



## Documenting Their Decisions: How Undocumented Students Enroll and Persist in College

**AUTHORS:** [Oded Gurantz](#), University of Colorado; Ann Obadan, University of Missouri. Published in [Educational Researcher](#).

**BACKGROUND:** We examine the postsecondary enrollment and persistence patterns of undocumented students who submitted the California Dream Act Application (CDAA) and were Entitlement Cal Grant eligible (i.e., qualified for California's state aid program). Our results focus primarily on applicants in the first three years of the program (2013-14 through 2015-16), which allows us to track them over their four years of Cal Grant eligibility and through their postsecondary attendance and completion records via CSAC enrollment data and National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data.

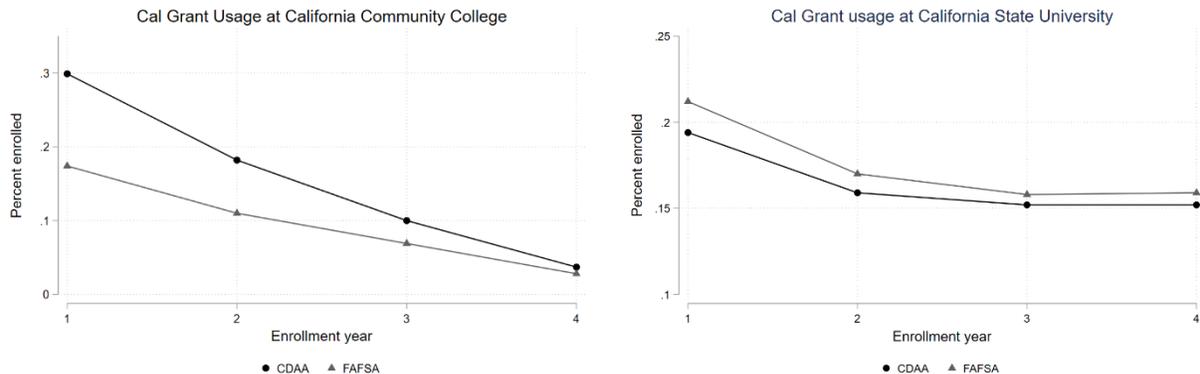
**RESEARCH DESIGN:** We examine the trajectories of undocumented students by comparing their postsecondary choices to FAFSA-submitting students, controlling for various background characteristics such as income, GPA, or high school attended. Our results are based on multivariate regression analysis to adjust for background characteristics between the two groups.

### KEY FINDINGS:

When we compare undocumented students to their peers we find:

- Undocumented students are 2 percentage points (pp) more likely to use the Cal Grant award.
  - This finding holds even if you remove FAFSA students who list out of state colleges on their FAFSA, which is one potential source of bias.
- Undocumented students are about 10pp more likely to use the Cal Grant at a community college in the year after being awarded a Cal Grant, but 5pp and 2pp less likely to use the award at a CSU or private, non-profit college. They are equally likely to use the award at a UC college.
  - Undocumented students are more likely to list only two-year colleges on the CDAA, so differences in enrollment are likely to result from different application patterns on the part of the students, rather than colleges being less likely to accept them.
- Persistence rates for CDAA students who enroll in two-year colleges are much lower than their peers with similar background characteristics.
  - Figure 1 (right) shows that 17% of FAFSA students and 30% of CDAA students received a Cal Grant payment at a community college the year after being offered the award, but in year four the payment rates for both groups was about 3 to 4% (Figure 1).
- Persistence rates in four-year colleges are similar between CDAA and FAFSA students.
  - Figure 1 (left) shows equal persistence rates from year 1 to year 4 for students in the CSU, and results for UC persistence are similar.

Figure 1. Cal Grant usage at CSU (left panel) and community colleges (right panel)



- As a result of these different enrollment and persistence patterns, undocumented students are overall less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree and equally likely to earn an associate degree.
  - Due to initial enrollment decisions, undocumented students are slightly more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree from the UC but less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree from the CSU.
- The growth in CDAAs usage over time is predominately driven by increased numbers of undocumented students attending community colleges, but with relatively little increase in the CSU or UC systems.

**CONCLUSION:** Our analysis shows that undocumented students who are Cal Grant eligible are slightly more likely to use the award than peers with similar characteristics, and equally likely to attend the more “selective” UC system, even though these schools are more expensive, have more challenging admissions standards, and may be farther from home. Undocumented students enroll in community colleges in higher numbers but drop out at higher rates. Yet undocumented students who enroll in the CSU or UC system have persistence rates similar to their peers, pushing against strong evidence of “mismatch” that suggests these students are not prepared for those environments. This finding highlights the need to understand what barriers inhibit or support four-year college enrollment for undocumented students, particularly in relation to the CSU.

Although a purely descriptive analysis, prior research finds large gaps in enrollment rates between undocumented students and their peers, and offering substantial state aid appears to minimize these gaps. Although we are heartened by some of the findings, we are mostly observing undocumented students who left high school in the early years of DACA, and not those currently facing a potentially more challenging national environment. We also identify community college persistence as a key stumbling block for students, and more work is needed to provide additional policy initiatives or supportive services to ensure undocumented students meet their full potential.