



2021

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Brianna R. Ramirez

University of California, San Diego, br030@ucsd.edu

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Recommended Citation

Ramirez, Brianna R. (2021) "Racist Nativism in the College Access Experiences of Undocumented Latinx Students," *Journal of College Access*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol6/iss2/6>

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Racist Nativism in the College Access Experiences of Undocumented Latinx Students



Authored by
Brianna R. Ramirez (*University of California, San Diego*)

ABSTRACT

This study explores undocumented Latinx students' college access experiences through a racist nativist framework to understand how the ideologies of racism and xenophobia underlie the possibilities of pursuing college aspirations. This article describes five particular ways in which racist nativism underlies undocumented Latinx college access experiences. These included 1) systematic lack of institutional college knowledge, 2) restricted college outreach, 3) instilling fear in pursuing college aspirations, 4) discriminatory financial aid policies and practices, and 5) contradictory rhetoric of "deservingness" of educational and life opportunities. This paper supports an understanding of undocumented Latinx student educational processes at the intersection of systems of marginality, as the practices, policies, and structures in higher education are microcosms of larger societal ideologies and inequities.

Keywords: undocumented students, Latinx, college access

Undocumented students are two percent of all enrollment in United States (U.S.) higher education. In 2019, an estimated 454,000 undocumented students were enrolled in college (New American Economy, 2020). The undocumented community's future is more vulnerable than ever, as Donald Trump's presidential administration implemented anti-immigrant policy that threatens immigrants' opportunities and existence in the U.S. With this overt racist nativist context (Pérez Huber, 2016), it is

necessary to explore how undocumented students experience educational processes at the intersection of systems of marginality, as higher education is a microcosm of societal ideologies and inequities. I situate undocumented Latinx students' college access experiences within a racist nativism framework to argue the challenges undocumented students face in higher education manifest from racist nativist ideologies and climate in the U.S. A racist nativist theoretical framework uncovers how racism, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant rhetoric and practices intersect and underlie the lives of Immigrants of Color (Pérez Huber et al., 2008).

Pursuing Higher Education

As undocumented students begin to develop their post-secondary plans, immigration status becomes particularly important (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011). It is not until students begin to prepare to pursue college that immigration status creates evident disparities in Latinx students' educational trajectories, with many undocumented students unable to pursue higher education because of their immigration status (Abrego, 2006). Gonzales (2011) named this critical time



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as the "dynamic period" when undocumented youth are between 16-18. In the "dynamic period," undocumented youth prepare to transition into a lifestyle limited by their immigration status (Gonzales, 2011). Gonzales described this transition from leading "legal to illegal" lives as undocumented youth leave the open school system only to face restrictive institutions that control their adult lives.

Research on college-bound students has found undocumented students need access to college-bound resources as they pursue higher education (Garcia, 2013; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012). Yet, undocumented students cannot access most support services because of their immigration status (Pérez Huber, 2010) or lack of appropriate institutional resources (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012). Certain services, such as college prep programs designed for first-generation and low-income students, are restricted from servicing undocumented students (Garcia, 2013). Another barrier is that many counselors and school personnel lack training concerning immigration status and college access and, therefore, cannot support undocumented students' aspirations for higher education (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012). Existing literature on college preparation demonstrates that institutional agents (Garcia, 2013; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012), parents and family (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012; Tierney et al., 2005), and peers (Enriquez, 2011; Garcia, 2013; Tierney et al., 2005) are essential sources of information, encouragement, and financial support as undocumented students are restricted from

accessing federal funded sources of college outreach and preparation.

Systems and Structures of Marginality Shape College Experiences

Anti-immigrant ideology shapes different U.S. contexts, including immigration policy (De Genova, 2004) and educational institutions (Morales, Herrera, & Murry, 2009; Pérez Huber, 2010). Immigration legislation and the politics of citizenship exclude and dehumanize the undocumented community (Chavez, 2013; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). Undocumented students' lives and educational opportunities are also shaped and restricted by immigration policy (Gildersleeve, Rumann, & Mondragón, 2010; Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Rincón, 2008). Historical mistreatment and racist immigration policy have targeted Immigrants of Color (Galindo & Vigil, 2006). The fight for educational equity continues as states pass laws to expand undocumented immigrants' rights, which are undermined by federal legislation (Rincón, 2008).

Few studies have explored undocumented Latinx students' college experiences that consider how forms of marginality shape this critical time in their lives. Undocumented students experience this anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiment in higher education. Muñoz (2013) explored undocumented Mexicana students' experiences and found

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students experience financial stressors due to discriminatory financial aid policies that restrict federal aid to undocumented students and the lack of institutional understanding of their financial needs. Students also experienced anxiety from navigating the campus and political climate, as their lives and educational opportunities are shaped by policy and rhetoric around immigration on and off-campus. Muñoz and Maldonado (2012) critique previous theorizations of college persistence by centering the experiences of undocumented, Mexican-born women. It was clear from the student counterstories that race, culture, immigration status, gender, and language shaped undocumented Mexican higher education experiences. Students navigated English dominance in higher education, the perpetuity of their outsider status, and traditional gender ideologies concerning women and education.

Theoretical Framework

I address a gap in undocumented student research by situating undocumented students' college access experiences within the intersecting systems of marginality that shape their everyday lives. To do so, I draw from a racist nativism framework to argue the challenges undocumented students face in higher education are manifestations of the racist nativist ideologies and context in the U.S. Research on nativism or fear of the "foreigner" argues historical mistreatment and racist immigration policies have racialized the

"foreigner" to target Immigrants of Color (De Genova, 2004; Galindo & Vigil, 2006; Pérez et al., 2010; Pérez Huber, 2010). Stemming from Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) that uncovers how race and racism shape the lives of Latinx people, racist nativism understands how anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia, and colonization is a form of racism in the U.S. that has historically framed Black, Indigenous, and People of Color as "foreigners" and perpetual outsiders to the lands the U.S. currently occupies (Pérez Huber et al., 2008). Racist nativism can be experienced in the form of microaggressions, "systemic, everyday forms of racist nativism that are subtle, layered, and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults directed at Students of Color based on race and perceived immigration status" (Pérez Huber, 2011). Racist nativist microaggressions are daily acts of violence and stigmatization that construct students as "non-native" and remind students of their status as perpetual outsiders in the U.S.

I build on racist nativism applications to the undocumented Latinx experience (Muñoz, 2013; Muñoz and Maldonado, 2012; Muñoz et al., 2018; Pérez Huber, 2010; Pérez Huber, 2011) by exploring racist nativism in undocumented student college access and transition. In situating this study within a racist nativist framework, I contribute to an understanding of college processes rooted in the systems of marginality that undocumented students experience in their lives. In doing so, this scholarship situates

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broader ideologies and institutions as contributing to the upholding and reproduction of infringed rights, limited resources, and restricted higher education opportunities that undocumented students encounter. To contribute to a just narrative about undocumented Latinx students' educational experiences, a framework that situates college experiences within intersecting marginalities is necessary (Muñoz, 2013; Pérez Huber, 2010).

Methods and Analysis

This study takes a qualitative approach to capture a "holistic account" (Creswell, 2013, pg. 186) of undocumented students' college access experiences. Interviews brought insight into how students experience and navigate accessing and transitioning to higher education. A face-to-face, one-on-one interview was conducted with each participant. These interviews were semi-structured, meaning the interview was guided by core questions, but functioned more like a conversation, allowing for flexibility in the interview process. The interviews lasted an hour and a half and were audio recorded. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and were then analyzed.

I captured undocumented student experiences as they accessed and transitioned from high school to college. Each student identified as undocumented, Latinx, graduated from a low-resourced, public high school in California, and were in their first

year of college in California. Students were recruited through purposive sampling and snowball sampling was employed (Creswell, 2013). With purposive sampling, participants are selected because they will help the researcher gain insight into the experiences of a specific community (Creswell, 2013). After obtaining IRB approval, I recruited by conducting a purposive sample of undocumented youth I met while working as a college advisor at various high schools in Southern California. After interviewing the students, I recruited through purposive sampling, I employed snowball sampling by asking each participant to share the recruitment flyer with two or three of their peers that met the eligibility requirements. Participants recruited through snowball sampling initiated contact with me if they were interested in scheduling an interview. The first ten participants recruited were interviewed.

This study includes 10 undocumented Latinx identified students across the public higher education systems in California. During data collection, students were in their first year at a California college or university. This presented the opportunity to learn about their recent experiences in navigating the college access process and navigating their first year in higher education. Table 1 describes the demographic information of the participants, including their age at migration to the United States. As indicated in the table, all students provided a pseudonym of their choice that would promote confidentiality of their names and identities.

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Table 1.
Participant Demographic Information

Participant (pseudonym)	Enrolled in system of higher education*	Country of Birth	Age at Migration to United States
Graciela	CSU	El Salvador	9 years old
Maria	UC	Mexico	6 years old
Natalia	CSU	Mexico	8 years old
Dianna	CCC	Mexico	9 years old
Jessica	CCC	Mexico	1st: 3 years old 2nd: 11 years old
Christopher	CCC	Mexico	4 years old
Hector	CCC	Mexico	6 years old
Alicia	CCC	Mexico	3 years old
Susan	CSU	El Salvador	5 years old
Marco	CSU	Mexico	7 years old

*CSU: California State University, UC: University of California, CCC: California Community College.

The experiences of the 10 students in this sample provide insight how racist nativism is present in college access experiences of this population of students that are marginalized by race and construction of illegality. The sample is small compared to the large undocumented community in the United States (New American Economy, 2020). Each individual has their own unique experience and story that may not be captured in the stories of the undocumented students in this study. The youth in this study also reside in California, which is one of the states with the largest undocumented population, yet undocumented students reside throughout the country (New American Economy, 2020). Because of the impact of state policies regarding immigration and education, the

experiences of these participants may not apply to the different realities of undocumented youth in other states. Yet, as a qualitative study, the findings of this research are not intended to be generalizable (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to the entire undocumented community and instead to provide insight from the lives of undocumented students and the underlying racist nativism they experience in their college access processes. The interviews were thematically coded for emergent patterns within, across, and between each student experience. The first cycle of coding, initial coding, examined the interviews and compared for similarities and differences within and between interviews (Saldaña, 2013). In the second cycle of coding, focus coding allowed for identification of the "most frequent" or "significant" codes

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developed during the first cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2013, g. 213). With focus coding, the researcher develops major categories or themes and establishes the data's patterns and significant findings. A Chicana feminist epistemology informed the student interview data analysis as I made meaning of the data from my Chicana cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) as the oldest daughter of Mexican immigrants and a mixed-status extended family. Cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) provides space for Chicana/Latina scholars to bring our journeys and histories, educational experiences, research training, and experiences of marginality to our research. Cultural intuition argues that as Chicana researchers, we possess a theoretical sensitivity for understanding how systems of oppression shape the Latinx community's experiences because of our own lived experiences and educational institutions in the margins (Delgado Bernal, 1998). In doing so, my cultural intuition is braided throughout the analysis and findings of this research.

Findings

The racist nativist theoretical framework supports an understanding of the college access processes experienced by undocumented Latinx students situated within the systems of marginality that underlie and shape their everyday lives. There were five ways in which racist nativism underlined the college access experiences of undocumented Latinx students. These

included 1) systematic lack of institutional college knowledge, 2) restricted college outreach, 3) instilled fear in pursuing college aspirations, 4) discriminatory financial aid policies and practices, and 5) contradicting rhetoric of "deservingness" of opportunities. Each of these is discussed with examples from student interviews.

Systematic Lack of Institutional College Knowledge

As first in their families to pursue higher education, students highlighted the centrality of seeking support to learn about college information, obtain advice about their college options, receive guidance with submitting their college applications, and begin developing an understanding of financial aid opportunities. Yet, each student was confronted with an institutional lack of awareness and understanding about college opportunities and the college application process. Many counselors and teachers did not possess training concerning immigration status and college access and could not support students in pursuing their higher education aspirations. Some teachers even reproduced their own racist nativist biases or misunderstandings. This was Maria's experience when she was in high school. Maria, a biology major at a University of California (UC) campus, was in Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) that aims to prepare high school students for college. In this class, Maria experienced racist nativism when her AVID teacher told her that students born outside the U.S. are ineligible to attend college. Maria explained:

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I was in the AVID program, I felt shut down in class. Can you believe the teacher said in front of the class that I can't go to college since I wasn't born here? She said undocumented people can't go to college! I didn't even say I was undocumented; she went there straight from when I asked if people not born in the country can go to college, and she said students like me couldn't go to college. I was shut down after that, and I wasn't the only student not born here (in the U.S.) in the class. I know that for sure.

Maria described experiencing a racist nativist microaggression in her 11th grade AVID classroom when her teacher assumed she was not born in the U.S. and labeled her undocumented for asking if students born outside the U.S. can attend college. Even though the AVID teacher was unaware Maria was not born in the U.S., the teacher ascribed "non-native" status to Maria because her question fit the teacher's assumption that Latinx folks are undocumented immigrants and outsiders to the U.S. The teacher also outed Maria's undocumented status to her entire class. This AVID teacher provided misinformation about college and marginalized Maria and the other immigrant students in her classroom. This structural and limited awareness of college opportunities for undocumented students across schools is a form of institutional racist nativism students navigate and must overcome to pursue their aspirations for higher education.

Racist nativism is also present in the scant availability of culturally and linguistically relevant information for students and their families. Students navigated the college access

as part of mixed-status and undocumented families, most primarily Spanish speaking. Marcela, a psychology major at a UC campus, described how she shared financial aid information with her family:

I had to tell my mom and dad everything about college. As I was learning, I tried to show them too. At first, my mom and dad didn't want me to apply and put all my information on the applications, and then when I went to the financial aid night at school, I came back with all the information. I felt better, and so did my parents about it.

Marcela's experience demonstrates how undocumented students shared their knowledge about college access with parents. In this example, Marcela discussed confidentiality and the financial aid process with her parents to reassure them the information they provide on applications is safe and critical for her to receive financial support to pay for college. For many students, this required translating college websites, brochures, and handouts into Spanish to make them accessible to their families. Students take on this labor because their families are central to this educational experience, yet racist nativism embedded in rigid availability and accessibility of college knowledge structurally restricts families from this process. The lack of dissemination of critical college information that is culturally and linguistically accessible to undocumented students and their families is reflective of the inferior and marginalized position of undocumented people in the U.S. This

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indicates undocumented students' educational opportunities and futures are not considered priority or foundational college information for higher education institutions, schools, and all entities in the college access application process.

Restricted College Outreach

With the limited college resources at most under-resourced high schools, college outreach and preparation programs play a critical role in disseminating information and guidance for college applications. Students have a heightened need to access college resources through outreach because of limited resources and information available at their high schools. Undocumented students are restricted from accessing the majority of these resources because of their immigration status, as certain services, such as federal college prep programs designed for first-generation and low-income students, are restricted from servicing undocumented students (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012). Jessica, a public health major in a California State University (CSU) campus, explained why she did not have support during the college application process:

Just because, like in ninth and tenth grade, I was shut down, I tried to get into a college program they had at the college center, and they told me I couldn't because I'm undocumented. Although by my senior year, they (college center counselors) were a little bit more accepting and comprehensible, like I still had that fear like oh, what if they do that again, you know? So like I would never try to get support anymore because I

was shut down. I went in there (the college center) like three times, and they shut me down, so I was like, you know what, I'm just not going to go in there anymore, because every time I would go in there, I would come out crying. I don't want to feel like that anymore, so I just did everything myself by my senior year.

Jessica attempted to access college resources from outreach staff during her 9th and 10th-grade years in high school and was turned away for being undocumented. As a result, Jessica protected herself from further victimization and did not seek support from college supports when it was her time to apply to college. Applying to college was isolating for Jessica, who experienced this process without the support of college outreach programs, a large part of college preparatory services available at her low-resourced high school. Jessica's experience demonstrates that exclusion from college outreach and support can be violent and painful for students as seeking support could result in victimization and impact future support seeking behaviors. Restricted access to college preparation resources shows the lack of federal funding and investment in the undocumented immigrant community in the U.S., reinforcing racist nativist beliefs and opportunity structures.

Fear in Pursuing College Aspirations

Systems of marginality underlie undocumented students' higher education experiences as they matriculate into higher education within a context of constantly changing policy and processes and a

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xenophobic political and social climate. Students described how education processes and hostile anti-immigrant context resulted in heightened fear in their families about applying to higher education during their college access process. The Trump presidential administration explicitly targeted and acted against People of Color, Latinx people, and immigrant communities since campaigning for the 2016 election. The Trump administration's rhetoric has been racially charged, targeting immigrants and People of Color and resulting in fear and anxiety for the immigrant community. Marco migrated to the U.S. from México at the age of 7 and attended a CSU as an anthropology major. Marco described his outlook on Trump and the current political context in the U.S.:

It just scares me with Donald Trump. At first, I was like, "Nobody's going to vote for this guy." And then we start hearing he is winning the Republican vote in the primaries. I was like, there's people out there who believe in this guy? They believe in everything he says. Like the whole immigrants are criminals, and he wants to deport everyone. And at first, I was scared, but now I'm like everyone's scared. I have friends born here, but their parents aren't documented; they're scared too. I mean, it's not surprising that there's people out there that believe in what he says.

Marco expressed the additional fear the presidential administration has produced within the immigrant community. Marco is cognizant of anti-immigrant sentiment throughout the country and the threats to his family's presence and community's success.

The racist nativist sentiment has shaped how families and parents feel as they navigate access to higher education. Students shared that pursuing college caused fear for parents and families because college applications required invasive and sensitive information. Students were concerned about confidentiality and their family's safety. Graciela migrated from El Salvador at the age of 9 and was attending a CSU. Graciela shared insight into the fear applying to college within the racist nativist context caused in her family:

For college applications, everything was so new to me. It was okay for me to put all my information down because I knew it was going to be for college, but my parents, I had to talk to them and explain everything to have their information on there. Yeah, my mom, at first she wasn't okay with me putting all her information out there about the taxes and all that stuff because they feel it's not confidential and they can give her information away. I had to explain to her, this is what is going to pay for my college, and after I started explaining it to her more, as I was understanding and hearing from school, I was also telling her this is what's gonna happen, this is how you are going to help me with this, so yeah they got more comfortable with it after a while, but I had to explain it to them how it was going to be.

Graciela shared her knowledge about financial aid with her mom to reassure her the information they provide on applications is safe and critical for her to receive financial support. Graciela's perspective demonstrates how students shared critical college with their families to address the fear, stress, and

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anxiety the racist nativist climate and policies in the U.S. cause to their families. Some of the central concerns within their families included confidentiality and safety, college options, moving away from home, financial aid, and expected family contributions. These topics caused distress and fear in their families due to the racist nativist policies, rhetoric, and practices within the U.S. and college access.

Discriminatory Financial Aid Policies and Practices

Federal financial aid is inaccessible to undocumented students, including California students who qualify for state financial aid through Assembly Bill 540 (AB540) and those with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) at the federal level. Students shared the impact of restricted financial aid access and even the complications they experienced when accessing state-level college funding. These restrictions and challenges result from racist nativist ideologies that frame Immigrants of Color as undeserving of federal investment to pursue higher education. Students experience racist nativist financial aid policies and practices through the insufficient funds to cover educational expenses. Hector attended a community college and was required to pay for most of his educational expenses by working multiple jobs because financial aid did not cover them. Hector described his frustration with this situation:

I have little financial aid. I'm hoping next year they have some more for me. I mean, I feel angry, I was disappointed I got very little. You know, I have to work more to achieve what others have for free. That makes me pretty angry. I'm working to pay for school, and at some point in first semester, it was pretty crazy. I had school from 8:30 to 2:30, and then I went to my other job at a high school. I'd be there from 3:30 to 5:30. Then from there, I'd go to the private tutoring job I have, which is from 7:30 to 8:00. I'd be getting home Mondays thru Thursdays around 9:00. Then Fridays and Saturdays, I would go to like a construction job. In terms of working, that's both mentally and just physically hard. Every Sunday, I was drained.

Hector was a full-time college student while also balancing three jobs to ensure he would cover his educational and household expenses. He described being emotionally and physically exhausted as a result of work and school. Undocumented students continue to be restricted from obtaining federal financial aid, making educational costs a challenge for many students. Limited financial aid also impacted students' college choice, such as in Alicia's experience. Alicia attends a community college as a biology major and aspires to be a veterinarian. She shared that she was accepted to various CSU's as a biology major but decided to attend a community college because of restrictive financial aid policies:

The financial stuff made an impact. Humboldt was my dream school. I wanted to go there so bad, and I got accepted, and I was so happy, but then I found out they weren't giving me enough money,

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and it's far away, and it was going to be expensive to go there, and I kind of knew it was unrealistic. I had to change my plans. I kind of had to give that up. I don't think it will happen even if I transfer once I saw they weren't giving me much. I'll have to transfer to a closer school I can commute to.

Alicia believes she will not transfer to her dream school because financial aid will not cover housing expenses at the university. Alicia demonstrates that even if students are eligible and admitted to universities, they often do not have the opportunity to attend those campuses because of discriminatory financial aid policies. The restricted access to federal student aid is a form of racist nativism undocumented students experience. Racist nativism treats students as perpetual foreigners and outsiders in the U.S., framing them as unworthy of federal investment in their pursuit of higher education.

Contradicting Rhetoric of “Deservingness” of Educational and Life Opportunities

The college access processes of undocumented Latinx students are surrounded by the racist nativist rhetoric present on a local, national, and societal level. Students highlighted the rhetoric around deservingness as they experienced questions and challenges to their right to access higher education. Racist nativism argues that U.S. society is rooted in upholding white dominance, which situates white people as entitled to resources, opportunities, and hence, a higher education (Pérez Huber et al., 2008). This narrative of deservingness is also upheld when the media, politicians, and

educators construct differences between students and their undocumented parents and elders. This framed students as victims of immigration and situate parents as the perpetrators of migration and the obstacles their children face.

Students also experienced policy contradictions through the messages and labels thrust upon different members of the undocumented community. Most of the students were part of mixed-status families, including U.S.-born siblings, DACA beneficiaries, and undocumented relatives who were restricted from qualifying for DACA. Because of the framing of policy, this sent contradictory messages of deservingness within their families. When asked about the limitations of DACA, Hector shared:

I'm protected with DACA, but in terms of my mom not having it, she's still doing everything that she can, she's working. She's doing everything she can to succeed, but I don't understand why she can't benefit from the same things like me, you know? I am a good person, and she is also a good person and has done everything she could to succeed and take care of us. She is why I get to be in college and go to school. She could probably do more for us, if she also had the opportunity.

Hector shared that his mother is a “good person” that has always invested in her children’s futures. As a single mother, she works multiple jobs to provide for Hector and his younger sister. Like many of the students, Hector was concerned his mother was

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restricted from opportunities he now has due to DACA. Policy is developed to protect and benefit individuals whom society deems as worthy of investment, restricting community members labeled “undeserving” or “unworthy” from opportunities from these benefits. Hector is confronted with policy that categorizes his mother as “undeserving,” but he challenges this when describing his mother as successful and hardworking. Hector attributes his success to his mother’s efforts, making him only eligible for these policies in part because of his mother’s investment in his future. The limitations and restrictions of policy shaped the students’ contradictory and complex understanding of U.S. opportunity structures. This rhetoric criminalizes parents and situates only specific immigrants as “deserving” of educational and life opportunities (Abrego et al., 2020). When experiencing the college access processes, undocumented Latinx students grapple with the guilt, contradictions, and complexity of deservingness and the criminalization of their families and communities central to their higher education aspirations.

Central Contributions

Through this study, I build on previous applications of racist nativism with undocumented Latinx students (Muñoz, 2013;

Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Pérez Huber, 2010; Pérez Huber, 2011) by exploring racist nativism in college access processes. The narratives of undocumented Latinx students indicate they experience racist nativism in their access to college as racialized and legal others in the U.S. The specific forms of racist nativism in their higher education trajectories include the lack of culturally and relevant college information for their undocumented and mixed-status families, restricted

accessibility to college outreach preparation at low resourced schools, instilled fear and anxiety in families of undocumented students concerning college access and transition, discriminatory financial aid policies and practices in higher education (Muñoz, 2013; Muñoz and Maldonado, 2012; Pérez Huber, 2010; Pérez Huber, 2011), and contradictory rhetoric around

deservingness of immigrants (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020). These forms of racist nativism treat undocumented students as perpetual outsiders in higher education which students must combat when pursuing their college aspirations.

This research contributes towards a framing of college access for undocumented Latinx students as a process that is complex, contradictory, and underlined by racist nativism. Understandings of college access often depict this time as a linear and systematic experience. Few have considered




“These forms of racist nativism treat undocumented students as perpetual outsiders in higher education which students must combat when pursuing their college aspirations.”

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the intersecting contexts that shape college access and transition for students (Perna & Thomas, 2006), and even less consideration has been given to the underlying role of race and racism (Yosso, 2006) and immigration and racist nativism in higher education (Muñoz, 2013; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012). Yet, these limited understandings of college access do not do justice to Students of Color and Immigrants of Color (Rendon et al., 2014; Rios-Aguilar & Marquez Kiyama, 2013). As college access policy, structures, and practices continue to uphold the legacy of racism and colonialism in the establishment of higher education in the U.S. (Wilder, 2014), it is necessary to understand how these systems of marginality underlie college access to undocumented Latinx students.

Implications

The findings of this work have implications for practice and policy. Critical understandings of the undocumented Latinx student experience are needed to disrupt the reproduction of racist nativist challenges and obstacles in their college access pathways. First, educational institutions should become spaces that welcome and protect undocumented students. K-12 school districts and higher education systems should become 'sanctuary' jurisdictions that refuse to collaborate with local, state, and federal immigration agencies. Second, institutional support must be accessible at secondary and post-secondary institutions. Institutional agents must be well-informed about

undocumented students' college application process and opportunities. Third, educators, faculty, and staff must be welcoming, supportive, and understanding of undocumented student experiences. Institutional agents must understand their impact when working with any marginalized community, particularly undocumented students, whose existence, and presence in the U.S. are challenged daily. This work involves critical reflection of positionalities and biases to disrupt internalized racist nativist thinking. Fourth, all college preparation activities should be grounded in the community's needs and assets, as students indicate the centrality of family in their college access experiences. Lastly, policy is needed to increase access and retention in higher education. While Deferred Action has afforded undocumented students several opportunities on the federal level, the program is not a permanent solution. The Trump administrations' racist nativist stance continues to threaten the likelihood that programs such as DACA or comprehensive reform will gain enough legislative support, but make comprehensive reform more critical than ever. 

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