

by Jennifer Marie Godinez and Alondra Espejel

The Minnesota Immigrant College Access Movement:

History, Policy and Recommendations to Admission Counselors

“My name is Jessy, I recently heard about you from Isabel from the Girls Scouts about the help that you offer young Latinos that wish to go to college but don’t have the legal status. I myself am found in that situation, I really have high hopes for myself and I wish to attend college to be in the business industry someday. As we all know you need college to have more knowledge and to learn more things that I still have not had the chance to look at. I was brought to this country and I’m thankful for it, I just wish this can happen for me, to accomplish my American dream. I know this country gives out so many opportunities, I just hope it can give me this one. I would love to hear back from you! I hope you can take some time and help me with my situation.” (Student email to article author, September 2009)

Children with high aspirations, high academic standards for themselves and their peers are denied access to higher education because a lack of policy reform and education practice reform in the United States of America. We, the people, are actually witnessing active, systemic inequality before our very eyes. The deep injustice of denying talented youth access to higher education has motivated us and many others in our communities to push for legal reforms and education practices reforms.

This article is an update on the social movement that has transpired in Minnesota for greater access to higher education for more immigrant youth. Discussing this movement in Minnesota is key, given that most of the attention has been focused on Texas and California. Minnesota has been experiencing rapid demographic shifts and particular growth with immigrant populations. (Fennelly and Huart 2009) The Latino population is projected to become the largest minority in the state within the next 10 years. (Peterson 2009) Immigration shifts and an increasing Latino population in this Midwestern state are bringing about historic changes—and challenges—in the overall US access to higher education movement.

College admission counselors must know that “new workforce” and “new community” are terms for immigrant families and immigrant youth. This demographic change will mean a necessary shift in education practice. College campuses must learn to adapt to the experiences, needs and talents of Latino, Somali, Hmong and Ethiopian students. There are some critical questions we must ask ourselves in college recruitment practices. If more than 10

percent of Minnesota children are excelling as bilingual navigators (compared to five percent in 1990) (Children’s Defense Fund of Minnesota 2002): what does this mean for the changing face of admission policies? What does this mean for college recruitment strategies?

In addition to highlighting important historical moments in the access to higher education movement in Minnesota, this article also presents key recommendations for changes in admission practices from the perspectives of students and advocates in the movement. These students and advocates believe that following these new practices will help each admission counselor meet the equity and excellence goals set forth by their institutions.

College Admission in a Global Reality

As college admission counselors, it is important to recognize the global, racial and economic context in which the issue of access to higher education for immigrant and undocumented youth¹ has surfaced. Minnesota’s global reality is clearly apparent when one acknowledges that the ways in which Latino and immigrant business owners are contributing to Minnesota cities, such as the \$2 million annual taxes, payroll and other expenses that the city of Richfield receives from immigrant business owners. (Almirall 2004) From this point of view, the influx of immigrant community members into our schools, churches and neighborhoods is a collective economic asset—they are the people who are making economic contributions and building the state’s future prosperity. State economist Tom Stinson observes that “wherever they [immigrants]

¹ The term “undocumented” is used to refer to students who do not have a student visa or US residency/citizenship status.

grants] come from, it's going to be important for Minnesotans to focus on making sure that we make the fullest use of the skills of that new workforce." (Baier 2008) Stinson continues by explaining that Minnesota's competitive advantage is tied to the quality of life and equality in opportunities that our new community members and our new workforce are allowed to achieve. (Stinson and Gillaspay 2008) However, researchers and advocates assert that reaping the rewards of the economic benefits being generated by these immigrant families and youth must be connected to advancing this community's human rights, labor rights and educational access. (Fennelly and Huart 2009) "Primary among these are state sponsored efforts to improve the high school graduation rates for immigrant youth, and employer-sponsored programs that insure opportunities for job training and advancement," according to Professor Katherine Fennelly (Fennelly and Huart 2009).

To quote Alejandra, one of the students who provided recommendations for this essay, college admission counselors must "help ensure that students are prepared to become the next generation of leaders, professionals, parents, workers and citizens."

This article may serve as a tool to help admission counselors meet these community-based expectations and help build the capacity of college admission offices to recruit and admit more immigrant, undocumented and Latino youth—a move that is necessitated by our society's evolving demographics. In order to prepare more college admission counselors to become advocates of equal access to higher education and to lead college campus efforts for global inclusion, we must learn about the challenges and solutions that have been crafted by these very students. What follows are updates on policy changes intended to support more immigrant youth to access a college degree, ending with recommendations to help support more undocumented students to enter a college campus.

10 Years in the Making: Immigrant Youth Secure Policy Changes for Access to Higher Education

Beginning in 1999, advocates of Latino youth at community-based organizations such as La Escuelita and El Colegio began raising the question of access to education for undocumented immigrant youth. It became more and more apparent that one of the most significant barriers in accessing higher education was the immigration status of students. The students themselves were motivated about education beyond high school, but the limits put on them by a broken immigration system and unclear "rules" for the use of status in higher education admission, created barriers and deterred them from pursuing a higher education. In 2001 a "call to action" meeting with various partners took place at a local university. Student testimonies were shared and community members discussed strategies to address this need. Through those ef-

forts advocates connected to Minnesota Representative Carlos Mariani, who then became one of the main authors of what is now known as the Minnesota Dream Act.² At the same time, local educators and immigrant entrepreneurs were developing plans for a Latino scholarship fund that would be supported by immigrant business owners and aimed at supporting immigrant youth that lacked access to state grants and federal financial aid.

As awareness grew about the issue of undocumented students and the lack of access to higher education, so grew the energy and power of the immigrant rights movement. In 2004 and based on the energy of the National Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, a core group of immigrant strategists began to lay the foundations of what today is known as the Minnesota Immigrant Freedom Network (MIFN)—a statewide immigrant integration group focusing on access to higher education for immigrant youth and community organizing. As more and more youth became involved in MIFN's unique "Yes I Can Dream!" curriculum, the movement for college access grew in size, matured in coordination and became stronger. One of the lessons in the curriculum includes an invitation for any youth to attend Student Day at the Capitol—a college access day which MIFN hosts in St. Paul. This day began with only a few dozen participants in 2004 and has now been attended by more than a thousand youth and allies in 2009. It is through this energy and mobilization that \$4.8 million have been secured over the past four years to help undocumented immigrant students gain access to a college education. In 2008 when the MNSCU Chancellor's office analyzed the impact of this access policy on their student enrollment rates they found that 3,540 students took advantage of the flat tuition at 11 colleges; 2,840 of those were immigrant students. These are the types of policy changes and immigrant education access issues that college admission counselors should be aware of and advocate for.

Immigrant Youth Provide Recommendations to Admission Counselors

While a large movement of access to higher education has transpired from the efforts of youth, advocates, community members, educators, and community organizations—accessing higher education also requires the active role of the admission counselor. To gain a sense of the best role admission counselors can play in access to higher education, it is important to hear from the experts—the youth themselves.

The youth that were asked to participate in writing this article are from the college access movement described previously. The students featured in this essay have trained younger students on the admission process, have assisted admission counselors in information sessions with immigrant families, and have raised

² The Minnesota Dream Act was a legislative proposal that would recognize undocumented students as residents for tuition purposes if they met the following requirements: graduated from a Minnesota high school, lived in the state for more than three years, and agreed to sign an affidavit with their college stating they were actively seeking to regularize their immigration status. The Minnesota Dream Act is not an acronym and is very different in scope than the federal DREAM Act, which is a federal proposal that would give undocumented students a path to citizenship if they enroll in college or the US military.

Understanding demographic shifts of your local community, historical gains in the policy sector by immigrant youth, and the youth recommendations as described above are tools admission counselors can use to enhance their recruitment strategies of immigrant youth to their institutions.

scholarship money for immigrant youth. Additionally, the authors of this article encourage admission offices nationwide to contact local immigrant youth groups or organizations serving immigrant families, to develop effective strategies. Here are the expert student voices:

Hugo

“I would ask a counselor to find out more personal information and talk to the student to see in what kind of way they can help and provide support. It’s more like building a counselor/student relationship; just enough so the counselor knows what he or she is trying to achieve and what kind of obstacles they face. Also, to be aware of what kind of resources can help a student such as federal, government and local foundations that can help financially. In my opinion, one of the best ways a counselor can help is by showing a student support because it gives him hope for the future. In my experience, my counselor Charlotte at Century College (MN) is and was very helpful to me. The first time I met her, she was able to give me advice on which classes I needed to take first. She said it didn’t matter what kind of class to take first, since my required ones were closed. I was enrolled and went from there. She also helped me to apply for this Century financial application and walked me through it step by step. Currently, she is helping me develop an academic plan for a mentor project. I find this is very supportive and inspirational. I am also very thankful for my counselor at City Academy High School (MN) because she paid for my first tuition at Century College. When I thought I wasn’t able to pay before the deadline, all of these little or big issues not only give me hope but give me the strength to pursue my educational goals.”

Denise

“I think college admission counselors need to show that it is possible to get a higher education. Sometimes they give the sense that only people with ‘papers’ can go to college. They need to show that there are ways to get to college, even if it’s harder for immigrant students to attend, it is still possible. Many students believe that they can’t apply for scholarships because they don’t have a Social Security number, this is why admission counselors should show undocumented students a list of scholarships that are available to them or offer other ways students can get money. Also, counselors need to walk us through the application process to show us

what we should fill out when students apply for college. For example, should they mark the box that says citizen, resident or simply leave it blank? Many students don’t know what box they need to check during this application process.”

Alejandra

“My advice to counselors is to help ensure that students are prepared to become the next generation of leaders, professionals, parents, workers and citizens. Every student needs guidance, support and expanding opportunities, so counselors must build stronger and closer relationships with students and their parents. They need to make an effort to learn more about our culture and provide all students with the knowledge and skills appropriate for our developmental level by designing, enhancing and implementing a comprehensive bilingual counseling program that promotes and improves student success. It would be a great idea to have a ninth-12th grade booklet with all the requirements students need to achieve each grade. It is significant that parents understand terms like GPA and how students obtain credits and how many they need in order for them to graduate from high school. It is vital for Latino students and their parents to have a better understanding on how the counseling program works, so parents can support their kids better and students identify their goals and work hard to achieve them. Counselors must also learn more about undocumented student opportunities out there, so they can best help fulfill undocumented Latino students’ interests. They should get involved in events that promote and give tools to work with the Latino community, so they have a better understanding about our culture. And most important, counselors should get involved to help students dream about their future and guide them through the journey and the struggle many undocumented, immigrant and Chicano students face and help them overcome the obstacles out there not only to graduate from high school, but to pursue a higher education.”

Understanding demographic shifts of your local community, historical gains in the policy sector by immigrant youth, and the youth recommendations as described above are tools admission counselors can use to enhance their recruitment strategies of immigrant youth to their institutions. The following framework synthesizes the authors’ and youths experiences in a hands-on format.

Working with Immigrant Students: An Admissions Counselor Framework

Student Themes:	Potential Solutions:
<p>Develop a welcoming environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language we use with immigrant families matters—stay positive and encouraging throughout the process. • “Admission Nights” with immigrant youth groups can assist in building relationships with students. Ask current college students to assist with these information sessions.
<p>Review the application process (with a focus on key questions for immigrant youth), academic criteria and course selection requirements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not assume that students understand each of the steps to admission. Review these steps in detail, meet with the student, and focus on any deadlines or requirements that are vital to these students’ success.
<p>Specifically review the financial aid options for immigrant youth—scholarship information is key.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarship lists for undocumented youth are increasingly available through various education networks. We recommend visiting www.mncollegeaccess.org to download a copy of compiled information.
<p>Develop trainings for your office so that information is not held with just one staff, but becomes a systemic effort in changing the culture of the admission office to become more accessible to all youth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take an assessment of accessibility listed here: http://groups.google.com/group/immigrant-freedom-network/files • This tool can guide your office to address key issues in preparing all admission counselors to work with all students effectively.



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