



Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales is Associate Professor in the School of Education and affiliate faculty in the Masters in Migration Studies Program at the University of San Francisco. Dr. Negrón-Gonzales has been working with, supporting, and researching undocumented youth for the past 10 years as a student affairs professional, a researcher, and an activist. She serves as founder and co-chair of the Task Force to Support Undocumented Students at USF, and her work seeks to bridge political economy, higher education, and immigration in order to highlight the ways in which migrant illegality is (re)produced through the racialized spaces of higher education within the context of neo-liberalism. She publishes in a variety of Education and Chicano/a/x Studies journals and her co-authored book, *Encountering Poverty: Thinking and Acting in an Unequal World*, was published in 2016 by the University of California Press. GNegronGonzales@usfca.edu

Deportation as an Educational Policy Issue: How We Can Fight Back & Why We Must

Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales, Associate Professor, University of San Francisco

Over the past two years, the Trump administration has advanced a policy agenda that aims to erode protections for undocumented immigrants; ramping up deportations has been a cornerstone of this approach. Deportation as immigration policy is nothing new, though this administration's policies have raised important questions about the detention industry and the deportation regime. This research brief situates deportations as an educational policy issue by illuminating key ways deportation shapes the educational experiences of undocumented young people in higher education. While conversation about undocumented students on college campuses have focused on building DREAM centers and developing scholarship funds, ultimately, if higher education scholars and advocates are serious about supporting undocumented young people, we must be active in the fight against deportations.

How Does Deportation Impact College Students?

Over the last eleven years, I have interviewed more than 100 undocumented young people in California about their educational trajectories through three different research projects. Though none of these projects centered on deportation, deportation emerges as a persistent theme in their experience of navigating higher education. I draw three themes from this rich body of interview data which demonstrate how deportations impact college students in hopes of making it clear how fighting deportation must be a policy priority for higher education professionals who advocate for undocumented students.

Deportation Causes Financial Strain on Students

Before discussing the financial costs of deportations, it is important to note that undocumented college students face enormous challenges when it comes to funding their college careers. Though specific policies vary by state, all undocumented

students are excluded from receiving the federal financial aid most low-income students rely on to access higher education. Undocumented students have limited options in a context in which working on campus is complicated at best or impossible at worst, and many grants and scholarships require a social security number they do not have. The college experience for undocumented students (and some citizen students with undocumented parents) is too frequently marked by the deportation of a parent. The financial consequences of deportation are complicated and varied. Students who rely on financial support from their parents can find themselves unable to make payments once the wages of the deported parent are lost. Students who are far away geographically may have to return home to care for siblings or attend to other family matters the deportation has upended. Students may have to work - or work more - to make up the financial gap or to send money home to support their families; this is even more true for students who do not receive financial help from their parents because they play a wage-earning role in their

Broader Context

Since taking office in January 2017, Trump has ushered in a number of key policies that aim to increase deportations and family separations among the undocumented community.¹

Executive Order 13768 (January 2017): This executive order increased border enforcement, drastically expanded the parameters for who the government considers a priority for deportation, threatens to remove funding from sanctuary cities, and makes it easier to deport migrants without due process.

Repeal of DACA (September 2017): Trump ordered the end of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which gave some measure of protection to eligible undocumented young people who had grown up in the US including protection from deportation and a legal work permit.

Zero Tolerance Policy (April 2018): This policy ushered in the practice of criminally prosecuting every person apprehended entering the U.S. without authorization to do so. This policy has the effect of separating children from their parents because once charged with a crime, parents are routed for criminal prosecution mandating placement in adult-only jails and detention centers. Two months later, Trump officially retracted this policy, but not before thousands of children were separated from their families; too many remain separated today.

Ending TPS (May 2018): The Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program was developed in 1990 as a humanitarian program designed to provide refuge for migrants from countries destabilized through war, natural disaster, or catastrophe. The Trump administration has ended the program for migrants from El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Nepal and Sudan. This decision essentially pushes these migrants, many of whom have lived in the U.S. for decades, out of legal status and either forced to leave or risk being deported.”

These policies are not generally identified as higher education-related policies by people in the field - they do not govern financial aid, college access, or federal funding for college and university students. However, these policies profoundly shape the lives of many young college students - both undocumented young people as well as students who are members of mixed status families - and as such must be seen as higher educational policy issues. This brief takes up deportation as an educational policy issue, laying out the ways in which deportation impacts college students and therefore must be seen as a higher education policy priority.

Lopez and Lopez² argue that undocumented students are caught at the intersection of two broken systems - the education system and the immigration system. In times like this, we are called to identify these areas of overlap and act decisively on behalf of our students.

family. Additional costs include those associated with navigating the process of deportation, including lawyers’ legal fees and bail. Naturally, when faced with these sorts of increased responsibilities, there are often academic impacts that are repercussions of financial strain as well. Belen’s reflection on her father’s deportation serves as an example of this strain:

“I mean, he worked in the fields. It’s not like he was making so much money or something but you know when you have everything worked out just right, and then his being gone just threw everything out of whack. We didn’t have enough money and there was no way for us to have enough.”

Undocumented Students Carry the Mental Health Burden of Deportability

In recent years, scholars, practitioners and undocumented young people themselves have begun to talk more about the pervasive yet often invisible toll that undocumented status takes on the mental health of undocumented individuals.³ Many undocumented students struggle with mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideations, which impacts not only their lives as students, but their overall physical and mental wellness. The constant fear of deportation, the perpetual calculation involved in not knowing to whom and under what circumstances it is safe to disclose one’s status, and the inability to think about the future with any certainty are difficult for undocumented people of any age. To couple this with the stress of college and the pressure to do well can be crippling for many young people. These impacts are even more extreme when the worst has happened, and a student is dealing with the aftermath of a deportation of a family member, friend, or acquaintance. Thus, it is both the deportability⁴ as well as deportation that negatively impact the mental health of undocumented students, seeping into all aspects of their educational lives, taking a toll on educational achievement, social interactions, and integration into campus life. Fears of ICE raids being carried out on college campuses, or right-wing speakers who threaten to name undocumented students on that campus being welcomed on college campuses in the name of free speech, further contribute to the feeling that students are not safe on college campuses.

Norma shares, *“I’ve never felt at ease. ...When you are undocumented, it’s like you are waiting for something bad to happen at every moment. There is always that chance that everything could change. That’s hard to carry around every day.”*

Family Separation causes Trauma that Thwarts Educational Aspirations

Deportation inevitably causes separations, as different members of an extended or immediate family units are forced to live in transnational configurations across borders. Aside from all of the logistical hardships this creates, as evidenced in the earlier sections of this research brief, another way in which this impacts the educational trajectories of undocumented students is that this separation can thwart educational aspirations. Students who are living as a part of fractured families may feel unable to go to college if it takes them away from family members. Others may turn away from higher education all together when faced with what can feel like the impossible choice between family and furthering one's education. The trauma of separated families runs deep, and often this trauma gets in the way of a student's aspirations for themselves because the trauma has put them in survival mode and education feels like an unattainable luxury in that context.

Brenda's navigation of her aspirations and the educational system exemplify this point: *"I think the fear of getting picked up by the police, it just makes you afraid of growing or getting out of your comfort zone."* When asked about the possibility of transferring to the 4-year college one hour away: *"I just couldn't do that to my mom and dad. They'd be too worried. It's not that I don't like it here. I'll probably just stay."*

"We must use our authority and our clout and act decisively on behalf of our students by situating deportation as a threat to our students' educational aspirations and lives."

What Can We Do?

1. Be active in the fight against Trump's deportation regime: Teach about migration across disciplines, build opportunities for students to engage in protest, and engage students in speaking out. Our students need space to process this fight and their place in it. As educators, we must create opportunities in and outside of the classroom for students to engage the ideas we teach and live their political commitments.

2. Fund and promote legal services to support students (and their families) who are fighting deportations: Colleges and universities should not only be funding services to support our students in their scholastic achievements, but also to support them as members of families navigating this complex legal environment. Sponsoring "Know Your Rights" trainings, developing partnerships with community-based organizations and legal services providers, and distributing materials so that students have the resources necessary to develop emergency preparedness plans is the work of the college community – we should not simply refer students out, but bring these kinds of resources and support into our campuses.

3. Speak up as Higher Education Professionals: We must use our authority and our clout and act decisively on behalf of our students by situating deportation as a threat to our students' educational aspirations and lives. Speaking out can look many different ways: we must speak out and up to our university administrations, we must produce meaningful research that can help inform the fight on the ground, and we must engage as public intellectuals and intervene in the public discourse around immigration policy through public scholarship. It is our duty to support our students, and in this political moment, this is support they need.

Endnotes

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