

Undocumented Students in Higher Education

How Many Students are in U.S. Colleges and Universities, and Who Are They?

Executive Summary

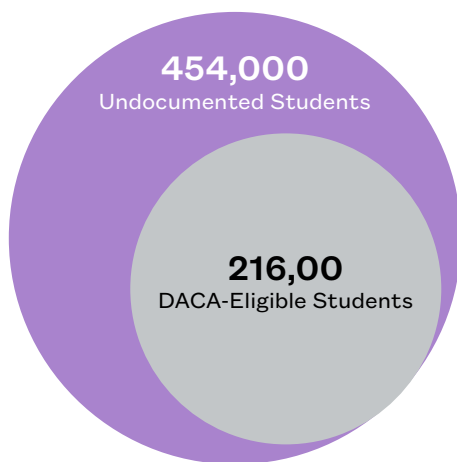
As the U.S. Supreme Court weighs whether to maintain Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the question around what the undocumented population in America looks like looms large. Research indicates that undocumented immigrants, including DACA recipients, are integral parts of their communities, paying taxes, starting businesses, and serving in key industries facing labor shortages.¹ The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic also demonstrates that undocumented immigrants are on the front lines in key industries, delivering essential services as workers in healthcare, agriculture, and food services.²

This report reveals that hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are students enrolled in higher education, working to obtain degrees and going on to use those skills as significant contributors to our economy. Before now, there has never been a full analysis of how many undocumented students are pursuing higher education in the U.S. The findings in this report show impressive participation rates. The findings also establish a new and expansive definition of undocumented students by fully accounting for both immigrant youth and adult learners who are striving to pursue higher education.

New estimates by New American Economy (NAE) drawn from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) indicate that undocumented students now account for **more than 450,000 or approximately 2 percent of all students in**

FIGURE 1

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students in Postsecondary Education⁶



Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

higher education in the U.S. Among undocumented students, students with DACA or who are eligible for DACA (hereafter referred to as “DACA-eligible”) constitute a subset of approximately 216,000 students or 1 percent of all students in higher education (Figure 1).³ The findings also reveal that most undocumented students pursuing postsecondary education in the U.S. do not have DACA, proportions that have only increased since the Trump administration announced the rescission of DACA on September 5, 2017,⁴ and a majority are not DACA-eligible.⁵

These findings underscore the urgency to ensure all undocumented students have access to work permits and protection from deportation, as well as a path to U.S. citizenship if they meet certain requirements. Finally, these findings also highlight the importance of extending in-state tuition to all undocumented students with state residency; providing equal opportunity to higher education for all; and helping all students, regardless of immigration status, reach their full potential.

When Did Undocumented Students Enrolled in Higher Education Come to the U.S.?

Most undocumented students enrolled in colleges and universities came to the U.S. as children or adolescents. They grew up and attended primary and/or high school in America. Among DACA-eligible students in colleges and universities, close to nine out of ten (89 percent) arrived as children (ages 0-12), while the rest (11 percent) arrived as adolescents (ages 10-16). Among all undocumented students, nearly half (47 percent) arrived before age 12, while 39 percent came between the ages of 13 and 21 (Figure 2).

Undocumented adult learners, who came to the U.S. as older adolescents or as adults, are also a portion of the undocumented student population striving to pursue higher education and contribute to their communities. The findings show that these individuals are part of the broader definition of undocumented students, which extends beyond Dreamers. These trends underscore the educational investments that both the students and their communities already have made and continue to make.

FIGURE 2

Undocumented & DACA-Eligible Students in Higher Education by Age of Arrival⁷

Age of Arrival	Undocumented College Students	DACA-Eligible College Students
Child (0-12)	47%	89%
Adolescent (13-21)	39%	11%
Adult (22+)	14%	0%

Note: To be DACA-eligible, an individual must have come to the U.S. before the age of 16.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

Undocumented Students in Higher Education by State

As with the overall undocumented population, undocumented students in higher education are concentrated in a small number of states, with a majority of students coming from five states (California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Illinois) and three-quarters of undocumented students coming from 11 states (California, Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois, New Jersey, Maryland, Georgia, Washington, Virginia, and North Carolina) (see Figure 3). Still, a significant number of undocumented students—more than 68,000—live in other U.S. states. Likewise, while the majority of DACA-eligible students are found in just 5 states—California, Texas, Florida, New York and Illinois—there are more than 48,000 DACA-eligible students in higher education in the rest of the country.

FIGURE 3

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students in Higher Education, 2018

	Number of Undocumented Students in Postsecondary Education	Share of Undocumented Students in Postsecondary Education	Number of DACA-Eligible Students in Postsecondary Education	Share of DACA-Eligible Students in Postsecondary Education
United States	454,000	2%	216,000	1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

FIGURE 3 (CONTINUED)

State	Number of Undocumented Students in Postsecondary Education	Share of Undocumented Students in Postsecondary Education	Number of DACA-Eligible Students in Postsecondary Education	Share of DACA-Eligible Students in Postsecondary Education
California	92,000	3%	52,000	2%
Texas	66,000	4%	35,000	2%
Florida	42,000	3%	16,000	1%
New York	33,000	2%	10,000	1%
Illinois	21,000	2%	12,000	1%
New Jersey	20,000	3%	9,000	2%
Maryland	16,000	3%	*	1%
Georgia	15,000	2%	8,000	1%
Washington	13,000	3%	7,000	2%
Virginia	11,000	2%	*	1%
North Carolina	11,000	2%	*	1%
Arizona	9,000	2%	*	1%
Michigan	9,000	1%	*	0.5%
Pennsylvania	9,000	1%	*	0.4%
Massachusetts	8,000	1%	*	0.4%
Nevada	*	3%	*	2%
Utah	*	2%	*	1%
Colorado	*	2%	*	1%
Minnesota	*	1%	*	**
Connecticut	*	1%	*	1%
Oregon	*	1%	*	**
Louisiana	*	1%	*	**
Tennessee	*	1%	*	**
Indiana	*	1%	*	**
Ohio	*	0.5%	*	**
Other	33,000	**	24,000	**

* Sample size is too small to report totals for the state

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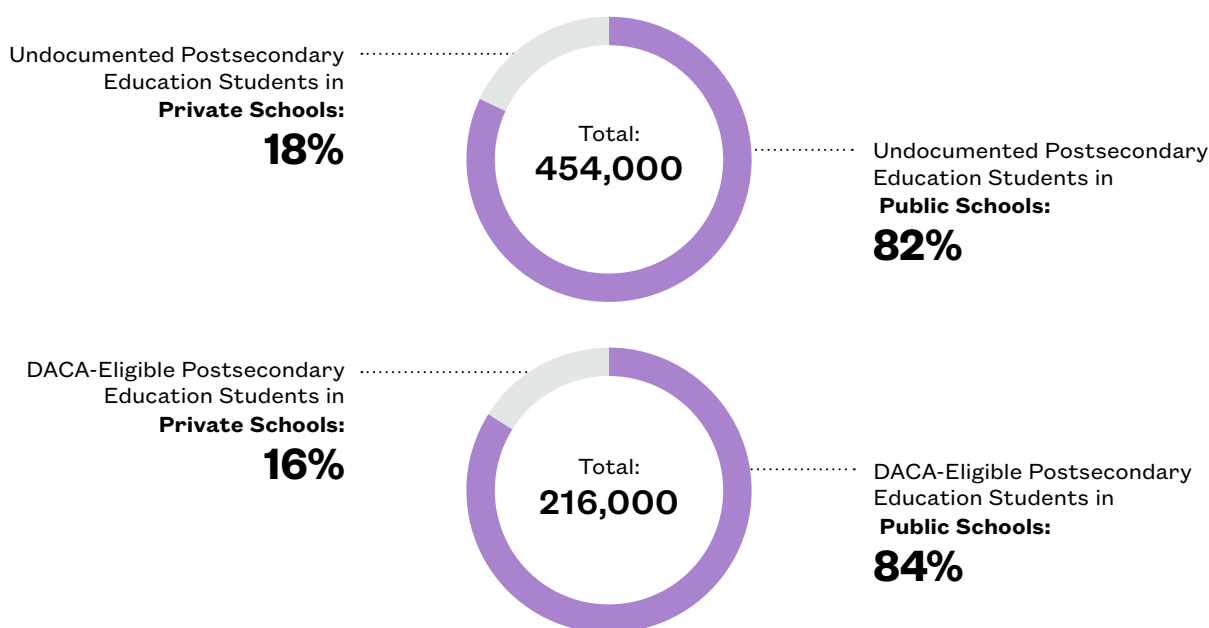
Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

Where are Undocumented Students Enrolled?

The overwhelming majority—82 percent—of undocumented students are enrolled in two- and four-year public colleges and universities, with many of these students attending community colleges.⁸ Meanwhile, close to 18 percent of all undocumented students are pursuing their education at private colleges and universities. Among the DACA-eligible student population, 84 percent are at public institutions, while close to 16 percent are private institutions (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Share of Undocumented Students in Public and Private Institutions of Higher Education



Note: Private schools include both non-profit and for-profit institutions.

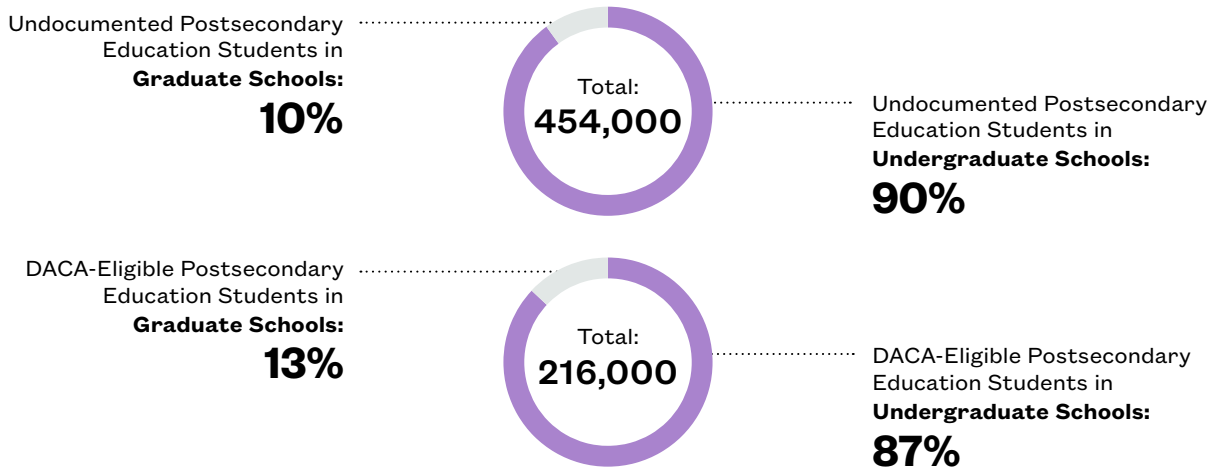
Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

While most undocumented students are undergraduates, the data reveal that a sizable portion are pursuing advanced degrees. Among all undocumented students, 10 percent are pursuing graduate and professional degrees, while 13 percent of DACA-eligible students are pursuing graduate and professional degrees (Figure 5).

Many undocumented graduate students hold degrees in STEM fields, the fastest growing sectors in the country. In fact, 39 percent of undocumented students pursuing advanced degrees have an undergraduate STEM degree, with 43 percent of DACA-eligible students pursuing advanced degrees having an undergraduate STEM degree. Among all undocumented graduate students with a STEM undergraduate degree, 41 percent have a degree in healthcare-related field, an especially important finding as the COVID-19 crisis highlights the nation’s severe shortages across the healthcare industry, from physicians to home health aides. Among DACA-eligible students, that proportion increases to 46 percent.⁹

FIGURE 5

Share of Undocumented Students in Undergraduate and Graduate Programs



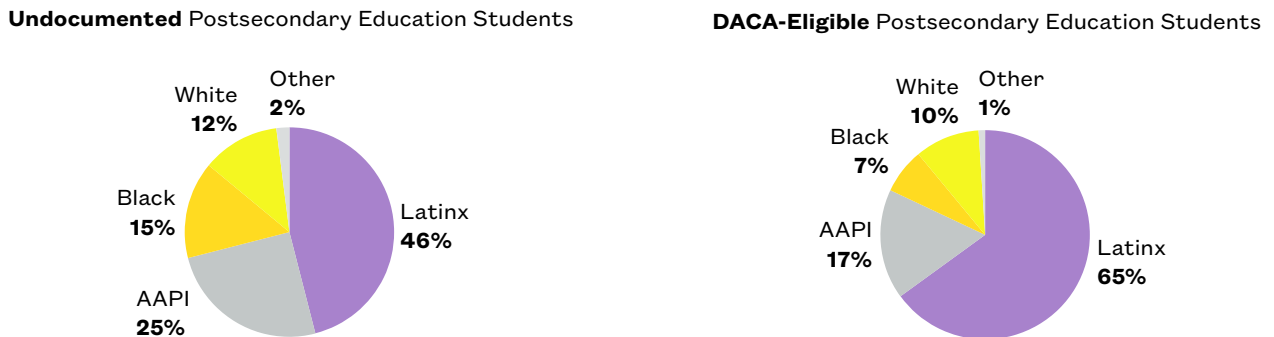
Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

Diversity of Undocumented Students in Higher Education

Undocumented students are a heterogenous population in higher education, reflecting the broad range of first-generation immigrants in the U.S. Hispanic/Latinx students account for approximately 46 percent of all undocumented students; Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students account for approximately 25 percent; Black students account for close to 15 percent; White students account for about 12 percent; and others, including biracial and multiracial students, account for about 2 percent. Among the DACA-eligible student population, 65 percent are Hispanic/Latinx, AAPI students make up approximately 17 percent, Black students make up about 7 percent; and White students make up nearly 10 percent (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students in Higher Education by Race



Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

Conclusion

Increasing the number of college graduates fuels community and state economic growth and prosperity. For that reason, more than 40 states have established goals for postsecondary credential attainment, such as having 60 percent of state residents earn a college degree or other postsecondary credential by 2025 or 2030.¹⁰ To reach these goals and address acute skills shortages, states and higher education institutions will need to increase the recruitment, support, and retention of immigrant students, including undocumented students. Indeed, immigration over the past 40 years and the rise of immigrant students pursuing higher education have greatly contributed to college enrollments in the past decades while strengthening campus diversity.

The findings in this report show that far more undocumented students enroll in higher education than was previously thought.¹¹ In their pursuit of higher education, undocumented students actively ready themselves to fill critical skills shortages, including in healthcare, STEM fields, teaching, and business, and become better positioned to support their families, communities, and regional and national economies. U.S. colleges and universities serve as key generators of social and economic mobility for all undocumented students, especially DACA recipients, who have increasingly broad opportunities to utilize in-state tuition in states across the country.¹²

While undocumented students face numerous barriers to higher education (including ineligibility for federal financial aid), the extension of in-state tuition and state financial aid eligibility to undocumented students who meet state residency requirements and the advent of DACA have positively impacted college attendance. In 2001, Texas became the first state to extend access to in-state tuition and some financial aid to undocumented students based on state residency. Since then, a growing number of states have successfully expanded in-state tuition and financial aid to undocumented students.¹³ In 19 states and the District of Columbia, all undocumented students who meet state residency requirements have access to in-state tuition, regardless of DACA status. In 13 additional states, undocumented students, or in some instances only DACA recipients, who meet specific residency requirements have access to in-state tuition at the state, institutional, or system levels.¹⁴ Concurrently, other states have not passed inclusive policies or explicitly bar undocumented students from in-state tuition or even enrollment in certain public institutions, including Georgia.

For undocumented students, the differences among the states in terms of access to in-state tuition and in-state financial aid are crucial, impacting their ability to access and succeed in higher education. Almost half of the top 25 states listed in this report do not provide all undocumented students who meet state residency requirements access to in-state tuition at all public institutions, including Georgia, North Carolina, Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Nevada, Indiana, Tennessee, Ohio, and Louisiana.¹⁵ Fourteen of the top 25 states do not provide access to state financial aid or scholarships to all undocumented students who meet state residency requirements: Maryland, Nevada, Florida, Georgia, Arizona, Virginia, North Carolina, Michigan, Massachusetts, Louisiana, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ohio.¹⁶

There is substantial evidence that policies that expand access to higher education to undocumented or DACA-eligible students result in increasing college enrollment for disadvantaged students while also bolstering local and state workforces. Studies have found that Hispanic/Latinx non-citizens living in states with in-state tuition policies are anywhere from 31 percent¹⁷

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to 54 percent¹⁸ more likely to be enrolled in higher education than their peers in other states. Research also shows that these policies reduce high school dropout rates among certain immigrant students by as much as 14 percent.¹⁹ The additional students who could potentially enroll and complete college as a result of expanded access would earn millions of dollars in additional income—translating into meaningful economic benefits for all Americans.

The findings in this report therefore are important for state educational goals and for higher education efforts to expand access and equity in higher education. In the current political context, these new estimates also point to the need to focus on the experiences, contributions, and potential of all undocumented students and not only on DACA recipients. These new estimates highlight the broader undocumented student population who contribute immensely to campuses across the country, and whose pursuit of higher education is vital to the future of this country.

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METHODOLOGY

Using the microdata of the 1-year sample from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS), we first apply the methodological approach outlined by Harvard University economist George Borjas²⁰ to study the subset of the immigrant population that is likely to be undocumented students in postsecondary education. We then use a set of criteria to identify potential international students, based on factors such as school attendance, grade level, age, length of stay in the United States, and hours worked, and further exclude them from the group to arrive at our estimates about undocumented students.

Since DACA-eligible students is a subset of the total undocumented student population, we apply the guidelines for DACA from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to ACS microdata to restrict our data further. Further description of New America Economy’s methodology of identifying undocumented and DACA-eligible students can be found in our methodology report.

ENDNOTES

- 1 “Undocumented Immigrants,” New America Economy (NAE): <https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/issues/undocumented-immigrants>.
- 2 “Undocumented Immigrants and the Covid-19 Crisis,” New America Economy (NAE), (April 4, 2020): <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/undocumented-immigrants-covid-19-crisis/>.
- 3 Total enrollment in fall 2018 was projected at about 19,828,000 students. For more information, please see: “Table 303.10: Total Fall Enrollment in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions,” Digest of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_303.10.asp.
- 4 Current Court injunctions in effect since January 2018 and through the publication of this report have only allowed for renewals of DACA by current or previous DACA recipients. They do not allow for new DACA applications.
- 5 To be eligible for DACA prior to September 5, 2017, young undocumented individuals must have arrived in the U.S. before the age of 16; lived continuously in the U.S. since June 15, 2007; be under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012; have no felony, significant misdemeanor, or multiple misdemeanor convictions; and be in high school or a high school graduate or veteran, among other requirements. For more information on eligibility requirements for DACA, please see: <https://www.uscis.gov/archive/consideration-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca>.

ENDNOTES (CONTINUED)

- 6 In 2017, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimated that approximately 18 percent (or 124,000) of then active DACA recipients were enrolled in postsecondary education, while 20 percent were enrolled in secondary education (138,000). For more information, please see: Jie Zong, Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Jeanne Batalova, Juia Gelatt, and Randy Capps, “A Profile of Current DACA Recipients by Education, Industry, and Occupation,” Migration Policy Institute (MPI), (November 2017): <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/profile-current-daca-recipients-education-industry-and-occupation>.
- 7 The age-of-arrival categories in Chart 2 represent an approximation of generational cohorts. Chart 2 extends the “Adolescent/Young Adult” category up to age 21 to account for GED and alternative high school programs, which accept older adolescents and young adults. These students may go on to community colleges. For more information, please see: Rubén G. Rumabut, “Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States,” *International Migration Review*, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 1160-1205, (Fall 2004): <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1887924>.
- 8 For instance, an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 undocumented students in California are enrolled in the state’s community colleges. For more information, please see: “California Community Colleges Dreamers Project: Strengthening Institutional Practices to Support Undocumented Students,” Immigrants Rising, et al., (2019): https://immigrantsrising.org/wp-content/uploads/Immigrants-Rising_CCC-Dreamers-Project_Full-Report.pdf.
- 9 STEM fields include those categorized as STEM fields by Department of Homeland Security’s (2016) STEM Designated Degree Program List and nursing fields as defined by U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2018.
- 10 For more information, please see: “Tracking America’s Progress Toward 2025,” *A Stronger Nation: Learning Beyond High School Builds American Talent*, Lumina Foundation, (February 10, 2020): <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2020/#nation>.
- 11 In 2019, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) updated the widely used estimate from 2003 that 65,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools annually, showing that the actual number was now approximately 98,000 undocumented students annually. For more information, see: Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, “How Many Unauthorized Immigrants Graduate from U.S. High Schools Annually?” Migration Policy Institute (MPI) (April 2019): <https://www.presidentsimmigrationalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/UnauthorizedImmigrant-HS-Graduates-FactSheet-Final.pdf>. Another widely cited estimate from 2003 was that only 5 to 10 percent of undocumented students who graduate from U.S. high schools enrolled in college each year. See: Jeffrey S. Passel, “Further Demographic Information Relating to the DREAM Act,” *The Urban Institute*, (October 21, 2003).
- 12 Roberto Gonzales, et al., “The Long-Term Impact of DACA: Forging Futures Despite DACA’s Uncertainties,” National UnDACAmented Research Project (NURP) (2019): https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/files/hii/files/final_daca_report.pdf.
- 13 Details on state policies regarding in-state tuition access for undocumented status are available at the uLEAD network website (<https://uleadnet.org/>). Other resources listing specific state policies, board of regents decisions, and other actions include Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, “Higher Ed Guide to Tuition, Financial Aid & Other Funding for Undocumented Students” at <https://www.presidentsimmigrationalliance.org/2019/11/22/higher-ed-guide-to-tuition-financial-aid-other-funding-for-undocumented-students/>, National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), “Tuition Benefits for Immigrant Students” at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/immigration/tuition-benefits-for-immigrants.aspx>, and National Immigration Law Center (NILC), “Basic Facts About In-State Tuition for Undocumented Students” at <https://www.nilc.org/issues/education/basic-facts-instate/>.
- 14 The Governor of Virginia approved a state bill on April 7, 2020 that will grant in-state tuition to all undocumented students who graduate from a Virginia high school or meet the state’s residency requirements and pass a high school equivalency examination. The bill goes into effect on July 1, 2020: <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?201+sum+HB1547>. For more information on access to in-state tuition by state, please see: “Higher Ed Guide to Tuition, Financial Aid & Other Funding for Undocumented Students,” Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (December 2019): <https://www.presidentsimmigrationalliance.org/2019/11/22/higher-ed-guide-to-tuition-financial-aid-other-funding-for-undocumented-students/>.
- 15 Arizona allows for undocumented students to pay 150% of in-state tuition; Massachusetts and Ohio extend in-state tuition to undocumented students with DACA status; and Indiana, Michigan, Nevada, and Pennsylvania offer in-state tuition to undocumented students and/or students with DACA status at specific two and four-year public institutions. For more information, please see: “Higher Ed Guide to Tuition, Financial Aid & Other Funding for Undocumented Students,” Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration : <https://www.presidentsimmigrationalliance.org/2019/11/22/higher-ed-guide-to-tuition-financial-aid-other-funding-for-undocumented-students/>.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Neeraj Kaushal, “In-State Tuition for the Undocumented: Education Effects on Mexican Young Adults,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (September 29, 2008).
- 18 Stella M. Flores, “State Dream Acts: The Effect of In-State Resident Tuition Policies and Undocumented Latino Students,” *The Review of Higher Education*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2010).

ENDNOTES (CONTINUED)

- 19 Stephanie Potochnick, “How States Can Reduce the Dropout Rate for Undocumented Immigrant Youth: The Effects of In-State Resident Tuition Policies,” *Social Science Research*, Volume 45, (May 2014): <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0049089X13001701>.
- 20 George J. Borjas, “The Labor Supply of Undocumented Immigrants,” (NBER) (2016).
- 21 To view the full methodology used by NAE to estimate the undocumented and DACA-eligible population, please see: <https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/methodology/>.

Acknowledgements

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