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Request Date: 28-SEP-2006  
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TGQ or OCLC #: 1239010 23620321  
ID: ULAO  
HDC  
ISBN/ISSN: 10585095

Material Type: Serial  
Title: Migration world magazine.  
Article Author: Dozier,  
Article Title: indocumented immigrant students...  
Vol./Issue: 23, 23  
Part Pub. Date: 1995  
Pages: 20-End


Pub. Place: Staten Island, N.Y. : Center for Migration  
Studies of New York, 1986 2002

Requester: ULAO

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Sandra Bygrave Dozier<sup>1</sup>

**T**raditionally, New York City attracts large numbers of undocumented immigrants. Sontag (1993) reported the City Planning Department estimates the number of undocumented immigrants in this City to be between 392,000 and 490,000. Despite the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, which included imposition of sanctions on employers who hire the undocumented, projections are that heavy immigration of these individuals will continue (Steward, 1990; Skerry, 1989).

According to Bogen (1986) many of New York's undocumented arrive as tourists or students, overstay their time, are from the Caribbean (although more recently, the data show that illegals in New York State are more likely to come from Europe; Sontag, 1993), include more single individuals than married couples, and tend to remain for long periods of time or even permanently.

Many undocumented immigrants arrive in this country with hopes of achieving. Flores (1984), in his paper on undocumented Mexican immigrants, concluded that educational opportunities and autonomy were the goals and objectives of many of these individuals. Yet, despite hopes of achieving, many undocumented find themselves in the low-skilled, low-paying, secondary job market (Fogel, cited in Lewis *et al.*, 1985).

However, as part of their preparation to remain in the United States and their drive for upward mobility, many of New York's undocumented immigrants take advantage of the higher educational opportunities that are available to them. They find the community colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY) attractive for many reasons. One compelling reason is cost. Many have limited incomes, and the tuition at CUNY is comparatively low. Similarly, undocumented immigrants who can prove New York City residency for at least one year are allowed to pay the resident tuition.

Additionally, the immigration status of these students does not preclude acceptance to the colleges. I have found that another reason many undocumented students attend

# UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT STUDENTS AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A DEMOGRAPHIC AND ACADEMIC PROFILE



Michael Kagan Photography

CUNY is the widely held, but often mistaken, belief that upon entering the University they will be able to obtain the student visa, thereby regularizing their status within the United States. Consequently, there appears to be an increasing number of undocumented immigrant students attending CUNY.

Despite the large numbers of undocumented students pursuing higher education, a review of Psychological Abstracts and the Educational Records Information Center (ERIC) data base revealed no research data on how these students are faring. This article attempts to begin to fill this gap by presenting

a profile of a sample of undocumented immigrant students attending one of the community colleges of CUNY. The present data consist of a study of 146 students, their academic records were examined in the fall of 1993.

## DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

**T**he sample consisted of 62% females and 38% males. The average age of the sample was 24 years; 16% were 30 years or older. The overwhelming majority (90%) were single.

TABLE 1  
Countries of Origin of Undocumented Students

Caribbean	n	Europe	n	Asia	n	South America	n	North America	n	Africa	n	Middle East	n
Trinidad and Tobago	21	Ireland	3	India	11	Peru	10	Canada	1	Bhutan	1	Israel	3
Jamaica	18	United Kingdom	2	Pakistan	8	Guyana	7	Mexico	1	Ivory Coast	1	United Arab Republic	1
Haiti	17	Poland	2	Taiwan	4	Colombia	3	Total	2	Liberia	1	Total	4
Antigua	1	Greece	1	Bangladesh	3	Ecuador	2	Percentage	1	Nigeria	1	Percentage	3
Dominican Republic	1	Total	8	Hong Kong	3	Surinam	2			Total	4	Unknown	5
Total	58	Percentage	5	Malaysia	3	Brazil	1			Percentage	3	Percentage	3
Percentage	40			Philippines	2	Chile	1						
				China	1	Venezuela	1						
				North Korea	1	Total	27						
				Republic of China	1	Percentage	18						
				Indonesia	1								
				Total	38								
				Percentage	26								

As Table 1 shows, 36 countries of origin were represented in this sample of undocumented students. The majority (40%) were from the Caribbean, followed by Asia with 26%, and South America with 18%. Not surprisingly, just one of the students was from Mexico. This finding is in keeping with data showing that New York's undocumented population is made up almost exclusively of non-Mexicans. This is unlike states, such as California and Texas, where Mexicans accounted for as many as 55% of the illegals (Passell and Woodrow, 1984).

Thirty-nine percent of the students reported overstaying valid tourist visas, while 61% entered the United States through other means.

### ACADEMIC PROFILE

The overwhelming majority (94%) of this sample entered the college as new freshmen. The remaining 6% were transfer students. Fifty-one percent attended full time; the majority (84%) attended during the day.

The high school backgrounds revealed that 40% graduated from a U.S. high school, 25% held the General Equivalency Diploma (GED), 15% graduated from a foreign high school, and 7% did not have a high school diploma. High school information was not available for 13% at the time the data were collected.

All entering CUNY students take a standard placement test of reading, writing, and mathe-

tics. Based on their performance, students are placed in remedial courses or are exempted from them. The overwhelming majority (97%) of this sample required a remedial reading course, 70% needed a remedial writing course, while 77% required remediation in mathematics. Furthermore, a small percentage (1.36%) required a basic English course that was designed for students having a limited ability to read, write, or speak English.

Students in this college have a choice of career or transfer curricula. Sixty-two percent of this sample of undocumented students chose career programs, while 31% chose the transfer programs; the remaining 7% were nondegree students.

Furthermore, both males and females (57% and 64%, respectively) were largely interested in the career programs. Likewise, both genders tended to select traditionally

gender-oriented curricula. Thus, while 9 of the 56 (16%) males chose pre-engineering as a curriculum, no female selected this. Similarly, while 35 of the 90 (39%) females chose nursing, just one male selected this as his curriculum.

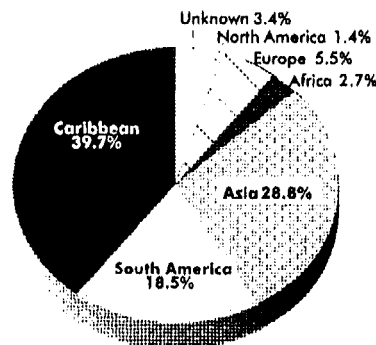
Predictably, the technologies were attractive to the males, 30% choosing these as their curricula, as compared to 6% females. There did not appear to be a differential trend with respect to gender in the business programs; thus, 27% of the males and 23% of the females selected business-related fields as their curricula. Interestingly, the male undocumented students (14%) were more likely to be non-degree students than the females (3%).

### GRADE POINT AVERAGE (GPA) AND PROBATION

These undocumented students had a mean GPA of 2.78. Thirty-three percent had earned a GPA of 3.0 or above. Only 12% of this sample had below a 2.0 GPA and were placed on academic probation. Both genders were equally likely to receive probation.

Interestingly, 61% of those on probation had graduated from a U.S. high school and 22% had entered with the GED. None of the undocumented students holding a foreign high school diploma was on academic probation.

Undocumented Students by Area of Origin



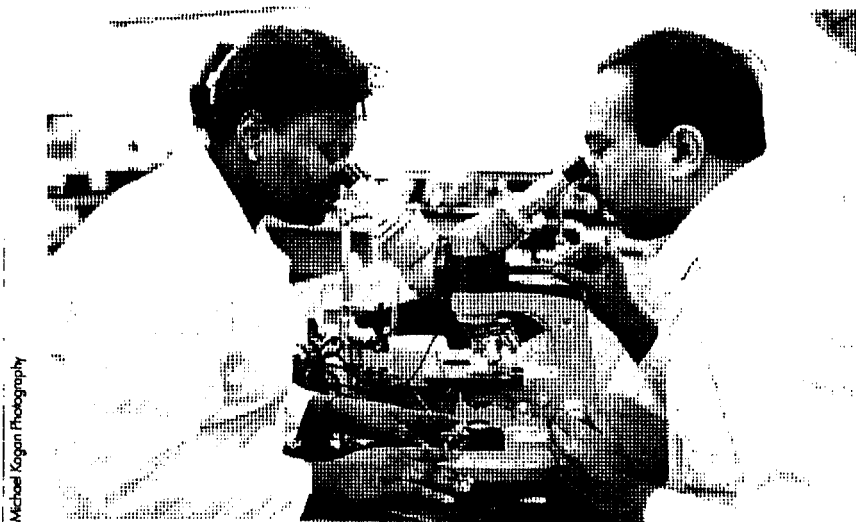
## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I examined the records of a sample of undocumented immigrant students who were attending a New York City community college. The data revealed that these students consisted mostly of single females in their early to mid-twenties, who were primarily from the Caribbean, followed by Asia and South America.

The data showing the predominance of females are in agreement with Passell and Woodrow's (1984) finding that New York's undocumented population consists of more females than males. That the majority of these

the finding of Flores, however, is partially true of this sample of undocumented. The overwhelming majority needed remediation in reading, and a significant number needed remediation in writing. Unlike Flores' (1984) finding, however, a significant number also needed remediation in mathematics.

The small number of students needing the basic English as a Second Language course can be attributed to the fact that, for many of these undocumented students, English is their native language or was taught in school. Additionally, for the nonnative speakers, acceptance to a degree program is contingent on their having a set score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).



Michael Kogan Photography

students were enrolled in degree programs suggests that they may be planning to remain in the United States for at least two years. This sample of undocumented students (with few exceptions) appears to be a fair representation of New York's undocumented population. One exception is that a smaller percentage (39%) reported overstaying valid tourist visas. It may be that this younger sample take riskier routes into the United States because it would be difficult for many to obtain valid visas to enter this country. Research shows that undocumented children in the elementary through secondary schools often need compensatory education and bilingual services in subjects such as reading and writing, but not in mathematics (Flores, 1984). A parallel could be drawn with compensatory education in the schools and the remedial education that this college offers. The present data show that

With all the difficulties inherent in being an undocumented immigrant, for example, difficulty securing jobs, living in fear of being deported, and so forth, one might predict that these students' academic performance would be poor. As Sidney Weintraub (1984) stated, living in a household in which members lead secret lives cannot be conducive to optimal educational achievement. However, despite the difficulties, the majority of this sample of students are doing well. This is possible because many of these students are motivated to succeed. That they risk the possibility of exposure to deportation by enrolling in college is one attestation to the importance of education to them.


The finding that no undocumented student holding a foreign high school diploma was on academic probation suggests that they are either better prepared for college than their

U.S. high school graduate counterpart, or are even more dedicated students. It would be interesting to see if this finding holds true for a larger and different sample of undocumented students.

One may ask why an undocumented immigrant would attend college since it would be difficult, at best, for such an individual to secure employment. However, Chiswick's (1984) finding that earnings are higher even among illegals with more education would reinforce college enrollment. Additionally, many undocumented individuals, in time, do become permanent residents (Briggs, 1984). Weintraub (1984) noted the favorable effect that regularization of status has on an individual's life. Having a career would enhance this favorable effect.

Furthermore, the finding that the majority of this sample gravitated toward the career programs, especially nursing and the technologies, suggests that some of these students are selecting programs that are useful outside of the United States in the event that they are deported or decide to return to their home countries.

There are limitations to this study. For one, the sample consisted only of those students who identified themselves as undocumented. Moreover, one needs to be careful about generalization of these findings to other undocumented students in areas, such as California, where language may play a more significant role in their academic achievement.

That this is the first college experience for the majority of this sample reminds us of the important role the community colleges play in the lives of these undocumented immigrant students. This sample of students appears to be faring well academically. However, as the numbers increase, college personnel need to be aware that these students present a challenge, not only because of their different cultural experiences but, more saliently, because of the different attitudes, behaviors, and issues that they present as a function of their immigration status. Part of the challenge may be to find ways to sensitively and effectively serve this segment of the student body who may avoid much needed services for fear that their immigration status may become an issue. 

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Queensborough Community College, Student Services  
References available upon request.