

# Handling Uncertainty: Tips for Working with Undocumented Students through their Career Journey

## INTRODUCTION

Choosing a career can be an exciting experience for students. However, it has its challenges, especially for undocumented students. They deserve to feel safe and in control of their career options. Thus, it is imperative to understand the obstacles undocumented students face on a state and federal level – especially under the new administration – to provide informed career advice. These obstacles create significant uncertainty such as limited career paths to explore, little to no paid internships or professional development experience, fears around their safety and visibility in a changing political landscape, and unclear long-term planning. By addressing these complexities, educators and career advisors can help undocumented students build confidence and resilience as they work towards fulfilling and sustainable careers.

**This guide is meant to help career advisers, higher education practitioners and high school educators understand the experience of undocumented students and provide them with the information needed to support these students in making informed decisions in their career journey.**

## UNDERSTANDING THE CAREER JOURNEY

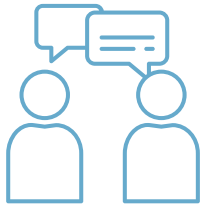
Each year there are more undocumented students in higher education without DACA which presents challenges in their employment options on-campus and in their respective fields. To learn more about the challenges undocumented students face while pursuing their career goals, read [Empowering Undocumented Students: A Guide for Career Services](#).

### Undocumented students may feel:

Discouraged to pursue or finish their college degree due to limited career and post-graduation opportunities	Frustrated that their options are limited or like they have no options at all
Disappointed that a staff member provided incorrect information which led to dead ends or false hope	Apathetic about their future due to state-specific career restrictions and nationwide policies
Exhausted about having to advocate for themselves and educate higher education professionals	Worried that disclosing their status may put their families in danger

## Career Centers

Some undocumented students avoid going to the career center as they often leave disheartened and unheard. They may view the provided resources as unhelpful for multiple reasons, mainly due to the lack of professional development offerings (internships, externships, etc.) and post-graduation options available to undocumented students.



### Career advice is often...

1. Geared toward undocumented students with DACA or work authorization
2. Focused solely on entrepreneurship instead of career goals and interests
3. Uninformed on the reality of undocumented students without DACA

The emotional toll of career advising can lead to heightened anxiety, stress, or a sense of hopelessness about their future, impacting their overall well-being and their academic endeavors.

Consider joining an UndocuAlly Training, identifying resources to learn more about the current undocumented experience, or signing up for a newsletter like the [Higher Ed Immigration Portal newsletter](#) to receive best practices and resources in your inbox.

## NAVIGATING CAREER CONVERSATIONS

Supporting undocumented students requires a thoughtful and inclusive approach that addresses their unique challenges and needs. Knowing how to address challenges undocumented students may face upfront instead of misleading students is crucial for relationship building and continuous support. This section highlights the topics that may arise while advising undocumented students and provides tips to navigate the conversation.

### Topics that may arise include:

#### Licensure Limitations for Technical and Professional Careers

(see the [Higher Education Portal](#) for more information on states that have licensure legislation)

#### Alternative Career Paths to Enter their Career of Interest

#### Funding Challenges for Post-Graduate Opportunities

(see [Immigrants Rising Life After College Guide](#))

#### Job Ineligibility due to lack of Work Authorization

## Addressing Career Concerns with Students

Consider the following scenario to learn how to hold space for students and offer career advice tailored to their status.

**Student:** *“I want to be a podiatrist, but I’m unsure what I need to pursue this career. I know I may need to go to medical school when I graduate but what comes next? I’m concerned about my future. I have not shared this with you before, but I am fully undocumented.”*



**Let’s break down the student’s concerns and brainstorm a response.**

**The student disclosed their immigration status to you.** Refer to Edu Light, Inc.’s [Do’s and Don’t](#) for tips to respond without making the student feel uncomfortable and ensure they feel safe to continue the conversation.

**The student is interested in a career in medicine.** They recognize that additional schooling is required however they did not mention licensure requirements. If familiar with the licensure legislation in the state, share the application requirements. If not, it’s okay to communicate that you may need more time to find accurate information. Visit the [Higher Ed Immigration Portal](#) state pages for more information on professional and occupational licensure requirements. Ask the student if they are open to exploring opportunities tangentially related to their career interests. Reach out to your alumni network to find an alumnus who has experience at the intersection of immigration and the medical field, and ask the student if they are comfortable being connected to the alumni.

Suggest that the student join a community like the [UndocuBlack Network](#), [UndocuProfessionals](#), and [Pre-Health Dreamers](#) to connect with individuals navigating similar career interests to discuss possibilities and challenges.

**Based on the tips above consider the following response:**

**Counselor:** *“Thank you for sharing your status with me. I understand that becoming a podiatrist is your passion. So you are aware, most states require U.S. citizenship or residency to obtain the necessary licensure for a profession in healthcare. Would you like to do some research on this? Here’s a resource to explore which states allow individuals to get professional licensure regardless of immigration status. Would you be open to exploring alternative pathways or career options in the healthcare field that may not require licensure but align with your passion?”*

## JOB SEARCH TIPS FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

Most employers cannot legally require individuals to disclose their status unless relevant to the job or opportunity. For example, jobs that require residency or U.S. citizenship like government-facing jobs will require a disclosure of status. Additionally, there are challenges based on state-mandated requirements for issuing I-9s to incoming employees. These tips will ensure that students know how to navigate the job search process while remaining protected and not jeopardizing their opportunities.

- 1** Think carefully before sharing your immigration status with an employer. In most scenarios, disclosing your immigration status to an employer is not required. Students are oftentimes encouraged to share their immigration status in job applications to help them stand out. However, **disclosing their status in a cover letter, via email or during the interview process may jeopardize their opportunity.**

Encourage students to **opt for general language such as “As an immigrant…”** instead of stating they are undocumented.

It is best not to share your immigration status in an email or a written exchange with a potential employer. If you want to know if the position requires work authorization, consider asking one of the following questions:

- *“Is this role available as both a full-time position and a contract option, or is it strictly structured for full-time employment?”*
- *“Could this position accommodate different work structures, such as contractor-based engagement, or is it only available as a full-time role?”*
- *“Is the role exclusively for direct employment, or could it be adapted to a contractor arrangement?”*
- *“Is there flexibility for this role to be structured as a contract, and are there any particular qualifications or requirements for eligibility?”*

- 2** Employers should not ask about immigration status before extending a job offer as it may lead to potential discrimination issues in the hiring process. Employers are prohibited from discriminating against applicants based on their immigration status or national origin, as per federal laws like the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

For applicants who are fully undocumented, consider redirecting the conversation by practicing the following statement. Use this statement if a potential employer asks about immigration status:

*"I do not believe it is appropriate for you to ask about my immigration status before extending a job offer. I would prefer we return to the interview questions to discuss how my skills and experiences align with this position."*

Students should be informed of their rights as workers, learn more about the [rights of undocumented workers in the workplace](#).

Applicants who are undocumented but have work authorization through programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS) should disclose their work eligibility without sharing unnecessary details about their immigration status. Consider practicing the following statement in case any issue regarding immigration arises:

*"I appreciate your interest in my eligibility to work. I can confirm that I am authorized to work in the United States and will be able to provide the necessary documentation upon hiring. I'm excited about the opportunity to contribute to your team and discuss how my skills and experiences align with this position."*

**Learn more about [employment authorization frequently asked questions](#).**

**3** Many employers will ask if the candidate will require visa sponsorship now or in the future. If you plan to seek an employment-based visa that requires employer sponsorship, you should mark "yes" to this question. If you are a DACA recipient with work authorization and are not yet sure whether you will seek an employment-based visa, you may wish to mark "no" but raise this possibility with the employer during the interviewing process. Marking "yes" to this question might disqualify you from the role if the employer is unwilling to sponsor new hires for work visas. You may want to talk to the employer to gauge how open they might be to sponsor you. To learn more about employment-based visa options for DACA recipients and other Dreamers, see the [Legal Pathways that Work resource hub](#) on the Higher Education Immigration Portal.

It is helpful to share opportunities for free legal consultations with undocumented students (e.g., through the Presidents' Alliance or Path2Papers), so they can explore whether an employment-based visa is a viable, helpful option for them.

# 4

There is no need to disclose residency status if operating as a business or independent contractor. Consider practicing the following statements in case you are asked to disclose unnecessary information:

*“Thank you for sending the consultant agreement with me. I’m unsure why the form is asking about legal residency status when I’ll be providing a service as a business. Is there a way we can uncheck that box and still submit the agreement form?”*

*“As a business, I am not required to disclose my legal resident status on any forms. However, I can complete and submit a W-9 form. Please let me know if there are ways to proceed without having to disclose my legal resident status.”*

## CONCLUSION

In order to provide accurate career advice to undocumented students, career advisers, higher education practitioners, and high school educators should understand the unique challenges undocumented students face on their career journeys, as well as the related sensitivities and resources available to help provide proper advice. Supporting undocumented students will look differently because they have to think through the legislative barriers which may prevent from pursuing their dream career. However, as professionals it is important to ensure that these students receive the necessary information to make informed decisions in their career journey.

For more tips, review the [Career Counseling Support for Undocumented Students](#).

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