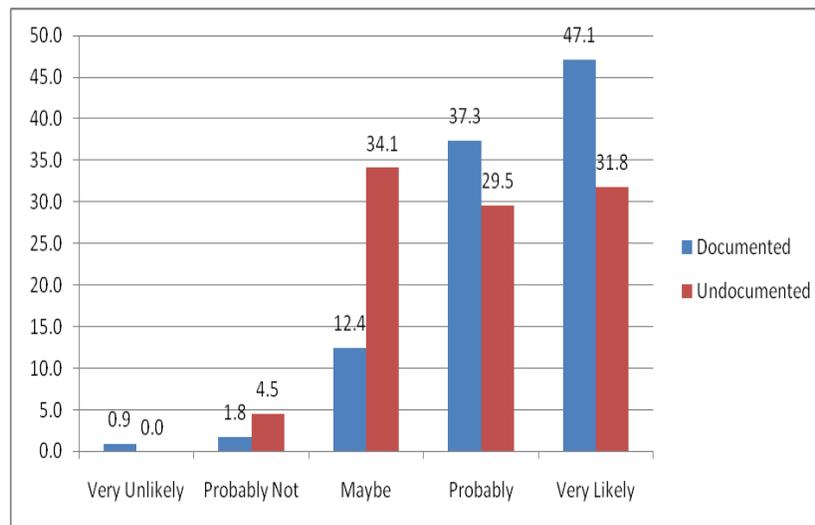
Graph 5: Difficulty Paying for College  
Documented versus Undocumented



\*\*\* significant at  $p < 0.001$

Documented and undocumented students were asked about their optimism over attending and graduating from college. Undocumented students were significantly less likely ( $p < 0.01$ ) to be optimistic about whether they would attend and graduate from college (see Graph 6).

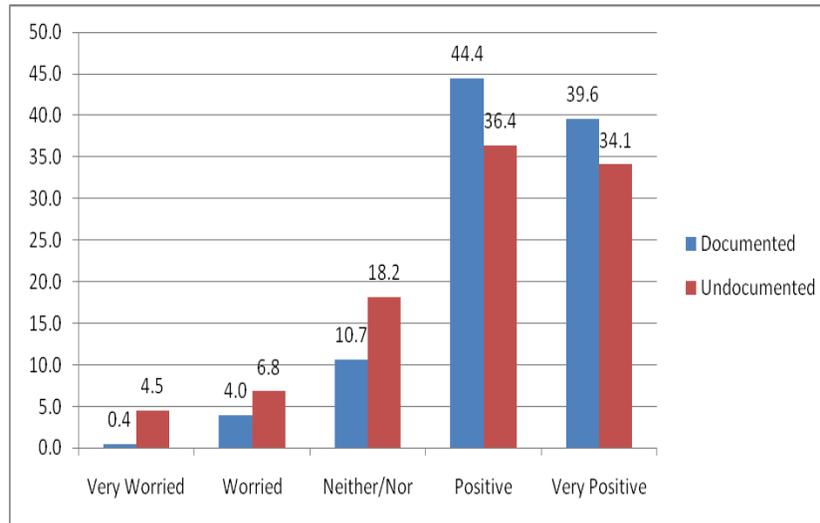
Graph 6: Optimism Over Likelihood of Graduating from College: Documented Versus Undocumented



\*\* significant at  $p < 0.01$

Finally, students were asked about how optimistic they were about finding a good job after their schooling. Documented students were significantly ( $p < 0.10$ ) more likely to be optimistic about finding a good job after school, though significant using the more liberal significance level (see Graph 7). Overall, 86 percent of undocumented students indicated they fear discrimination because of their undocumented status.

Graph 7: Optimism for Finding a Good Job in the Future:  
Documented versus Undocumented



~ significant at  $p < 0.10$

Table 1  
Responses by Undocumented Students

	Percent that Agreed
I want US citizenship	100%
I worry about the future	80%
I still plan to try to go to college	77%
Without a college education, I will stay in the US and work any job I can find	71%
If I finish college, but cannot get a legal job using my education, I will leave the US	63%

## **Analysis and Discussion**

Documented and undocumented Latino students differ in their educational engagement and work ethic, as well as their optimism of the future. As traditional theories about immigrants suggest, undocumented students are more academically engaged compared to other students. Specifically, undocumented students are significantly more academically engaged, try harder in school, and place a greater value on their education compared to documented students.

Traditional theories of immigrants suggest that they take seriously the opportunities presented in American society and engage in assimilation. This study confirms that for Latino high school students in Chicago, who not only try harder in school, spend more time on studies, and also place greater value their grades. They are not only more engaged, but also more confident about their potential for academic success in college compared to their documented classmates, either because they are confident in the academic ability or their work ethic.

However, the negative effects of undocumented status on optimism for the future are significant. As predicted by previous research (Abrego, 2006), undocumented students greatly worry about paying for a college education. Undocumented students are unable to get in-state tuition rates in the majority of states. Regardless, they are also unable to access virtually all student loan program opportunities, and are the children of undocumented workers who already struggle to find well-paying stable jobs. In other words, students' families cannot financially contribute to their education, nor can the families or students get loans to pay. Undocumented students, clearly aware of this barrier, worry that paying for college will be very difficult. Some lose their motivation as a consequence. (Abrego, 2006)

As predicted, knowing how difficult it is to pay for college negatively affects undocumented students' confidence in obtaining a college education. Those students are

significantly less likely to be optimistic about completing their college studies. Specifically, those students are 32 percent less likely to feel it is “very likely” they will complete their studies, and nearly 30 percent less likely to feel that it is either “likely” or “very likely” they will finish. Nearly 40 percent of undocumented students feel that it is less than “likely” they will finish college. This compares to only 15 percent of documented students. These results confirm that the pessimism and disappointment experienced by post-high school undocumented youth is already being anticipated by high school youth. That pessimism begins before the major barriers to college and full-time employment begin.

Finally, the inability to as-easily attend college and having an “undocumented status” makes undocumented students more pessimistic about finding a good job after their schooling. Not only are they more pessimistic about jobs, overall, their undocumented status makes them worry about the future. Approximately 80 percent of respondents indicated they worry about the future because of their immigration status, and nearly 40 percent are very worried.

The consequences of their undocumented status will have negative consequences for these students after high school. As previous research described of post-high school undocumented youth, the consequences for undocumented students include a series of barriers that limit their political, economic, and social integration and opportunities in the United States. Students struggle to find adequate jobs to support their families. Students struggle through college. Generally, students are left to living a life as second-class citizens. (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011).

Considering the significantly higher academic engagement and greater pessimism of the future, it is important to also consider what undocumented students plan to do in the future if the Dream Act or similar legislation is not passed. All undocumented students indicated that they

wanted US citizenship. And despite the financial barriers, 77 percent of students indicated that they would still try to go to college. Just as importantly, 71 percent said that they would definitely stay in the US even if they could not get a college education and work whatever job they could find.

The social and economic consequences as projected by this survey are considerable. If undocumented students cannot get the college education they desperately want, they will remain in the United States, have families, and work whatever jobs they can find, jobs that will generally inadequately pay. In other words, without access to a college education, these students are not leaving, but will instead have children who will be born US citizens. Because their parents are undocumented and unable to obtain higher education or stable adequate jobs, those children may be more likely to depend on state-run programs. They will attend public schools though their parents will not likely be able to afford a home to pay property taxes on. They will use public medical insurance programs like Medicaid because their parents will not have jobs that include health insurance as a benefit. They will otherwise access welfare programs they might be eligible for because their undocumented parents will likely struggle to support them.

Finally, this study found that there will be serious consequences for the United States if no solution to this problem is found. Approximately 63 percent of undocumented students said that if they were able to successfully complete college, but not find a relevant job in the US, they would leave the country. In other words, the majority of undocumented students indicated that they would still try to attend college. For those who are successful, when those students cannot later find relevant work using their skills and education, they will take their education, their skills, and their higher taxable income to other countries which will then benefit.

## Conclusion

The increasingly divisive social and political climate continues to detract from constructive debate over immigration reforms that could address the precarious circumstances of undocumented students. If the US continues to fail to seriously consider the Dream Act or similar comprehensive legislation, it will lose out one way or another. Students who cannot get a college education may remain in the US and struggle, possibly taking more from the system than it allows them to pay in. That increasingly large, struggling group of second-class citizens will have children who will may depend on the “welfare system.” Or alternatively, those students will struggle, but finish college, remain unable to get a legitimate and relevant job here, and leave the country and take the skills to another country. However, with the ability to attend college, undocumented students will increase the country’s tax revenue through higher taxable incomes, and will decrease the costs of healthcare, crime, welfare and other public assistance programs. We are not guessing that these students will fulfill their end of the bargain; as seen here, undocumented students are thirsty for the opportunity to socially and economically integrate into the fabric of American society.

This study leaves open further areas for exploration of undocumented youth. First, a more complex analysis beyond the basic exploratory analysis here should be done, including controlling for the effect of the significantly different rates of family college attendance between documented and undocumented students. A larger sample size of undocumented students would allow researchers to statistically examine additional issues and do more complex statistical analysis. However, surveying larger numbers of undocumented students is difficult. Additional geographic locations and nationality groups would allow researchers to project their findings as nationally representative, and to add to the complex and continuous examination of immigrant

perspectives on assimilation. In addition, follow up surveys or interviews of the parents of undocumented students would add an interesting but largely ignored dimension to this growing area of study.

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