Resource - Language Guide- Citizenship & Immigration

Citizenship and Immigration are incredibly complex and sensitive topics to understand, and the U.S. immigration system is a complex network. The language we use shapes how we treat people. We can easily harm folx with the phrases we use without even knowing it. How we talk about people also reveals our deeply held explicit and implicit beliefs and perceptions.

Descriptors of immigration status tend to center on and affirm people with citizenship and because of that the language used to describe people's immigration or citizenship status can reinforce stereotypes, dehumanize individuals and groups, render them invisible or hyper visible, and regulate their access to civil and human rights. This centering perpetuates a hierarchy where those without citizenship are "othered" and treated as less than, both in societal perception and in access to rights and resources.

For example, when we use terms like "illegal" or "alien" when referring to residents who are not citizens, we reduce individuals and whole communities to their immigration status while also criminalizing and/or vilifying their existence. It further reinforces narratives that fuel xenophobia and systemic discrimination.

Inclusive language around immigration status should affirm and acknowledge the legitimacy of everyone as human beings, regardless of citizenship. Because it is important to have a sense of "who" or "what" these conversations are about we've cultivated a glossary of immigration related terms for folx to use as a resource. When talking about these issues and when descriptors are relevant, we encourage you to be as specific as possible to eliminate ambiguity and prevent overgeneralizations. Using precise terms that clearly convey your intended meaning, and avoiding coded language or generalizations can be critical to one's identity and "safety".

Note: There is terminology created by the government and there are terms used by the immigrant community. It is important to understand all terms and consider the context and audience you are speaking to when deciding which term is appropriate to use.

Advanced Parole	A special travel authorization for DACA recipients issued by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). It allows individuals to travel outside the United States for authorized reasons, such as education, work, or visiting family, and return lawfully. This is crucial for Deferred Action Childhood Arrival (DACA) students because leaving the country without advance parole would terminate their DACA status. Essentially, it grants them temporary permission to re-enter the U.S. after their trip.

Alien Registration Number/Alien Number (A-Number or A#)	A unique seven-, eight- or nine-digit number assigned to an individual by the Department of Homeland Security.
“Alien” or “Illegal”	As an inclusive ally it is important to denounce the use of degrading terms, such as “alien” and “illegal”, to describe undocumented or unauthorized immigrants because it casts them as inhuman outsiders. “Alien” is a term used in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) and immigration laws to refer to non-citizens, but it should be avoided when/if possible. “Illegal” is a term that is often used to describe immigrants who have not yet obtained legal status. Referring to individuals as “illegal” implies that they have committed a crime(s). Under current U.S. immigration law, entering the United States without inspection or overstaying a visa is not a crime; it is a civil violation. The discourse surrounding this raises the question of the “legality” of colonial settlers’ immigration that was established by conquest. Settlers are people who establish a permanent community in a new place, often displacing the people who were already there. Immigrants are people who move to a new country, usually through a legal process. When you pause to think about how discourse about immigration and "legality" are rooted in historical and systemic contradictions, there is a paradoxical and uneven nature of "legality". The idea of “legality”, especially when applied to immigration, often ignores the historical context of colonialism, where settlers, through conquest and displacement, established societies that then created the very legal frameworks are now use to “police” immigration. This paradox is rarely acknowledged in mainstream discussions. Its uneven application of "legality" as a construct. Settlers, who often arrived uninvited and displaced Indigenous peoples, were never held to the same legal scrutiny that immigrants today face. Meanwhile, immigrants- especially those from historically colonized or marginalized regions, are subjected to strict and often dehumanizing legal processes. This raises critical questions about who gets to define “legality” and “legitimacy” and how these definitions perpetuate colonial power structures, bigotry, xenophobic rhetoric, and hypocrisy.
Agricultural Worker	As a nonimmigrant class of admission, this is an individual coming temporarily to the United States to perform agricultural labor or services, as defined by the secretary of Labor.

Amnesty	A pardon for unlawful status and a path to lawful permanent residence signified by a green card.
Asylee(s)	A Person / people granted asylum under section 208 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA).
Asylum seeker(s)	A person / people seeking international protection. They have left their country of origin and have applied or intend to apply for asylum status.
[Gender based] Asylum Seeker	In the U.S. context, a person / people who request asylum based on violence related to one's own gender. For example, female may request asylum in an effort to escape female genital mutilation, rape, forced marriage, domestic violence, sexual slavery, and many other acts of violence committed against them because of their gender identity.
Asylum	Under U.S. and international law, is permission granted to refugees to remain within the country to which they have fled because they fear persecution in their home country.
Birthright Citizen	Birthright citizenship is the colloquial designation of legal status that you get when you are born in the United States. It's used to describe the legal principle that all people born in the United States, within its borders, are citizens by birth. It's also a constitutional guarantee. It's in the first sentence of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which was added to the Constitution in 1868 and was intended, among other things, to overrule the (Supreme Court's) *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision, saying that people of African descent, whether they were free descendants of slaves or enslaved themselves, could ever be a U.S. citizen.
Citizen	A person / people born in the United States, or in certain territories of the U.S., such as Puerto Rico Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the commonwealth Northern Mariana Islands. Certain persons born abroad are also citizens at birth by acquisition through a citizen parent or parents. One also can become a citizen through derivation of citizenship and naturalization.
Deferred Action Childhood Arrival (DACA)	A program introduced in 2012 to allow undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children, under the age of 16, (known as "Dreamers") to lawfully remain in the United States to live, study, and work without fear of deportation so long as they have no significant criminal record and have graduated high school or college or received a degree equivalent.
Designated School Official (DSO):	The term used by the Department of Homeland Security to refer to the person(s) who administer the "F-1 (Student)" program at a university or college. MWCC's DSO is Marcia Rosbury-Henne, Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management.
Detainee	Someone who is currently detained. As an ally to our students and employees, we believe that dehumanizing language like "detainee" serves only to reinforce the stripping of people in detention of their fundamental human rights. We suggest that using terminology such as "detained

	immigrant/person" or "person in immigration detention" are the best terms, insofar as the discussion is actually related to their detention.
Dreamers	Undocumented youth. This moniker came out of the DREAM Act movement from proposed legislation first introduced in 2001. It recognizes that people brought to the U.S. by their families at a young age should not be penalized for the rest of their lives or relegated to a permanent underclass of American society without access to higher education.
Humanitarian Parole	Is a longstanding executive authority which allows certain individuals to enter the United States, even though they may not meet the definition of a refugee and may not be eligible to immigrate through other channels. Parolees may be admitted temporarily for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit. This includes but is not limited to parole programs for Ukrainians, Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans seeking to temporarily reside in the United States.
Immigrant(s) / Foreign Born	In the U.S. context, a person / people who migrate to a foreign country with the intention of settling there. Any person lawfully (already) in the United States who is not a U.S. citizen, U.S. national, or person admitted under a nonimmigrant category as defined by the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). section 101(a)(15). The terms immigrants and migrants are often used interchangeably but they are not synonymous and can vary. Immigration is the word used to describe the process of a non-citizen settling in another country. To be an immigrant can comprise a wide range of legal statuses, some more legally privileged than others.
Immigration Detention / Prison / Jail	Across the world, the term "immigration detention" is used to refer to the government practice of incarcerating human beings while they wait for a decision on their immigration case. In the U.S. context, most facilities are either literal prisons run by private prison companies or county jails that contract with ICE. When a U.S. Customs and Border Protection official apprehends an immigrant, they are often first brought to a building where they are placed in a cell, cage, or room where the government keeps immigrants at very low temperatures with foil blankets and without warm clothing.
Immigration and Nationality Act (INA)	The law governing U.S. immigration policy.
Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR)	An LPR is an immigrant who has been lawfully accorded the privilege of residing permanently in the United States.
Naturalization	This is the process by which a foreign-born individual becomes a citizen of the United States. To naturalize, immigrants must be at least 18 years old;

	have been lawful permanent residents of the United States for five years (three years if married to a U.S. citizen); demonstrate a basic knowledge of English, American government, and history; and have good moral character.
Nonimmigrant	Nonimmigrants are individuals who are allowed to enter the United States for a specific purpose and for a limited period of time, such as tourists, students, business visitors, diplomats and specialty occupations such as high-tech workers or seasonal agricultural workers. People in this category are in the country legally but only on a temporary basis. Examples: • Students (F-1 visa) • Business visitors or tourists (B1/B2 visas) • Fiancées (K-1 visa) • Individuals granted temporary protected status
Refugee	A person/people fleeing conflict or persecution; all refugees are first asylum seekers
Migrant	There is no one internationally accepted legal definition of a migrant because migration refers to many kinds of human mobility. For the purposes of this document, a migrant is someone who is moving from place to place (within their country or across borders), usually for economic reasons such as seasonal/ temporary work, not synonymous with refugee. A person / people moving away from their usual place of residence for reasons other than conflict, violence, or persecution. The main difference between migrants and immigrants is that immigrants move—usually permanently—from one country to another. As mentioned above, migrants are individuals who move from their homes but can either stay within the borders of their home countries or migrate internationally. Immigrants also go through a set immigration process to move to a new country permanently, while migrants don't necessarily relocate through legal pathways. For many migrants, this leads to an undocumented status. It is important to note that not all migrants are immigrants
Mixed Status [households]	A household in which at least one member is residing legally in the United States and at least one member is not. Often, this includes children born in the United States to unauthorized immigrant parents
Nationality	The country of a person's citizenship or country in which the person is deemed a national.
Naturalized Citizen	A foreign born person / individual who has been granted full rights as a United States citizen other than through birth to a U.S. citizen parent.

Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS)	A Web-based system that the U.S. government uses to maintain information on F and J students who come to the United States for study. Each F and J student has a SEVIS immigration record which reflects their I-20 or DS-2019.
Temporary Protected Status (TPS)	A temporary immigration status granted to nationals of certain countries who are already in the U.S. and who cannot safely return to their home country due to things like war, a natural disaster, and other extraordinary conditions. Some countries include El Salvador, Haiti, Nepal, Honduras, Nicaragua, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.
Undocumented / Unauthorized	A person / people who are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents of the United States, who do not hold a visa to reside in the U.S., and who have not applied for legal residency in the U.S.
Undocumented / Unauthorized / [Immigrant]	In the U.S. context, an individual who has entered the United States without authorization or proper documentation or a person who entered the United States legally but who has fallen "out of status." As an ally, committed to using inclusive and affirming language, "undocumented immigrant" is not ideal nomenclature, we suggest the use of "individual without legal status" for lack of a better term.
United Stated Federal Agencies	DHS: Department of Homeland Security DOS: Department of State USCIS: United States Citizenship and Immigration Services ICE: Immigration and Customs Enforcement CBP: Customs and Border Protection FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigations
VAWA (violence against women) Self-Petitioner	An individual/person who is the victim of severe domestic violence married to or a child of a citizen or LPR who may petition for LPR status without the cooperation of the abusing spouse.

In general, avoid referring to people's immigration status unless contextually relevant and essential. Avoid inaccurate and demeaning terminology and statements, such as that listed below.

Avoid	**Suggested**
alien	immigrant; person; individual without legal status
illegal	undocumented; irregular
anchor baby	child of undocumented immigrant
chain migration	family-based migration (if relevant)
ethnic; exotic; foreign	Do not use to describe people; name the country of origin instead
natural; naturalization	a void except in reference to US immigration law
host country	country of destination; destination country

home country; sending country	country of origin

Things to avoid saying…	**Why?**	**What to do or say instead…**
I noticed you have missed several classes and haven't been on campus lately, is this because you are undocumented?	Although perhaps well intended, this question assumes a student holds an identity they may not. You must question where that assumption is coming from. Is it their skin color? Not all undocumented students look the same. Never directly ask a student about their status. Allow them to share for themselves.	I noticed you haven't been in class or on campus lately. Is everything okay? What kind of support do you need?
Oh wow, you are undocumented, etc.? I never would have guessed.	You should question yourself, what am I basing this assumption off of? Skin color, perceived socio-economic status? Not all undocumented, etc., individuals are people of color or even look the same and not all are from low-income families/communities. Over generalization reinforces stereotypes.	Thank you for sharing your identity with me. What kind of support do you need? Are you finding community on campus?
You are so brave!	Although the phrase sounds supportive, it is tokenizing the student's experience. It assumes that they are the person that made the decision to come to the U.S. when often they did not have a choice in the matter. Yes, the student may have overcome challenges to be here, but we do not want to sound patronizing.	It sounds like you have overcome a lot in your life.