

Supporting Students Experiencing Immigration Status Challenges



At Viterbo University, our Catholic Franciscan mission calls us to honor the sacred dignity of every person, to walk with those who are vulnerable, and to cultivate a community grounded in compassion, justice, and care for the whole person. As federal immigration policies and enforcement practices continue to shift, we recognize that these changes may create fear, uncertainty, and distress for members of our campus community. Additionally, we are also committed to following all applicable laws and cooperating appropriately with law enforcement agencies should we be approached to assist them in some way.

In the spirit of accompaniment, this resource has been developed to support faculty and staff as they respond to the emotional, mental, and academic challenges students may experience related to immigration stress. This document offers guidance rooted in care and solidarity, highlighting common challenges, their potential impact on student well-being and learning, and practical strategies for responding with compassion, discretion, and cultural sensitivity.

Our goal is to ensure that students know they are not alone, and that Viterbo University remains a place of belonging, support, and hope.

UNDERSTANDING IMMIGRATION STATUS TERMINOLOGY

Undocumented or Unauthorized

These terms refer to individuals born outside the United States who are not U.S. citizens and do not currently have recognized legal immigration status. This may include students who:

- Entered the United States without inspection or with fraudulent documents
- Entered legally on a temporary visa but later violated the terms of that status
- Currently have or previously held Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status

The terms “undocumented” or “unauthorized” are preferred over “illegal,” as they are more accurate and less stigmatizing. When possible, focus on a person’s status rather than using it as a defining label (e.g., “a student without legal status” rather than “an illegal student”).

Mixed-Status Families

Includes individuals within the same household who hold different citizenship or immigration statuses. Examples include:

- Parents who are undocumented with U.S.-born citizen children
- Families where one spouse is a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident and the other is undocumented
- Households with a combination of citizens, permanent residents, undocumented individuals, or individuals with temporary legal status

WHAT FACULTY AND STAFF MAY ENCOUNTER WHEN WORKING WITH STUDENTS

Silence as a Protective Strategy

Silence may be a survival strategy for students navigating immigration-related stress. To avoid unintentionally revealing sensitive information or exposing themselves or family members to risk, students may limit participation or avoid conversations that could lead to questions about citizenship or legal status.

Disclosure of Immigration Status

When a student chooses to disclose their immigration status, the response they receive is critical. Students cannot predict whether an educator’s response will be supportive or harmful. A compassionate, non-judgmental response can build trust and encourage help-seeking; a dismissive or reactive response may discourage future disclosure and support.

HOW IMMIGRATION-RELATED STRESS CAN AFFECT STUDENTS

Mental Health Impacts

- Chronic anxiety, fear, or depression related to family safety or potential deportation
- Prolonged stress that may present as hypervigilance, withdrawal, or emotional dysregulation
- International students may experience heightened anxiety related to visa compliance, travel, or reentry into the U.S.

Academic Challenges

- Difficulty concentrating, leading to declines in academic performance
- Missed classes due to family emergencies or fear of leaving home
- International students may feel pressure to maintain full-time enrollment despite mental health concerns due to visa requirements

Social Isolation

- Fear of stigma or misunderstanding may prevent students from sharing concerns
- Mixed-status families may experience exclusion or marginalization
- International students may face cultural, language, or social barriers that compound isolation

Behavioral and Emotional Signs Faculty, Staff, and Peers May Notice

- Withdrawal from academic or social activities
- Declining academic performance
- Heightened anxiety or vigilance in class
- Physical complaints such as headaches or fatigue
- Emotional outbursts or regressive behaviors
- Reluctance to engage in discussions or events related to immigration
- Hesitation to participate in travel, off-campus activities, or study abroad programs

HOW FACULTY AND STAFF CAN SUPPORT STUDENTS

Create a Safe and Trusting Environment

- Communicate clearly that all students are valued and supported
- Foster inclusive classrooms and offices
- Submit a [CARE Report](#)
- Connect students with the campus, community, and legal resources listed on the [Viterbo Cares website](#).

Practice Active and Compassionate Listening

- Allow students to share concerns at their own pace
- Validate their experiences without making assumptions about immigration status

Offer Practical Support

- Refer students to the [Counseling Services](#), [Campus Ministry](#), our [Dean of Students](#), or other appropriate campus resources
- Share “[Know Your Rights](#)” information
- Reassure students about confidentiality and FERPA protections

Use Respectful Language

- Use non-stigmatizing terminology such as “undocumented” or “unauthorized”

Be Patient and Flexible

- Recognize that stress may affect attendance or academic performance
- When possible, offer flexibility, extensions, or alternative arrangements

Collaborate Across Campus

- Work with campus partners to build a coordinated support network
- Participate in or promote professional development related to immigration stress and student well-being

Student Safety and Support

- Share “[Know Your Rights](#)” resources
- Share general volunteer opportunities [here](#)
- Check out local trainings or education resources to assist in supporting students (like Bystander Intervention Training) through organizations such as [Right to Be](#) or the [Franciscan Spirituality Center](#)
- Encourage students to develop personal and family safety plans
- Point to legal resources available on the [Viterbo Cares website](#)
- Use the one-sheet document to help educate yourself and others about what to do if federal enforcement agencies arrive on campus
- Be sure to review FERPA policies and encourage other staff to know and understand this information as well; Viterbo generally cannot release non-directory information about students (including information about their immigration status) without a court order or subpoena
- If law enforcement agencies or officials come to campus, Campus Safety serves as the primary point of contact to ensure compliance with legal requirements while prioritizing student safety and privacy. Faculty and staff should immediately contact Campus Safety at 608-796-3911 if approached by agents or asked for student information.

LAW ENFORCEMENT & FEDERAL AGENT INTERACTION FAQs

Viterbo University & La Crosse Police Department

The following information addresses common questions about Viterbo University Campus Safety, interactions with the La Crosse Police Department (LCPD), and federal immigration enforcement agencies. This guidance is intended to help students, faculty, and staff understand their rights, responsibilities, and the support available to help maintain a safe and inclusive campus environment.

If I am a victim of a crime, is the La Crosse Police Department automatically notified?

No. If you are a victim of a crime, the La Crosse Police Department is not automatically notified. Viterbo Campus Safety will assist you if you choose to file a police report. There are limited circumstances where notification is required by law, such as mandatory reporting obligations, emergency situations, or immediate safety concerns.

If I am accused of or involved in committing a crime, is the La Crosse Police Department automatically notified?

No. Viterbo Campus Safety does not automatically notify the La Crosse Police Department if someone is accused of a crime. Notification depends on the nature of the incident, whether mandatory reporting laws apply, whether there is an immediate threat to safety, and whether a victim chooses to file a police report. In such cases, Campus Safety can assist the reporting party with contacting law enforcement.

If the La Crosse Police Department is notified, can I have a representative with me?

Yes. You have the right against self-incrimination, which means you are not required to speak with law enforcement unless you choose to. You may request to have a representative present during interactions with law enforcement, such as an advocate, advisor, or legal counsel, depending on the circumstances.

Are federal agents or law enforcement officials allowed on campus?

Federal agencies and law enforcement have limited authority on university campuses. In general, these agencies may not enter non-public areas of Viterbo University property—such as residence halls, classrooms, offices, or staff-only spaces—without appropriate legal documentation, such as a valid judicial (court-issued) warrant.

What would happen if federal agents or law enforcement came to campus?

If federal agents or law enforcement officials were to come to campus, Viterbo Campus Safety would assess the situation and follow established University protocols. The University would review any legal documentation presented and respond in a manner that complies with the law while prioritizing the safety, privacy, and rights of the campus community. Campus Safety would serve as the primary points of contact and will initiate further communication with University Leadership.

What would happen if federal agents or law enforcement requested access to campus?

If federal agents or law enforcement officials requested access to campus, Campus Safety would require appropriate legal authority—such as a valid judicial warrant—before allowing entry into non-public spaces. Campus Safety would also notify appropriate University officials to ensure that proper procedures are followed.

Will Campus Safety protect me from federal agents or law enforcement?

Viterbo Campus Safety is committed to the safety and well-being of all members of the University community. While Campus Safety cannot obstruct federal authorities or law enforcement acting within their lawful authority, they will ensure that all required legal procedures are followed and that University policies, privacy protections, and individual rights are upheld to the fullest extent permitted by law.

FERPA CONSIDERATIONS

Under FERPA, the University generally may not release non-directory student information including information related to immigration status without a valid court order or subpoena. Any such requests should be referred to designated university officials for review and response.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Counseling Services at Viterbo University are available to support students experiencing immigration-related stress and can assist with referrals to campus and community resources as appropriate.

IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students may face unique challenges related to visa requirements, travel restrictions, employment authorization, or changes in federal policy. Viterbo University staff who support international students actively monitor guidance from federal agencies, and collaborate with professional networks to remain informed of best practices.

International students are encouraged to connect with the [International and ESL Program Coordinator](#) for individualized guidance and up-to-date information related to their status.

