



Fall 12-14-2012

## Illinois Wesleyan Student Creates Guide for Counseling Undocumented Teens

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### Recommended Citation

Hill, Kim, "Illinois Wesleyan Student Creates Guide for Counseling Undocumented Teens" (2012). *News and Events*. 1986.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/1986>

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## Illinois Wesleyan Student Creates Guide for Counseling Undocumented Teens

Dec. 14, 2012

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – As politicians, pundits and the public, once again, debate comprehensive immigration reform, the teenage children of undocumented immigrants try to cope with a perpetual state of limbo – a situation which prompted Illinois Wesleyan University senior Sylvia Rusin to create a resource guide that will help school administrators better understand the issues faced by these students.

“My goal with the guide was to help high school principals, teachers and counselors create safe zones and effective support networks and encourage undocumented youth to pursue post-secondary education,” said Rusin. “The problem is, undocumented students don’t just need a green card and college advice. They need someone to talk to, someone to help them survive the fear and struggle of their daily barriers, someone to turn that sparkle of the American Dream into a reality.”

Undocumented teens, who may have immigrated to the United States as small children, are often unaware of their situation until they turn 16, resulting in feelings of shock and anger. Even if a youngster confides in a trusted high school teacher or counselor, school officials may not know how to help undocumented teens cope with the hopelessness and frustration they feel upon learning they cannot legally obtain a driver’s license, a job or it seems, a bright future.



*Sylvia Rusin*

To help the students and their schools better cope with the complexities of these issues, Rusin’s resource guide was created to improve school administrators’ understanding of the daily life of undocumented youth. She will share her work and other information on her research at the July 2013 national conference of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese in San Antonio, Texas.

A sociology and Hispanic studies double major, Rusin interned this year at the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) in Chicago. One of her first assignments was to identify a school for a pilot project to train the school’s teachers and counselors on the mental health issues of their undocumented students. Rusin said most principals and counselors she contacted were interested, but wanted literature to distribute among their staff.

“The problem was, there literally wasn’t any existent literature on the mental health aspect of undocumented youth for this audience,” Rusin said. “So, I decided to make it.”

Rusin researched the psychosocial effects of undocumented status of high school youth, discovering that the so-called “1.5 generation” is rarely aware of their lack of citizenship before the age of 16. (The term “1.5” refers to people who immigrate to a new country before their teens.) The trigger points for this discovery are their peers’ ability to obtain driver’s licenses and jobs.

The common psychosocial issues include anger, despair and a lack of motivation, according to Rusin’s research. School counselors are often unaware of the underlying causes of students’ sudden change in attitude or performance in school. Forty percent of undocumented adults ages 18-24 do not complete high school, and only 5 to 10 percent of undocumented high school graduates go to college, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

The resource guide also summarizes the Illinois DREAM Act that is designed to make scholarships, college savings, and prepaid tuition programs available to undocumented students who graduate from Illinois high schools.

At Illinois Wesleyan Rusin is president of Sigma Delta Pi, the national Spanish honors society. She is also a member of Alpha Lambda Delta, national honors sorority; National Society of Leadership and Success; and National Honors Society.

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