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# As Trump Threatens Deportations, Campus Leaders Tread Carefully

Colleges are considering what supports they can offer their undocumented students. Some leaders feel constrained in what they can publicly say or legally promise.

By [Sara Weissman](#)



Trump's presidential win left undocumented students feeling ill at ease. Are campuses prepared to support them?

Frederick J. Brown/AFP/Getty Images

**T**he president of Wesleyan University wasted no time addressing his students' concerns about the election results after Donald Trump's victory on Nov. 5.

Michael Roth put out a statement the next day reflecting on the four years ahead—and highlighting how the university might respond to the potential deportations of undocumented students. He was ready; like other longtime higher ed leaders, he'd been there before.

“As we said after the election of 2016: Wesleyan will remain committed to principles of nondiscrimination, including equal protection under the law, regardless of national origin or citizenship,” Roth wrote. “The University will not voluntarily assist in any efforts by the federal government to deport our students, faculty or staff solely because of their citizenship status,” he vowed.

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But as Roth subsequently told *Inside Higher Ed*, there are limits to the assurances Wesleyan can give. The university will “of course comply with the law. If we get subpoenas, we’ll have to respond to subpoenas,” he said. On the other hand, “if we are just encouraged to create an authoritarian atmosphere in which people are put at risk because of the color of their skin or because of their accent, we won’t cooperate with that.”

A chorus of campus leaders offered similar messages and limited reassurances in 2016, when Trump was first elected president and vowed to crack down on undocumented residents. But this time around, the chorus has been quieter.

When Trump sailed to victory this month on a platform that promised mass deportations while blaming undocumented immigrants for many of the country's ills, fear and uncertainty spiked among the roughly 400,000 undocumented students in the U.S. In the days since, some higher ed leaders have started bolstering counseling and legal services for undocumented students. Some have joined Roth in putting out statements promising not to go back on protections their institutions historically offered, including keeping students' citizenship status private.

But leaders also appear to be walking a fine line: preparing for potential policy changes while trying to avoid panic, and promising protections without stepping out of legal bounds or courting backlash. But if fewer campuses are issuing public statements or announcing plans to support undocumented students this year—reticent, perhaps, to make political statements after public blowback over their handling of pro-Palestinian protests—many are still quietly working to ensure students feel prioritized.

Miriam Feldblum, executive director of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, knows that's true because her organization is fielding questions from so many campuses about resources and services for undocumented students and employees. When the Presidents' Alliance hosted a briefing for campus leaders on the topic Friday, more than 1,300 registered.

But they're operating in a different political environment than when Trump was first elected, Feldblum said.

"Campuses are both more prepared and more wary about speaking out, given that in 2016, campuses were not targets in the same way that they are now."

# Prepping for the Possibilities

Feldblum believes Trump could issue executive orders related to immigration as early as his first day in office, so campuses need to start preparing for potential scenarios.

“We need to be clear-eyed about what can occur under the incoming administration,” Feldblum said.

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**Republicans Could Abolish the Education Department. How Might That Work?**

On the campaign trail, Trump promised mass deportations of millions and, in his first term, tried to squash the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA, an Obama-era policy that protects immigrants brought to the U.S. as children from deportation and allows them to work in the U.S. The Presidents' Alliance estimates a third of undocumented students are eligible for DACA—about 141,000 in all—based on 2021 data. The policy has been mired in an ongoing legal battle since Trump's attempt to end it.

Project 2025, a policy manual for a second Trump presidency drafted by the conservative Heritage Foundation, calls for denying federal financial aid to students at institutions that offer in-state tuition to undocumented students and getting rid of “sensitive” areas—zones where there are limits on federal immigration raids and deportations, including K-12 schools and college campuses.

Some state-level supports for these students are under attack as well. Last week, Republican Texas state representative Terri Leo Wilson filed a bill that would prevent undocumented students from receiving in-state tuition. Currently, 25 states and the District of Columbia (Texas included) allow qualified undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates, and 19 of those states offer them state financial aid.

While some of the possibilities are alarming, Feldblum said, “This is a time to prepare and not panic.”

Accordingly, the day after the election, the Presidents’ Alliance came out with a guide to ways that campuses can support noncitizen students and employees.

The group encouraged university leaders to issue statements of support for immigrant students, host workshops explaining how their rights might change under the new administration and share lists of on- and off-campus resources, including legal advising. Campus leaders were urged to remind students that personal information in their student records will remain private under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. The group also suggested campuses host “community-building” events, like “reflection circles” or “creative expression workshops” for anxious students.

Jenny Muñiz, senior policy adviser at UnidosUS, a Latino advocacy organization, said higher ed leaders sometimes “opt to do nothing because they are concerned they are not experts in immigration,” so she believes it’s important for institutions to partner with law schools or immigration organizations to offer informational workshops to

campus administrators and employees so staff feel confident in their understanding of undocumented students' rights and know what kinds of resources can legally be offered to these students.

Trinity Washington University, historically a Catholic women's college in Washington, D.C., is one institution that's working proactively to make sure undocumented students feel as safe and supported as possible.

The university reached out to local legal clinics after the election to ensure they're ready to work with concerned students. Staffers are in regular touch with advocacy groups for immigrants, like United We Dream and the National Immigration Law Center, to stay updated on what resources their students might need. And the Board of Trustees met with a group of 10 undocumented students on Friday "to hear from them directly about what are the issues they're facing and to think about ways we can help," said Patricia McGuire, Trinity Washington's president.

Undocumented immigrants account for at least 10 percent of the university's full-time undergraduate student body, and while no student has been detained to date, some of their family members have been in the past. Trinity Washington has processes in place to connect students with legal services if that occurs again.

"The hard thing is knowing with any precision what's going to happen," McGuire said. "The greatest fear that many of our students have is that somehow they or their families will be subjected to raids in the middle of the night, that armed men are going to show up and take them away."

She believes "that's really unlikely to happen in any immediate scenario." Tom Homan, Trump's pick for "border czar," has shared plans to begin mass deportations by prioritizing people with criminal histories or who pose a national security threat, targeting "the worst first."

But given that the incoming administration is far from predictable, “we’re preparing in case that’s not true,” McGuire said.

## Colleges’ Legal Conundrum

Campuses are in a legal bind in terms of how much they can actually protect students from deportation.

“The problem everybody has is there’s no legal way to resist,” said McGuire. Legally, “we can’t say that, well, if ICE showed up at the door, we would hide our students.” But “we have a right to ask for the [legal] grounds for any action,” like a subpoena or warrant, and to take the time to consult lawyers, “so it’s not like we just have to open the doors and let police come rushing in.”

There would be a balance to strike between “being legally deliberative,” she said, while “not being hostile in a way that invites even more violence, if you will.”

Multiple campuses have come out with statements that reflect that tension, reiterating that they have policies to protect undocumented students’ information and don’t plan to aid federal immigration authorities—unless they legally don’t have a choice.

Sonya Christian, chancellor of the California Community College system, wrote in a [Nov. 12 memo](#) to the campus community that the system’s policy is that “we do not participate in federal enforcement of national immigration regulations unless compelled to by state or federal law.”

The Center for Immigration Law and Policy at the University of California, Los Angeles, similarly reassured students in a [statement](#) that the University of California system doesn’t share citizenship status or other private student information “without a judicial warrant, a subpoena, a court order” or some other legal compulsion.

The UC system also “generally prevents campus police from undertaking joint efforts with federal immigration enforcement or detaining people at the federal government’s request,” the statement read.

## It’s Not 2016 Anymore

Campuses’ responses to undocumented students’ worries after the election echo their reactions to anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy during Trump’s first presidency—but in a lower key thus far.

In 2016, institutions faced calls and petitions to become “sanctuary” campuses, similar to sanctuary cities that pledged not to cooperate with federal immigration authorities. While most campuses stopped short of adopting the controversial term, some did promise not to voluntarily cooperate with federal immigration authorities, within the bounds of the law, and many college and university presidents came out with statements defending undocumented students and denouncing Trump’s proposed policies. Ninety presidents, for instance, signed on to a letter calling for continuing the DACA program.

But McGuire hears fewer presidents speaking out this time. She suspects their reluctance stems in part from watching some of their colleagues roasted in congressional hearings on campus antisemitism amid the Israel-Hamas war (with some leaving their jobs as a result).

Since then, “most presidents of my acquaintance have adopted neutrality as their thing,” she said. “We want to protect our students, but we don’t want to do something that would harm them more, so some presidents will stay silent as a means of protecting their students and campuses.”

She understands their approach, but she’s also concerned that undocumented students might lose a sense of safety and belonging as a result. Immigrant students



“come to a university to find not only a campus but a community of support, and to make our community of support meaningful for them, we have to speak up on their behalf,” she believes.

Muñiz said it’s too early to tell how campuses will ultimately respond, but she noted that many institutions are better prepared to offer guidance to undocumented students than they were eight years ago. During Trump’s first presidency, campuses quickly built up services for immigrant and undocumented students in response to his rhetoric and policies. Some now have centers dedicated to undocumented students—a [2020 report](#) found at least 59 across the country—and many campuses now have ready-made lists of resources for undocumented students to learn their legal rights.

“A lot of the legwork, a lot of the tool kits and information that folks were scrambling to put together in the last administration now exist,” she said. “It’s really a game of dissemination.”

## Written By



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