

IMMIGRATION-IMPACTED STUDENTS AT AU

A 2026 Report written by the Center for Latin American & Latino Studies at American University

Presented in November 2026

CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN & LATINO STUDIES
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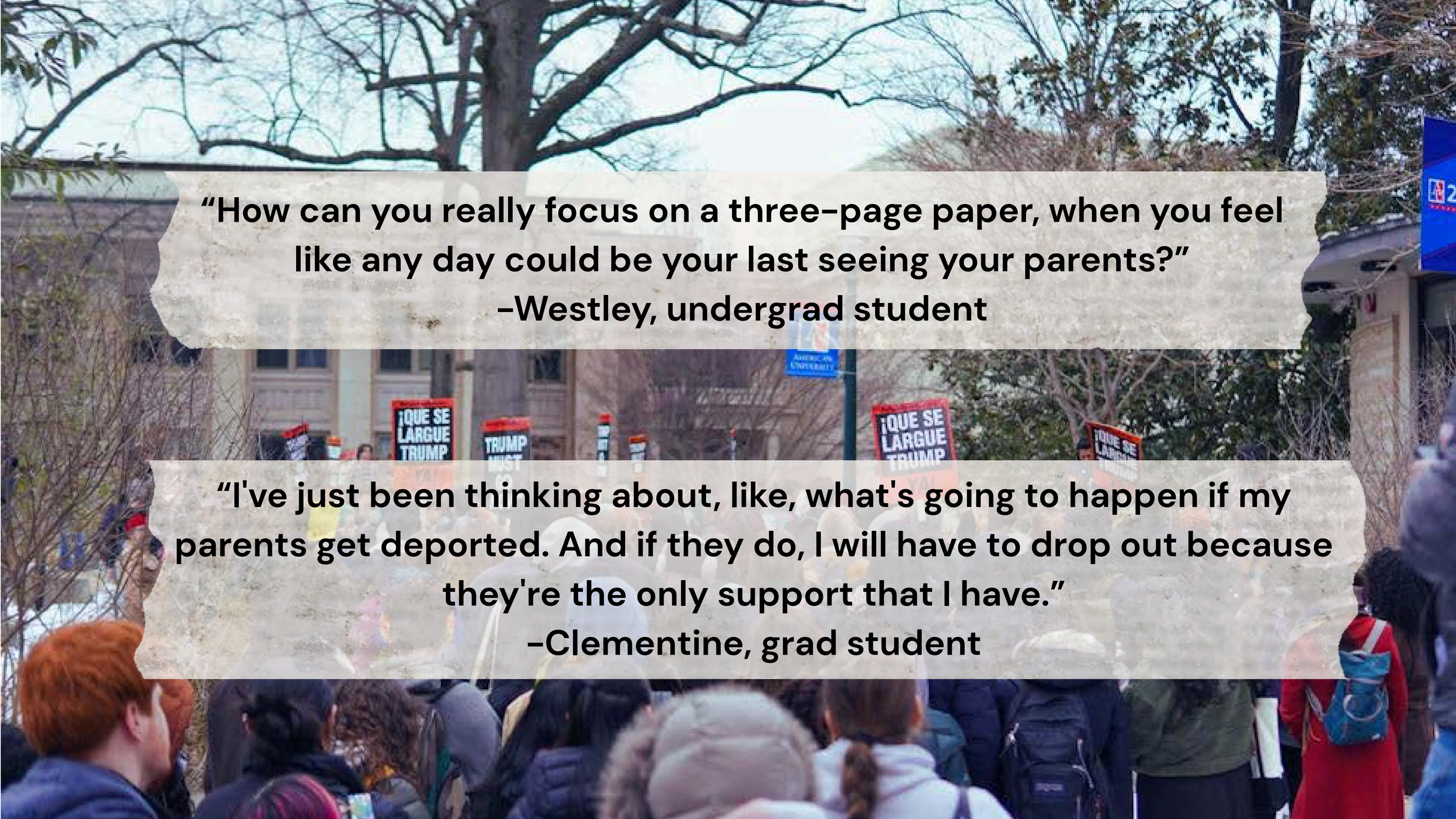
The Immigration Lab

DEFENDING THE DREAM INITIATIVE

OVERVIEW

The purpose of this study is to learn about the lived experiences of immigration-impacted students at American University.

The Team: This study was initiated by **Professor Saba Ahmed** with AUWCL's Defending the AU Dream Initiative ("AU Dream"), **Professor Noemi Enchautegui de Jesus** in CAS, **Dr. Ernesto Castaneda** in CLALS and The Immigration Lab, and **Professor Eric Macias** in the SOE, and a team of **student researchers** including: Wilfredo Flores, Caryalyn Jean, Maria Carvalho de Morais, Andres Blume, Danjha Leon Martinez, Noah Green, Kat Olmos, Zari Carr, Angella Pulido, Mercy Campos, and Isabella Bernal.



“How can you really focus on a three-page paper, when you feel like any day could be your last seeing your parents?”
-Westley, undergrad student

“I've just been thinking about, like, what's going to happen if my parents get deported. And if they do, I will have to drop out because they're the only support that I have.”
-Clementine, grad student

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE IMMIGRATION-IMPACTED?

1ST GENERATION IMMIGRANT

Born outside the U.S. and moved here as an adult

1.5 GENERATION IMMIGRANT

Born outside the U.S. and moved here as a child or adolescent

2ND GENERATION IMMIGRANT

Born in the U.S. to parents who are were born abroad and moved here

Immigration-impacted students are those whose families, or themselves, have interacted with and/or been impacted by the U.S. immigration laws and policies.



METHODOLOGY

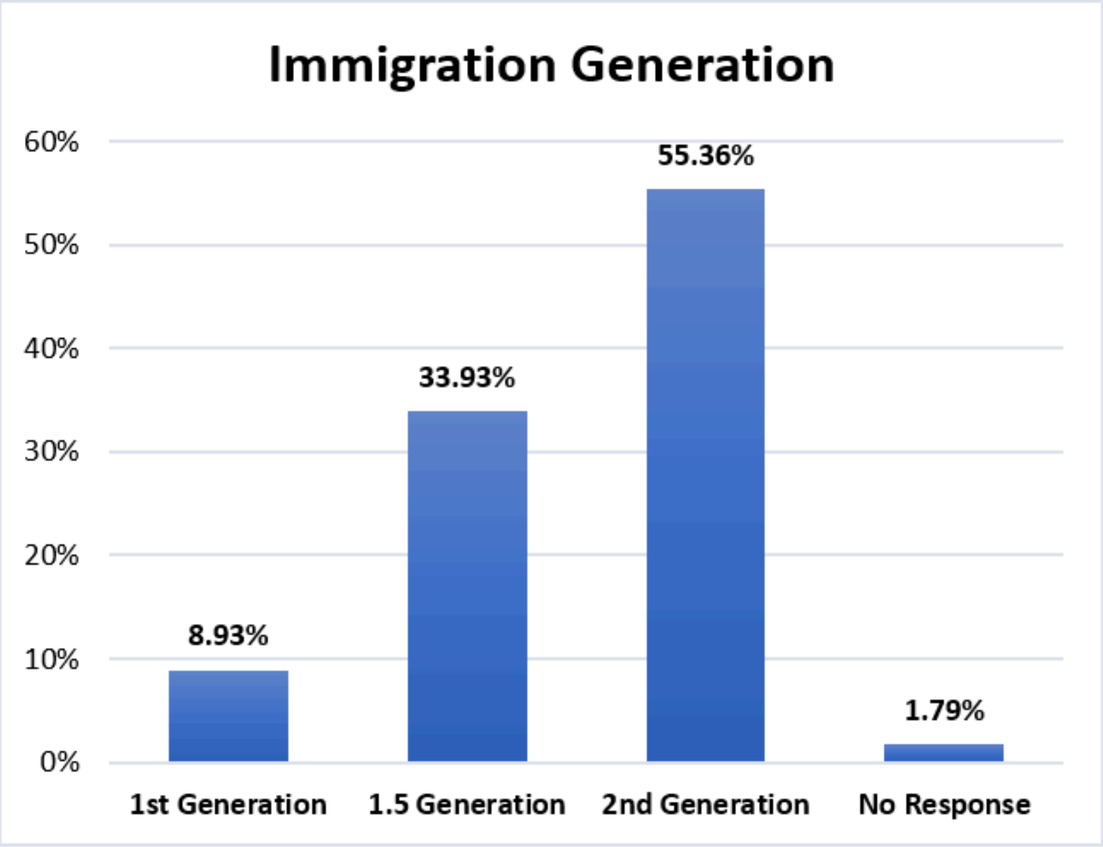
- Participant recruitment: flyers posted around AU's campus, social media, and snowballing.
- Demographic surveys and interviews for this study were conducted either in person or via Zoom, as preferred by the participant.
- Interviews ranged from 30 - 90 minutes.
- IRB-approved project – pseudonyms used
- Researchers conducted interviews, transcribed them, and analyzed them thematically through case studies.

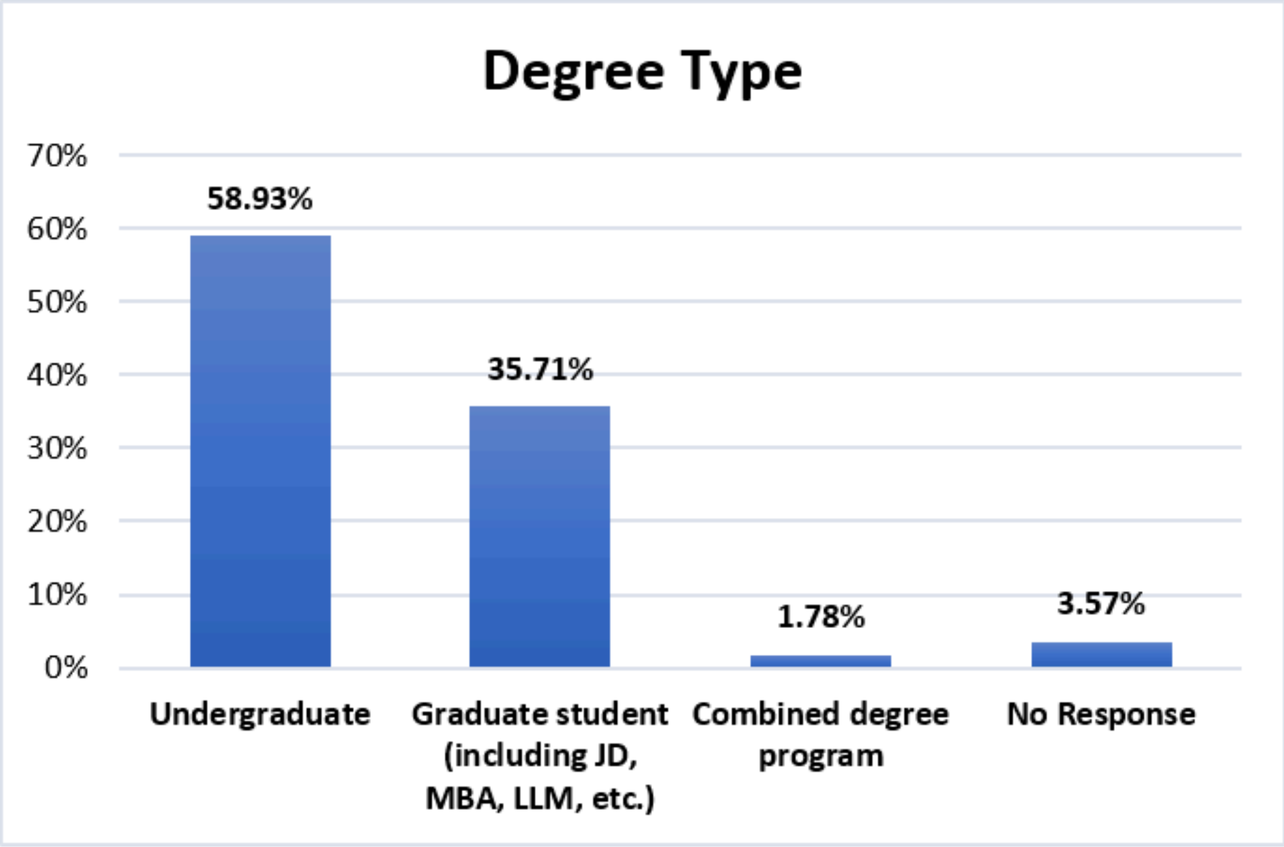
Those who identified as international students were omitted from this sample. Their immigration status impacts their personal and academic life in vastly different ways.

DATA

56 demographic surveys and interviews

- 24 born outside of the U.S. (5–1st Gen, 19–1.5 Gen)
- 31 born in the U.S.






FINDINGS



Cartoon by Galen Moore

LIVING WITH THE THREAT OF DEPORTATION OR FAMILY SEPERATION

Students describe a persistent awareness that they or their family members could be detained or deported at any time--an uncertainty that students are forced to face daily.

Ivy, grad student

“[The immigration officer] like yanked us and slammed us against the metal beds in the detention center... I remember I would sleep in between my mom's legs for warmth, because it was just so cold, and it was just a metal bed, and they didn't want to give us any blankets or any pillows or anything...”

I got really sick in the Detention Center. I got chicken pox, and they didn't give us any treatment or anything, like my mom would have to like steal the salt from the kitchen to bathe me in the salt, so that the inflammation could go down because I was so bad like I got inside my throat, and she was scared that I was going to die because I didn't want to eat anything.”

Clementine, grad student

"After the [2024] election, I spent like a good week just waking up and crying, thinking about what's going to happen to my family... I've just been thinking about, like, what's going to happen if my parents get deported. And if they do, I will have to drop out because they're the only support that I have. So, it's been a lot to take in, even more recently."

For many students, the possibility and anticipation of detention and deportation introduce the IMMEDIATE risk of academic disruption of education and assume financial and caregiving responsibilities.

Jasmine, undergrad student

“I do carry a little bit of fear with me every single day that I might come home, and my parents aren't there, or that if we ever get stopped by the police that, you know, somebody will take my dad away because he has tattoos and he's a relatively buff and brown man... I can't carry myself with confidence.”

Within campus spaces the fear persists; a space that is supposed to be comforting turns students hyper-aware of their surroundings.

The threat of detention and deportation operates as a chronic stressor in students' lives. Not only their emotional well-being but also their educational experiences.

INTERGENERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY & PRESSURE TO SUCCEED

Academic achievement can carry the weight of an entire family's sacrifices.



Hyacinth, undergrad student

"There is like a pressure to succeed. I think externally from my family back in Mexico. Just because I have opportunities that they never really had."

Lily, undergrad student

"I definitely have a lot of pressure on me from my family, from friends back home, from everyone to kind of hold up to this expectation of getting the best grades, graduating with a certain degree, things like that.
So that pressure of doing the best I can is a little bit stressful. Because if I fail a test, my life is over, right? So, the expectations and the pressure on me is definitely a big stress around my life."

- Immigration-impacted students can be harder on themselves because they feel they have greater stakes at hand that go beyond their own goals.

- Navigating an amplified set of stakes, measuring success not only by their own goals but also as a reflection of their family's sacrifices and representation of their whole family.

Petunia, undergrad student

“No matter how tired I am, I always have to remember, like, even if I'm tired, like my parents were more tired and they like sacrificed so much for me to come and have a good education and like a good life here.

So, it's like it's really important to me that I um try my best at like everything I do and try and like uphold my family values because like my parents sacrificed so much for me that I really want to like live up to their sacrifices.”

- Immigration-impacted students can be harder on themselves because they feel they have greater stakes at hand that go beyond their own goals.
- Navigating an amplified set of stakes, measuring success not only by their own goals but also as a reflection of their family’s sacrifices and representation of their whole family.

"having to stress about whether I'm going to be able.... buy shampoo next week or have enough money in my paycheck to buy my ticket home. Those are really constant stressors that really impact me like on a day to day basis."
-Lily, undergrad student

Financial Challenges & Concerns

Financial stress is central to student experiences and identities, directly connected with being immigration-impacted.

- Legal processes create additional financial burden
- Many students worry about being able to cover living expenses and basic necessities
- Many students are able to meet their needs but worry about the impact of losing their status or someone else losing their status or being deported

Delilah, grad student

"Next year, after we know my DACA, [my parents have to] pay money, that they don't have, to renew it.... But still, there's not a real [legal] pathway for me unless it's through marriage. Or I could apply through my brother, but that will take over 20 years."

Willow, undergrad student

“And [my dad] jokes around. We went to San Diego, and he was like, ‘I imagine, a great retirement house right here.’ I'm like, ‘with what money? I haven't graduated yet. Whoa! Wait.’ So, Imma try to give him a house in San Diego. He deserves the world. He sacrificed so much for us. So, I want him to have a good retirement home. I don't know when that's gonna happen when I get a job.”

Students are investing in their academic and professional futures, with the goal of attaining a good job and providing for themselves and their families.

“When it comes to not belonging. I feel like a lot of people on the AU in the age community... are really insensitive. I think it’s just because of a lack of maybe, yeah, finding more knowledge or like educating themselves. But a lot of people. Whenever I tell them that I’m Hispanic or I’m from Cuba, they make a lot of really insensitive comments, or like maybe a really insensitive joke.”
-Lily, undergrad student

Finding Community & Belonging

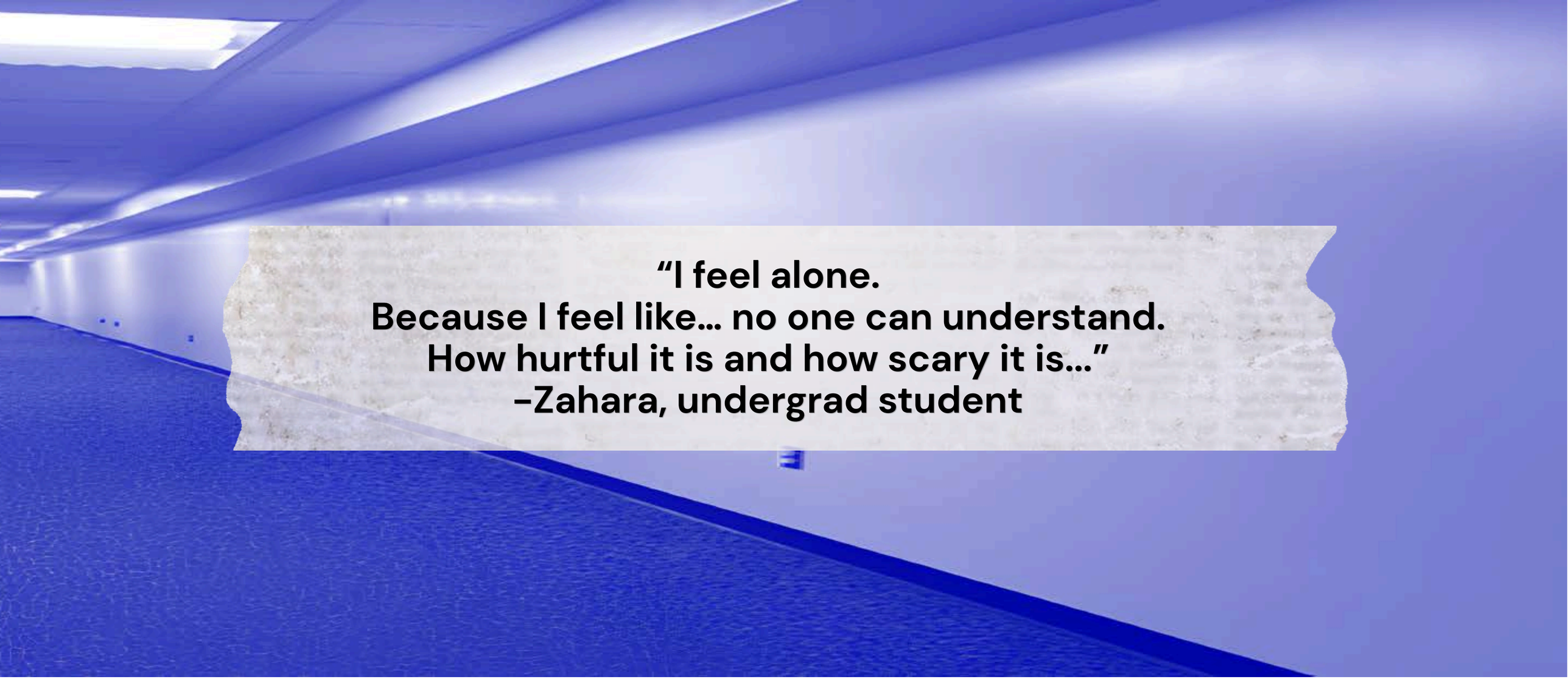
“When I came to AU, I cried everyday for 2 months. There was no one at AU that spoke Spanish, or understood me. The housekeeper on my floor-- I loved her. Sometimes I had to avoid her because everytime we saw each other we would speak for at least an hour.”

-Dahlia, undegrad student

Students on campus have a hard time adjusting to classes. In addition, students also find difficulties navigating their place on a new campus, especially students who struggle to find others who share similar cultures.

“And through those organizations, I do have a sense of belonging. It's people who have similar backgrounds as me, who still share some of our experiences as me, and we often get to converse about it... and just knowing you have someone who's gone through what you've gone through... It allows you to be just a little bit more vulnerable, which I just think is generally a good thing for everybody.
–Aster, undergrad student

Immigration-impacted students find community and sense of belonging on campus.



MENTAL HEALTH

Immigration-related stress intersects with academic and financial pressures.

- Trauma and/or chronic stress
- Unhealthy coping mechanisms

“Maybe I drink a bit more than I should... for a minute it helps me forget, and for a minute I feel happy.”
-Westley, undergrad student

“I'm doing my best to like seek culturally appropriate help. I want to be able to talk about my parents, immigrant experiences and my cultural experiences and like how they've affected my mental health.”
-Iris, undergrad student

Students seek mental health services on campus, but restrictions apply:

- Limited sessions
- Cultural competence

"At the beginning of the second year of my second year, I started using the psychological resources that they have here. So like the therapy, the counseling, and it's been helping quite a bit in terms of managing and planning my days to make sure I can get everything done, and then also have time to deal with my responsibilities."
-Rose, grad student

"So, I'm like trying to think strategically now, like, okay, when can I use it?... After that, those 8 sessions were up, and it was really difficult to find [a therapist] in the DMV area who had availability or was taking in a new client. So, like they said, I could connect you to resources. But it's really hard to actually connect to resources outside of school that you may need."
-Lily, undegrad student

“I wish that AU was more supportive of their immigrant students... I wish there was more of a space for them to feel safe, that they have community, that they have support.”

“Being an immigrant and like I would have liked to received more support and be like hey, like, let's look at other resources or hey, like talked to this office like we want you to do everything you can to stay instead of automatically referring me to defer or to withdraw was really discouraging.”

-Anthea

RECOMMENDATIONS

01

Enhancing Student Resources

Important notices to students in different languages (financial aid notices, etc.). Financial aid, career services, and other student services, DACA and immigration impacted specific counseling.

03

Ensuring Funding for Student-led Initiatives

“There’s a lot of resources for international students... but not really much help at AU for me or people like my family [undocumented and mixed status]. It honestly feels like the university doesn’t really care about us.”

“I definitely do try to make use of the food pantry as much as I can....it has helped a lot”

02

Culturally responsive mental health care

More accessible counseling with culturally competent professionals.

04

A more inclusive campus environment

Cultural competency trainings, inclusive programming, and clear information about discrimination policies.

“What students like me need is acknowledgment… that we are seen, that we are heard, and that there will be people there for us.”
–Westley, undergrad student



THANK YOU

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

Email us at clals@american.edu or olmos@american.edu

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