

Undocumented and Documented International Students: A Comparative Study of Their Academic Performance

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During the 1998-99 academic year, 490,933 international students were enrolled in colleges, universities, English language programs, and high schools in the United States (Davis, 1998-99). Studies have shown that international students as a group are considered academically low-risk students who have academic achievement as their highest priority. They have strong academic skills and are consistently among the best students on campus (Rogers, cited in Allameh, 1989; Allameh, 1989; Leong & Sedlacek, 1989; Byrd, 1991; Huntley, 1993). These studies have focused on documented students who hold the F1 immigration status. These students are often from countries where economic development is relatively high. They usually perform well despite challenges such as the language and cultural differences they encounter upon entering the United States.

One subgroup of international students, the undocumented, may not be faring as well academically, however, because they experience both the challenges faced by the documented students and also challenges caused by their questionable immigration status. In addition, they are often clustered in the lower end of the socioeconomic strata of the United States. Davis (1998-99) indicated that between 1993 and 1998 community colleges' international student enrollment grew by 32%. Therefore, as these colleges enroll increasing numbers of both documented and undocumented international students, it is important to distinguish between them so the college personnel may be better prepared to meet these students' specific needs. This is especially relevant as Tompson and Tompson (1996) indicate, since the growth of international student enrollment has served to offset the declining college enrollment rate of American students in the past decade.



For this report, undocumented students are defined as those who either enter the United States legally then remain after their immigration status has expired, or those who enter the United States by evading inspection at a port of entry. The documented international students in this study all hold the F1 (student) immigration status. The study described in this report was designed to compare two groups: documented and undocumented international students attending an urban community college in New York.

It was expected that comparing the two groups would reveal the following distinct differences between them: The majority of the undocumented students would be from the Western Hemisphere, particularly the Caribbean and South and Central America; the rationale being that it is easier to enter America surreptitiously from countries that are closer to its borders. The undocumented students would be younger, because in general younger people have fewer financial and professional ties to their home countries when compared to older, more settled individuals, and they would be more likely to take the risk of entering and remaining in the United States as undocumented immigrants. In contrast, the documented students would be primarily from Asia and on average would be older than the undocumented students. Additionally, the documented students as a group would outperform the undocumented students academically because documented international students have been found to be among the best on campus.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The subjects consisted of two groups of international students who were enrolled for the spring semester of 1999 at an urban community college in New York. The documented and undocumented sample consisted of 294 and 246 students, respectively. The two samples' academic and demographic records, which are kept by the college, were examined in the fall semester of 1999. The demographic records that were examined included each student's gender, marital status, age, and country of origin. The academic records that were examined included the students' high school information, performance on the college's placement tests, fields of study, attendance status, grade point averages, academic probation and dismissals, and academic honors.

Results

Demographic Profile

Gender and Marital Status

The sample of undocumented students consisted of 53% males and 47% females, whereas the documented sample consisted of 45% males and 55% females. The majority of the documented and the undocumented students were single, 96% and 90% respectively.

Age

The average age for both groups was 25 years old. Seventy-one percent of the undocumented students were between the ages of 17 and 25 years. Eighteen percent were between the ages of 26 and 34 years. Eleven percent were in the 35 and older age group. In contrast, 59% of the documented students were between the ages of 17 and 25 years. Thirty-five percent of the documented students were between the ages of 26 and 34 years old. The remaining 6% of this sample was in the 35 and older group.

Countries of Origin

Both samples were diverse with regards to countries of origin. The documented students represented 55 different countries, whereas the undocumented students represented 48 different countries.

Table 1

Regions of Origin for the Documented and Undocumented Students

Regions	Documented		Undocumented	
	n	%	n	%
Africa	12	4	13	5
Asia	142	51	66	27
Caribbean	59	18	78	32
Europe	45	16	16	7
North America	4	1	6	2
South/Central America	26	9	67	27

Note. Regions of origin were available for 288 of the 294 documented students.



As Table 1 shows, 51% of the documented students came from Asia. Eighteen percent came from the Caribbean. In contrast, 32% of the undocumented students came from the Caribbean. South and Central America and Asia were relatively close seconds, each accounting for 27% of the sample.

Academic Profile

High School Graduation Information

The data showed that 68% of the documented students graduated from a foreign high school. Sixteen percent held a United States high school diploma. In contrast, 76% of the undocumented students had earned their high school diploma in the United States, whereas 11% had graduated from a foreign high school. High school information was unavailable for 16% of the undocumented students and 13% of the documented students.

Length of Time Between High School Graduation and College Entrance

For the undocumented sample, it took an average of six months after graduation from high school for the students to enter college. In contrast, the documented students took an average of five years after high school graduation before they entered college.

Performance on College Placement Tests and Remediation Needs

After admission to the college, all entering freshmen are evaluated in reading, writing, and mathematics. Based on the test results, students are either placed in remedial courses or are allowed to enroll in college level courses.

Reading, Writing, and Mathematics Test Results

Reading test results were available for 237 of the 246 undocumented students, and 285 of the 294 documented students. The results showed that 78% of the documented and 61% of the undocumented students needed some level of remediation in reading. Forty-eight percent of the documented students and 33% of the undocumented performed at a level where they were classified as English as a Second Language (ESL) students.

Writing test results were available for 240 undocumented and 288 documented students. Seventy-five percent of the undocumented students needed remediation, compared to 80% of the documented.

Mathematics test results were available for 233 undocumented and 283 documented students. For the documented sample, 39% required remedial math. In contrast, 64% of the undocumented students required remedial mathematics.

Table 2

Fields of Study for the Undocumented and the Documented Students

Fields of Study	Undocumented		Documented	
	n	%	n	%
Business	124	43	84	35
Technologies	50	17	29	12
Liberal Arts	61	21	59	25
Health Sciences	17	6	27	11
Fine Arts	25	9	7	3
Non-degree	6	3	24	10
Pre-Engineering	8	3	10	4

Note: Data were available for 240 of the 246 undocumented students.

Fields of Study

As Table 2 shows, business was the top choice as a field of study for both groups of students. Thirty-five percent of the undocumented students and 43% of the documented students chose this field. In comparison, 6% of the documented students chose the health sciences, including nursing, as a field of study. Eleven percent of the undocumented students, a slightly larger group, selected the health sciences as a field of study.

Table 3

Attendance Pattern of the Documented and Undocumented Students

Students	Full-time always	Part-time always	Full-time/ Part-time
	%	%	%
Undocumented	25	27	48
Documented	69	5	25



Part-Time versus Full-Time Attendance

As shown in Table 3, 69% of the documented students attended this college full-time, whereas 48% of the undocumented students had a mixed pattern of attendance; they attended full-time some semesters and part-time in other semesters. Just 5% of the documented students were exclusively part-time students; in contrast, 27% of the undocumented were exclusively part-time students.

Grade Point Average, Academic Honors, Academic Probations, and Dismissal

The mean grade point average (GPA) for the undocumented sample was a 2.43, whereas the mean GPA for the documented sample was 2.88. Nevertheless, 85% of the documented students had GPAs above a 3.00. In contrast, 31% of the undocumented students had earned GPAs of 3.00 or above. Furthermore, 21% of the undocumented students had been placed on academic probation at least once, whereas 2% of the documented students had been placed on academic probation. Additionally, 6% of the undocumented students had been academically dismissed at least once, whereas 2% of the documented students did receive academic honors by being placed on the dean's list, whereas 26% of the documented sample was placed on the dean's list at least once during their college career.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the two groups of international students, though similar on some variables, were largely dissimilar. Both groups were predominantly single and diverse in terms of country of origin. The documented students included more males (53%) than females, whereas the undocumented sample had more females (55%) than males. Historically, the international students who come specifically to study in the United States have been predominantly males (Davis 1998-99). One explanation for this may be that for these students, their families, who often sponsor them, believe that it is more valuable for males to receive an education in the U.S.

Although the mean age for both samples was 25 years, further examination of this variable revealed that more of the undocumented students were between the ages of 17 and 25 years than the documented students

(71%). Interestingly, 11% of the undocumented students, compared to 6% of the documented students, were in the 35 and over age range.

The leading region of origin for the documented students was Asia. This result is supported by Davis' (1998-99) study of international students. He found that 56% of America's international students came from Asia. The expectation that the majority of the undocumented students would originate from the Caribbean and South and Central America was borne out.

The finding that 76% of the undocumented students received their high school diploma in the United States suggests that they had lived in America for at least one year and most likely more. Consequently, these students may have had more time to adjust to American culture and would experience less socially related difficulties in their transition from high school to college than the documented students.

The time between obtaining the high school diploma and entrance into college was generally longer for the documented than the undocumented students. Allameh (1989) reported that more American students also entered college soon after graduation from high school than did international students, suggesting that the undocumented students in this sample may be more like the American students on this variable. Allameh (1989) stated that the difference in time taken to enter college after high school between the American students and the international students occurred because the documented students had to complete the college application process before entering the U.S. to study. This may be exacerbated because in some countries it is difficult to obtain a student visa (Davis, 1998-99). Students may have to apply several times before receiving the visa.

Overall, the undocumented students had better placement scores for reading and writing than the documented. These results may seem surprising at first since the documented students were expected to have stronger academic skills than the undocumented students. However, the fact that 48% of the documented students were found to be ESL, compared to 33% of the undocumented, that many did not attend high school in America, and that many were not recent high school graduates could combine to decrease these students' performance on the placement tests.

It is noteworthy that although both groups required remediation in reading and writing, this requirement did not preclude them, particularly



the documented students, from being good and in some cases excellent students. This suggests the need for caution by individuals who tend to equate the need for remediation with the inability to be successful students.

The fact that the documented students as a group outperformed the undocumented students on the mathematics placement test was not surprising because it is generally known that documented international students do well in the areas of mathematics and engineering. Furthermore, at this level, mathematics is less affected by language than are reading and writing, again supporting the notion that the documented students' language difficulties did impact on their placement scores in reading and writing. Because the majority of the undocumented students graduated from an American high school, it would be interesting to compare their performance on these placement tests with the U.S. citizen counterpart.

The fact that the majority of the documented students attended full-time is believed to be a function of immigration's rule that requires all students who hold the F1 (student) immigration status to attend college full-time. On the other hand, it is not surprising that many of the undocumented students attended on a part-time basis. These students are often poor, and they receive no financial assistance from this college. Given these circumstances, it may at times be difficult for these students to afford the full-time tuition.

The expectation that the documented students would academically outperform the undocumented was supported. Despite the language and cultural adjustment difficulties that they experience (Selvaadurai, R., 1992; Huntley, H.H., 1993; Luzzio, Henao, & Wilson, 1996; Tompson & Tompson, 1996), the documented students may be more focused and goal-directed, thereby improving their performance. Additionally, they may spend more time studying, knowing that their families in their home countries who are supporting them expect positive results. In fact, Heikinheimo and Shute, in their 1986 study of foreign students' adaptation, found that even students who receive no support from their families experience the same pressures to perform and work hard to receive good grades because they do not wish to disappoint relatives in their home countries.

In contrast, the undocumented students who may be highly motivated, as evidenced by their willingness to attend college despite their financial situation and uncertain immigration status, may be working long



hours with little time for studying. Some may not have easy access to needed tools, such as computers and other school supplies, and some may not be able to buy the texts that are required for their courses. Furthermore, having worked for the past nine years with undocumented students, this author is aware that many of these students do not receive monetary support from family members. In fact, many undocumented students report that they have literally stopped communicating with family members in their home countries because their families are expecting that they will send money to help with family expenses. Many wish they had money to send home, and many do, but those who cannot are often too embarrassed to reveal this fact to their families in their home countries.

Furthermore, it has been this author's experience that many undocumented students who live with their families in the U.S. often do not receive support from family members, especially if the student is attending full-time, believing that the student should be working more to help support the family; or the families may be supportive and aware of the value of an education, but do not give the students time to devote to studying. Additionally, some undocumented students may feel discouraged at times, wondering if they will be able to find employment in their field of study, due to their immigration status. These issues may affect their abilities to perform maximally.

Conclusions and Implications

This study shows that the characteristics of the international students on F1 visas are very different from those of the undocumented students. Therefore, undocumented students should not be grouped together with international students with F1 visas in conducting research studies or in devising programs to promote success of the students in each respective group. Based on this study that was conducted at one community college in the Northeast, the implication for the documented students is as follows: These students are performing well academically, but their poor language skills are problematic. Therefore, language acquisition programs aimed at language enrichment are crucial to these students.

The implications for the undocumented students are as follows: Extra help in the development of basic mathematics is essential. Additionally, since about one third of this group was also identified as ESL, then they



too would benefit from language enrichment. However, since many of these students attend college part-time, they may find this enrichment more effective if it is given as part of a course requirement. Furthermore, because academic probation is an issue for the undocumented students, they would benefit from workshops on development of academic skills such as note-taking, study, and test-taking skills. Community colleges might wish to identify undocumented students and target appropriate services, including those suggested above, needed by this population. It should be noted that services for these students should stress confidentiality, taking into account their immigration status and its attendant difficulties.

The following are the implications that apply to both groups. They are both diverse. Therefore, programming on issues of cultural diversity should be offered to the college community. Both groups also need remediation in reading and especially writing. In addition to remedial course offerings, this college has instituted "writing across the curriculum" which is one way to address this issue. Additionally, at-risk undocumented and documented students should be identified and offered interventions in their first semester. Finally, by understanding and responding appropriately to the different needs of these two groups of international students, colleges will be more capable of ensuring their academic success.

There are limitations to this study. It was conducted in the northeastern United States; consequently, there may be differences in the undocumented students' countries of origin. If this study was conducted in the West or Southwest, for example, individuals from Mexico might represent the majority of the undocumented students. In this study there were no students from Mexico. This is a community college; therefore, one should be cautious about generalizing these findings to the four-year colleges. Future studies should compare the documented and undocumented students' academic performance to students who are U.S. citizens.

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