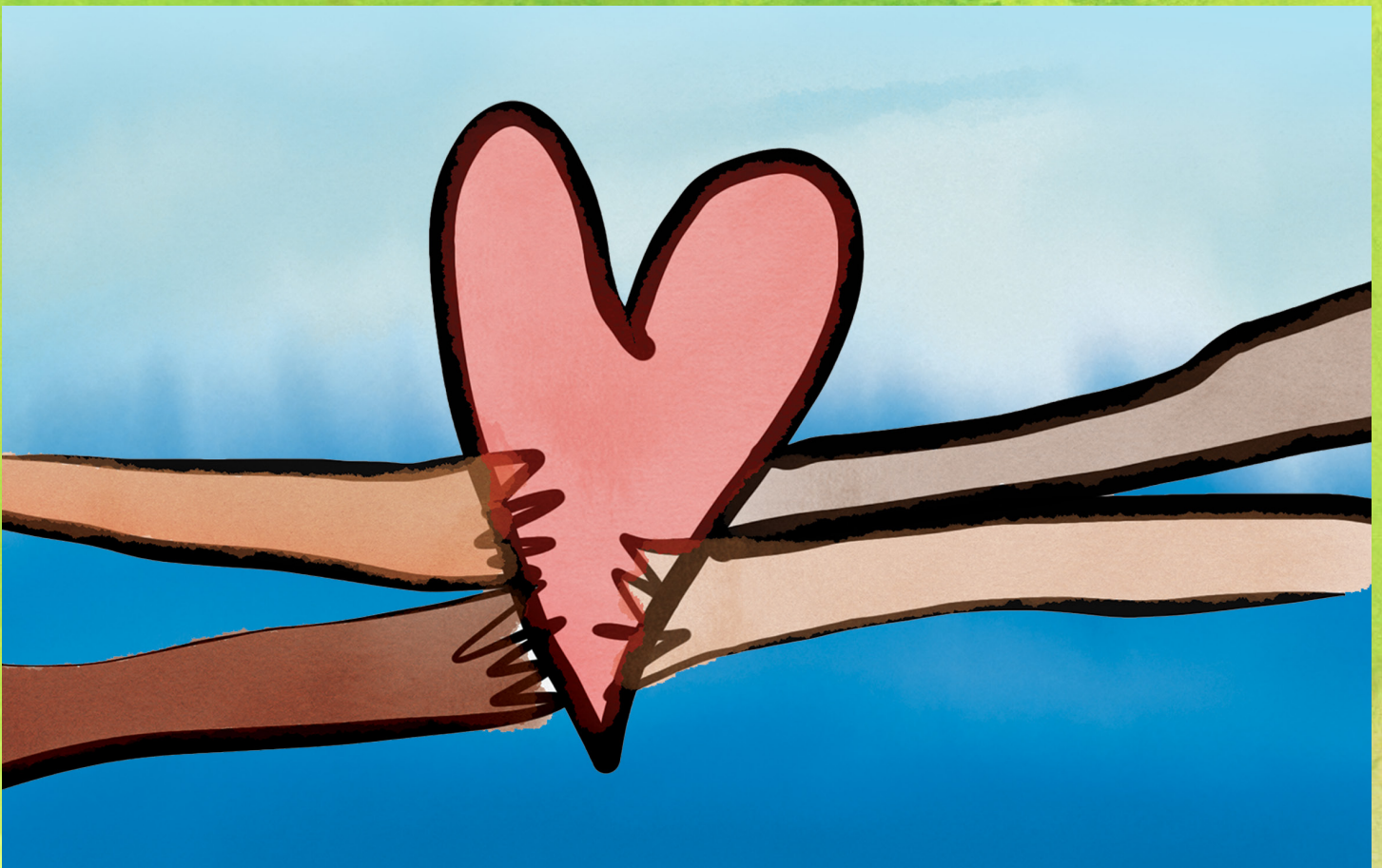


# Cultivating Comadrerismo for Collective Liberation

Ana Miriam Barragán Santoyo, California State University Dominguez Hills

Joanna B. Pérez, Ph.D., California State University Dominguez Hills





### **Abstract**

In this paper, we draw from our positionality, respective roles on campus, and experience with developing the UndocuScholars Research Methods class. We argue that despite learning to navigate during a pandemic and dealing with the coexistence of grief and joy, transformation in the academy is possible when seeds are planted through building community, vulnerability, and the creation of an equitable and student-centered curriculum. At the same time, transformation in the academy occurs among faculty and staff through the development of comadrerismo, which is a bond that extends beyond collegiality, as it seeks to foster a sisterhood that honors, supports, and validates people's journeys, roles, and goals in life. In the end, we all benefit from the harvest by reimagining spaces as locations where we can experience healing, transformation, and eventually, collective liberation. It is within our line of work that we can envision, change, and benefit from altering the institutional practices that move us to radically shift from individualistic to communal joy.

### **Key words:**

Comadrerismo, UndocuScholars, collective liberation, community healing, higher education

*“All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions and society so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom.”*

*~bell hooks*

As educators, mentors, and practitioners on university campuses, it is not uncommon to work in silos. This is especially the case during the pandemic when social distance is the norm. However, to witness transformation in the academy, it is important to deconstruct and challenge institutional practices that promote oppression, isolation, competitiveness, and disempowerment. Part of the process requires that we collaborate across divisions to build meaningful connections and advocate for culturally relevant practices that account for the needs, strengths, and goals of the entire campus community. In our case, drawing from our expertise and passion for social justice led to the development of a class, *UndocuScholars Research Methods*, which provides undocumented students<sup>1</sup> with opportunities to conduct research, study

abroad, and enhance their professional development. This is significant for multiple reasons. For instance, research programs are usually federally funded, which means that undocumented<sup>1</sup> students are not eligible to participate. Also, without advance parole,<sup>2</sup> undocumented students cannot study abroad. Lastly, rarely do staff and faculty have the opportunity to bridge their expertise to co-teach and mentor students. More specifically, beyond adding to a student’s learning experience and overall growth, we see this as an opportunity to heal upon collectively understanding that grief and joy can co-exist in our daily lives.

In this paper, we draw from our positionality, respective roles on campus, and experience with developing the UndocuScholars Research Methods class. Ana Miriam is a self-proclaimed *greñuda* whose work is influenced by the thousands of stories she has heard from undocumented immigrants: from interviewing farm workers in her hometown Boonville, California to countless encounters in university offices and K-12 classrooms across the country. She holds many intersectionalities as a queer Chicana who immigrated to the United States at age 10. Her journey includes navigating life as a child of immigrants from Jalisco and Michoacán, Mexico. Fully understanding the direct impact of family separation, she now travels as a form of liberation and hopes to create beautiful spaces for others to experience the world. Her proudest accomplishments include having the

<sup>1</sup>The term “undocumented students” is inclusive of immigrants who have obtained additional benefits through United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS).

<sup>2</sup> Advance Parole is a federal benefit that allows eligible non-citizen immigrants to travel abroad.

opportunity to grow in community and collectively create spaces in higher education that advocate for equity with and for undocumented students, including serving as the Program Director of the California State University Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) Immigrant Justice Center. A proud daughter of Guatemalan immigrants and first-generation scholar, Joanna is committed to approaching scholarship, teaching, and community engagement with a social justice lens. Her research examines how systems of power and inequality shape the social conditions of immigrant communities. As an educator, she facilitates student-centered learning environments that draw on students' experiences, strengths, and resilience. At the same time, she participates in efforts that center the voices and address the needs of underserved communities. Currently, in her role as Associate Professor and Interim Faculty Associate Director of the Office of First & Second Year Experience at CSUDH, she leads and collaborates with campus partners to implement culturally sustaining pedagogies, programming, and strategies that seek to close equity gaps in higher education and beyond. Together, we argue that, despite learning to navigate during a pandemic and dealing with the coexistence of grief and joy, transformation in the academy is possible when seeds are planted through building community, vulnerability, and the creation of an equitable and student-centered curriculum. At the same time, transformation in the academy occurs among faculty

and staff through the development of comadrerismo, which is a bond that extends beyond collegiality, as it seeks to foster a sisterhood that honors, supports, and validates people's journeys, roles, and goals in life. In the end, we all benefit from the harvest by reimagining spaces as locations where we can experience healing, transformation, and eventually, collective liberation. As bell hooks (1994) points out, it is within our line of work that we can envision, change, and benefit from altering the institutional practices that move us to radically shift from individualistic to communal joy.

### **Comadrerismo**

Within the Latinx community, family, whether biological or non-biological, is often critical to survive, overcome, and thrive in society. In particular, "Latino familism assigns females the helping roles of nurturers, healers, educators, and diviners" (Comas-Diaz, 2013, 63). To sustain such roles, Latinas rely on the guidance, support, and encouragement of other women. In some cases, Latinas become comadres (co-mothers), which "strengthens the special bond between women who are intimate friends" (63). While comadre is often a label that is used to describe the relationship between the mother and the godmother of a child, comadrerismo is also symbolic of the relationship among women who share common goals, values, and seek to utilize their bond to advance the



betterment of their surrounding community.

Women of color, including Latina faculty and staff, are underrepresented in educational and institutional spaces. One way that we manage to persist and thrive is through comadrerismo. In our case, comadrerismo allows us to build a bridge between faculty and student affairs and has become symbolic of resistance, community, unity, love, and hope. Through building strong coalitions, positionalities are valued, experiences are validated, and strengths are uplifted. As Ribero and Arellano (2019) point out, “comadrismo refers to a feminist reciprocal relationship among women” that can be utilized as a mentoring model (p. 336). Through building “trusting kinship relationships,” women that are committed to anti-racist work can thrive and have a deep impact in their respective disciplines and classrooms (p. 336). To do so, especially during a pandemic, like Banda & Reyes (2022) point out, building and embodying comadrerismo includes grounding ourselves in a Latina epistemology of care, which “prioritizes personal connection and sharing life experiences to build community and belonging” (p. 4). This is accomplished through building trust, being vulnerable and transparent, and utilizing a social justice lens that informs the work that we do and how we take care of each other in the process. While this model is critical among faculty who are women of color, it is also equally important to

implement among women of color who are staff and administrators. As evidenced in our experiences, we find that comadrerismo becomes critical not only for women of color in academia, but also has the capacity to have a ripple effect on students and the entire campus community.

### **Positionality**

Beyond colleagues, collaborators, and comrades, we consider ourselves comadres. Through sharing our life experiences, struggles, insecurities, fears, while also celebrating our accomplishments, encouraging each other, and simply providing space for us to be our authentic selves, we have bonded in a way that makes our work that much more meaningful. We find joy in knowing that, as opposed to abiding to the individualistic, competitive, and at times, toxic nature of the academy, we can utilize our roles and draw on our expertise, tools, and resources to imagine, create, and implement programs, events, and classes that center the voices, needs, and strengths of our diverse student population. Together as daughters of immigrants, we embrace the cultural power and accessibility we have to connect with students we serve. We approach our work with compassion knowing exactly what our students are facing, which allows us to operate in common ground. As educators and practitioners, our positionality, higher education experiences,

and community engagement inform the way that we use our roles at CSUDH to validate, affirm, and uplift the unique experiences of students. More than emphasizing the importance of academic success and professional development, we must invest in students by building community and reimagining the academy as a place that recognizes our community cultural wealth (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016) in order to achieve collective liberation (O, 2020).

Comadrerismo has shaped our professional, community, and personal experiences. Professionally, comadrerismo has provided a safe and brave space in academia where we can reimagine our respective roles and how we impact students, campus partners, and community at large. Our comadrerismo represents the power of building coalitions between academic and student affairs. Together, we intentionally facilitate spaces of learning where students witness the importance of community care, which is an act of mutual love, respect, and support. Within and outside the classroom, we consistently create and/or support campus events, programs, and initiatives that focus on celebrating our unique positionalities, experiences, passions, and goals. For example, besides co-creating UndoScholars and Global Immersion Program, we have been active participants in student-centered events including but not limited to: (1) día de los muertos, honoring those who have passed, (2) xtravaganza ball, honoring the tenacity

and creativity of the LGBTQIA+ community, (3) women's retreat, honoring the educational and personal trajectories of students who identify as women, and (4) resilient caregivers workshop, honoring the unique circumstances and experiences of the campus community who play the role of caregivers. In each of these events, we have learned how to re-imagine and model mentorship, how to dismantle meritocracy and the idea that we succeed by working in silos, and how to integrate and celebrate non-white, heteronormative narratives that are often ignored in academia.

Our comadrerismo has provided the outlet that we need to grow professionally through changing the ways we approach academic writing (e.g., co-writing this article), co-teaching (e.g., undocuscholars research course and community engagement & social justice course), and how we embody praxis within both academic and student affairs. This includes changing policies and campus practices that are inclusive of diverse student populations. Through our joint efforts, we have also changed the ways we define and engage in advocacy work. Beyond promoting social change within our campus, we also work towards impacting the surrounding community, including our own respective families.

In an effort to center wellness and prioritize our mental health, we allocate time to check-in, vent about work, talk about our personal life, share experiences

(e.g., work at coffee shops, attend conferences, go on a road trip, etc.), meet each other's families, and constantly show up for each other. Text threads (including audio messages) are filled with affirmations (you are capable, your feelings are valid, etc.), words of encouragement (e.g., you got this!), and accountability (e.g., working out, getting enough sleep, drinking water, etc.). Whether in person, via text, or video chat, we are always vulnerable, give each other grace, share tears, laughter, secrets, Instagram reels, and reimagine what our work and future can be. Given the many ways that it positively impacts our lives, we also began to model our coexistence through comadrerismo with others across campus.

Outside of the classroom and among members of the Undocumented Student Ally Coalition (USAC) on campus, cultivating seeds was reflected in the intentional, consistent, and committed effort to connect and bond beyond the walls of the academy. Slowly and steadily, check-ins and personal life updates became regular at meetings, and a smaller subcommittee of four self-identified Latinas who worked on creating and implementing a mental health retreat for undocumented students started a group text. The group bonded over birthdays and often shared advice on career moves, dating, and family dynamics. At the same time, celebrations over small and significant accomplishments also became a regular practice to uplift one another and show love and support in

new and healthy ways. Consequently, cultivating comadrerismo led to scheduled lunch meetings, walks, and beach dates to share personal goals, challenges, and accomplishments, and gradually, comadrerismo has been extended to those interested in connecting beyond the demands of work as an effort to care for each other. It is through these multiple forms of bonding that we have come to recognize comadrerismo as synonymous with growth, safety, encouragement, partnership, celebration, affirmation, validation, liberation, and commitment.

### **Pandemic Context**

Writing about grief forces us to process and accept the complex, and often devastating, realities of our lives and our students' lives. We have come to the conclusion that it is impossible to separate our personal lives with work. In fact, they blended way before our rooms became our offices and our homes our entire work environment. In the process, we recognize that it is necessary for us to acknowledge that our work has always been political, and that the political, is personal (Lee, 2007). Therefore, in a world of chaos and unfairness, our personal experiences inspire us to create bridges and opportunities for undocumented students to grow and feel joy without neglecting the fact that grief is part of the process. In the case of the pandemic, grief is directly connected to structural inequities. Among

undocumented students in particular, our immigration system, health care structure, labor rights constraints, and educational institutions were the prominent causes of grief (Ro, Rodriguez, & Enriquez, 2021).

Social distancing forces family separation, which has been a reality for immigrants, including our students (Galvan et. al., 2022). When videos of devastated families went viral due to not being able to see their loved ones, it became apparent that pain and grieving remain an individualistic experience rather than building solidarity and showing compassion towards immigrant families. To worsen the situation, undocumented immigrants in certain labor industries are considered essential workers, yet many do not have access to healthcare or receive stimulus checks from the government. In addition, some of them do not qualify for unemployment and face challenges meeting their basic needs. This phenomenon impacts the way that our students conceptualize their humanity.

Feeling helpless and hopeless at times, we did our best to support students and remind them of their humanity. For months, we had been hearing the stories of our students facing financial and mental health challenges. Some of them lost their loved ones, and others lost their jobs while others lost both! Truthfully, it was extremely difficult to support these students with the lack

of resources for undocumented immigrants and the injustices they were and continue to face. The virtual world was not any different because grief logged-in during zoom meetings, too. Despite the screen, grief was present in students' eyes and broken voices. We could hear grief as students recounted stories of sorrow and loss. Grief just kept showing up all around us: in the classroom, in email reminders about people dying, during doctor's visits, and using the pandemic as an excuse to reject Black and Brown people seeking asylum at the border (Beckett, et. al., 2022). Grief showed up at breakfast, and it did not leave after dinner. It lingered. And while we thought there was a collective understanding that everyone was having a difficult time, it is not true. Some people had it much worse than others, and that included our undocumented community.

At CSUDH, there was a direct correlation of the number of students enrolled on campus and the financial challenges undocumented students and their families were experiencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From fall 2020 to spring 2021, 98 students did not return. Using data from the University Effectiveness, Planning, and Analytics department, at a meeting with advising offices to address the pushout rate among undocumented students, the Immigrant Justice Center reported that almost half of the students did not return the following semester due to an outstanding balance to cover tuition and fees, with



40% of students owing less than \$900. In addition, the number of undocumented students enrolled dropped drastically from 867 in fall 2020 to 676 in fall 2021. This number reflects the national decrease in enrollment across universities in the United States, but that data does not account for the specific challenges that undocumented students face in accessing and staying in higher education.

While the United States government ignored the needs of undocumented immigrants, including those called essential workers, university leaders worked together to find alternatives to the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) since it excluded undocumented students from receiving any of the funds. Successfully, the university distributed financial support through non-federal funds including emergency grants, scholarships, and institutional grants (CSUDH CARES Act). On the other hand, Los Angeles County also offered support available to undocumented immigrants and non-profit organizations such as Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) and Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), both of which provided emergency relief regardless of immigration status (COVID-19: Keeping Los Angeles Safe). In California, the Golden State Stimulus checks were also given to undocumented immigrants. Though there was a collective understanding of the need to create equitable and accessible financial

opportunities for undocumented immigrants in California, they were not enough to compensate for the lack of unemployment benefits and the fear to access appropriate health care services due to their immigration status (Yu et al., 2020).

Collectively, we felt the need to rush and force normalcy as much as possible because we were too tired of the pandemic and all the grief that it brought with it. Hence, to change the narrative, we hit the ground running at the beginning of the 2021 - 2022 academic year, ready to plan and implement a study abroad opportunity through advance parole for Deferred Action and Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipients. Advance parole is a federal benefit for eligible non-citizens to travel abroad for humanitarian, employment, or educational reasons. For our students, advance parole not only represented an opportunity to study abroad, but it also gave them an opportunity to reunite with family and re-imagine what home means to them (Estrada & Ruth, 2021). This informed our work and classroom dynamics.

### **Planting Seeds of Joy**

The UndocuScholars Research Methods course was planned and designed from an intentional community effort. The idea was born at a USAC meeting where members were asked to address structural inequities at the university

that excluded undocumented students from participating and receiving an equitable education. A group of faculty and staff began brainstorming and writing a proposal to implement a program for undocumented students to conduct research. By spring 2022, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies committed funding to create a course and support the committee's efforts. With additional support from the Office of Undergraduate Research and multiple Student Affairs departments, the program allowed participants to study abroad as part of their research projects. To ensure that students also benefited from an affirming and transformational learning environment, we designed the curriculum and program by accounting for the experiences and intersectional identities of undocumented students on our campus.

We are committed to facilitating learning spaces that are student-centered and constructed through the pedagogy of love and care, which takes time, effort, and compassion. To us, the classroom is more than a learning space; it can become a place where building community, creating a sense of belonging, and experiencing growth can lead to transformation (O, 2020). To do so requires faculty-student engagement that is collaborative rather than transactional. In our case, in the midst of navigating life in a pandemic, adjusting to online teaching/learning, and fighting against structural inequality, we find ourselves realizing that transformation requires working

towards liberation through joy.

From the beginning of the semester, we were intentional about prioritizing community building and connections. In fact, before discussing the weekly course content, we began by doing check-ins where we shared our highlights and struggles. In other words, we provided space to humanize each other's experiences, as we recognize that many of our students have multiple responsibilities beyond being students (i.e., caregivers, parents, workers, etc.). As the semester unfolded, we witnessed how students created a community space where they could be transparent and show support to one another. This became a process where seeds were planted, as it opened up the space for students to share without judgment and be embraced with an open heart and mind (Reyes, Banda, & Caldas, 2020). For example, students creatively showed their support through the Zoom chat, emojis, and reactions. This practice is instrumental in transforming the academy because the humanization of students occurs through acknowledging, validating, and affirming their experiences, resulting in communal joy.

Part of developing an equitable and student-centered curriculum requires the act of selecting readings and creating reflection-based assignments that provide an outlet for students to begin to recognize themselves as scholars and knowledge-producers. In opposition to the culture of academia where there is a

seeds through facilitating open discussions, promoting life-long learning, and building a mentoring relationship. Ultimately, the goal is for students to recognize the power of cultivating their own agency within and outside of the academy.

Within the context of our class, autoethnography research became a tool for students to utilize their experiences and positionality as the foundation to understand larger social issues. Through autoethnography, not only are students contributing to interdisciplinary studies, but they are also challenging traditional notions of research practices (Jimenez, 2020). In the process, planting seeds encompasses students reclaiming their power to question, disrupt, and alter daily practices, institutional barriers, and societal norms that are built to maintain the status quo. Hence, autoethnography research provides students with intellectual growth and has the capacity to cultivate seeds that promote community growth.

### Caring for the Seeds

The intentionality behind the curriculum to reflect students' experiences and encouragement to see themselves as scholars included guest speakers who were or are currently undocumented, and since Zoom became our main space for knowledge production and community building, program participants

demonstrated their support to one another in various ways including Zoom chats and emojis. Regarding our first speaker of the semester, a student wrote

*"I would like to say thank you for sharing your story, what really stood out to me is how you said that "you're coming out" was being undocumented. I can relate during high school I will keep quiet; I was ashamed of people knowing I did not have "papers". Also, thank you for sharing the nontraditional resources. I never thought of using a podcast/ social media for research purposes. You give me hope!"*

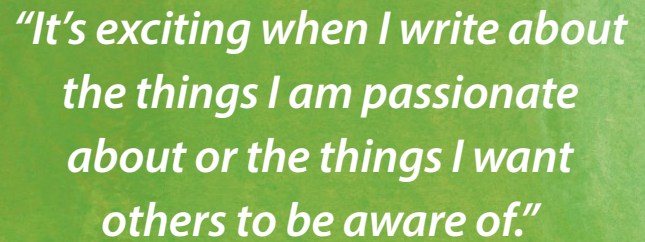
The importance of centering the community using academic research was highlighted among many speakers, and a student shared their gratitude to one speaker as *"thank you for the presentation, I enjoyed it. Specifically, because your projects not only focus on presenting in the academic world but also outside academia."* Using the Zoom chat, several participants were comfortable



demonstrating their support to one another. They shared their favorite music that uplifted them and gave each other tips on how to best study or deal with stress. They also elaborated on how they felt about certain issues discussed in the class and revealed weekly tragedies and triumphs. Sharing heart and clap emojis became a familiar way of showing up for each other and letting students know they were not alone. Students seemed so comfortable with each other that at least five students constantly showed their children or siblings on camera. This sense of community and comadrerismo extended beyond classroom dynamics, as it also informed our pedagogical approach.

Through innovative pedagogical approaches, we found that part of building community and providing a space for students to reflect on the course content was utilizing online learning platforms such as Jamboard. Prior to having students engage in a variety of activities, we would share our own experiences, fears, and doubts regarding research, writing, and professional journeys. In turn, students were willing to share their own questions, concerns, doubts, and fears regarding their own academic journey. For example, in a Jamboard session, students shared their challenges associated with their writing, ranging from making grammatical errors to not doing justice to the data collected, such as, *“finding the correct term that matches the energy that was given during a testimony.”* At the same time, students also shared what

they enjoyed about the course. For example,



*“It’s exciting when I write about the things I am passionate about or the things I want others to be aware of.”*

Comadrerismo is about pedagogy of love and care that is shared with authenticity, vulnerability, passion, and advocacy. Hence, beyond supporting students along their research journey, it is also about being open to student feedback to co-create a learning space that results in collective empowerment. Students provided feedback through the Perceived Teaching Effectiveness (PTE), a campus student evaluation web-based system, as well as course assessments through a survey and Jamboard.

In a PTE evaluation, a student mentioned, *“be there for the students whenever we needed help, always in a positive attitude, keeping the students engaged, and helped build a community amongst the students. Overall an amazing professor!”* Furthermore, the importance of supporting students to build connections was well received, as a student mentioned a highlight for them was, *“relating the teaching material to real-life experiences to provide the student with a better understanding of the material.”* To do so, we were intentional in making the class community-based and

engaging, which is exemplified as a student mentioned, *“creating a community of belonging with excellent collaborative skills”* and another student stated, *“her lectures are so engaging and interesting that it allowed me [to] further... my interest in the field.”* These responses are critical, as they highlight the effectiveness of community building, pedagogy of love, as well as culturally sustaining curriculum and classroom dynamics. In fact, a student shared, *“this course was exceptional, it was full of knowledge, interactive, and warming.”* Beyond how students felt about the class, it was great to know that the course also had a long-lasting impact in their journeys as scholars. As a student captures,

*“My knowledge in research has expanded greatly due to this course...giving me the confidence to conduct my own research and notice the power that the undocumented scholars have in creating new knowledge.”*

During our end of the semester Jamboard reflection activity, students wrote *“thank you for being understanding and always giving feedback in such a caring way”* and *“thank you Dr. Perez*

*and Ana Miriam for always being true and passionate in every class.”* Similarly, through a survey administered by the Immigrant Justice Center to understand/analyze the overall impact of the program, one student wrote, *“the most valuable takeaway from this program was the sense of hope and optimism it provided for me. It helps to build my confidence in a academic setting and it allows me to connect at a personal level with peers and faculty members.”* Also, the sense of community allowed students to rely on each other to stay motivated. A student mentioned, *“the fact there have been other people in my shoes and we are not alone, we can succeed.”* Hence, through our comadrerismo, not only did we learn how to be more intentionally student-centered, but students also became equipped to collectively navigate and thrive throughout their higher education journey.

As faculty, we interpret the impact of comadrerismo extending beyond the classroom. When we asked students to reflect on their growth and describe the impact of the course, they highlighted the following words, *“purposeful experience, eye opening, very empowering, impactful, opened up my mind, great experience, tremendously inspiring, safe place to grow, life changing, immensely rewarding, and positive.”* In addition, we found that the course not only served as a space for community-building and knowledge production, but it also encouraged some students to apply for graduate programs. A student wrote, *“thanks to this program I*

*was introduced to amazing individuals and mentors. It allowed me to work with caring faculty which has motivated me to pursue a graduate degree.*” Another participant expressed, *“this program has had a great impact on me as a student and as an individual. It has completely changed my view of research and it has allowed me to grow as a scholar. Without this program I don’t think I would have been motivated to apply for graduate school.”* Another valuable takeaway can be interpreted as students’ experiences being validated because they shared the same immigration status. For example, one student wrote, *“I was able to connect to other students in my situation and who understand the challenges of being an undocumented student trying to belong here,”* and another student wrote *“[the course] definitely created a sense of belonging between me and campus because of the amazing people I met as well as discovering the [Immigrant Justice] Center.”* Indeed, as evidenced by student feedback, comadrerismo is critical to the survival of faculty, staff, and students as they navigate institutions that were not built with them in mind.

Upon completing the course, students continued to connect with each other. In particular, for students who conducted research abroad, it was crucial to find outlets to facilitate comadrerismo across borders. Some students created a group text that served as a space to ask questions, exchange ideas, as well as provide resources and tips regarding traveling

abroad as DACA recipients. In the process, students revealed intimate traveling stories. Often, they shared pictures of their family, past or present, or sites that brought back memories about their lives prior to migration. For example, students shared pictures of traditional cuisine, former homes,

*“The moment we choose to love,  
we begin to move against  
domination, against oppression.  
The moment we choose to love,  
we begin to move to freedom,  
to act in ways that liberate  
ourselves and others”*

*~ bell hooks*

monuments, schools, and grave sites of family members who they did not have the opportunity to say goodbye to because of their inability to travel. It was in these moments when the text exchanges became filled with positive affirmations and words of encouragement. Each student took the time to validate, affirm, and uplift their peers no matter the circumstances.

### **Harvesting Comadrerismo**

As the pandemic positions undocumented students and their families at a



disadvantage, autoethnography research creates a pathway for students to travel to their birth countries, reunite with their loved ones, and reimagine home for themselves. During this process, students experience grief, joy, and begin their healing journeys together. Upon completing the course, students began to prepare themselves for their journeys to their birth country, and it was at this point when students expressed the coexistence of grief and joy. On one hand, grief manifested in the painful reflection of what their lives could have been if they never immigrated to the United States and the guilt associated with their family's inability to travel. On the other hand, joy showed up in the excitement to visit their distant relatives, travel outside of the United States, and experience their birth countries through music, food, tours, customs, etc. As a result of these emotions colliding, healing is rooted in common experiences and collective freedom.

While we intentionally took time to build comadrerismo that influences our approach and experience, we understand that there is always room to learn and improve. One of the lessons we learned was that offering a research methods course was useful, but students would benefit from the academic support beyond one semester. Modeled after McNair, a federally funded program, the Toro UndocuScholars Research program was simply not sustainable as the course was the only funded aspect of the program. Contributing factors that

led the program to not continue included students not being able to receive funding for conducting their research and faculty not receiving financial compensation for their mentorship. In addition, it is vital that we build relationships with faculty mentors the summer before starting the academic year so that they go through an ally training and understand the important role that they play in supporting the research endeavors of undocumented students. Lastly, it is important to also carve out time to discuss the ways that research can be utilized to further their education and career pathways. As such, while student participants learned from and were inspired by several undocumented and/or formerly undocumented scholars, we did not have the capacity to discuss the step-by-step process of applying to graduate school and/or how to make connections between their research expertise and career goals.

### **Conclusion**

More than before, it is important to uphold the value of community – not just as a slogan to promote a false sense of togetherness, but to truly be intentional with the impact we create with our own power. While we continue to grieve the loss of loved ones and an old way of life, we are creating spaces for us, spaces of joy, and spaces to heal together in community and in comadrerismo.

Comadrerismo has been the lesson these

last two years because it is not only about loss; it is about who shows up when we need it. Therefore, comadrerismo is about what we gain when we feel we have lost it all. Comadrerismo allows us a space to grieve, to cry, to feel, to reflect, and above all, to care, and grow. This process allows us to imagine and reimagine what community looks like within and outside of the academy.

Together, we intentionally develop spaces that reflect our authentic selves and allow us to embark on our healing journeys outside of the classroom. While we are working hard to strive for equitable and accessible opportunities for students, we also know that we cannot do it alone. Allies and advocates are important to create and implement the unimaginable. The partnerships<sup>3</sup> we build are not only meaningful for the lives of our students, but also for us, as it is symbolic of what we wished we had in our own higher education journeys. There is so much joy that comes from working with others who share resources because they trust and support our vision. Through this transformative collaboration, students can continue engaging in a cycle of growth by utilizing a community-center approach. Above all, they now have the tools and the power to recognize themselves as scholars, say they are knowledge-producers, and have access to better opportunities to advance their studies.

Our recommendation for everyone who is losing hope in higher education is

to challenge yourself to grieve, to push yourself to be vulnerable, and to be intentional about the community you are creating for yourself and others. We acknowledge that when we open ourselves to opportunities, we open ourselves to be vulnerable and to ask for support. This process is necessary in order to witness transformation. Ultimately, with vulnerability comes liberation and with liberation comes joy. And this is part of our healing journey in higher education.

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