



EDITORIAL

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Fulfilling a Dream: Meaningful Professional Development and Work Experiences for Undocumented Students

The DREAM Project Fellowship

The stereotype of the “starving college student” is alive and well. Few have experienced it at the level that undocumented students have. To be an undocumented student means that they have entered the United States without inspection or have nonimmigrant visas that may or may not have expired. According to The Legal Information Institute at Cornell Law School, “undocumented immigrants live in the United States without legal immigration status. They are not provided work authorizations and there are no pathways for them to gain citizenship” (Wex Definitions Team 2022). Their lack of work opportunities and professional development make them especially vulnerable. This is still the case even while enrolled in college (if they are in a state that allows them to attend), where they are ostensibly preparing for their future careers.

Despite the obvious struggles undocumented students have in securing work, there is a shortage of publications devoted to cultivating undocumented students’ professional futures. Though programs and centers aim to provide holistic support to this group of traditionally underrepresented students, a missing element is often this aspect of professional experience. Since the advent of the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, more commonly known as DACA—a policy created during the Obama Administration in 2012 that allows undocumented people under a certain age to apply for work permits (PBS News Hour 2017)—academic scholarship on the undocumented college student experience has grown.

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Due to the Trump Administration’s rescinding of DACA in 2017, many of these students have found themselves in unprecedented and difficult situations (PBS News Hour 2017). However, in the presence of open hostility toward undocumented students, notable and meaningful support has blossomed. This article will detail the two-year-long process of working with undocumented student fellows at the University of California, Irvine, how they grew professionally, and what the libraries can learn from this unique experience.

Background of the Dream Project Fellowship

On April 8, 2019, the University of California (UC) Irvine issued a press release announcing the DREAM Project Fellowship. The release stated that undocumented students, especially those without DACA protections, are in an untenable situation: They need to support themselves through college but are unable to work legally. Consequently, the campus DREAM Center, which serves students regardless of their DACA status, created a program for undocumented students to gain valuable, paid work experience (Haynes 2019). The DREAM Project Fellowship (DPF) program pairs fellows with a mentor and a work site on campus. The program takes a two-pronged approach, with support from the Center and the mentor: the Center providing professional development workshops called “Saturday Academies” and the mentor providing on-site, specialized employee training.

During the student’s time as a fellow, they will “complete projects that add value to the placement sites and placement sites will fund a \$3,600 scholarship” in exchange for roughly ten hours a week of work. (UCI DREAM Center, n.d.) In addition to the financial support, the work experience, and the personalized mentorship allotted by this program, the DREAM Center also provides professional development support and opportunities in the form of supplemental “Saturday Academies.” (UCI DREAM Center, n.d.) These weekend seminars and workshops cover topics like interviewing techniques and presentation skills while giving participants time to get to know others in the program.

The UCI has approximately thirty-five thousand students with a very small undocumented student group (Data USA, n.d.). Of these students, approximately three hundred receive the fellowship each year. (Blanca Villagomez, DREAM Center Program Manager, in discussion with the author, June 2024.) I was fortunate enough to match with two exceptional fellows; I was paired with one during the 2022–2023 school year and the other during the 2023–2024 school year. Like all DPF mentors, I was mandated to take the UndocuAlly training course, which taught that a good ally builds trust—a key component of which is protecting the fellows’ privacy. Therefore, out of respect for their privacy, I will use pseudonyms: My fellow from 2023 will be referred to as “J” and my fellow from 2024 will be referred to as “S.” The remainder of this article will detail my experiences of working with these two fellows as well as their main takeaways from having participated in DPF.

Overview of Fellows’ Library Projects

As part of the UCI Libraries’ standard operating procedures, staff and administrators regularly review our mission and values statements and consider opportunities to implement more programming that reflect the mission and values. (UCI Libraries, n.d.) During a recent review, we decided that applying for and hosting a Dream Fellow would be a great way of showing our progress in inclusion and commitment to diversity. The focus and process of the projects undertaken by the two fellows were more or less the same, with a few small differences. Each year, prospective sites were given access to all DPF applications. We looked through them, earmarking the candidates we wanted to interview. After conducting the interviews, we picked our top candidates and ranked them in order of preference.

J’s Project

After getting to know J, a second-year psychology major, and her interests, we decided to build a project concerning library services and outreach,

evaluating how effective these services were at serving traditionally underrepresented and underprivileged students who are generally connected and supported via the campus Student Success Initiatives subdivision (UCI Student Success Initiatives, n.d.). The project's goal was to determine how to improve library services and outreach, keeping in mind the changes in students' study habits since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent closure of the university. After training J in database research, she assembled a literature review featuring the scholarship she found in ERIC, Education Source, LISTA, and Academic Search Complete. Together, we sorted through the research and began developing questions for a series of focus groups. After we created a master list of potential questions, we brainstormed ideas to encourage students to sign up to attend these focus groups. J created colorful and eye-catching flyers with QR codes that would lead anyone who scanned it to the sign-up sheet. These ads were distributed online to different social media platforms and via emailed newsletters. To sweeten the deal, J and I opted to provide all attendees with a free lunch funded by the libraries. Concurrently, I had to ensure that J was properly prepared to engage in this type of research methodology; as a result, I had her take the Institutional Review Board (IRB) training. The focus group was led by J, who later transcribed all of the dialogue.

S's Project

S's project was nearly identical in process and execution, but instead of library services, we focused on library spaces. As a result, S, a third-year engineering student, did similar legwork compared to J. S conducted a literature review, formulated interview questions, went through the IRB training, created a Google sign-up form, designed a flyer, sent out various messages to campus partners to help us advertise focus groups, and then led the focus groups. Like J before him, this DPF fellow did not have any office work experience; as a result, I was proactive in helping him when he needed assistance, particularly during the literature review research process, the IRB training, and the marketing. Having learned from the previous years' focus group, which had middling attendance numbers despite a high number of sign-ups, we determined that the free lunch would be replaced with a chance to win \$50 gift cards. Our turnout for the focus groups this school year was an improvement over last year's. Like J, S led these focus groups and later transcribed the data.

The Fellows' Professional Development: The Impact of DPF and Working with the Libraries

It is crucial to remember that while DACA exists (allowing students to have work permits and, thus, get jobs), many students in DPF do not have DACA due to the high cost of filing paperwork (United We Dream 2024) and therefore have no work experience. There were common areas of growth for both J and S during their fellowships at the library—notably, learning the ins and outs of professional communication via email. Skills such as knowing how to navigate Microsoft Outlook (S did not know what BCC meant until this fellowship) or Google Forms seem like second nature to many who work in a professional environment, but not to these students. Having to send reminder emails and confirmation emails to participants of the focus groups was a new detail they had never had to consider before as students. They also struggled with being comfortable in an office environment and managing their class commitments as well as the project they were working on. Learning how to facilitate an interview and ensuring that everyone had opportunities to speak their mind were additional challenges that both the fellows rose to meet.

Other than doing volunteer work with student clubs, this was J's first time leading and managing a project. It was also the first time J interviewed people, which helped her gain experience for what she hopes to do professionally someday as a therapist or counselor. "If I want to be a therapist, I have to interact with people... So, I found communicating with other students helpful," she noted (Acevedo 2023). J also believed that her IRB training would help her in the future with various research endeavors in graduate school. She valued how the experience "helped me better manage my time, allowed me to practice interviewing students, and taught me how to navigate research databases" (Acevedo 2023). After the DPF program ends, the fellows are required to design and print a poster for presenting at a symposium. However, it should be noted that in S's fellowship year, 2024, attendance at the symposium was made optional due to massive police presence as a result of the Chancellor's call to disband the Free Palestine encampment.

Some of the notable takeaways from J's poster included having a better understanding of what she'd like to do (and not do) for a job, and learning more about the field of librarianship, which dispelled her previously held misconceptions. (Acevedo 2023). She also learned how to better manage her time. Overall, the project showed her that the knowledge gained via the focus groups could be implemented in near real time within the libraries, linking data collection and procedures to tangible outcomes that help students (J, in discussion with the author, May 2023).

Unlike J, S did have some work experience, in the field of manual labor. Upon completion of the fellowship, he relayed to me, "I learned a lot about others... how to... work with groups more, especially since most of the engineering jobs or tasks that I've done for school have been very independent" (S, in discussion with the author, June 2024). Similarly to J, S had not conducted any interviews or led focus groups for work or his studies. He believed that this face-to-face interaction was beneficial to him in developing a professional air in the presence of others. Learning how to communicate efficiently, effectively, and promptly via email was a new professional skill that he learned while working at the library. He also singled out learning "professional language" and how that was "big" for him (S, in discussion with the author, June 2024).

Having done manual labor, S admitted that he did not think he would be able to get nearly the amount of professional development via that type of employment. "It's not as professional; it doesn't look as good on a resume," he noted, before eventually adding that he was hoping to land a paid internship with an aerospace company (S, in discussion with the author, June 2024). He said the skills he learned as a fellow, like conducting literature reviews, will be crucial for his career: "I found out that in a lot of either internship programs or jobs, you still have to do lit reviews as an engineer, such as like finding what engines are most efficient," S commented, before adding that none of his classes necessarily delved into the more practical aspects of office work (S, in discussion with the author, June 2024).

Conclusion: Libraries' Perspective

The fellowships taught the libraries about working with undocumented students. Some staff members did not understand the distinction between the fellows and regular student workers. Because of this distinction, the fellows were not onboarded the same way and did not have the same training schedule. They also did not have a timecard or an iron-clad weekly schedule. This made it difficult at times for the fellow to meet other students and for other students to grasp that the fellows have different parameters for work.

I hope that in the future, other librarians will apply to mentor DPF student to give the student valuable work experience that they would not otherwise receive. While library staff are aware of the presence of undocumented students at the university as well as of the DREAM Center's existence, many have little or no direct experience working with undocumented students. The fellowships are symbiotic: both parties—the fellows and the mentors they are paired with—learn and gain from one another. The libraries gather valuable data to improve their services and spaces and the fellows get to learn how to work in an office environment, use specific tools, and hone new skills, all of which they can put on a resume. While I work at a university where undocumented students have support, not all universities (or states) are as friendly to undocumented students. It is my hope, and that of other undocumented-student allies, that those reading about this fellowship, its impact on the libraries and the fellows themselves, will be inspired to consider the possibility of bringing this type of work opportunity to their campus.

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