The School Counselor and Working With Undocumented Students
(Adopted 2017)

American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Position
School counselors promote equal opportunity, a safe and nurturing environment and respect for all individuals regardless of citizenship status, including undocumented students, understanding this population faces a unique set of stressors. School counselors work to eliminate barriers impeding student development and achievement and are committed to the academic, career and social/emotional development of all students. The ASCA Ethical Standards (2016) state: “School counselors are advocates, leaders, collaborators and consultants who create systemic change by providing equitable educational access and success by connecting their school counseling programs to the district’s mission and improvement plans. School counselors demonstrate their belief that all students have the ability to learn by advocating for an education system that provides optimal learning environments for all students” (p. 1).

The Rationale
The U.S. Supreme Court case Plyer v. Doe (1982) prohibited states from denying undocumented children a public K–12 education. According to the ruling, denying them that education would create a “lifetime of hardship” for undocumented children and a “permanent underclass” of individuals (Eusebio & Mendoza, 2015).

Educators have been at the forefront of implementing the recent immigration policy known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), not just in supporting undocumented students in gathering documentation for their DACA requests but also in advising them on the many academic, career and personal opportunities that could be made possible by obtaining DACA (Avila & Zellner, 2015).

A comprehensive school counseling program is an integral component of the school’s academic mission. Comprehensive school counseling programs, driven by student data and based on standards in academic, career and social/emotional development, promote and enhance the learning process for all students. The ASCA National Model ensures equitable access to a rigorous education for all students. Undocumented students deserve the same services as all other students but face social, financial and legal barriers. This makes the students need support to feel safe, in addition to needing assistance to find funding for any postsecondary educational goals due to lack of Title IV federal financial aid: grants, student loans, work study.

Many students experience stressors due to:
- Separation from family
- Acculturation issues
- Language barriers and interpretation for families
- Fear about detention and deportation or family members’ detention and deportation
- Caretaker roles for family members
- Concerns about their futures
- Limited understanding about navigating college access and availability to them
- Marginalization due to mixed cultures
- PTSD due to traumatic immigration events
Retraumatization

Connecting with a school counselor will alleviate many of these stressors and fears, especially when individual counseling addresses the students’ concerns. Having access to a qualified school counselor at any age allows students to talk to someone and develop a support system that will enable the students to have goals for their futures and feel safe. School counselors recognize all of these stressors can be somewhat alleviated by contact with a school counselor.

The School Counselor’s Role
School counselors focus their skills, time and energy on direct and indirect services to all students, regardless of their citizenship, national origin, race, color, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status or any other demographics. School counselors participate as members of the educational team and use the skills of leadership, advocacy and collaboration to promote systemic change as appropriate. Supporting all students with a variety of needs may include a diverse skill set, including knowledge about many legal factors affecting students.

“Undocumented youth, in particular, can experience high levels of acculturative stress from immigration-related issues such as separation from family and academic difficulties. The psychological costs of family separation, associated with the migration process and with U.S. immigration procedures such as detention and deportation, are well-documented and, among children, may include symptoms of depression and anxiety” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The role of the school counselor includes:

- Advocating for the rights of undocumented students, ensuring students are not barred from education based on foreign birth certificates, lack of a Social Security number or a home language other than English
- Working with other district personnel so any information collected is uniformly applied to all students and not used to discriminate or bar certain students’ access to education
- Supporting undocumented students by helping them gain access to an equitable education that meets their needs, such as ELL services, if necessary
- Supporting the family with questions about educational access and rights
- Assisting students with seeking postsecondary goals, navigating college access and finding funding for their goals
- Working with community resources for support to keep families intact while supporting students who may not have access to a parent because families are separated due to the potential enforcement of borders
- Ensuring schools are a safe haven for undocumented students and will not divulge confidential information to any outside agencies without proper legal documentation

Summary
School counselors understand undocumented students face additional legal, financial and social stressors and need additional support with these barriers as well as assistance with postsecondary goals. School counselors have a responsibility to provide services to all students regardless of their citizenship status, advocate for their access to services and prevent discrimination against students by removing barriers impeding student development and achievement.
References


Resources
