

Undocumented College Students in the United States: In-State Tuition Not Enough to Ensure Four-Year Degree Completion

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<A> Highlights

This brief review the literature on undocumented college students in the U.S. and provides a comparison of the performance of undocumented students to that of U.S. citizens and other legal migrants using restricted-access data from one of the largest urban public university systems in the U.S. where many undocumented students are eligible for in-state tuition. Overall, undocumented students perform well in the short-term, earning higher grades and higher rates of course and associate degree completion than their U.S. citizen counterparts. But undocumented students are less likely to earn their bachelor's degrees within four years. This finding suggests that, despite their earlier college successes and their access to in-state tuition rates, at some point after enrollment, undocumented students experience higher costs to completing their bachelor's degrees than they had anticipated upon enrollment. We offer a number of policy considerations for university officials and policymakers who aim to help undocumented college students succeed in postsecondary institutions.

<A> Policy Context

In June of 2012, President Obama and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced the "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals" program, which would shield eligible undocumented immigrant youth from deportation and provide them with a pathway to work authorization. An estimated 1.7 million undocumented youth who migrated to the U.S. with their parents before they were 16 years old may be eligible for the new program (Passel and Lopez 2012). At the congressional level, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which goes several steps further to provide some undocumented students a pathway to permanent residency status and access to federal benefits, such as aid for college, has stalled on several occasions. Since Obama's reelection in November 2012, there has been renewed attention to immigration reform with several members of Congress joining forces with the White House to propose plans for a comprehensive overhaul of the immigration system. Some of these proposals include policies that provide pathways to permanent residency for undocumented individuals.

In the absence of federal policy providing undocumented youth with a pathway to legal status or ensuring the rights of undocumented youth to postsecondary education, state legislation ranges from banning undocumented immigrants from public colleges and universities to providing them with in-state tuition and state aid if they graduate from a state high school. Alabama and South Carolina are the only two states that currently ban undocumented immigrants from attending a public postsecondary institution. At the other end of the spectrum, one dozen states have passed legislation to extend in-state tuition benefits to eligible undocumented students.

Opponents of policies that mandate postsecondary access to undocumented youth or provide them with a pathway to legal authorization raise concerns about possible increases in

the rate of illegal immigration and reductions in the amount of state aid available for legal citizens. Proponents argue that such supports to undocumented youth will help them succeed in school and the labor market, which provides for a stronger workforce and higher tax revenue. Despite the ample policy attention given to undocumented college students, there are few large-scale analyses of their achievements while in school. This information is absent from the policy debate primarily because we have been unable to accurately identify undocumented students in federally-sponsored surveys and other administrative data sources.¹ In contrast, there is a relatively large quantitative literature on foreign-born students generally (irrespective of their immigration status), which often documents high levels of academic expectations and school performance, despite their limited familiarity with U.S. culture and norms (Kao and Tienda 1995; Fuligni 1997; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Glick and White 2003; Glick and White 2004; Schwartz and Stiefel 2006; Conger, Schwartz, and Stiefel 2007; Stiefel, Schwartz, and Conger 2009). What remains unknown is whether immigrants who lack documentation, a status that restricts their access to a number of essential opportunities, such as legal employment, financial aid, driver's licenses, and other public benefits, have the same or different academic outcomes as their fellow immigrants and U.S. citizens.

In this brief, we take an unprecedented look at the educational achievements of undocumented students who make it to college. We rely on a unique dataset from a large

¹ Since individuals who participate in federally-sponsored surveys, such as the Current Population Survey (CPS), are not asked about their immigration status, researchers have proxied for undocumented status by identifying Mexican-born students who are not citizens to determine the effect of state-level tuition policies on undocumented students' college-going rates (Kaushal 2008; Flores 2010).

Urban College System in New York (UCSNY) that records students' immigration status, validates students' self-reports by requiring them to submit documentation, and centrally gathers this information from all colleges in the system. With records on entrants to UCSNY between the years 1999 and 2004, our analyses compare the academic achievements of students who are undocumented to those who are visa holders, permanent residents, and U.S. citizens.² In addition to providing new information on achievement differences between undocumented students and students with the full benefits of citizenship, our inclusion of immigrants with valid visas and those who have become permanent residents also reveals how undocumented immigrants fare relative to other immigrants with greater security and opportunity. Permanent residents and visa holders are protected from the threat of deportation and able to engage in the formal labor market. Permanent residents are also eligible for federal financial aid, such as the Pell program, which provides low-income students with grants of up to \$5,500 per year. The analyses provided in this brief shed light on at least one important question underlying the debate over federal and state policies that remove barriers

² A U.S. citizen is an individual who either was born in the U.S. or obtained citizenship through the process of naturalization. Permanent residents (also known as a green card holders) are defined by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services as “any person not a citizen of the United States who is residing the in the U.S. under legally recognized and lawfully recorded permanent residence as an immigrant” (USCIS 2012). Visa holders are individuals who reside in the U.S. temporarily for a specific purpose, including those with work visas or student visas. Finally, an undocumented or unauthorized immigrant is one who does not have legal authority to live or work in the U.S. This status is achieved either by entering the country illegally, or by violating the terms of a legal visa.

to postsecondary institutions and the labor market for undocumented immigrant youth: in a state with a relatively favorable attitude and policy climate towards undocumented youth, do they succeed?

<A> What Is Known about Undocumented Students in U.S. Colleges

Previous literature has established that students' success in college is associated with their academic skills and familial resources as well as the academic, financial, social, and psychological supports provided by their postsecondary institutions and fellow classmates (for reviews of this literature, see Adelman 2006; Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009). Most undocumented students come from families with limited financial resources and parents who are themselves undocumented and unable to provide guidance and support in navigating U.S. institutions. Thus, undocumented students face many of the same hurdles faced by other low-income, first generation, college students. Their lack of documentation poses even greater challenges to normal college pursuits, such as obtaining driver's licenses, places to live, student identification cards, financial aid, loans, and employment both off and on campus. A growing body of qualitative research provides rich accounts of the additional barriers that undocumented students face while in college (De Leon 2005; Abrego 2006; Diaz-Strong and Meiners 2007; Perez 2009; Contreras 2009; Perez et al. 2009; Gonzales 2011; Muñoz and Maldonado 2012). Interviews with undocumented college students reveal that they often fear that their legal status will be discovered and reported when they interact with college administrators and fellow students (Contreras 2009; Muñoz and Maldonado 2012). Other students report feelings of isolation as a result of anti-immigrant prejudices and insensitive or discriminatory comments expressed by their classmates, professors, and university staff. In

one study of students in Washington State, which has an in-state tuition policy, several students also reported receiving incorrect information from the university staff regarding their eligibility for benefits (Contreras 2009).

Yet these same studies often point to a tremendous resilience among undocumented students and an ability to overcome the barriers to college entry and persistence. Many of those who succeeded found support in their diversity offices, Latino student groups, and individual staff members whom they trusted. In the only prior study to our knowledge that quantitatively compares the college completion rates of undocumented students to other students, Flores and Horn (2009) find that undocumented students at the University of Texas-Austin persisted at rates comparable to their documented Latino classmates, a finding that is consistent with a pattern of resiliency among students who lack documentation.

<A> New York and UCSNY

As a long-standing immigrant gateway, New York is home to approximately three million foreign-born residents, an estimated 625,000 of whom are undocumented (ACS 2010; Passel and Cohn 2010). The Fiscal Policy Institute also estimates that approximately 5,500 undocumented students are enrolled in New York state colleges (FPI 2012). In 2002, the New York State legislature passed a bill to grant in-state tuition at state colleges and universities for undocumented youth who graduate from a New York high school or receive a GED in the state of New York. UCSNY had been granting in-state tuition to undocumented youth since 1989. In 2011, state legislators aimed to further remove barriers by proposing the New York State DREAM Act, which would render qualified undocumented youth eligible for state and local grants, loans, and scholarships. Of significant importance, one version of this bill would

grant undocumented youth access to the state's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). This state-funded aid program provides grants of up to \$5,000 per year to students based on income and residency; to be eligible, a student must have lived in New York State for 12 consecutive months before the term of entry into a New York college. The New York State DREAM Act had not been successfully approved by all branches of state government by the writing of this brief.

The data for this brief are taken from a large urban university system in New York that educates more than 480,000 students in over 20 colleges and institutions. In addition to tracking academic choices and outcomes in the university system, the data record students' citizenship or immigration status in the U.S. for the purpose of tuition determination.³ Undocumented students comprise nearly 3% of the 161 thousand students who enrolled in associate and bachelor's degree programs at UCSNY from 1999 to 2004 (see Figure 1). Students with valid visas comprised another 6%, with permanent residents and U.S. citizens making up the remaining 25% and 66% respectively. Just under two-thirds of the students who enroll in UCSNY choose one of the six community colleges in the system, with the remainder opting for one of the 11 bachelor's degree-granting institutions within the system.

³ To be considered for in-state tuition, undocumented students must complete a residency form showing that they either received a GED issued by New York State or attended (for 2 years) and graduated from a New York state high school. The form also includes an affidavit in which students pledge that they have already or will file an application to legalize their status. For complete description of the application process and residency verification, see Nienhusser and Dougherty (2010).

<A> Finding #1: Undocumented Students in UCSNY Receive Less Financial Aid and are Less Likely to Enroll Full-Time than U.S. Citizens

The largest difference between immigrant students and U.S. citizens is in financial aid receipt: undocumented students and visa holders are ineligible for federal Pell aid and the New York TAP program and, as a result, receive no funding from these programs (see Table 1). In contrast, over three-quarters of permanent residents receive Pell funds and two-thirds receive TAP funds. U.S. citizens also have high rates of Pell and TAP receipt, at 57% and 60% respectively.

Undocumented youth are also unlikely to receive support from other sources as they are ineligible for most sources of college-based or private financial aid. Perhaps due to their lower likelihood of obtaining financial support from state, federal, and private sources and their need to work while attending school, undocumented youth are far less likely than the other three groups of students to enroll in their degree programs full-time (also shown in Table 1).

<A> Finding #2: Undocumented Students in UCSNY Earn Higher GPAs than U.S. Citizens

Undocumented students in the associate degree programs earn an average GPA of 2.5 compared to 2.0 for U.S. citizens in their first semester (see Figure 2). In the bachelor's degree program, the difference between undocumented students and U.S. citizens is smaller (0.15 of a GPA point), but still favors undocumented students. In fact, all three of the immigrant groups outperform U.S. citizens on first semester GPA, with visa holders earning the highest GPAs in their first semester of college. This pattern of early success for undocumented students is one that is repeated for other measures of early college momentum, perhaps due to the select group of undocumented students who were motivated enough to make it to this point in their academic careers.

<A> Finding #3: Undocumented Students in UCSNY Earn Higher Credit Completion Rates than U.S. Citizens

On credit completion rates (the percent of all credits attempted that are earned with a passing grade), undocumented students in both degree programs again fare well relative to their U.S. citizen classmates (see Figure 3). In the bachelor's degree programs, undocumented students complete their courses at a rate of 90% compared to 87% for U.S. citizens. In the associate degree program, undocumented students and those with visas earn equally high rates (approximately 88% for both), with U.S. citizens at a low of 77% course completion.

<A> Finding #4: Undocumented Students are Less Likely to Complete Their Bachelor's Degrees On-Time than U.S. Citizens

Undocumented students in the associate programs are more likely than U.S. citizens to complete their degrees "on-time" (defined by UCSNY as within two years). However, those in the bachelor's degree program are less likely to complete on-time, which is defined by UCSNY as within four years of enrollment (see Figure 4). The difference between the on-time completion rates for the two degree programs suggests that undocumented students in the bachelor's degree programs experience greater costs to completing their degrees.

All of the comparisons made above are statistically significant at a level of 5 percent. In additional analyses not shown here, we also use regression analysis to determine whether the differences shown in Figures 2 through 4 are driven by differences in the characteristics of students and the academic choices they make upon enrollment. That is, we hold constant students' demographic characteristics, high school achievement, entry year, college, and college

major to isolate the college performance gaps between students by their documentation status. While some differences are slightly attenuated and others widen, the direction and statistical significance of the performance gaps remains the same. In another analysis, we examine the gaps in graduation rates within six years of enrollment for bachelor's degree students and find the same results as those in the four-year graduation analysis.

<A> Summary of Key Findings

In this brief, we use data on the census of undocumented students in one of the nation's largest urban college system where they are eligible to in-state tuition to determine whether undocumented students fail or succeed relative to their peers once they make it to college. The results reveal some complexity in the answer.

The undocumented college students in UCSNY are less likely than their documented classmates to enroll full-time and to receive state or federal financial aid. These two differences reflect the fact that undocumented students are ineligible for such aid, which perhaps necessitates enrolling part-time. At the same time, undocumented college students fare relatively well in the first semester of college, earning higher GPAs and college credit completion rates than U.S. citizens. In the associate degree programs, which are less selective than bachelor's programs and require fewer credits to earn a degree, undocumented students are also more likely than U.S. citizens and permanent residents to complete their degrees on time. Indeed, on many indicators, undocumented college students look much like permanent residents, earning similar GPAs, credit completion rates, and graduation rates. The findings here are consistent with the research on U.S. immigrants generally who, perhaps due to their selectivity, tend to outperform native-born with similar demographic profiles. These quantitative results also square with previous

qualitative studies, which often find undocumented students reporting high levels of resiliency and optimism about their studies. Our study suggests that, despite the barriers that the absence of documentation likely pose, immigrant students without authorization are perhaps just as positively selected and resilient as those with documentation.

There is, however, one area where students who are undocumented do not outperform their classmates: they have the lowest rates of on-time graduation in the bachelor's degree programs. This is true even in a city that has a strong history of immigration and provides some undocumented students with in-state tuition. And this finding holds even when we control for choice of college, college major, full-time enrollment, high school achievement, and other background characteristics. The results suggest that, despite their earlier college successes, at some point after enrollment, undocumented students experience higher costs to completing their degrees than they had anticipated upon enrollment. These costs could be in the form of credit constraints created by undocumented students' ineligibility for financial aid; incorrect information from university staff regarding their eligibility; stressful interactions with classmates or university staff; or in the increasing realization that their labor market opportunities, even with a diploma, will be extremely restricted. In fact, undocumented students have reported that they extend their time in school deliberately in the hopes that the DREAM Act will pass and provide them a legal entry into the labor force (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011).

<A> Policy Implications

This brief is unable to predict what would happen if colleges were made accessible to a much larger, and potentially different, population of undocumented students.⁴ However, we can offer the following insight for those policymakers and practitioners who would like to see undocumented youth succeed: Simply offering in-state tuition may not be sufficient for undocumented youth to earn their bachelor's degrees. At the federal level, undocumented students would likely benefit from access to Pell grants and other loan programs. Yet there are a number of additional strategies that state policymakers and higher education officials in New York and other states could pursue.

⁴ The findings in this brief are influenced by a number of factors. First, the setting is one of the largest cities in the U.S. with a relatively diverse student population (of both natives and immigrants) and a relatively unique immigrant population (fewer immigrants from Mexico, for instance). Thus, the undocumented students in this college system may not be typical of undocumented students across the nation. Second, while there are selective universities within this college system, none are as selective as some of the top schools in the U.S. If undocumented students are better served by more selective colleges, the findings could differ. Third, there is the possibility of differential selection into college; for instance, the undocumented student who makes it to college may be more motivated than the typical U.S. citizen who makes it to college. Differential selection patterns suggest that if postsecondary education were made accessible to a larger population of undocumented students, we might observe them earning lower GPAs, credit completion, and graduation rates than what we have presented in this analysis.

 Financial Aid

Policies that provide undocumented students with access to state financial need and merit-based aid and other tuition-reduction programs are a natural place to start. Several states, including California, New Mexico, and Texas, already provide eligible undocumented students with both in-state tuition and access to the state financial aid programs. Until recently, New York City operated the Vallone scholarship, a publically-supported scholarship program that was available to undocumented students.⁵ Funding for the Vallone scholarship was based on tax revenues and in 2010, the award amount dipped to a low of \$250 per student. The City Council determined that such awards were too small to provide meaningful aid and decided to eliminate the program in 2010.⁶ As the only scholarship program available to undocumented students, the City Council could reinstate the program and increase the amounts of the scholarships by reducing the number of recipients.

Officials at UCSNY could also offset the elimination of Vallone scholarships through college-based tuition waivers. These waivers were recently used by public systems to offset tuition increases for those students most in need.⁷ Because the waivers, which are essentially tuition revenue expenditures, would be provided through colleges directly to undocumented

⁵ See details and criteria, www.cuny.edu/vallonescholars; see also testimony of Michael Fabricant, Professional Staff Congress/CUNY, to the Joint City Council Hearing of the Higher Education and Immigration Committees of the New York City Council, <http://psc-cuny.org/psc-testifies-support-nyc-council-resolution-supporting-nys-dream-act>.

⁶ The Ticker, Baruch's news website, Interview with Scholarship Coordinator, Jennifer Salas, www.theticker.org/about/2.8215/peter-vallone-scholarship-revoked-1.2616689#.UGGzclH5-So.

⁷ See "Partial Tuition Waivers", www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/cmo/i/9/14/index.html

students, there would be no restrictions seen with state or federal sourced aid. And with greater attention to the lack of resources available to undocumented students, private sources of scholarships could be encouraged to fill the gap left by government. In addition, Teranishi et al. (2011) recommend that community colleges themselves raise funds to provide scholarships for undocumented students from alumni and from local businesses.

 Information and Institutional Awareness

Though our study did not directly document the everyday experiences of undocumented students on college campuses, we know from interviews with undocumented students that they can experience isolation on college campuses and, sometimes, incorrect advice from university professionals (e.g. Contreras 2009). Most college students are likely to obtain incorrect information on occasion, yet for undocumented students, the fear of deportation can prevent them from reaching out to other university staff or their peers for accurate information. These kinds of barriers can be addressed with more professional development for university staff and faculty regarding undocumented students' eligibility for existing benefits and the stresses that they face in college. Contreras (2009) also suggests frequent auditing of institutions and individuals responsible for implementing in-state tuition to undocumented students to ensure that the programs are complying with state mandates. Muñoz and Maldonado (2012) further suggest that institutions of higher education create task forces and develop university policies designed to address the needs of undocumented students. As part of this process, universities may also benefit from connecting with individuals and institutions in the local community that work with undocumented students and fostering partnerships with the existing diversity offices and Latino student groups on campus. Universities may also support undocumented students by ensuring

that the information that is distributed to their parents is translated into their native languages (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011).

 Federal Legislation

Ultimately, while the efforts just described should lower the costs to bachelor's degree completion for undocumented students, they will continue to face barriers in their attempts to persist through college and secure jobs upon graduation in the absence of clear federal policy. In the K-12 system, undocumented students are guaranteed the right to a public education as a result of the 1982 ruling by the Supreme Court in *Plyer vs. Doe*. There is no comparable legislation that governs postsecondary education, which results in a wide range of state policies that either restrict or enable undocumented students' access to college and tuition support while in college. Prior research suggests that in-state tuition policies increase undocumented students' likelihood of enrolling in college, which is clearly the first step to ensuring that they obtain diplomas (Kaushal 2008; Flores 2010). Yet if the barriers to employment are sufficiently large as to dissuade students from graduating even after they choose to enroll in college, then efforts to increase aid and loans to undocumented students will be insufficient to close the graduation gap. Removing the threat of deportation and providing opportunities to legal employment as the Deferred Action Program and DREAM Acts aim to do may minimize these further barriers.

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Table 1: First Semester Aid and Enrollment by Documentation Status

	Undocumented	Visa Holder	Permanent Resident	U.S. Citizen
Pell receipt	0%	0%	76%	57%
New York State TAP Receipt	0%	0%	67%	60%
Full-time attendance	83%	90%	93%	92%

Figure 1: Documentation Status of UCSNY Students

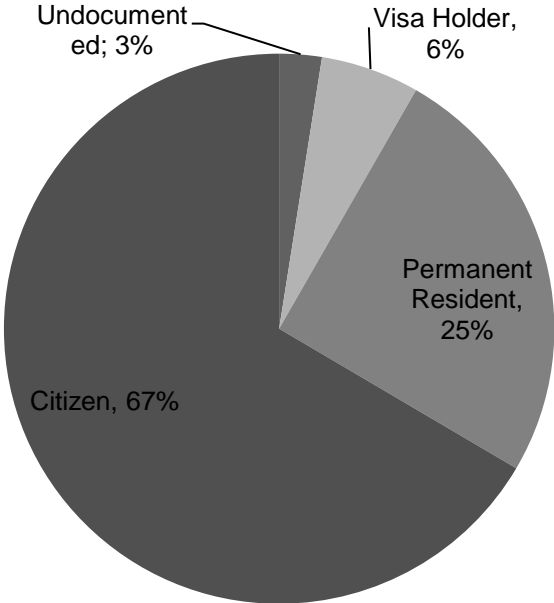


Figure 2: First Semester Grade Point Average of UCSNY Students by Documentation Status and Degree Program

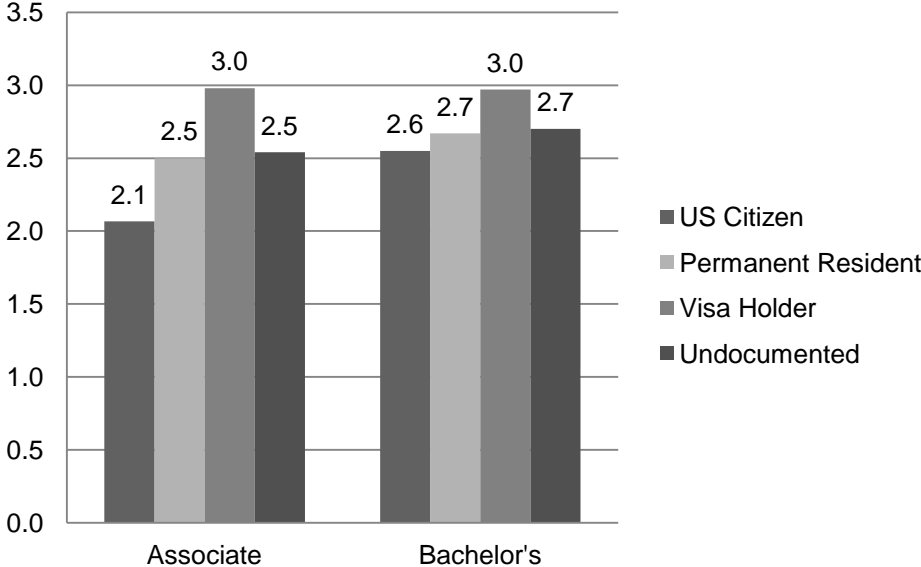


Figure 3: First Semester Credit Completion Rate of UCSNY Students by Documentation Status and Degree Program

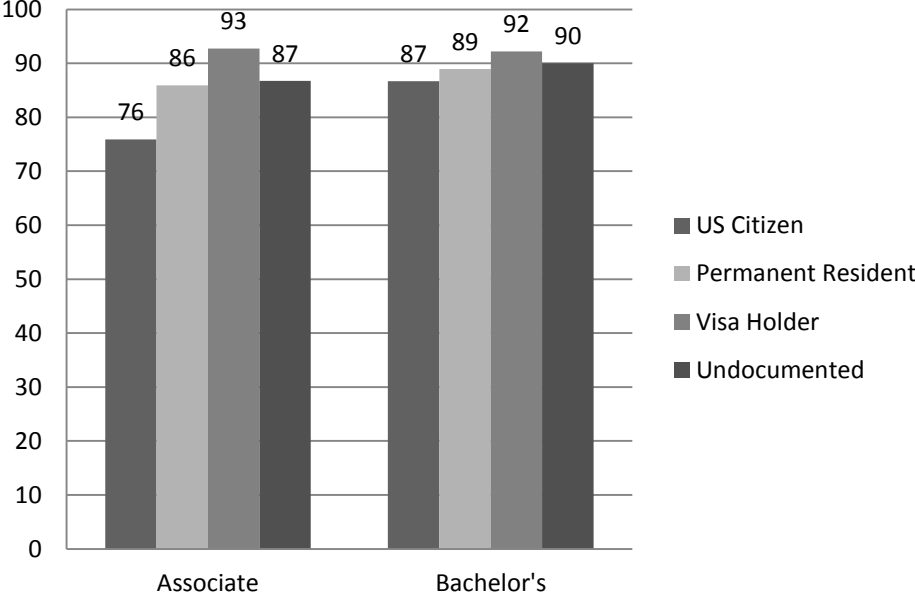


Figure 4: On-Time Graduation Rate of UCSNY Students by Documentation Status and Degree Program

