by Beleza Chan

Not Just a Latino Issue

Undocumented Students in Higher Education

Picture an undocumented student, and for most college counselors, it will be the image of a Latino student. However, the reality is that students from many other ethnic groups lack documentation as well.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, countries with the highest number of undocumented immigrants are, not surprisingly, Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Many undocumented immigrants also come from the Philippines, China and Korea.

These students hail from everywhere. According to DreamActivist.org, an online resource network for undocumented students, they come from places such as Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Ecuador, England, Fiji, France, Ghana, Guatemala, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Mexico, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, South Korea, Taiwan, Tonga, and Venezuela.

According to one of DreamActivist's founders, Prerna, the network has "black dreamies, brown dreamies, yellow dreamies, white dreamies—a rainbow full of dreamies."

"Dreamies" refers to students who would benefit from the DREAM Act, a piece of legislation that would provide a path to citizenship for undocumented students who were brought to the US as minors.

Shame

Irene is an example of a Dreamie. She is 28, born in the Philippines, and was brought to the US at the age of 10. Her mother's parents were granted US citizenship after her grandfather fought in World War II. In hopes for better educational opportunities, Irene's mother brought her children to study in the US.

Irene knows that being undocumented bears a cultural stigma among Filipinos; it is shameful, and kept secret. There is even a pejorative expression for undocumented immigrants. "Tago ng tago," literally means "always in hiding" in Tagalog, and refers to undocumented aliens that need to always live in hiding for fear of being deported.

Because of this stigma, Irene did not even consider coming out to her counselor. "Because of my upbringing, and I'm sure other undocumented Filipinos share this, there was just no way around it: our parents would tell us not to tell anyone. So with that, it is not just about the relationship of the student and counselor, it is also about educating communities about immigrant rights," Irene mentions.

But her relationship with her counselor would have been different if her counselor were not so rigid. She says that it would have helped having counselors who looked like her, shared her language and were just overall genuine.

Although Irene knew about her undocumented status from an early age, it was not until she was in college that she was able to open up to people outside her family. She regrets not having been able to do it sooner.

Invisibility

Ju, 19, is an undocumented student born in South Korea, and brought to the US at age 12, soon after his parents got divorced. After the divorce, his mother became the main family provider, but was faced with extreme financial difficulties that led her to leave South Korea in 2001.

"When I say we moved because of financial problems, I mean really real financial problems. My mother borrowed money from private lenders, and when she could not pay them because business was slow, they came to our house threatening us. We were constantly moving away to be away from them," explains Ju.

As he adjusted to life in the US, Ju felt he was living a normal life until his senior year in high school, until he wanted to apply to colleges, and until he wanted to apply for a driver's license. He suddenly felt he did not have the same opportunities as his classmates, but was able to hide his identity as an undocumented student since he was not Latino.

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Invisibility is like a double-ended sword for non-Latino undocumented students. On the positive side, being invisible allows these students to live in the US without being profiled as undocumented. Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents are unlikely to stop them for interrogation. Not only that, but it also puts "Asian Pacific Islander (API) undocumented students under less pressure to face humiliation because of this (derogatory) label," adds Ju.

But this is not necessarily a good thing. As Irene explains, it can feel really lonely to not be able to share this hardship with others because of shame. "I didn't know anyone else who was Asian and undocumented when I was growing up. I think if other undocumented Asians knew other Asians who were undocumented, they wouldn't feel so alone and isolated."

Ironically, one of six Filipino immigrants, and one in four Korean immigrants are undocumented, according to the Migration Policy Institute's data from 2007. Isolation among these communities is largely due to the invisibility of their immigration status because of the idea that it is only a Latino issue.

This "invisibility" has also resulted in minimal outreach to non-Latino undocumented students. Many are not given any information on how they can pursue a college education despite their immigration status. It is essential for counselors to build relationships with students, so they are aware of their specific hardships.

Ju never revealed his immigration status to his college counselor. "I've never spoken to my high school counselor or college counselor about my immigration status. I did not speak to them because I was afraid to tell them my situation and I did not trust them at that time, I didn't trust anybody."

Safety is another issue. "For one, I think safety is the most important issue; undocumented students need to feel secure that their personal information is confidential and that no harm will come to them. Second, they need to feel really comfortable, so building a strong relationship with the students will allow for them to share their experiences," says Irene.

Words of Advice: Ask Questions, Be There

Kemi, 21, born in Nigeria and brought to the US when she was only six years old after her younger sister began receiving medical treatment for cerebral palsy in the US, remembers that coming out to her counselor was not very successful. "She didn't understand the issue at hand and the challenges it posed, and therefore I missed out on a lot of information that would have greatly helped in the admission/financial aid process," she recalls.

But it is not just about knowing the facts. It is also about being understanding and knowing that these students have been raised in this country for most of their lives, and they should not be judged based on their immigration status.

Martin, 25, who emigrated from Russia when he was 11, remembers that he did not know much about the reasons why his parents decided to move. "Something about the film industry in LA and the fact that my father worked in the film industry in Russia made him want to settle here," he faintly recalls. He was a child when he came. He did not know much about the consequences of overstaying his visa. He also did not know he had broken the law, or that he was undocumented until he was 17. He did not understand the impact of being undocumented until he had nearly completed college.

Today, he sees the importance of having someone guiding along the way. And he encourages counselors to "Ask questions. Don't ignore the issue. Be proactive, and most of all, be open to letting these students know that they are welcome to speak to you. Nothing is more important than an image of acceptance."

Forgetting Stereotypes

Undocumented immigrants are usually thought to be the ones who have crossed the Mexico-US border illegally, however, the reality is that many of these non-Latino undocumented students have entered the country legally, but fell out of immigration status for different reasons.

Kel, 23, was born in Germany, of Indian nationals, and brought to the US at the age of five. His father brought his family over legally through an employment visa, but last year, his family lost its legal status, and they are currently facing deportation.

Kel mentions that undocumented students are, on the outside, just your average student. There is no way to know that someone is undocumented just by looking at them. It is not just a Latino issue. "The only difference is internally, they're torn, they're fighting every day in ways no one can understand, hoping they don't lose their family, their friends, their home," says Kel.

It is especially important for counselors who are working with these students to know to put the politics of it aside. As Kemi, points out, it is important to create open dialogue, not one that "criminalizes or dehumanizes the student and the situation."

As Kel says, "be understanding. Undocumented students just want to be a part of America, they want to settle down, follow their dreams. But unfortunately, a large number of them won't get the chance. The key is to be there. No matter how you look at it, the kids are the victims. It's easy to say 'leave when you're 18 and then come back,' but it's not that simple. Coming back requires money, requires a ton of time, especially in countries where a lot of people apply for visas. Any counselor knows you don't blame the victim."

Success, Despite Struggles

Although for several of these students, coming out to their counselors was a failed attempt, there are some success stories. By and large, however, many undocumented students do feel that they are alone on their path to college. And this is especially the reality of non-Latino undocumented students.

For Irene, Ju, Martin, Kemi, and Kel, the "Latino-issue" stereotype has allowed them to navigate American society without being profiled as undocumented, but it has not come without a price. Because of the backlash that undocumented students face, for many of them, it feels safer not to expose one's immigration status. But this means, never opening up and asking for help.

Because of this fear, it is important that counselors are more proactive in reaching out to this population by making information readily available and maintaining an environment of open dialogue, where no student feels judged.

As the daughter of Chinese immigrants in Brazil and an immigrant herself in the United States, **BELEZA CHAN** has experienced the struggles and difficulties of newcomers. Chan works towards social justice by teaching at-risk youth in San Francisco, writing about ethnic issues, and organizing students for passage of immigration reform. She is a graduate advisor with Educators for Fair Consideration (E4FC).

Telltale Signs: Tips for Identifying Undocumented Students

by Katharine Gin *(biography on page 20)*

Undocumented students do NOT only…

- Come from Mexico or Latin America
- Have strong accents
- Take ESL classes

Undocumented students OFTEN…

- Use passports as their primary form of identification
- Refuse to participate in prestigious programs despite their high academic achievements
- Resist applying for government financial aid even when they're low-income
- Fail to get driver's permits even though they've passed driver's education