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How change is instigated for undocumented* students in higher academia: A Swarthmore case study.

*the term undocumented mentioned in the paper refers to both the undocumented and DACAmented community

Introduction

The majority of academic literature documenting to the lived experiences of undocumented undergraduates has been explored in conjunction with ways in which institutional systems hinder academic success and trifle the institutional trauma associated with their presence within the white, elitist, ivory towers of academia. These explorations have exemplified the need for major institutional reform, the many of which includes: tuition equity, institutional endorsement, and overall awareness of the undocumented community. These findings reflected Professor of Educational Studies Elaine Allard's academic research examining the evolution of Swarthmore College's support for their undocumented students, centering on the performative milestone hallmarking the college as a sanctuary campus. From the critical feedback of Swarthmore's undocumented students in 2018, they perceived Swarthmore's seemingly momentous declaration as "largely symbolic" (Allard et al., 2018). While students "did not worry much about financial burdens, transportation, or overtly hostile peers and institutional agents", and was granted access to legal support and emergency fund services, the student's core aspirations coming to Swarthmore -- the promise of profound reinvention through academic success -- was still being vehemently challenged by the lack of internship opportunities and career support (Allard et al., 2018). The lack of faith, feeling of belonging and agency within the institution had "[eroded] students' sense of institutional citizenship [and] also threatened their sense of national belonging and civic participation" (Allard et al., 2018). The report concluded with recommendations for the college to implement institutional programming for staff and students, update available resources for internships, graduate programs and scholarships eligible to undocumented students, increase emotional and mental support, and establish an alumni network of undocumented Swarthmore students. But how will these goals come to fruition?

By examining Swarthmore as a case study, this essay will explore how reform actually becomes produced within colleges while going against the grain of institutional bureaucracy. The essay will also address questions such as: what changes have taken place since the inception of Swarthmore's symbolic vow to protect the livelihoods of its undocumented students in 2016? Who has been part of this work, and to whose expense? And how has the work distributed amongst students, faculty, and administration reflected or contradicted the distribution of responsibility structurally bestowed upon each entity on campus?

Conceptual Overview: Who are higher institutions meant to serve?

Since its inception, American higher education was exclusively gate-kept to serve the interests of a very marginal group of people. Marketed specifically towards middle to upper class, white, cisgendered American, males, institutions served as a channel to supply value to a particular location while bringing local revenue into towns. For instance, in the 1890s, institutions served “de rigueur for upper middle class American families” as the leisurely lifestyle of academic classrooms were reserved for those who financially and socially had the privilege to do so. (Labaree, 2017) This was because colleges’ primary objectives were “more concerned about surviving than they were about attaining academic eminence”, scrambling to acquire “financial resources and social legitimacy” (Labaree, 2017). Dispelling the myth of education as the great equalizer, the historical foundations of higher institutions have shown that colleges have always served against the interests of the societally marginalized groups of the time. The undocumented community is no exception. In fact, it is only relatively recently that undocumented students have received access to post secondary education. Section 505 of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act revoked any “postsecondary education benefit” to undocumented student including federal financial aid (Hutlin & Liu, 2019). It was not until 2001 when Assembly AB540 was instituted in California that set precedent to provide in state tuition to their undocumented students. Since then, there have been 18 states adopting tuition equity legislation for undocumented students. However, issues regarding undocumented student reform continues to spark fervent opposition. Eight states have been sued because of their legislations and California, Oklahoma and Wisconsin has had a history of revoking their decisions. Three states specifically prohibit in-state tuition for undocumented students, and two states prohibit undocumented students from enrolling at any public postsecondary institution in their state.

The history of higher education’s relationship with the undocumented community provides insight to why institutional change is so strenuous for undocumented students. Institutional structures were built upon and continues to thrive under a dominantly male, white, upper class, and American society, as colleges were not built to handle the needs, uplift the voices, and provide resources for undocumented students. Reforms have been brought through long, painful epochs of undocumented advocacy, pursued by generations persistent, undocumented immigrants and their allies.

Administration’s role in institutional reform

College students gain critical perspectives as they go through a system created and sustained by the administration to serve its students. They bring incredibly valuable insights, highlighting flaws and gaps of support within the institution through their own counternarratives of institutional neglect and trauma. However, the administration does not serve the students, but the sanctity of the institution itself; given the historical context of how change is instituted, the nature of the role of the administration inevitably has clashed with the interests of the students being affected. The discipline of their occupation is more focused on managerial oversight of “resources of time, space, people, and dollars” which means they cannot solely work at the interest of the students and faculty. (Childress, 2019). Herb Childress, the author of, *In The Adjunct Underclass: How America’s Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission*, attests as a former administrator claiming: “most of my work was coordinative rather than individually productive.” (Childress, 2019), implying that interest lied more predominantly with upholding the bureaucratic structures of the college rather than fulfilling the exact demands of students.

Childress also highlights a critical appeal of the administration's facilitation of institutional bureaucracy: "The genius of bureaucracy is that it makes genius into bureaucracy, taking bright, risky ideas and burying them inside safe layers of structure." (Childress, 2019) Ironically, the safe and sanctuary implications of this metaphor does not apply to undocumented students, who lack academic and emotional support in comparison to their non-undocumented counterparts. Due to the current purview of contemporary political and social ties to higher education, these layers of institutional structures will never be safe and never be equitable for undocumented students, meaning that the current institutional bureaucracy cannot serve undocumented students the same way as others. This requires the administration to resort to unprecedented methodologies, to take risks. This is what undocumented students have been advocating for, including Swarthmore's own sanctuary status. And for undocumented students, there will always be a tension between administration and students regarding how much they are willing to diverge from traditional roles of the college administrator. However, in the eyes of the undocumented students, it is difficult to defend the moral righteousness of their work -- protecting the overall standing of the institution -- when the institution was founded on and thrives upon a history of economic, social, and American-born superiority.

Implications of institutional actions/inaction on undocumented students

Institutional governance by nature are inclined to withhold their assent to undocumented students' demands to remain legal, economic, and social propriety. Consequently, the lack of initiative has stereotyped the administration as indolent or apathetic to student outcry-- resulting in a fragile relationship between the vulnerable students and administration. Even worse, the undocumented students must live with the inadequate action or inaction of the administration, a consequence exacerbated when considering the mental, financial, judicial sacrifices undocumented students made to pursue higher education. For example, undocumented students are emotionally impacted by the struggle to belong in an inequitable institution, where in a study of undocumented undergraduates, "24 percent of the responses indicated the need for administrators to recognize, embrace, and support undocumented students as part of the campus community" (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Allard conducted a similar study documenting the lived experiences of undocumented students at Swarthmore College, where the students were forced to shoulder the burden of exerting excessive time and anxiety navigating the labyrinthine, intransparent structures of institutional bureaucracy while wagering the need to reveal their status. Whether navigating unclear academic, internships, and fellowships policies or feeling inevitably frustrated by the suffocating, inflexible nature of their academic agency, institutions often end up actively hurting their undocumented students.

History of undocumented student reform at Swarthmore: Fall 2016 to Fall 2020

Inspired by the results of the 2016 presidential election, on November 16, 2016, more than 300 students, faculty, and staff participated in a civic demonstration to institute Swarthmore as a sanctuary campus. On December 2, President Smith and the Board of Managers published an official statement designating Swarthmore a Sanctuary Campus. This declaration was a pledge to uphold the sanctity of the institution by ensuring the safety of all students, regardless of immigration status. This meant to minimize engagement with immigration enforcement and to ensure the privacy of undocumented students from local and federal law officials.

In the Spring of 2017, riding on this momentous victory, the Sanctuary Campus Working Group was established to “recommend policies, resources, and services designed to provide for the safety and sanctuary of undocumented and other community members at Swarthmore College.” (Sanctuary, 2018) Under the recommendations of the working group, the college established the Dean’s Emergency Fund and directed focus to ensure access to local, legal consultants. While protecting student privacy and safety, the college did not focus too much on academic and emotional support. At the end of the semester, Sanctuary Campus Working Group released a [report](#) highlighting recommendations for the institution to implement. Figure 1 showcases the recommendations and whether they have been enacted since the release of the report:

Figure 1

Recommendations from the Sanctuary Campus Working Group report (Patnaik et al., 2017).	What has been done (from the testimonials of undocumented students)
“Form a uniform policy regarding requests for information and access to campus facilities or individuals and present it clearly to all community members.”	If this has happened, undocumented students do not have knowledge of what the uniform policy entails.
“Provide DACA and undocumented students with names of qualified attorneys willing to provide assistance and legal representation in both routine and urgent circumstances; furthermore, urge DACA and undocumented students to build a relationship with a qualified attorney well before their services are needed.”	Jen Marks Gold has provided opportunities for undocumented students to meet a lawyer individually, however, from student testimonials, the lawyer was only able to reaffirm what students already knew.
“Build relationships with legislators and other local/regional government officials.”	No, not to undocumented students’ knowledge
“Continue updating the college website to reflect our most current understanding of legal/political issues, and to ensure current and prospective students know the resources available to them.”	A page exists on Swarthmore’s website titled “ Resources for DACA/Undocumented students ” that provides information about DACA policies from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, highlights national immigrant rights /educational reform organizations, and about the DACA renewal policy.
“Coordinate approaches to background checks and clearances across the college.”	No, not to undocumented student knowledge
“Establish procedures for advance parole recipients to study abroad.”	No, not to undocumented student knowledge

“Develop alternatives to both student employment and research assistantships for students who are ineligible to work as paid employees of the college.”	The revamped Sanctuary Committee has started working on this initiative in Fall 2020 due to undocumented student demand.
“Connect DACA students with potential employers willing to sponsor green cards.”	No, not to undocumented students’ knowledge.
“Work towards establishing post-graduation pathways for citizenship.”	No, not to undocumented students’ knowledge.
“Educate stakeholders across the college to better understand issues relevant to DACA and undocumented students.”	No, not to undocumented students’ knowledge.

It is important to note that the Sanctuary Campus Working Group stopped meeting after the publication of this report, and most recommendations have not been pursued since its release.

During the Fall of 2018, an undocumented student affinity group, UndocuAllies, existed as a subset of ENLACE, the Latinx student organization on campus. However, because the majority of the members were busy juniors and seniors, the group was not very active. In the Spring of 2019, one sophomore undocumented student struggling with her undocumented identity asked Dean of International Students Jennifer Marks Gold to invite all undocumented students to an ice cream social event, which led to the emergence of Swatties for Immigrant Rights (SIR). SIR became its own official affinity group on campus thanks to the initiative of several ambitious, undocumented sophomores.

In the Fall of 2019, several undocumented students had actively tried pursuing cocurricular opportunities but was being consistently denied because of their lack of work authorization. Two tempestuous undocumented students were inspired to reach out to faculty and administration to partake in actionable steps after meeting with an undocumented student from Tufts University, who claimed cocurricular opportunities without work authorization was possible. However, after having consulted with administrators and faculty far and wide, including Jen Marks Gold, Dean Karen Henry, Dean Sha Duncan Smith, Ashley Henry, and Jen Magee, the students were informed that the college would stand their ground prohibiting all experiences with any financial compensation be available to undocumented students without DACA. This included research opportunities, Lang Center fellowships, department TAs, Residential Assistants, Writing Assistants, Student Academic Mentors, and more. To face the cold truth felt like a slap in the face to these students, who relied on having the institutional support to expand their knowledge, fill their resumes, and gain career experience, especially when it would be near impossible for them to acquire anything equivalent outside the college.

In the Spring of 2019, acting upon the hard-learned grim reality and the righteous indignation felt because of the institution, SIR began to mobilize and sought to expand their circle of support in numerous ways. First, SIR decided to create a subgroup of their organization to include student allies who could help carry

the momentum of advocacy and garner student wide support. They were able to publish letters of advocacy through VOICES, a student publication featuring the voices of marginalized communities, and host two meetings with undocumented students and allies. Just before the pandemic, SIR and their student allies were in the midst of planning a protest to endow undocumented students their own incoming student orientation as the forced integration into Interational Orientation was leading to traumatizing circumstances where students felt incredibly vulnerable when questioned about their immigration status. Unfortunately Jen Marks Gold shut down the orientation proposal after discussing with Dean Sha Duncan Smith. Additionally, the first generation and low income (FLI) council, the FLI student affinity group on campus, started working in conjunction with the undocumented students to develop a specific committee to allocate monetary resources and other means of support for FLI undocumented students. Furthermore, several students sought faculty guidance in order to leverage additional support. After working with Allard, knowing her history of research regarding Swarthmore's undocumented students, she and Edwin Mayorga, a fellow Educational Studies professor, united various faculty to discuss how to act upon the existing institutional barriers hindering undocumented students from gaining academic resources and opportunities. This marked the first time that a group of faculty had convened on this issue since the Sanctuary Campus Working Group in 2017. Towards the end of the semester, the faculty received approval for a Sanctuary faculty committee led by Allard. During this semester, one undocumented student also received the Academic Divsion Summer Stipend for computer science research. This was done with the advocacy of the faculty member who the student was planning to work with, and crafting the stipend proposal so that the research objectives were aimed towards elevating the student's academic knowledge as opposed to work that directly benefited the college. This set precedent for a new policy where undocumented students were now elligible for paid research and other fellowships that was targeted towards student experience and not a paid compensation of work for the college.

In the fall of 2020, the sanctuary committee held their first semester of meetings. The two primary goals of the sanctuary committee for the 2020-2021 school year were to reinstate and revise the current policies prohibiting undocumented students from participating in co-curricular opportunities and to bring faculty and staff on the same page regarding educational policies and support related to undocumented students at Swarthmore to ensure accurate dissemination of knowledge. Several undocumented students have also been pursuing individual initiatives during the semester including creating an undocumented student guidebook in hopes of publishing the information on Swarthmore's official page for undocumented students. Another undocumented student has been conducting interviews highlighting the lived experiences of undocumented Swarthmore students to present the counterstories and their findings to the administration and faculty in the spirit of bringing undocumented voices to the forefront of advocacy and awareness.

The Roles of Administration, Faculty, and Students in this history

Figure 2: Distribution of who was instigating reform: students, faculty, administration from Fall 2016 to Spring 2019

Event description	Significance	Time	Student	Faculty	Administration
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Swarthmore becomes a Sanctuary Campus	Catalyst for raising awareness for undocumented presence and establishing regulations to ensure their safety	Fall 2016	Student faculty, and staff demonstration	Student faculty, and staff demonstration	Student faculty, and staff demonstration President Smith and Board of Directors officiate Sanctuary status
Sanctuary Campus Working Group is made and releases report	The committee starts having conversations about how the institution can evolve to better support their undocumented students. Develops specific guidelines on what work needs to be done.	Spring 2017	Student representatives: Yasmeen Namazie '19, Jackelyn Mejia '20, Ivan Lomeli '19	Faculty representatives: Matt Zucker – Engineering (Co-Chair) Gina Patnaik – English Literature Christy Schuetze – Sociology and Anthropology	Admin representatives: Shá Duncan Smith – Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Development; Dean's Office (Co-Chair) Jennifer Marks-Gold – Office of International Student Services Varo Duffins – Office of Financial Aid
Swatties for Immigrant Rights was found	Allows undocumented students a space to unite together allowing for critical conversations to happen in the space.	Fall 2018	Veronica Testi '21 and other undocumented students in the class of 2021.		
Sanctuary Committee was reinstated	Allocates a group of people responsible for ensuring reform again and hopefully allows the conversation	Spring 2019	Alison Kim '23 and Olivia Vazquez '22	Elaine Allard and Edwin Mayorga	

	and work to carry on for many years to come.				
SIR Open was formed	Critical in building campus presence and representation and allies for student advocacy.	Spring 2019	Alison Kim '23, Olivia Vazquez '22, Judith Weng '23, Veronica Testi '23, Oswaldo Morales '21,		
First undocumented student to officially receive a fellowship for academic research.	Set president for undocumented students to qualify for specific academic experience driven fellowships		Alison Kim '23	Kevin Webb	

[Historically](#), the administration has been reluctant to act upon the student body's behest and has not been at the forefront to call off discriminatory and hurtful institutional policies, particularly when it regarded the livelihoods of non male, Black, indigenous, low-income, and undocumented students, forcing them to protest. This has resulted in institutional schisms between the students and the administration including most recently, the 2017 protest to ban fraternities on campus after records of sexual assault from their members were leaked. In the case for undocumented student reform, the institution has had a history of offering very unrealistic and insipid alternatives to problems of academic access that would not ruffle the feathers of Swarthmore's policies, which included conducting individual research without any faculty support or financial compensation or getting babysitting or tutoring gigs off campus to earn money. But mainly, they have recommended nothing at all, claiming that their hands were tied to their own institutional policies. These insupportable actions have forced the undocumented students to spearhead initiatives of advocacy and institutional reformation as exemplified in Figure 2.

Nevertheless, in order for long lasting policies to be constructed in the name of equity and inclusivity for undocumented students, administration support is critical. Instituting Swarthmore as a sanctuary campus was ultimately the decision of the president and the board of managers, as well as the all major institutional change that has come from the college. From joint faculty and student demand, the administration decided to reinstate the Sanctuary Committee with various academic Deans, a legal advisor, and a financial aid staff as part of the ongoing collaborative effort.

Most of the creative solutions and the resilience to continue this work ultimately came from faculty and students who may not have had the utmost authority but showed genuine concern for the lack of institutional support and desperately demanded change. Even as the administration became involved in this process under the Sanctuary Committee, there continued to be clashing interests of faculty wanting more for the undocumented students versus the administration insuring good legal status and upholding the institutional policies currently in place. The very nature of each respective occupation allows the administration to take away the autonomy over the professoriate, as mentioned in *American higher education in the twenty-first century: Social, political, and economic challenges*:

“Professorial myths-of collegial decision making, individual autonomy, and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge-have come into conflict with the realities of complex organizational structures and bureaucracies. Important academic decisions are reviewed by a bewildering assortment of committees and administrators. These levels of authority have become more powerful as arbiters of academic decision making.” (Bastedo, Altbach, & Gumpert, 2016)

However, with enough determination, it is possible for the faculty to triumph. For example, a Computer Science faculty’s advocacy was instrumental for an undocumented student to receive a stipend for summer research. The professor’s primary concern was to ensure that this undocumented student would receive the research experience they deserved instead of upholding existing measures of the stipend acquisition policies. Faculty support was critical as the student relied on this faculty to use their positions of power to reach various figureheads who were part of the decision making process, including the provost, academic department chair and others.

Ultimately, most of the initiatives would not have been possible without the several students in 2018 that founded SIR. As undocumented students are often very discrete in disclosing their status, it is incredibly difficult for students to find each other, and more importantly, have conversations about their campus experiences. It is only when the affirmation of institutional trauma is built in sacred spaces of mutual trust, is when the determination to mobilize manifests. It is critical to note that there are currently only five to six undocumented students who embody the effervescent, persistent work ethic that have pushed the boundaries of educational mobility for these students. They are mostly undocumented without DACA status (of which most of the institutional neglect directly affects them) and DACA students who are passionate and have extensive experience in educational and immigration related advocacy. While these students have developed a passion advocating for the general awareness of the undocumented presence and inspiring conversations of equity and embodying the ideologies of a constantly evolving sanctuary space, it only represents the partial truth. Envisably, undocumented students are very tied down to this work. Because of the lack of faith in the institution to carry the leg work, the students have been forced to do most of the work themselves, leading to institutional trauma. The time out of students to organize, to find and verify information, to have faculty all come together induces extraneous academic and mental stress. Living with the failure of the institution tarnishes their relationship within the administration, from ardent hopefulness to indignant despair. Undocumented students are forced to fight out of survival and of critical urgency because each day these students are living under the status quo is another day undocumented students are not provided with the rights that they deserve, which is detrimental to the academic and mental wellbeing of the students and their capacity to succeed once out of the institution. Furthermore, the impending post-graduation uncertainty of career access and graduate school leaves

undocumented students unable to utilize their undergraduate degree to the fullest of their ability, disrupting the faith and worth in their own undergraduate education.

Revisoning the role of Students, Faculty, and Administration

To assuage the institutional damage inflicted on undocumented students, a transformation of administration and faculty accountability is imperative. A thorough recollection of what the college has done and what they have not done is critical for incoming undocumented students navigating the institution. This can be achieved through an active undocumented student affinity group, connecting generations of undocumented students that come and go at Swarthmore. This can also be achieved through an administrative undocumented point person, should their responsibility be to relay the institutional history of reform, the work that they are currently working on, who is part of this conversation and how students are able to get involved to provide critical feedback and recommendations.

For Swarthmore to live up to their title as a Sanctuary campus is to knowledge that the definition of sanctuary is not a static, reachable state of place, but an constantly evolving place to be that works conjunction with the ever changing social and political dynamics of undocumented immigrant reform in contemporary society. Therefore, it is imperative that there are systems in place to ensure the consistently proactive progress is always being made to avoid inconsistent bursts of institutional reform upon student outburst. This includes having an undocumented student administrator be actively overseeing the general progress and operations, sustaining the work of the Sanctuary Committee with equal representation of administrators, faculty and students, and sustaining the student immigrant rights group and undocumented student affinity group to continue garnering undocumented student representation and advocacy.

As we continue to redefine and expand the implications and responsibilities of Swarthmore as a sanctuary campus, the college, with the level of prestige and influence they pride themselves on having, must utilize their privilege to lobby for progressive political reform in the local, state and the federal level. This includes, but is not limited to:

- a. State level: In-state college tuition for undocumented students
- b. National level: that all undocumented students be eligible for state financial aid, federal financial aid, and that all undocumented students should be labeled as domestic students and qualify for private scholarships by the college.
- c. National level: Equitable and inclusive pathway to citizenship for undocumented individuals
- d. National level: Advocating for student visas and (at least) temporary legal status for undocumented undergraduate and graduate students
- e. National level: Advocating for work employees to sponsor work visas for undocumented immigrants

For faculty to proclaim that they are invested in the academic success of all of their students, they must become educated on the complexities of what it means to be an undocumented student while providing the necessary exemptions and support that they need to succeed within and beyond the college. This

means having a thorough understanding of legal limitations of academic ventures and developing a fervor commitment to pursuing creative outlets to account for these hindrances.

In the same vein as low-income, BIPOC and non-male people, undocumented students are forced to thrive in a place that historically erected and enshrined for middle to upper class, white men. In order for Swarthmore to live up to its proclamation of being arbiters of justice and equity, consistent attention must be paid to the pain and violence perpetrated onto marginalized students passing through the institution. And despite the equitable reform that has taken place since the genesis of the college, there is sufficient evidence to argue that most of the burden falls onto the students to institute this change.

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