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**“WE TAKE CRISES AND WE MAKE THEM WORK”: PLATICAS AND TESTIMONIOS OF UNDOCUMENTED LATINA/O/X COLLEGE STUDENTS TO ENGAGE IN CRITICAL RACE FEMINISTA PRAXIS**

Fernando Villalpando

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TO ENGAGE IN CRITICAL RACE FEMINISTA PRAXIS

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A Dissertation  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education  
in  
Educational Leadership

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by  
Fernando Villalpando  
May 2024

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Fernando Villalpando

May 2024

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## ABSTRACT

Undocumented Latinx college students have experienced and continue to experience challenges to earn their American dream (Pentón, Herrera & Obregón, 2018). Their aspirations and resiliency are facing one of the biggest challenges yet with the rhetoric and actions of the Trump Administration. These actions may have major implications on their journey through higher education and society. In California alone there are approximately 38,000 undocumented college students who could be in jeopardy of their future, and the implications of the current presidency's actions could have enormous impacts on their lives (González, 2009). By wanting to rescind Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), President Trump places the faith and lives of undocumented Latinx college students on the hands of Congress. Students who were hoping to be able to use their degrees with the work permit given by DACA, may not be able to do so anymore if there is no immigration reform that will enable them to work with the same opportunities as their resident and citizen counterparts, and use their degree to contribute professionally to this society. There are three objectives of the study: To find out and learn from the experiences of undocumented Latinx college students. To understand how the experiences of undocumented Latinx college students navigate higher education, the current rhetoric, their aspirations and persistency to achieve their professional goals, and to provide a different perspective on educational attainment through a CRT lens of undocumented students.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the two pillars in my life. The lovely memory of my mother, Sanjuana Acosta who was my first inspiration. Her sacrifice and courage were the greatest demonstration of love any person could even demonstrate, and my grandmother, María Guadalupe Carrillo, who raised and cared for me while my mother was away as a migrant worker to be able to send the necessary to support us and have an opportunity for a better life.

To my wife, Sonia and our children, Lucca, Gael and Mila. You are the reason I wake up every morning to keep working on being a better version of a partner and father that I did not see growing up. You are the greatest and most rewarding part of my life. I love you!

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Through this study, I aimed to provide a space to understand the context and experiences of undocumented Latina/o/x college students at a four-year college in Southern California. The purpose of this work was to engage in testimonios (Yudice, 1985) and pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) to understand through these students' own voices how college leaders can better support their post-secondary pathways. This population has a long history of encountering challenges due to various systems of marginalization that Latina/o/x individuals who are undocumented in the United States suffer injustices, mistreatments, and oppression from a society that does not welcome them and criminalizes them. Nevertheless, Latina/o/x college students who are undocumented continue to persist in higher education. This dissertation study aims to examine the experiences of Latina/o/x college students as they navigate higher education both under a xenophobic Trump era and the Biden years. The study is conceptualized by taking into account findings from previous literature that emphasize the importance of the family, motivation, fear, resilience and identity of these students. In this research process, the participants and I will focus on developing an action-based practice or event that will benefit the undocumented student population on campus.

## Problem Statement

Undocumented students and their families see education as a pathway to an improved future when socioeconomic disadvantages block social mobility and a lack of American economy manufacturing jobs that used to be of financial security are no longer available (Crosnoe, 2005). For these students and their families “schooling has become a high-stakes goal... their only ticket for a better tomorrow” (Crosnoe, 2005, p. 271). In preparation to pursue education pathways, families foster resiliency for undocumented students (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). The ways in which undocumented Latina/o/x students combine resiliency learned throughout their time with the examples of their families and institutional resources vary. The experiences of undocumented Latina/o/x students also vary depending on higher education legislation and immigration policies that allow them, or not, to work after earning a college degree.

According to a study by the President’s Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2020), we have approximately 454,000 undocumented students in the United States, of whom 216,000 are DACA-eligible. In California alone we have approximately 92,000 undocumented students, and of those approximately 52,000 are DACA-eligible (2020). Policies like California’s AB 540, and president Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program have supported undocumented students overtime. California charges undocumented students in-state college tuition if they qualify for AB 540, as well as they may have the opportunity to access financial aid if they qualify for the California Dream Act, and

some students may have access to work if they qualify for the DACA program. However, such pathways and experiences depend on the political times, the contexts, pathways, and experiences. With Trump as president there have been ongoing negative incidents that expose the hostility against undocumented immigrants and people already in the United States. From incidents with Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) deporting non-violent and responsible undocumented people, to the separation of families, keeping children in detention centers, and having to send asylum seekers to wait outside of the United States, in Mexico. These actions are indicative of the hostile anti-immigrant and anti-Latina/o/x political climate that has been the dominant discourse in the current administration and have been used as a political token to gain support and electoral votes.

While the assumption may be that under a democratic presidency of Biden, undocumented Latina/o/x students may have better experiences, this study aims to understand if a change in presidency influences the overall context that students navigate. More specifically, this dissertation study focuses on the experiences of Latina/o/x undocumented college students at one Southern California college and understanding what institutional practices and policies can support their college pathways.

## Purpose Statement

Uncertainty on their own future is what undocumented Latina/o/x college students face as they keep moving forward with their education. These students have resiliency, and have endured uncertainty throughout their lives. Many times, these students and their families have lived in fear of being separated or just on how they are going to keep moving forward. The purpose of this work is to engage in critical race feminista praxis (Delgado Bernal & Aleman, 2015) by engaging in testimonios (Yudice, 1985) and pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) that will serve to hear the real experiences through their own voices and understand how the college can shift policies and practices to better serve their academic goals. With the daily challenges students face, remaining questions are, will they be allowed to use their degrees once completed, and will there ever be a reform to allow them to alleviate their struggles? In this study, the participants and I focused on developing an action-based practice or event that benefited the undocumented student population on campus. The dissertation will not include the event as data, but the planning of the event will be part of the outcomes and praxis component.

## Research Questions

This dissertation will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of undocumented students with academic counselors/advisors?

2. What policies and practices do undocumented students navigate when developing a sense of belonging in higher education?
3. What transformative ruptures do undocumented students envision that can foster a sense of belonging in higher education?

### Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to provide important understanding of the experiences of undocumented Latina/o/x college students as they pursue higher education in a hostile political climate. The aim is to support the continued assistance to undocumented Latina/o/x students.

### Theoretical Underpinnings

Given that the Trump presidency has led to increased polarization, incivility, and hostility (Rogers, 2017), the current political state and discourses call for a theoretical framework that is centered in the experiences of undocumented students. Aguilar (2019) draws from central tenets within critical race theory (CRT), LatCrit, and TribalCrit to develop and share Undocumented Critical Theory or UndocuCrit. This study was guided by UndocuCrit.

### Assumptions

It will be assumed that through the study I will find out that undocumented student success is higher as they combine resiliency with resources that they are

able to access. Also, informed by previous research studies, it will be assumed that students find support among each other and through mentors to continue pushing forward as they continue to face challenges, but also, as they find strength within themselves and their support systems.

### Delimitations

The study will be delimited by a focus on the experiences of Latina/o/x undocumented students in college and it will relate directly to their experiences in higher education. I acknowledge that not all undocumented students are Latina/o/x and that they may have other racial/ethnic backgrounds, such as Asian and Caribbean nationalities. However, given the context of the specific area in Southern California, a focus on Latina/o/x students makes sense.

### Definition of Key Terms

For the purpose of this study, undocumented students will be defined as students who do not have a social security number, are not U.S. citizens, do not have permanent residency, qualify under AB-540, and have DACA. Resiliency will be defined as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress. It also means persisting in the face of difficult experiences. Institutional resources will be defined as a source that will provide academic and social support provided by the college, which includes financial aid when a student is in need.



## Summary

As seen throughout Chapter 1, this study will examine the connection between experiences, challenges, resiliency, and resources available for undocumented college students. It will center the role of institutional responsibility in fostering persistence among undocumented Latina/o/x college students. In Chapter 2 I will provide a literature review with research that will support the conceptualization of this study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Education is often framed as the only ticket for a better tomorrow when socioeconomic disadvantages block social mobility, and a lack of American economy manufacturing jobs that used to be a source of financial security are no longer available (Crosnoe, 2015). In other words, as Crosnoe (2005) argues, “Schooling has become a high-stakes goal for the children of immigrants... their only ticket for a better tomorrow” (p. 271). However, immigrant students aim to attain a career, not only for financial incentives, but also to do something that they will enjoy (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). That goal and enjoyment of education is in great part attributed to community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) that undocumented students are able to benefit from. These students are resilient, unafraid, outspoken, and actively engaged in their future (Chang, 2018; Gonzales, 2017).

Undocumented students in the United States have had to endure many challenges throughout the years. They have fought legal and political battles to access minimal resources, rights, and benefits. At the same time, undocumented students have found a way to keep striving for a better education. With those gains, there are still numerous challenges to overcome, and the current political rhetoric continues to threaten the long-fought gains. In order to understand the

challenges and gains, it is important to discuss the historical context that informs the experiences of current undocumented students.

Understanding legislation and policies, such as *Plyler vs. Doe* (U.S.S.C., 1982), to in-state tuition from Texas to California through Assembly Bill 540 (2001), and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) under President Obama in 2012, is essential in understanding the long-fought road. Equally important, is knowing the setbacks and threats such as California's Proposition 187 of 1994, which wanted to exclude undocumented immigrants from public services, including education, and the most recent threats from Trump in 2017 to rescind DACA, which is currently at the United States Supreme Court waiting on a decision.

The following sections will provide an overview of historical and current policies that influence the educational opportunities available to undocumented students as well as various attempts to a path of lawful residency and eventual citizenship. In addition, resiliency will be discussed in relation to family support, motivation, fear and identity, and student activism. Lastly, undocumented students navigating higher education will also be a section, which will cover how students have and continue to navigate a system that was not created for them. With this roadmap, I intend to develop a strong foundation for my dissertation, which will be a *testimonio*-based study that will examine how undocumented Latinx students are responding to the Trump-fueled anti-immigrant policies, practices, and sentiments and how they are navigating their higher education

goals with the current times. This study aims to examine whether alongside access to institutional resources, resiliency supports undocumented students as they face the challenges of navigating higher education in a system that was not created for them (Patel, 2015), and in fact was created to offensively and proactively keep them out.

### Policies Influencing Educational Opportunities

The nonstop fight for better treatment toward undocumented individuals began early in United States history. Darden (2014) discussed the historical journey to provide free public education to immigrant children, regardless of their status. Darden (2014) explained in a brief manner the legal and historical development of education access to immigrant children since the 1982 Supreme Court case *Plyler vs. Doe*, which under the protection of the 14th Amendment (1868) guarantees free and public education to all children regardless of immigration status.

In addition, education officials are forbidden to inquire and expose the immigration status of any student. School districts can accept birth certificates from other countries and cannot ask social security numbers.

*Plyler* forbids K-12 officials from making inquiries that expose immigration status, requiring social security number: or engaging in other behaviors designed to reveal illegality. School districts can therefore accept foreign birth certificates or other international forms of identification. The high

court made clear that school officials have no role in enforcing immigration law (p. 77).

When it comes down to undocumented young children who attend American schools, high officials and courts understand how impactful it would be to leave these students to basic educational needs, and interpret the U.S. Constitution in favor of them. In the Spring of 2014, “U.S. Attorney General Holder said exclusionary practices ‘not only harm innocent children, they also markedly weaken our nation ... by leaving young people unprepared and ill-equipped to succeed and contribute to what is, in many cases, the only home they have ever known’” (p. 77).

In California, Propositions such as 187 (1994) aimed to enact the exclusion of undocumented people from social services, particularly from education, which has been protected by *Plyler*. That same anti-immigrant rhetoric of the 1990s in California with former Governor Pete Wilson (1991-1999), is very similar to the current anti-immigrant sentiment and rhetoric by the current Trump administration, but now on a national level (Aguilar-Hernández, 2019).

During the same time and sentiment, the federal Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 was enacted, and stated in section 505 that if a person was not lawfully present in the United States they are not eligible for postsecondary education benefits, and thus blocking access to higher education after the rightful access to K-12 education. This was an important law because never before was such a statement or guideline

addressed at the federal level and many states ended up implementing their own laws.

However, what happens when that young undocumented student finishes high school, turns 18 years old and is no longer protected? By default, that student is no longer protected and is labeled as an outsider of the law.

Additionally, these have been seen by the dominant culture as non-deserving of any education, including higher education (Patel, 2015). Their language, culture, and the color of their skin are not part of the dominant culture for which the academic system was created, and the disruption brought by undocumented Latinx students has not been welcomed (Patel, 2015). This has happened throughout time and in various instances.

### Access to Higher Education

Texas became the first state to offer undocumented immigrant students with in-state college tuition and financial aid without taking into consideration their legal status. This law allowed immigrant students, who had attended high school for at least three years and graduated, to qualify for the in-state tuition, yet students had to sign an affidavit to commit to change and legalize their status in this country. Texas initiated this initiative in 2001 and, since then, at least 18 states have followed by providing undocumented students with in-state tuition ("Undocumented Student Tuition," 2019). However, three states, Arizona, Georgia and Indiana, have outlawed in-state tuition for undocumented students;

while Alabama and South Carolina have prohibited undocumented students from enrolling in any public higher education institution (“Undocumented Student Tuition,” 2019).

Twenty years after the U.S. Supreme Court decision on *Plyler vs. Doe*, “Texas became the first state to successfully pass a tuition-related bill addressing undocumented students' access to all in-state public higher education” (Flores, 2010, p. 435). Flores (2010) demonstrated that undocumented students in Texas, the majority being Latinx, were more likely to attend college after the introduction of this benefit. Flores (2010) also found that undocumented students who had graduated from high school were almost five times more likely to enroll in college once they were able to receive in-state tuition, than students from other states that do not have it. Additionally, the enrollment of undocumented Latinx students in higher education institutions with in-state tuition has not demonstrated adverse effects to institutions or the educational outcomes of “native” students (Kaushal, 2008).

Nationwide, California has led the way in attempts to increase access to higher education for undocumented students. Soon after Texas, Governor Gray Davis signed Assembly Bill (AB) 540 (2001), which allowed undocumented students who attended and earned their high school diploma or GED in a California high school to pay regular in-state tuition. With AB 540, the stigma involved with this population has been decreasing slowly (Abrego, 2008). Undocumented students know that they still need to continue breaking down

barriers, but they are willing to take those extra steps. Abrego (2008) explained that “when a law like AB 540 underscores their merits and grants them rights, it gives them legitimacy, and they willingly invoke the law despite risking deportation” (p. 730). As a result of the implementation of AB 540, the effects of the law have actually been stronger than the initial intention.

### Access to Financial Aid

The topic of access to higher education for undocumented students has also been discussed throughout the United States. Miksch (2005) examined state and federal laws in relation to access to higher education for undocumented immigrants, lawsuits, and struggles with Kansas laws to give in-state tuition to undocumented students following the steps of other states. Another area discussed is the DREAM Act and how it was established through programs. This process started in 1996, when congress wanted “to clarify the status of undocumented immigrant students in the higher education context” (Miksch, 2005, p. 60). The problem with having in-state tuition available for undocumented students was that it was still too expensive to afford tuition because financial aid programs were not open for undocumented students. On the one hand, “of nine states with in-state tuition laws on their books, only two, Texas and Oklahoma, offer(ed) state financial aid to undocumented immigrant” students (Miksch, 2005, p. 61). On the other hand, Utah only allowed undocumented students to apply for one state aid program. Although some level of support is offered in various



states, another challenge has been that many undocumented students are not aware of the possibilities and resources when it comes to attending college. Miksch (2005) points out that the states that have not established any laws on this subject tend to let colleges and universities make their own policies on the subject.

Although states began to increase access for undocumented students, by July 2004, Kansas was sued by 24 students who were U.S. citizens and did not live in Kansas. Their argument was that they wanted to receive in-state tuition because undocumented students did. In particular, “The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) contended that Kansas violated IIRIRA by giving in-state tuition to undocumented students, but not to out-of-state students” (p. 62). Nevertheless, Kansas was following the law that stated that undocumented students that attended and graduated from their high school for at least three years will be allowed to obtain in-state tuition. The continual contention served as a constant reminder for a need to provide pathways to citizenship status.

### Pathway to Lawful Residency and Citizenship

As such, former President Obama sought the passage and enactment of the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act with the purpose to create for undocumented students who qualified, a path to residency and eventual citizenship. Unfortunately, it was not passed even though at the

time of its inception it counted with bipartisan support (Pentón, Herrera & Obregón, 2018). The DREAM Act was written to meet the needs of many undocumented students in the United States who were graduating, but yet had no possible opportunities within higher education., Its purpose was to encourage and promote to undocumented students the goal of going to college.

The DREAM Act aimed to allow undocumented students to apply for temporary legal status with the goal to receive permanent status in the end, and it wanted to eliminate any trouble for the states that do provide in-state tuition to undocumented students. The DREAM Act attempted to benefit students that never had any legal conflict in the United States, who arrived here before the age of 15, graduated from a U.S. high school or received a GED, and had been admitted to a college. These students would have qualified for in-state tuition, federal work program, and student loans. Once students or candidates completed six years under this Act, they could be granted permanent residence if they maintained a “good moral character” or completed 2 years towards their bachelor's degree or graduated from a 2-year college. For students that served in the U.S. Military for 2 years, the same benefits would apply. It is important to note that the DREAM Act would not have forced states to give in-state tuition and students would not qualify for Federal Pell grants.

Another purpose of the DREAM Act was to make higher education affordable for undocumented students by opening the door to state and federal loans and scholarships. In states such as California that signed the state

legislature in 2011, the California DREAM Act allows students to qualify for in-state tuition and some financial assistance from private funds for higher education if they meet certain criteria required. Several states have adopted the DREAM Act which makes students eligible for some financial aid (Flores, 2010). Winning such battles may have given undocumented students hope and strength to continue forward, but the struggles continue, and new challenges and barriers based on hate continue to persist against their human rights and existence.

Similar to Flores (2010), Kaushal (2008) analyzed the effects of in-state tuition for undocumented students of Mexican origin in the college attendance rates. The study demonstrated an increase in three areas of college attendance when an in-state tuition policy was available. The study found that in-state tuition significantly increased the college enrollment of undocumented students, increased the proportion of students with some college education, and also increased the proportion of students with an associate's degree (2008). Kaushal (2008) also found no evidence that the in-state policy had negative effects on U.S. citizens and state residents. The awareness of in-state tuition was also connected with an increase in students who were U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage attending college. In other words, in-state tuition policies may encourage students who are U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage to continue on to college. Kaushal (2008) called for states to offer both in-state tuition and make colleges aware of the services they can offer to undocumented students to create programs that will reach out to those students. Similarly, Muñoz (2009)

expressed that although the laws and policies were changed, many undocumented students do not always take advantage of them. Some of the reasons included the lack of knowledge of what resources were available, not being able to afford college, lack of accurate information in part of the schools, and not knowing their rights.

In 2012, President Obama implemented the executive action called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which provided limited protection to undocumented students, if they qualified. The parameters included that “it does not grant citizenship, but for those who apply and are approved, it places a temporary halt to any deportation action. In addition, it allows a young person to work in the U.S. without fear” (Darden, 2014, p. 77). The deferred action in itself was a big victory for young undocumented students, which allowed for the first time for them to be unafraid to look for a job that would pay them competitive wages, allow them to receive benefits, and use the degrees that they earned. Many times undocumented students would not even consider continuing with college because they were told that they could not get a real job in a field of their major because they were not able to work (Uwemedimo, Monterrey & Linton, 2017). DACA changed that, and gave students hope that one day there would be an easier path to residency and citizenship (Pentón, Herrera & Obregón, 2018).

Unfortunately, since his presidential announcement and beginning of his campaign on June 16, 2015, Donald Trump enacted a rhetoric of hate and

criminalization toward immigrants from Mexico, all of Latin America, and the Middle East (Trump, 2015). It took less than a year for Trump to take action against thousands of DACA recipients by rescinding DACA on September 5, 2017. He argued that the United States Congress should be the one to enact a true immigration reform (Trump, 2017). In reality, he used thousands of DACA recipients as a bargaining token in order to get his campaign promise to build a wall between Mexico and the United States (Holland & Wolfe, 2019).

As undocumented students have gained ground and rights to access education at various levels, from K-12 to higher education, they have also faced many different challenges. Individuals and organizations using anti-immigrant rhetoric based on white supremacist ideology, dominance, and privilege, continue to battle the policies that favor undocumented immigrants and students. Fortunately, undocumented immigrants and students are resilient and have overcome barriers, which has made them strong enough to continue putting their foot forward towards a better life.

### Confronting Challenges

Previous research finds that undocumented Latina/o/x students engage in academic resilience to navigate education institutions successfully (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). Social resilience, in particular, has been defined as the ability “to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political, and environmental change” (Gallopín, 2006, p. 297

citing Adger, 2000). Aligned with the concept of resiliency, Yosso (2005) identified community cultural wealth and the abilities of Communities of Color to navigate toxic educational institutions. It is difficult to focus on the need for undocumented Latina/o/x students to depend on their levels of resilience as they recover or adjust to marginalization and dehumanization because these challenges are not easy and unnecessary. However, when they combine this resiliency, rooted in community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), they may become some of the strongest individuals who are left with no other choice but to overcome challenges (Perez Huber, 2009).

#### Family Fostering Resilience

The resiliency of undocumented Latina/o/x students is in great part developed from the familial capital within their community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). The family role and their capital play a pivotal aspect in the success or undocumented Latina/o/x students. Crosnoe (2005) discussed the dilemma that children from Mexican immigrant families go through while they are in elementary school. In a study that examined approximately 1,000 kindergarten students following them in an Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Crosnoe (2005) found that this student population, whether born in Mexico and brought to the United States at a young age, or born in the United States to Mexican parents, possessed a certain type of family guidance and background that can transfer their high levels of motivation and survival to academic success. In their pursuit

of college, the family continued to serve as motivation for undocumented students. Chapin (2014) also found that undocumented students benefit from “older siblings who were in college and all expressed admiration and found this a source of inspiration and confidence that they could also go to college” (p. 1795). Without a doubt, family support, seeing older family members pave the way for younger generations, and witnessing and being part of the challenges of immigrant families, create an almost innate survival strength and skills that young immigrants transfer to their academic goals, and navigating the academic system. They will continue to face those challenges, but it is important to see how their challenges and experiences make them resilient to a system not created for them.

### Fear, Resiliency and Identity

Fear is a constant in the lives of undocumented people. Gonzáles and Chávez (2012) examined questions of how the undocumented status of immigrants who came to the United States affects their perception in topics such as politics, civic duties, and public life. Gonzáles and Chávez (2012) build on Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject to present the abjectivity experienced in the lives of immigrants because that is, in the end, how many of the undocumented population feel, as if they were aliens or a waste in this society. “Abjectivity speaks to how the ‘casting away’ of individuals and populations shapes (or perhaps delimits) their social, economic, and biological life” (p. 256). The study

focused on surveys done via phone to undocumented Latinos and whites in Orange County, California. What they found out through interviews and the collection of qualitative information was that the label of “illegal” and the resulting experience of abjectivity made their life more difficult through the internalization of fears. The effects of this resulted in a dichotomous experience between becoming deactivated victims or becoming outspoken and politically engaged (González & Chávez, 2012). Additionally, Yoshikawa, Suárez-Orozco, and Gonzales (2016) also found that this status as “unauthorized” has major consequences across their social and cognitive spectrum, as well as their psychological risk mechanisms.

The article, *The American DREAM and Immigrant Students*, focused on the experiences that immigrant students face on a daily basis in relation to the national debate on immigration. The article “describes the experiences of legal, refugees, and undocumented young people as well as children of immigrant parents” (Pang et al., 2010, p.180). Part of the goal of this article was to shed light where these individuals have a place in society, and where the immigration debate places them. It highlights that students have to navigate around: family separation, deportation, negotiating between two worlds, limited financial and social resources, laws and policies, and uphold the American Dream. These dreams come with fear, separation anxieties, and the struggle to maintain the will to continue fighting to achieve the main goals.



Chapin (2014) discussed the results of her qualitative research of 12 Mexican-American adolescents and the positive outcomes and their resilience. The resilience factor that Chapin focuses on, is a factor that had not been often researched, and there was not a good amount of literature that supported factors when it came to minoritized students' success, but that has changed in the recent years. Chapin (2014) defined resiliency as a combination of factor that come from two specific areas, "social support and individual characteristics of the youth" (p. 1792). Those individual characteristics include "coping with stress, personality traits, intelligence, cognitive skills, positive view of self, and effective emotion and behavior regulation" (p. 1792). Chapin (2014) found that resilience was a factor used by students to overcome some heavy and dramatic hurdles on the road to educational success.

In the results of the study, Chapin found that having direct support from friends, family members, and teachers was a source that increased resilience levels. Lastly, the majority of the students mentioned that adapting and learning from challenges was a major factor that added to their resilience. Many came to the United States as children and had to learn English, and going through that experience gave them a different perspective on adapting and facing challenges. Some of those challenges and concerns not addressed include how these students navigated their immigration status, and if and how they faced anti-immigrant rhetoric, which is the missing layer in it, and will be the goal of my study. By finding the missing part in the literature, the study aims to understand

how undocumented Latina/o/x students navigate these important points of their reality, and what makes them succeed, or for some of them, stop out.

Along the same theme, Abrego (2011) addressed the concerns I had from Chapin (2014), the lack of details on immigration status and the anti-immigrant rhetoric, and goes into detail about additional challenges undocumented students face. Abrego (2011) found that within the immigrant population, there were different stigmas, fears, and involvement depending on their arrival and experiences. In this study, Abrego (2011) found that first-generation, “undocumented Latino immigrants who arrived in the United States as adults” (p. 338), had a different perspective on involvement, fears, and stigmas than those 1.5 generation immigrants. When compared to those who came as children the adult arrivals still shared the commonality of being banned legally.

However, the study found that first generation immigrants tend to live in the shadows, live in fear, and have little involvement in social and immigration movements. Whereas the 1.5 generation, included immigrants who arrived at a young age and tended to be more vocal in the movements for social acceptance and political reforms (Abrego, 2011). Abrego (2011) explained with this study the other layer that is of interest for my study, which is the younger undocumented students and their spirit of not being silenced. The generational differences in this areas is an aspect that is interesting and worth complicating further in order to shed light into testing out the ingrained ideas of adaptation and assimilation.

To address the spirit of undocumented students and being unafraid to speak up, Gonzáles (2011) provides us an understanding of how undocumented begin to understand their different status, how it affects them, and how they start to become active. Gonzáles (2011) examined the shift that undocumented students go through once they get out of the protection of the K-12 system and go into the real world in which they are no longer protected, to a minimal degree by *Plyler v. Doe*. Many 1.5 generation students were never aware of their immigration status until they arrived to high school and started to think about life after high school. These students transition from being able to earn an education, to not knowing what will happen after high school. They transition from being included to being excluded.

Meanwhile, in this process, students “must learn to be illegal, a transformation that involves the almost complete retooling of daily routines, survival skills, aspirations, and social patterns” (p. 602). This exclusion from a society that is their home, the only one they know, is what has increasingly fed their involvement in activism, and being unafraid. They are fighting for their lives in the only home they know. Depending on your data, you could add to this argument by offering a decolonial critique of what it means to “learn to be illegal” depending on status, but also where you ideological stand in terms of levels of coloniality.

## Student Activism

Once in college and after overcoming the challenges of finding themselves trying to reach a goal that was promised to them, undocumented students have more opportunities to challenge injustices. In her address at the 2010 American Sociological Association (ASA) Annual Meeting, Nakano Glenn from the Department of Ethnic Studies at University of California at Berkeley, mainly focused on the historico-sociological effects of the treatment towards undocumented immigrants in the United States. She argued that “citizenship is not simply a fixed legal status, but a fluid status that is produced through everyday practices and struggle” (Glenn, 2011). She presented historical examples of the treatment towards undocumented immigrants, and its trajectory. She found that undocumented college students became more vocal when demanding being part of society.

Ultimately, “the undocumented student movement, which asserts that education is a human and social right, represents a form of insurgent citizenship, one that challenges dominant formulations and offers an alternative and more inclusive conception” (2011). As Glenn (2011) stated, by demanding to be part of this society, undocumented students are trying to be recognized as members of this society, but also, to be recognized with their individual identities and not just to adopt an identity that is not theirs.

In a different study Jefferies (2008) examined the views towards undocumented immigrants who came to the United States to fulfill the American

Dream, but encountered systemic blocks that would not allow them to do it, and are seen as undeserving (Patel, 2015). He found that merit was not enough to be successful. This was particularly true for the undocumented 1.5 generation students. As mentioned before, undocumented Latina/o/x college students are seen as outsiders who do not deserve a place in higher education because of their difference to the dominant culture of higher education academia (Patel, 2015). These students actively engage on their campuses to speak out unapologetic with the goal to get the respect they deserve and gain representation.

Jefferies (2008) also exposed the ways the media frame undocumented immigrants, their stories, and how the debate shapes the perspectives on the undocumented students and the immigration topic. Media uses negative labels such as “*illegal*” or “*illegal alien*,” especially in topics and labels used more during election years in which they criminalize undocumented immigrants here in the United States. Jefferies (2008) noted that “this frame has origins in the broader national debate over immigration policy and political organizing, as opponents have deemed it productive to garner opposition to immigrants' rights” (p. 250). If this is the way of framing how undocumented students are seen, then “in meritocratic terms, this population will rarely ‘succeed,’ because systematic barriers block access to higher education institutions and professional advancement” (p. 251).

Jefferies (2008) called for a change in ideology and lens in which undocumented immigrants are viewed and ends by saying that “meritocracy can and is now being used to justify the segregation of new waves of immigrants. To have a more informed debate on policy about immigration, stakeholders need to find a way to include structural views of how society operates, instead of relying on individual narratives that ultimately distort societal perceptions of equality” (p. 251). As it is seen in different forms of media from different spectrums, media uses negative and deficit language to refer to undocumented communities, which is another layer undocumented students have to face. They are facing an anti-immigrant mechanism all around them, in all areas of society, and they are still pushing forward towards their place in society.

Student activism against mechanisms of oppression has had some positive steps forward, which gives activists fuel to continue their movements.

Abrego (2008) found that state and federal policies also have implications for student activism. In particular, AB 540 had implications on how undocumented students feel at their schools and can focus on achieving goals regardless of their status. Abrego (2008) finds that “academically high-achieving undocumented students use the language of ‘justice’ to claim legitimate spaces for themselves in higher education. This allows them to declare themselves worthy and legitimate members of society” (p. 730). In other words, policies, such as AB 540, can foster for undocumented students a sense of belonging and being part of society. Undocumented student activists have seen the results of

their fight against deficit and hate language, and the importance to continue their fight for justice and growth.

As college students become more vocal, they start to unite. For instance, a student-created group at the University of California, Santa Cruz called Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) was formed by students who realized that their university, professors, staff, and even fellow classmates were not informed of the struggles of AB 540 students on campus (Dominguez, et al., 2009). These students wanted to provide a more humanizing view of undocumented students and people overall at a time that labeled them criminals or even terrorists (post 9/11). This student group created a theater performance on stage that was vivid and full of personal experiences in which many came out as undocumented for the first time in front of university administration officials, professors, friends, and family. The student group and their “S.I.N. show reframes the debate on immigration by constructing a new frame of humanity, global migration, oppression, survival, and collective interdependence” (Domínguez et. al., 2009, p. 441).

Undocumented students continue to stay involved in activism, not just by focusing on education issues but immigration issues globally. Corrunker (2012) in her article focuses on the activism of undocumented students towards getting fair treatment, as well as anti-deportation movements. The article focuses on the effects of criminalization of students whose only crime is being undocumented. Corrunker (2012) highlighted the progress made from the AB 540 Bill to now the

DREAM Act, and that students were vocal, and kept fighting for access to higher education, and other human and essential rights. Three of the major commonalities from immigration movements globally are: “(1) leadership of undocumented immigrants; (2) visibility; and (3) measures of ‘deservingness’” (p. 143). Undocumented students in the United States are more aware of the immigration issues around the world than the common citizen, since this is something they share with those who are escaping their countries.

Seeing immigration as a global issue provides a way for “better understanding the complex relationship between globalization and migration” (p. 143). Being so aware of global immigration issues makes undocumented Latina/o/x students in the United States more empathetic of the immigration status of not only their fellow Latina/o/x friends and family, but of a global family, and understand that the power systems in places are all around the world. So the change they are looking for and fight for, is not only for themselves, but for a greater cause.

### Undocumented Students Navigating Higher Education

So far, I’ve shared a small glimpse of the identified challenges that undocumented students have to go through from K-12 to college level and have critically examined, justified the inclusion and exclusion of literature, offered gaps in the literature, and focused on research studies centered around ways in which undocumented students engage in resiliency. As expressed throughout the



chapter, undocumented students keep fighting, with fear, but with even bigger dreams to be included in a country that-for the most of them-is the only home they know. Just as those challenges were identified, also I have found the areas in which there are gaps in the literature and need a critique to continue improving the literature to better understand the realities of undocumented students, better position ourselves as researchers, and propose better solutions in research, action and to higher education in the United States. Next, I focus on their experiences related to navigating higher education.

In the first large-scale national survey to examine the experiences of undocumented college students, Suárez-Orozco, Katsiaficas, Birchall, Alcantar, Hernández, García, Michikyan, Cerda & Teranishi (2015) attempted to find ways to improve their experiences nationwide. The aim was to fill the gaps in previous studies about the experiences of undocumented students. In their study, Suárez-Orozco et. al. (2015) focused on participants between the ages of 18 and 30 who were at the time of the survey enrolled in a public or private 2- or 4-year university and did not include graduate students. The total of surveys received from the nationwide campaign was 909, with 54% identifying as women. Thirty-three languages were reported spoken by the participants with the majority being Spanish, as well as the majority of the participants (88.7%) being Latino/a (Suárez-Orozco et. al., 2015). The survey represented 264 higher education institutions, including 121 community colleges, 98 4-year public universities, and 45 private 4-year universities.

Suárez-Orozco et. al. (2015) were able to find important factors that affect all undocumented students, but also made important observations on their great level of resilience to keep moving forward. Some of the areas of concern found were: family characteristics, time constraints, deportation concerns, anxiety, college affordability, and discrimination. Some areas of strength were: academic resilience, civic engagement, undocufriendly campus reputation, safe spaces, peer support, and institutional agent support. Recommendations given by the students in the surveys included: to understand the students and educate the staff, provide help, and public endorsement. Suárez-Orozco et. al. (2015) were able to present results that prove that undocumented students face many different challenges, but continue to demonstrate their resiliency to continue moving forward. Suárez-Orozco et. al. (2015) are showing us the importance of a reform in education, in particular, higher education and how undocumented students are perceived and welcomed in campuses. Once again, this demonstrates that student voices and experiences need to be heard, documented, and shared to amplify the understanding for those who have been used to only seeing their own perspective.

#### Institutionalized Systematic Support

Gámez, López, and Overton (2017) used qualitative methods to investigate the important factors that influence the success of DACAmented, undocumented and immigrant students in higher education. The study

interviewed eight DACAmented and undocumented students from various institutions who ranged from community college students to completing a Ph.D. (Gómez et.al., 2017). Gómez, et.al. (2017) were able to find three key factors that positively impacted the academic success of this student population. Their findings highlight that having mentors who provide guidance and support are a key factor for success. Another factor is the students' resiliency, which provided them with either strength, bravery, courage or perseverance. The last factor is *ganas*, which gave these students the desire and innate motivation to push forward regardless of the challenges they faced in their journey. This particular finding reinforces a connection between undocumented students navigating higher education and resilience, noted earlier. Although *ganas* has had problematic connotations as well due to the inference of underperformance due to lack of student and parent motivation (Cabrera, López & Sáenz, 2012), it is still an asset-based factor that has contributed positively to student success among undocumented students. These examples of motivators for students, is what I intend to find in my study. As Gamez et.al., found in their study those three factors, I believe there are additional factors that undocumented students have to utilize from their skills learned throughout their life to navigate the current rhetoric and political time.

Similarly, Gildersleeve and Vigil (2015) state the need for institutionalized support for undocumented students at higher education institutions. They expressed the importance of administrators, faculty and staff be well-versed in

the policies and rights regarding undocumented students, otherwise they could worsen the psychological stress of undocumented students by providing the wrong information (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015; Pérez, Cortés, Ramos & Coronado, 2010). Additionally, the need for dedicated staff and spaces for undocumented students, as well as a proactive presence on social media and online platforms can assist and be reassuring in the success of undocumented students (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015). Valenzuela, Pérez, Pérez, Montiel and Chaparro (2015) call these efforts Institutional Undocu-Competence (IUC). Institutional Undocu-Competence (IUC) is not just resources, but a critical framework with appropriate steps to assess how higher education institutions are serving undocumented students (Valenzuela, et. al., 2015). It truly is a valuable tool to ensure marginalize students receive equitable services, resources and access (Valenzuela et. al., 2015).

Furthermore, as recommended by Harmon, Carne, Lisardy-Hajbi, and Wilkerson (2010), states with in-state tuition for undocumented students should publish, disseminate and communicate information of the progress of their in-state programs and how they impact all involved. It is equally important for higher education administrators to promote access opportunities through their platforms and affiliations, as well as being current in all legal issues that benefit all students in their institutions (Harmon et. al., 2010). Additionally, as a critique to institutionalized support, I believe that higher education institutions should have a fund to pay for immigration fees for their students. Just like they do a

great amount of fundraising for new buildings, schools, laboratories, services for international students who pay great amounts of money for their education in the United States, they should also have those funds to support their undocumented students at their campuses.

In a grounded theory study, Negrón-Gonzales (2017) examined how the undocumented status of many community college students in California's Central Valley shaped their access and persistence to complete a degree. Negrón-Gonzales (2017) interviewed 30 undocumented community college students between 2013 and 2015 in California's agricultural Central Valley. She acknowledges the aforementioned progress from supportive legislation in California, which was supposed to pave the way for undocumented students to have more access to higher education and benefits, such as in-state tuition and being eligible for some financial assistance. However, she found that this was not the case for many undocumented students in the Central Valley where they encountered different factors that prevented them from accessing resources. Even though there have been policy changes in the recent years, Negrón-Gonzales (2017) finds that, especially, undocumented community college students in the Central Valley continue to have many barriers to access those services and benefits that are meant to help them.

Negrón-Gonzales (2017) concluded that "many of the state's most marginalized undocumented students who aspire to attend college continue to be turned away, pushed out, and left behind" (p. 107). Negrón-Gonzales (2017)

found that undocumented students experience “constrained inclusion.” Through this study, students shared their challenges accessing resources and finding staff who were understanding and well informed of their needs. Many times, even though the student knew what they were eligible for, the colleges’ staff were not and were unwelcoming. This also affected their persistence to continue on to transfer to a 4-year university and complete a degree (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017). In particular, Negrón-Gonzales (2017) recommends that future studies research the effects “in which the Trump presidency will again reconfigure the educational trajectories of undocumented students” (p. 119). As recommended, this is the intention of my work, and find directly from the undocumented students what they see themselves is needed, and not just from what is recommended by academia or administrators who may not necessarily be in the same situation students face every day.

Upon interviewing undocumented Chicana college students, Perez Huber (2009) found that gender, family histories, and spirituality played supported students as they navigated a research university. Similarly, Muñoz and Maldonado (2012) also found that intersectionality was important when examining the experiences of undocumented Mexicana college students who manage and navigate the implications of their race, gender, class, and legal status. This is a response to the recommendations from other researchers who studied the immigration phenomenon and recommended to examine “how race, class, and gender impact retention of diverse populations” (p. 293). Through the

lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and more specifically, the Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), the researchers examined factors that contribute to the persistence to attain a college degree of this student population. It also provided a perspective on the intersectionality of identities within the group. The goals of an intersectional perspective are also to “facilitate the inclusion of marginalized stories and voices with the purpose of advancing educational research and pedagogy” (Muñoz & Maldonado, p. 294, 2012).

The study was conducted with four *mexicana* undocumented college students between the ages of 20 and 23 years of age. The researcher approached this as an instrumental case study and conducted in-depth interviews and a focus group. A total of 4 interviews per participant were conducted, making it a total of 16 interviews. Muñoz and Maldonado (2012) found that race, legality, and gender have given them a sense of resistance to the dominant discourse and a sense of identity. All four students shared their experiences navigating their way into their courses, the struggles to find someone knowledgeable to help them, or simple tasks such as getting their college identification card.

These students expressed fear, frustration, sadness, and anger when topics of immigration were discussed in classes, and they could not truly give their opinion because they were concerned with any retaliation. They also shared that they had to break barriers and traditions of being women of Mexican descent who were proud of their cultural identity, but who were also tied to a

feminine role of education not being a priority, especially if they came from “old-fashioned” Mexican families. Many times, they even minimized the racism experience because they internally had accepted the labels and stereotypes imposed on their culture. Even though they were bothered by such stereotypes, they would minimize them because it was not intended directly at them or it was just for a length of time. Their experiences of and eventual success became their form of resistance to the dominant culture and discourse.

### Financial Challenges

The idea and visualization of the college experience that students watch in cinema and teenager shows is far from reality, in particular for undocumented students. For most undocumented students, spring break vacations or summer internships, have to be spent working long hours to provide for themselves and finance their higher education (Williams, 2016). Unfortunately, undocumented students are not eligible for Federal grants, loans, or federally funded work study opportunities. This means that undocumented students have to rely on private scholarships, employment, and other forms of financial assistance, like in-state tuition for those states that grant it to undocumented students to secure funding for their tuition (Yoshikawa, Suarez-Orozco and Gonzales, 2017).

Students oftentimes encounter these challenges once they enjoy the amazing feeling of being accepted into a higher education institution, and they receive or see in their student portal the cost of tuition, housing, and other



expenses, which could lead into a dilemma of reconsidering their college options (Romo, Ozuna-Allen and Martínez, 2019). According to Yoshikawa, Suarez-Orozco and Gonzales (2017), from all undocumented students attending a higher education institution, “it is estimated that less than 10%” (p. 7) are able to secure funding for their college expenses. These challenges lead students to work long hours to be able to pay for their college expenses, which negatively affect their engagement with their peers, faculty (Yoshikawa et.al., 2017), and their presence in on-campus activities. Additionally, the campus housing cost and living expenses become another burden in the college going experience that could become another underlying challenge that could potentially make students reconsider their college of choice (Romo et.al., 2019).

For undocumented students in California, the passage of the California DREAM Act by state legislators in 2011 was an immense victory, which has allowed them to receive both institutional and state-funded aid at public institutions (Raza, Williams, Katsiaficas and Saravia, 2019). With the California DREAM Act implemented, and for those who qualify for in-state tuition through AB540, undocumented students in California have “reported a sense of relief from the worry of finding ways to pay for their tuition” (Raza et.al., 2019, p. 350). Thankfully, with the passage of this California legislation, many undocumented students have not had to reconsider options or be pushed out due to the financial burden, and it has provided crucial support that has allowed undocumented students to continue attending a four-year institution (Raza et.al., 2019).

Adversely, the California DREAM Act, does not cover the same amount of support as resident students receive, and undocumented students still have to manage to pay other expenses such as living expenses and family responsibility related costs (Raza et.al., 2019). Students have reported facing food insecurity, unhealthy lifestyles and skipping meals due to the lack for financial needs beyond tuition (Raza et.al., 2019). These milestone victories for undocumented college students create a sense of hope and relief, but they do not paint the “full college experience” picture that students hope and see. These victories, even though a few steps forward, continue to be threatened by the current political discourse that students are living in.

#### Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)

Once undocumented immigrants, and particularly, students were able to apply for DACA, they were able to experience the power of inclusion (Ellis, Gonzales & Rendón García, 2018). These undocumented students were still in a state of abjectivity, as mentioned earlier, between being not considered undocumented yet not eligible for residency (Ellis et. al., 2018). These students feel partially included, and are able to navigate their lives in a country which is their home with more confidence and regained the desire to further their education to eventually earn a professional career (Ellis et. al., 2018).

What DACA has provided these undocumented students is the possibility of “profound self-transformations wherein they began to envision their lives in

new, broadened terms” (Ellis et. al., 2018, p. 5). Ellis et. al. (2018) found that before DACA many students felt hopeless, discouraged, unfocused, uncertain, frustrated, anxious and even considered suicide. Fortunately, these undocumented students were able to access social provisions through DACA that allowed them to see an opportunity to get ahead in life and transform the psychological lives of undocumented immigrants and students (Ellis et. al., 2018). Yet, even with having some inclusion, undocumented students cannot help but to feel uncertain without legal pathways to citizenship (Ellis et. al., 2018). The fears have still been present with these undocumented students. One of which came true with the election of President Trump. The fear of the termination of DACA with a new President had been a latent feeling that became reality with the rhetoric of the current administration. Thankfully, many higher education campuses that have Undocumented centers have provided safe spaces for undocumented students to express their fears, thoughts, and emotions (Kleyn, Alulema, Khalifa and Morales Romero, 2018).

#### Trump Rhetoric: Microaggressions, Racial Violence and Invisibility

Even with strides made throughout history, and the years for struggles, we are currently in a different political time with a not so inviting political discourse in the United States. As researched by Pérez Huber (2016), white supremacist ideologies and inhumane perspectives towards immigrant communities support the current administration’s attitude in issues of immigration, which has created an opening for others with similar views to reinforce racist nativism in spaces that

become more and more adapted for acts of white supremacy. As theorized by Solórzano and Pérez Huber (2015b), racial microaggressions directed towards People of Color in education are a systematic form of racism. These microaggressions are “(a) verbal or non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out automatically or unconsciously; (b) are based on a Person of Color’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent or surname; and (c) are cumulative-taking a physiological, psychological, and academic toll on those targeted by them” (Gomez and Pérez Huber, 2019, p.4-5).

Unfortunately, these microaggressions do not always stem from people undocumented students expected it from. Current undocumented college students face these racist nativist microaggressions by both staff and students at college campuses (Gomez and Pérez Huber, 2019). Students have faced financial aid employees who feel entitled to vocalize their racist nativist beliefs by telling undocumented students that they “should be grateful because people like [them] shouldn’t even get money in the first place” (p. 7). In other instances, students have faced serious violent threats, especially after the results of the election of Donald Trump.

Latina students have shared incidents in which white male students cheering after the election results screaming at them “we’re going to rape you” (p. 8) and chanting other phrases like “we’re going to build that wall” (p. 8) and “make America great again” (p. 8). The actions of these individuals demonstrate

a small glimpse of the level of comfort people with these white supremacist ideologies have to create these racist nativist spaces.

These unfortunate events have exposed some very serious areas in which higher education institutions are lacking the support needed for “all” students, in this case, undocumented students. As researched by Muñoz and Vigil (2018), the current political discourse and rhetoric have exposed the racist nativist spaces that exist on campuses. One of the most common areas is academic ignorance on issues and needs related to their undocumented college students. These students are confronted by staff and faculty at higher education institutions who are ignorant of the socioemotional factors that their actions and lack of preparedness cause on undocumented or DACA students, and it only reveals their racial nativist beliefs (Muñoz and Vigil, 2018).

Another area in which higher education institutions are not staying true to their educational goals is the continued reproduction of pervasive invisibility of undocumented and DACA students. In this case, when institutions continue to produce and reproduce material and feelings of invisibility by staff, faculty, and students (Muñoz and Vigil, 2018). When undocumented and DACA students are not included as part of the institution openly; academic classes, communication, financial aid, campus website, student life, and many other areas, the institution is failing to serve all those who are enrolled, attend classes, and pay tuition, and more importantly, they fail to recognize the existence of undocumented students on their campuses, and their lived realities (Muñoz and Vigil, 2018).

These previous two areas lead to a third area, which is hidden/nonpresent communities of support. Even though many campuses have centers dedicated to serve undocumented students, these centers do not reach all students. Students have had to rely on “hidden” individuals who they have entrusted. Many times, these individuals are staff or faculty members who are allies and are aware of the students’ academic, institutional, and socioemotional needs. This creates a hidden/non-present community at each campus that supports students, but that is not visible, which perpetuates the invisibility of undocumented students (Muñoz an Vigil, 2018).

Given the sociopolitical history and previous literature, this dissertation study aimed to listen to aim of my study, is to listen directly from the students’ voices about how voices how they are seeing themselves and their families with the current state of the society they are living in, and how they see themselves in it. With the study, I aimed to understand and learn how our undocumented Latina/o/x college students saw themselves living in a society with the current anti-immigrant rhetoric. I wanted to provide a platform for them to share their current realities in our colleges, communities, jobs, and how themselves and their families are living in aon a day-by-day state of the unknown

#### Theoretical Framework – Undocumented Critical Theory

Since the beginning of his presidency, Trump has “call(ed) into question the status and rights of many different groups in American Society” (Rogers,

2017, Web Article). This has created stress and concern in schools where there are fewer white students. Additionally, polarization, incivility, and hostility have grown, particularly in white-majority schools (Rogers, 2017). The current political state and discourses call for a theoretical framework that is centered in the experiences of undocumented students. Critical Race Theory (CRT) was initially developed in law as a theoretical tool by legal scholars to acknowledge the marginalized experiences of People of Color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Within the educational research, scholars (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), have been resorting to CRT as a theoretical framework to bring to light race and racism, and how they intersect to oppress People of Color. LatCrit uses the tenets of CRT, but it goes further by acknowledging the experiences, issues of immigration, language, culture, and ethnicity of Latinas/os that are not taken into account by the dominant discourse, and better examine the unique forms of oppression they experience (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Even though CRT and LatCrit could be used, their limitations show that they do not focus explicitly on the experiences of undocumented students.

Aguilar (2019) draws from central tenets within CRT, LatCrit, and TribalCrit to develop and share Undocumented Critical Theory or UndocuCrit. From TribalCrit, Aguilar (2019) identifies two tenets that capture similar experiences to undocumented communities, both related to white supremacy, capitalism, and assimilation. Within those two tenets, Aguilar (2019) demonstrates how U.S. oppressive policies have focused on taking advantage of

marginalized communities and taking away their civil rights, and after they have gained what was needed, disposing of them as inferior beings. Additionally, Aguilar (2019) also exposes another intersection between TribalCrit and UndocuCrit on how governmental and educational policies towards these marginalized groups has always been closely linked to the need of assimilation, and ultimately colonization.

Hence, with the development of UndocuCrit, Aguilar (2019) seeks to transcend colonized minds through UndocuCrit in order to better understand the nuanced and liminal experiences of undocumented communities. The four tenets developed as the framework for UndocuCrit are:

1. Fear is endemic among immigrant communities.
2. Different experiences of liminality translate into different experiences of reality.
3. Parental *sacrificios* become a form of capital.
4. *Acompañamiento* is the embodiment of mentorship, academic redemption, and community engagement. (Aguilar, 2019, p. 153)

The goal through these four tenets of UndocuCrit is to “highlight the resilience of undocumented communities by exposing the fear and oppression to which [these communities] are subjected, the varied and rich fullness of [their] experiences, and the ways in which [they] navigate and succeed despite the obstacles encountered on a daily basis” (Aguilar, 2019, p. 153). These four tenets of



UndocuCrit allowed me to place my study from a perspective of decoloniality of the different society mechanisms that have been established to exclude undocumented students, and communities.

Additionally, I hope to add, based on the students' *pláticas* and *testimonios*, the limitations it may have based on the lived experiences of undocumented students. For example, *testimonios* may reinforce the notion of intersectionality; such that an undocumented Latina student may navigate higher education differently than an undocumented Latino student and the same for sexuality. From my place as a researcher, son of an undocumented immigrant mother, and an advocate and ally, I still do not have the same experiences, fears, and challenges undocumented students have. I want for the students' voices to drive mine and their recommendations given.

### Summary

Without a doubt, the journeys of undocumented students and their families are far from over. They will continue to fight against roadblocks from those who believe that they are inferior and criminals, and not deserving of being in the United States. They will continue to work and contribute to the American economy without getting any credit for their contributions to our successful economic system. This is an ongoing process that will not stop anytime soon. Undocumented students and their families, allies, and supporters are always looking for ways to support this deserving population, which is part of what

influenced the development of this study. Chapter 3 will cover the research design that I will be using to conduct my study, which I hope will help me prove my assumptions of the study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### Purpose Statement

Undocumented Latina/o/x college students have experienced, and continue to experience challenges to earn their academic and professional goals in the United States. Their aspirations and resiliency have been tested by yet another challenge with the rhetoric and actions of the Trump Administration. However, the dehumanizing laws persist beyond the Trump Administration, which have implications on their journeys through higher education and society.

In California alone, there are over 75,000 undocumented college students who could be in jeopardy of their future, and the implications of the actions against them could have enormous impacts on their lives (González, 2009, The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2022). While the attempt to rescind Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was turned down by the United States Supreme Court, which stated that the “Department of Homeland Security (DHS)’s decision to rescind DACA was arbitrary and capricious” (2020), former President Trump placed an added threat to continue finding a legitimate venue to jeopardize the lives of undocumented Latina/o/x college students. Students who were hoping to be able to use their degrees with the work permit given by DACA, may not be able to do so without immigration reform that enables them to work with the same opportunities as their resident and citizen counterparts.

While research studies can have recommendations, without proper legal recourse, undocumented students cannot use their degree to contribute professionally to this society. Nevertheless, this participatory action research project aimed to create transformative ruptures, informed by the experiences of the participants. The purpose of this study is to learn first-hand from undocumented Latina/o/x students their journeys, experiences, challenges, motivation, and aspirations to continue reaching for their academic and professional goals, and to hear from them directly recommendations as to what are the best practices that college counselors and staff can do to better serve and make them feel welcomed.

### Research Questions

In order to learn from the experiences of undocumented Latina/o/x college students, understand, and provide a platform for their voices, I plan to use the following questions to guide my research. The goal of the research questions is to understand how the experiences of undocumented Latina/o/x college students help them navigate higher education, the current rhetoric, their aspirations and persistence to achieve their professional goals.

1. What are the experiences of undocumented students with academic counselors/advisors?
2. What policies and practices do undocumented students navigate when developing a sense of belonging in higher education?

3. What transformative ruptures do undocumented students envision that can foster a sense of belonging in higher education?

### Research Design

To have a more impactful research design that focuses on transformative and challenges mainstream, antiquated, and dominant designs that are not designed for this type of research and experiences, I engaged in Critical Race Feminista Praxis (Delgado Bernal, Dolores, et al., 2016). Through the lens of Chicana feminista, research intends to disrupt Western colonial assumptions of neutrality and unbiased data. Chicana feminist researchers recognize the existence of liminal spaces in the middle of two worlds known as *nepantla*. From these spaces of in-between and confusion new knowledge is created, while transformation and growth is happening. This praxis aimed to make an impactful change in the existing patriarchal, classist, anti-immigrant, racist established structures and move towards a more eclectic and spiritual activism.

Within the lens of Critical Race Feminista Praxis, we can better understand what is called transformative ruptures. These transformative ruptures are “those incidents, interactions, experiences and moments where a disruption of pervasive coloniality, institutional racism, and systematic inequity occur” (Delgado Bernal, et al., 2016, p. 29). Through these ruptures and choques (Anzaldúa, 2002) of mindsets, political views, discourse, and ideologies new opportunities for change, knowledge and possibilities can emerge. Every

encounter with a different ideology and discourse presents an opportunity for change and growth, and every encounter to learn from the experiences of those marginalized, minoritized and displaced in limbo create an opportunity for growth and create transformative ruptures.

### Methodology and Methods

Due to the nature of the topic in the study and the purpose, the methodologies and methods of data collection were *testimonios* (Perez Huber, 2009) and *pláticas* (Flores & Morales, 2022). By using *testimonios and pláticas* the methodology was integrated within the design. *Testimonios* and *pláticas* bridge theory, method, and epistemology within it to create knowledge (Perez Huber, 2009). The study focused on learning directly from the participants, or research collaborators, and their lived experiences and challenges. These experiences and challenges made their resiliency and aspirations even stronger through activism and by finding support within their networks and allies. (Huber, 2009; Glesne, 2011).

*Testimonios* is an emergent qualitative methodology that focuses on the conveyed experiences of historically marginalized and disenfranchised individuals with origins from Latin America who have experienced struggles and socio-political persecution (Perez Huber, 2009; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga & Flores Carmona, 2012). Perez Huber (2009) argues that the current education system is dominated by ideologies of meritocracy, individualism, and color-

blindness that does not fully acknowledge the experiences of students of color, which she calls Apartheid of Knowledge. This system of oppression masks the struggles of those students, which for this study will be undocumented Latina/o/x college students (Perez Huber, 2009). According to Delgado Bernal and Villalpando (2002) these ideologies of superiority are rooted from Western epistemologies that maintain white superiority through the reproduction of knowledge. In order to create a change and disrupt the apartheid of knowledge, *testimonios* become a research tool that creates that disruption to the traditional research method and design, creates a new research method that demonstrates the value in the experiences of the communities of color in academia, and, more importantly, create knowledge and theory through the experiences of these communities (Perez Huber, 2009).

Testimonios contain alignments with CRT and LatCrit, which are: 1. Revealing injustices caused by oppression, 2. Challenges the Eurocentric ideologies, 3. Validates experiential knowledge, 4. Acknowledges the power of human collectivity, and 5. its commitment to racial and social justice (Perez Huber, 2009). These five alignments are part of the main goal of this study, which will attempt to learn from the experiences of the undocumented Latina/o/x college students.

To answer the second and third research question, I used the *pláticas* methodology (Flores & Morales, 2022). One of the most critical parts of *pláticas* is that it challenges the notion of objectivity, which is an important tenet in the

Chicana Feminista Praxis. Additionally, as a researcher, it was imperative to practice reflexivity and look inward and critically question my positionality to be better prepared to engage and connect with our research collaborators. By looking inward, I was taking a look at my identities and my ties to systems of oppression and power (Flores & Morales, 2022?).

Pláticas are unstructured conversations we have with friends, families, colleagues, mentors and mentees in which we engage every day for check-ins, advice, or different perspectives to a situation. These conversations may lead to laughs, tears, eye-opening perspectives, frustrations, moments of clarity, but definitely are meaningful conversations where change can occur, and new knowledge is created. These pláticas are rooted in Chicana/o/x/Latina/o/x oral traditions of passing knowledge from another and self-discovery through these community conversations. These pláticas do not follow a structure or a script, but rather take shape as the conversation flows and the research collaborators allow the conversation to move forward by feeling comfortable to share their experiences.

Even though pláticas do not have a structure in which the conversations occur, there are important aspects that outline a Chicana/Latina methodological praxis. These five aspects of pláticas are to (1) view and honor participants as co-constructors of knowledge; (2) incorporate everyday lived experiences; (3) are two-directional and based on reciprocity, vulnerability, and researcher reflexivity;



(4) provide a potential space for healing; and (5) draw heavily from Chicana/Latina Feminist Theory (Flores & Morales, 2021).

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that I used to examine the experiences of undocumented Latina/o/x students in higher education was Undocumented Critical Theory (Aguilar, 2019). I selected this theoretical framework because Aguilar created it by pulling from Critical Race Theory (CRT), LatCrit, and TribalCrit tenets to develop UndocuCrit and better understand the experiences of undocumented students. Even though CRT and LatCrit has been used by researcher and scholars to bring to expose the racism and oppression, and mistreatment of Latina/o/x communities (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), it does not go into detail on the treatment specifically of undocumented Latina/o/x students. By pulling from from CRT, LatCrit and TribalCrit, Aguilar created a framework that not only examines the oppressive and racist practices by the white supremacist dominant culture, but also focuses on the assimilation and educational practices as it was done to American Indian communities, who ultimately were part of the colonization tactics (Aguilar, 2019).

In the tenets of UndocuCrit there is a focus on: The familial capital mentioned earlier, and how the parental *sacrificios* are so important and just the seed of the future success of their children. Another focus is that within those *sacrificios*, there is the fear among the undocumented communities, and how it

could potentially terminate it. Also, another tenet is that the experiences of undocumented students are a different reality than those who are not undocumented, but it is something that they live with every day, and thus is *their* reality. Lastly, acompañamiento, is that mentorship that was also mentioned earlier, and the importance of having a support system, a safe space where they can feel at home to reach their academic goals. This is the importance of the establishment of UndocuCrit to try to better and fully understand their experiences. The four elements were part of the main goal of this study, which aimed to learn from the experiences of the undocumented Latina/o/x college students.

### Participants

Participants for the research were self-disclosed undocumented college students and staff members from a southern California university. In order to respect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants of this study, it was important to ensure protection of their identity. The primary method of selecting participants will be network and snowball sampling. This will enable me to create a pool of participants who share common experiences (Glesne, 2016). After the initial pool of participants, I moved towards homogenous sampling in order to learn and describe the experiences of this subgroup in depth (Glesne, 2016; Plano & Creswell, 2010). During the *Testimonios* process, it was important to have a small group of participants which focused on participants who identify as

Latina/o/x undocumented students and undocumented staff members, hence why it needed to be specific when selecting participants who meet the criteria for the study.

### Data Collection

Given my qualitative approach, I focused on making meaning of the lived experiences and challenges of participants along with actions that can interrupt the marginalization of undocumented students. The first step to start collecting data was through observations from virtual and on-campus events or workshops. This allowed me to take field notes of these events as they occurred naturally, and provided context, such as descriptions, physical and virtual setting, and activities, for the next step of data collection (Plano & Creswell, 2010).

*Testimonios* calls for researchers as participants; thus, I was a participant observer to: engaged in activities, have the opportunity to see the experiences from the participants' views, and to learn from the situation (Plano & Creswell, 2010). Once I witnessed events as they happened naturally, I was able to access a group of possible participants. I then collected data through both pláticas and testimonios.

Unlike traditional focus groups in which asking sensitive questions and gathering the participants' experiences and challenges would not to be ideal (Plano & Creswell, 2010), in *testimonios* sharing those experiences is the core of the methodology which creates knowledge through the struggles and oppressive

experiences and realities of the participants (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). Testimonios occurred alongside pláticas, discussed below.

The third method of data collection occurred through pláticas. The purpose of the pláticas was to bring together participants in order to interact with each other and share their experiences to create knowledge (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). These pláticas had semi-structured questions, which allowed for initial direction, but allowed the participants to direct the conversations. All the testimonio and pláticas were recorded with the permission of the participants, transcribed, and shared with them for clarification and additional comments (Glesne, 2016; Perez Huber, 2009).

### Research Setting

This study took place at a public state university in Southern California classified as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). This university had an Undocumented Center, led by a director, which represented a safe space for undocumented Latina/o/x college students. Additionally, this campus also had programming for undocumented students that provided workshops and activities such as immigration workshops, talking circles, graduation ceremony, among other types of programming. The campus also counted on a staff and faculty ally network that supported the efforts of the Undocumented Center. My goal was to participate continuously in the events organized by the Undocumented Center

and will also attend virtual events intended for this student population in order to recruit possible participants to establish trust (Glesne, 2016).

I approached the coordinator and students who continuously engaged the center to talk to them about my research, the significance and purpose, and started creating a pool of potential participants. The goal was always to conduct, if possible, the individual interviews at the Undocumented Center because students felt comfortable in that space. Due to the busy schedules of all the participants, I conducted pláticas in person, over Zoom, and via telephone.

Our first plática was individual and this served as an opportunity for each participant to share their testimonio. The symposium was our action research project and we finished with a group plática two days after the symposium. In the group plática, we reflected on the event, shared any thoughts we did not get to discuss, and planned for next steps. The pláticas were transcribed and coded to create the themes which is how the results were presented and organized. All pláticas were initiated with opening guiding questions, and then the pláticas continued as a regular conversation, which helped create an environment of familiarity among the participants and to make meaning out of these conversations.

### Data Analysis

The data collection and data analysis process happens simultaneously, alongside participants, with *testimonio* (Perez Huber, 2009). During the individual

testimonio pláticas we discussed how their experiences as undocumented Latina/o/x college students affected their educational trajectories during the political climate. Data collection and analysis was done in a three-phase process, each integrating the participants into the analysis (Perez Huber, 2009).

The three-phase data analysis process consisted of preliminary, collaborative, and final data analysis (Perez Huber, 2009). During the preliminary data analysis all individual testimonios were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed using the UndocuCrit (Aguilar, 2019) lens of analysis. LatCrit was also used to isolate thematic categories related to unjust and oppressive experiences (Perez Huber, 2009). Next, was the collaborative data analysis phase, which happened during two pláticas group interviews (Perez Huber, 2009). As part of the pláticas, I included reflective questions to engage in dialogue and start creating knowledge and theory through their experiences (Perez Huber, 2009).

In the final data analysis phase, experiences were connected, and findings will be combined from the first two phases (Perez Huber, 2009). This allowed me to engage in the knowledge and meaning making that incorporated the participants (Perez Huber, 2009). This process was healing and allowed student participants to step into their power because they shared their common experiences, fears, family influences, *sacrificios*, mentorship and found meaning in them to keep moving forward (Aguilar, 2019).

## Trustworthiness

Undocumented Latinx college students are a vulnerable group due to their immigration status. For this reason, one of the main ways to accomplish trustworthiness was to get permission from key gatekeepers at the campus and the participants themselves (Glesne, 2016; Perez Huber, 2009). As it is part of the *testimonio* process, triangulation of the different data sources is not only a way of enhancing trustworthiness, but also of creating knowledge from the data collection and analysis (Glesne, 2016; Perez Huber, 2009). Also, as part of the *testimonio* process, member checking and reflections were an essential part, along with sharing rich, thick descriptions through transcripts with the participants (Glesne, 2016; Perez Huber, 2009).

Trustworthiness is an important aspect of the research process; it is also an aspect that is tied together with the dominant ideologies of meritocracy and superiority (Perez Huber, 2009). Having to prove the validity of the experiences and struggles of communities of color is another way of contributing to these oppressive systems (Perez Huber, 2009). *Testimonio* intends to create a disruption in that system by giving validity to the experiences of communities of color by sharing them and acknowledging them, proving asking for their validity (Perez Huber, 2009).

## Limitations

*Testimonios* focus on the experiences of people with origins in Latin America, and, thus, they are limited to Latinx populations (Perez Huber, 2009). This limitation in itself is a criterion of *Testimonios*, but leaves out the experiences of other communities of color who may be experiencing similar experiences that could be compared, and that we could learn from (Perez Huber, 2009). This is an area of future research to be analyzed. Another limitation to my study is the fact that I will only focus on the experiences of students in one college campus. Even though different students in different universities in the state, and, particularly, in other states where there are less students and resources, may have similar experiences, they also may have very particular experiences depending on the university or state where they attend college.

One last limitation is the fact that I only included participants who were voluntarily willing to participate in the study and openly shared their status with me. By only interviewing those willing to participate, I may not have been able to learn from the experiences of those who are not as open as these participants to share their experiences. The experiences of those who are navigating in the shadows of the immigration system might be far different from those who are unapologetic and unafraid.



## Researcher as Instrument

Many of us spend our days thinking qualitatively without knowing it, it is a mental process we have been doing since we gained the ability to start reasoning. Even those who do not favor qualitative research as a methodological framework use it in their everyday life. It is a *quality* of our daily lives to analyze situations, make observations, inferences, and deductions, evaluate and think critically and creatively (Saldaña, 2015). By using this thinking process in our daily lives, we are able to shape our thoughts, conversations, and the implementation of what we consider valuable to us, unjust, and needs change. We learn about different issues and attempt to see others through different lenses and angles that allow us to continue learning about the human experience and social life (Saldaña, 2015).

I can consider myself a researcher now, even if I thought I had never truly considered myself as one. I've added to my repertoire of research skills different tools and perspectives throughout the years as I continue to learn and experience new aspects of life and see it through different lenses. My cultural, social, academic and professional backgrounds have added to the shaping process of my epistemology. The lenses and angles I use today to frame my studies have been influenced by my experiences, my environment, observations of the lives around me, especially the trials and tribulations of my family, friends and those who I serve. As we create our different epistemologies, all of us have a worldview very different from each other. Analyzing now what all this means to

me, and the way I've seen the world, I can finally give it a name. Frank (2013) shared that epistemic diversity is the fact that all of us have our different truths, and there are multiple epistemologies, which leads to "multiple ways of approaching the same problem" (p. 363). This epistemic diversity is what makes each of us different, and how each one of us establishes what we stand for, fight for, what we want to change in our environment, and eventually what truly drives our research.

Growing up in a border community between Mexico and the United States has given me a different perspective that only those in that environment get to witness. I remember clearly seeing the farm workers in the buses going to work in the different fields of the valley and coming back after their shifts with their clothes dirty from the dirt and mud. I remember my mother leaving to work before sunrise and leaving me with the responsibility to get my younger sister ready by helping her get dressed, comb her hair, and feed her before taking her to preschool. My mother, a former undocumented worker, suffered the mistreatment of the same people who continue mistreating and disrespecting farm workers today. She lived her life in fear of losing the little that she had to support us.

I also remember seeing the wasted talent of many of my high school friends who were undocumented and didn't have the opportunity to continue to college. As a high school teacher later in my life, I continued seeing that wasted talent and potential as well. By this time, there were more resources for undocumented students such as in-state tuition for those who met the criteria. I could not help

myself to notice the history of oppression towards our communities where minorities are the majority, but at same time get the least of resources allocated towards them in education, and where suspension and expulsion rates in schools increase the school-to-prison pipeline for our youth (Winslade, Espinoza, Myers, & Yzaguirre, 2014). Being a student in high school and first years of college while the infamous Proposition 187 was on ballots in California, started to open my eyes to a world that I had not seen before, one of oppression, prejudice, and injustice by those in power towards those in my community. Both of these propositions' main goal was to place barriers for undocumented immigrants by limiting or denying them access to healthcare, public education, and ensuring education was mainly focusing on English only. Needless to say, this has not stopped, it seems to have resurrected from a hiatus period, but is alive, and continues with the current Trump administration. Seeing all the hate and racism make a comeback by many people towards anyone who "looks" as an immigrant or speaks another language has been heartbreaking. As a college counselor now, I see how these actions, and the current political climate against immigrants has affected many of my students who may be undocumented themselves or with family members who are undocumented.

These experiences and issues are the reason why I'm here today. I went from a dream of wanting to become a Spanish literature professor at a university, to being in a doctoral program and who will focus his work on social justice, helping youth *at-opportunity* (rather than deficit term *at-risk*), and using my

position to continue to create knowledge from the experiences from those who are underrepresented, oppressed, undocumented, and who deserve better than the treatment they receive. I went from a selfish dream towards becoming an agent of change for those who are disempowered. This kind of work is extremely important because “the perspectives of those on the disempowered end of the social spectrum are often invisible to those with power” (Frank, 2013, p. 365). These subjectivities are the reasoning behind the way I relate to people, and the force behind my research.

Unknown to me up until this program, I operate from the Critical Theory paradigm (Glesne, 2016). The purpose and mission of my inclination and dedication to these issues are to create a positive impact on the conditions of those who are oppressed, and seek a positive, fair, and equitable transformation (Glesne, 2016; Sipe & Constable, 1996). Those in power and the system behind them cannot understand truly what those *below* them are facing if they never lived that themselves. They cannot generalize their conditions and crucify them just because they do not have the same perspectives and experiences as them, or because they assume that the lifestyles of those in power is the right way to live.

I intend to be an instrument that will challenge the value systems of our society, advocate for those who are exploited and oppressed, harvest understanding of these perspectives, and change the dominant discourse in our society (Glesne, 2016). I have always thought that the best tool to fight racism,

oppression, exploitation, and all types of injustices is with education. The knowledge that *Testimonios* gives is a powerful tool that can be used to discover what is just, challenge and change the unfair systems that exist, and take action to change the world into a place that is equitable and fair for all (Sipe & Constable, 1996).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I share the findings of this study. As shared in previous chapters, the purpose of this study is to learn directly from the voices of current undocumented Latina/o/x college students both their experiences, challenges, and aspirations as they navigate their college careers in a public university in Southern California. The three research questions that guided this Critical Race Feminista Praxis study through plática/testimonio methodology are the following: 1) What are the experiences of undocumented students with academic counselors/advisors?; 2) What policies and practices do undocumented students navigate when developing a sense of belonging in higher education?; and 3) What transformative ruptures do undocumented students envision that can foster a sense of belonging in higher education?

Over the course of the pláticas with the participants, six interconnected themes became evident as we developed more trust with each interaction. Additionally, with each plática, we became more comfortable with each other. In our last plática the participants shared a transformative rupture that emerged from the pláticas because they called their group an underground network in which they were able to check in with one another, support each other, and get together in occasional meetups.

The six themes that emerged from these Pláticas that I identified were: 1) Early awareness & resiliency; 2) Transition from high school; 3) Community college support; 4) University resources; 5) On going undocumented training for staff and faculty; and 6) Self advocacy and mentorship. With each of these themes, I will be discussing and answering my research questions to better understand directly from the students' voices their experiences with counselors and advisors, how they have learned to navigate higher education, and what transformative ruptures they take part in and would like to see happen in higher education for the benefit of all undocumented students. First, I share a brief profile of each participant, with some elements changed in an effort to maintain confidentiality.

### Participant Profiles

#### Lilly

Lilly is a first-year undocumented college student who was admitted to the university out of a local high school. She is 19 years old and originally from Peru, arriving in the United States four years ago. She is the oldest child in her family, and with that, comes a great amount of responsibility to be the example for her younger siblings, and be a support system for her parents. Lilly is a Biology major with a minor in Child Development. Her ultimate goal is to go to medical school to become a surgeon and help children.

Currently, Lilly had a 3.20 GPA, was taking a full load of units, as well as taking part in the California state program, College Corps, which provided financial assistance for college students who take part in the program by volunteering. College Corps has been a great support to supplement her access to financial support since she does not qualify for DACA. The lack of access to more financial aid or employment was also the reason why she had to deny her admission to a private out-of-state research university, which was her first choice for undergraduate work. Even though she was given a tuition scholarship, she was not able to financially afford the cost of student housing at the private out-of-state research university. Due to this, she decided to stay at her local university where she was admitted and has access to financial aid through the California Dream Act (CADA).

### Robbie

Robbie is a second-year undocumented student who chose to attend the university right out of high school. He was 20 years old at the time of the interview and was in the United States since the age of 1-year old when he arrived with his family from Mexico. He does not know any other place as his home; the United States has been his only home. He is very proud to know that his abilities got him accepted into seven out of the eight universities that he applied to while in high school. He decided to stay at his local university because of the resources that were available to him. He was recruited for the university's honors program and has been part of it since he started.



Robbie held a 3.85 GPA, while taking a full load of units each semester. Additionally, he has taken advantage of the opportunities to take summer and winter intersession classes. He is a Political Science major, and a Pre-Law Criminal Justice minor, and his plan is to go to law school and become an attorney. Robbie does not have DACA status. He was in the process of applying for DACA and completed his biometrics when the Trump administration rescinded DACA. As a first-time applicant, he will not be able to apply for DACA until the Supreme Court's decision. Robbie is currently working without a work permit.

### Sofia

Sofia is a first-year transfer student from a community college. Sofia's journey is different from Lilly and Robbie. Sofia is 30-years old and arrived to the United States at the age of 15 with her younger sibling in 2007 with a visa. Sofia and her sister arrived from El Salvador by themselves. Their mother was already in the United States and her father is still in El Salvador. While in high school, she did not have the best guidance regarding college access for undocumented students. She applied and was accepted to a private research university in Southern California, but due to the lack of financial aid support or information she had to deny her admission to the university. After the heartbreak of this decision, she had to find a way to pay for her future education. She decided to enroll herself in a Licensed Vocational Nurse program to first find employment to be

able to support herself, her family, and pay for school. She is currently the head of household supporting her mother and younger sibling.

She applied to DACA on time and currently has work authorization. Because she has been able to work, she went back to community college and eventually transferred to the current university. This is not her local university, but decided to attend this university because she reviewed multiple university websites and found that there were resources available for undocumented students at this university. She is currently a Cyber Security major and holds a 2.78 GPA. She works full-time at a local hospital while also being a full-time student.

### Clarissa

Clarissa is a graduate student who will be graduating with her master's degree in communication studies with a 3.64 GPA, and is looking for opportunities to continue her journey and be admitted to a fully paid Ph.D. program. She is 25 years old and arrived from Mexico at the age of seven years old. She decided to attend her local community college to be able to save money before transferring to a university. She shared that there were some great resources at her community college that were able to provide support, but also there were some staff who were not as informed. Once she completed her transfer associate degree, she transferred to the current university to complete her Bachelor's Degree in Communication Studies.

She completed her BA during the COVID pandemic with a 3.27 GPA. She shared that due to the pandemic, the Communications Studies department had spots open for their graduate program. She decided to make the best out of adversity, like always, and was accepted to the program almost immediately. She emphasized that in this program she found very supportive professors who advocated for her in many instances. One of the main situations she faced was not being able to complete the requirements to be a graduate student instructor for the lower division Communication Studies program because the university does not have in place a way to properly compensate students without work authorization. She does not have DACA status and is in the same situation as Robbie because she completed her biometrics requirement to be able to get DACA when it was rescinded. Currently, she does not have work authorization.

### Early Awareness and Resilience

During the first group *plática* as the participants felt more comfortable with each other, they began to share more of their experiences and challenges. As the *plática* went on and the conversations were flowing, their testimonios became more real and themes of their experiences started to arise. Findings that arose from the testimonio and *pláticas* among all four participants included an early awareness of their undocumented status, whether it was by understanding the form of their arrival and understanding their situation, or by learning from an early

age from their family about how to react to potential situations they could encounter. Robbie recalled vividly:

I always knew I was undocumented from the elementary, middle school age, so I already knew I couldn't leave the state. I didn't receive the same aid, stuff like that. I didn't have the same benefits.

As shared atop in Robbie's profile, he has been in the United States since the age of one, and his only home has always been this country. For a young child to be so aware of his immigration status, lack of benefits, and lack of ability to travel created a unique perspective on what it is to be in a place that is your home, but does not consider the individual as equal as anybody else.

Similarly, Clarissa was well aware of her status from early conversations with her family. Her family made sure the children were well prepared in case of ever being questioned by authorities. She recalled early conversations with her family:

I always knew, it was one of the earliest conversations. I immigrated when I was seven, and it was one of the early conversations, "if a cop stops us, what are we doing here? We're going to Disneyland. Do we know English? We don't know."

It's just that kind of idea. So it's very much that mindset. I think the journey for me has been finding out that I'm not as limited as in danger or as literally illegal as I've been led to believe. Because it's very much a mindset of when you're aware of your status, you have done something

wrong and you have to be here proving above and beyond that you are not a threat, that you're not someone trying to steal something or something along those lines.

Clarissa's early conversations created, as she reflected, a predisposed immigrant mindset of being self-aware of her conditions and status when potentially encountering a law enforcement officer. Both Robbie and Clarissa arrived in the United States at a young age, and both have established this early knowledge of their conditions and status, and how to keep themselves safe from sharing too much about their status. Opposite to the other participants, Clarissa's mindset had been transformed and reestablished due to her experiences in high school, community college, earning her bachelor's degree, and going into a master's degree program that exposed her to decolonial and postcolonial theories.

This early awareness also created a great sense of resiliency. Lily and Sofia arrived in the US in their teen years, and since that moment they were aware of their immigration status, Lily shared, "Yeah, I always knew I was undocumented student since I came here because I was 14 when I came here." While Sofia arrived at the age of 15 with her younger sibling. Both Lily and Sofia struggled more understanding and navigating high school, learning about the limitations of their status, and finding support.

As teenagers in high school and not having the college awareness that many students are exposed to in early years such as middle school, both Lily and

Sofia had to face challenges early in high school about how to become eligible for college. Sofia recalled:

Yeah, when I was in high school, I think it was shocking. Just that's when I found out when I was about to graduate, because I was trying to do the applications. And so it was very different. I didn't know how to go about it. And my mom wasn't going to know how to help me either. So I kind of just pushed through.

Sofia had to be resilient and resourceful, which is the case for immigrant students, she had to rely on the limited resources and knowledge she was able to get. She knew that her mother had less knowledge about how to go to college and did not want to give her another concern beyond supporting them. As she shared, she had to push through to get ahead.

Lily's experience was similar, but also she ensured she was not misplaced in her academics due to her status or being an English learner. Lily shared:

I was supposed to be a freshman, but then they got my transcript from Peru, and I became a sophomore. And my counselor, she told me that I shouldn't do that because I won't be able to graduate with enough credits like that to apply to college. But I was like, no, I know I have the knowledge to be a sophomore. So I just didn't want to go back to freshman year if I was supposed to be a sophomore. So I kept with that. She didn't give me the resources or talk to me about AP classes or things that I needed to do to get into college.

She realized at that early age that being an English learner did not translate into being behind academically. She had the knowledge to be at least a sophomore and the language barrier was something she knew she could overcome. Lily had to advocate for herself to ensure she was not misplaced academically.

Robbie had been building that resiliency since a young age and knew that he had to rely on himself, and knowledge gained throughout his academic journey. He had the familial support of his parents who always encouraged him, even if they did not know how to help him navigate the road to college. Robbie recalled:

So I knew my parents couldn't help me, but they always encouraged me like, *colegio, tienes que estudiar*, like, *así vas a salir adelante*. So I was like, all right, keep telling myself, keep going, keep going. And like I said, until I made it to junior year, when I started getting resources, that's when I started. Now that's where I am now.

Robbie knew that he had the support of his family and regardless of challenges, lack of information or guidance on the college journey, he had to keep on going. His resourcefulness and resiliency kept on moving him forward.

Moreover, Clarissa summarized this aspect of undocumented students well by saying, “And that's the thing with the marginalized people, we take crises and we make them work because we've been living in crisis for a while.” This statement in our *plática* resonated with all of the participants and made them feel closer to each other, which contributed to an instant connection.

## Experiences of Undocumented Students with Academic Counselors & Advisors

Originally, the goal was to focus only on the experiences and challenges of undocumented Latino/a/x students at the college level. This was with the purpose of not overextending the research between secondary and higher education. All the pláticas were initiated with the higher education focus, but all students brought out their experiences and challenges in high school. It became evident that their experiences and challenges in higher education were just a result and extension of what they had to overcome to get there. All participants shared real and extenuating situations they faced in secondary education and how it marked them in a positive or negative way.

### Transition from High School to College

Initially, when I conceptualized the study and created my research questions, my intention was to focus on the college experience of undocumented students, not necessarily their high school journey or experiences. As we had our pláticas, the theme of high school, access to college information, and the lack of support from high school counselors emerged. It was also evident that in many instances, when in high school undocumented students relied on the support of a handful of high school staff who were supportive, created connections and made students feel comfortable about their status. For most, that support system and access to information did not come from their high school counselor. After having these pláticas, it was evident that the transition from high school to college is one of the key hurdles undocumented students need to overcome to reach higher



education, and not just academically, but a navigational hurdle without much support or guidance. The students who participated in our group made it through high school and had to advocate for themselves to be able to attend higher education. Thus, it was important to learn about the struggles they faced in high school because other students potentially continue to face similar obstacles.

#### Lack of Advising from High School Counselors

All four of the participants shared a common experience of having high school counselors who were not the most supportive, lacked information on how to support undocumented students, and were not encouraged to attend college because they did not fit the mold of college bound students. Robbie shared:

In high school with my counselor, I feel like he didn't know I was undocumented, so it was weird. So he would always treat me as a regular student. He would just check up on me, make sure I was passing my class. And that was it. Just once a time, one thing a year. My counselor always told me that I had to do FAFSA, but I knew I couldn't do FAFSA, but I didn't want to tell him because like I said, we didn't really have that much of a connection.

Similarly, Lily shared similar experiences with different high school counselors:

My counselor, she didn't give me a lot of information or resources because of my status and because I was like, it was my first year here, so I didn't know English. It was just the basics. So she thought I wouldn't be able to make it to college. I got a new counselor, but I felt that I was alone again

because my new counselor, we didn't have that connection where I felt like I was able to go out and talk to him.

Sofia shared her experiences in her high school and how the lack of information affected her ability to make a decision about attending a university directly after high school:

I feel like in the high school I was at, there wasn't much, much information for undocumented students. And so I remember applying to a lot of universities and I actually got into USC, but at that time I didn't know that I could go, so I kind of just ignored it.

Lastly, Clarissa recalled her high school experience as she was given no hope at first to be able graduate high school:

So I started the path to college early in high school. I missed sophomore year because of personal reasons. And then I started, when I got back into the junior year, they basically told me, you won't be able to graduate and there's not much we can do. And so they told me, but you can keep coming to the admissions office and see if something comes up because of my status. And so I kept doing that until eventually I found an early college program in my local community college.

In each of these instances there was a lack of connection between the students and the high school counseling staff. There was also a lack of understanding of the postsecondary resources available for undocumented students.

Robbie did not feel comfortable sharing his status with his counselor because the counselor did not take the time to get to know him. As we will see, he resorted to other people to get the information and resources needed. Lily had a similar experience as Robbie with the lack of personal connection with her counselor. Additionally, she had to deal with her counselor's preconceptions regarding her status and still being an English learner, and how, according to this preconception, Lily would not be able to make it to college. Andrea's lack of information about resources and possibilities at her high school to be able to attend a university regardless of her status prevented her from making the decision to possibly go directly to USC. Finally, Clarissa had to resort to a program at her local community college to find assistance to be able to graduate high school and earn college credits at the same time, while at her high school she had been told she would not be able to graduate.

#### Resorting to Institutional Agents in High School

The high school counselors were not helpful in terms of supporting undocumented students. Particularly because high school counselors were not fully equipped to know how to support and guide undocumented students. The participants relied on finding other institutional agents within the high school setting who became their central source of information, support, guidance and created an environment for students to feel safe with sharing their immigration status.

After sharing his experience with his high school counselor and the lack of connection, Robbie smiled remembering the two individuals in his high school who guided him and provided support, but most importantly, were the most encouraging:

It wasn't because of my counselor that I came to college, it was because of my Spanish teachers that actually came here. I went to miss, señorita, Valles because she was always the one that would motivate me. Yeah, Ms. Terrell too.

They were actually the ones that are like, you can go to college, stuff like that. So they're the ones that always motivated me, hyped me up. I got to the point in junior year and I was like, hey, college is here. And I came to this university because they were the only ones that actually advocated at my high school. And señorita Valles was the one that was like, you guys can go even if you're undocumented and stuff like that. She encouraged me to go to the meeting and I did. And well, I was there and I got all this different information.

For Robbie, that connection that he created with both of these teachers, but specifically his Spanish teacher, was critical to be informed on his possibility to attend a university, get in contact with university representatives, and learn about the different resources available for him at the university.

In Lily's case, she had two bad experiences with high school counselors, the first one was not supportive and did not provide advanced classes or college

information just because of her immigration status and because she was an English learner. While the second counselor did not create an environment in which it was possible to have a good connection enough for Lily to feel comfortable to share her status. The constant change of counselors at the high school or the change of caseloads each academic year do not provide enough time to establish a good relationship and connection with students.

However, Lily recalled that one counselor was supportive for a short period of time in addition to other institutional agents at her high school:

But then I got a counselor, and he was the one who helped me. I even was able to create a club to help immigrants and that's something that made me proud. And then he, not retired, but he got a new position in the district. So I felt that I was alone again. So I got and went to what's it called? the career center, and I got to meet one of the ladies that works there and she was really helpful. She helped me throughout the process because as an undocumented student, it's a different thing. It's a lot of things they have to submit even with the DREAM act.

Lily has been an advocate for herself, but the moment she found the support and guidance needed, and established that Acompañamiento, she was able to thrive even more than trying to navigate this hurdle by herself.

### Experiences with Community College Counselors and Advisors

The experiences with counselors and advisors improve once students get over the major hurdle of completing high school and being able to go enroll in

higher education. For Sofia, community college was where she found support and guidance. There, she was able to connect with other undocumented students:

So then I joined the college and the community college, West College, and that's where they helped me because they had an Undocumented Student Center. The community college there, they were becoming slowly aware of other resources for students. And so I started talking to a lot of the undocu groups and things like that. And so they were the ones that were able to give me all the resources. And I finished the two years and then I transferred here... and here because that's where I am now, thankfully.

After the lack of information and guidance that Sofia experienced in high school, which led her to ignore the admission letter from USC, she was able to find support at the community college from the undocumented center. She was then also able to connect with other undocumented students to create a community.

Clarissa had a similar experience at the community college she found to help her graduate from high school after she was told she would not be able to do it. Clarissa shared:

I swear by it. It's called Dual Enrollment Academy. It's really good. There's very supportive people there. And basically the deal was that if I went there and they helped me finish high school using college classes here and there, I had to finish my first two years in community college first. I

also swear by it because it's two years that you can avoid the debt, that it's going to be the same as any other college.

Once Clarissa found this resource from the community college, she was able to demonstrate that despite her status and the year she had to take off for personal matters, she had the ability to excel beyond the expectations from her high school.

### Fostering a Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

Once undocumented students were admitted to the university, whether it was directly from high school or transferring from a community college, students had to learn how to navigate a new environment and system. As an institution of higher education, the policies, procedures, offices, services, resources and faculty and staff are vast; much greater than what they experience at their previous educational institutions. However, students needed to find a space where they could create a sense of belonging and find a supportive environment and community.

As a result of our first in-group plática, all four participants shared how they experienced the university differently. They all found support from faculty and staff, but also experienced challenges. As they got to talk to each other independently, by the time they participated in the symposium, they immersed themselves more in their experiences in higher education. The experiences ranged from Lilly, who was in her first year of college, and still learning to

navigate the university, to Clarissa, who had walked a long journey to completing her master's degree.

### Supportive Community

The supportive community fostered by the college reached students even before they arrived to the campus. For Robbie, a key factor to attend this university was that staff from the undocumented center went to his high school to table at an event and provided information for high school students. He recalled,

I applied to eight different colleges just to see where I would be at. And I got approved to seven and I'm glad of that. I didn't make it to UC Santa Barbara, I think. But out of eight, seven, I'm like, damn, that's good enough. And so when I went to this university's information table of the undocumented center, I was like, this is a college I'm going to go to. So I picked up on the information and I tried to write down everything I had. So I got here, I was going to go here no matter what. I was thinking UC earlier in high school, but I was like, nah. So when senior year came, I knew what to do. I searched up everything.

By having that ability to connect with as early as high school with staff from a welcoming undocumented community, Robbie was able to make a decision based on the information given and already starting to build a community at the university, something that he did not have at his high school. This single tabling event provided more information, connections and aspirations than the entire time he had known his high school counselor.



Sofia's experience was similar. She did not have the opportunity to meet anyone from the university's undocumented center, but she was able to easily navigate their website.

And so that's when I said I looked into the university, even though it was so far away and it's just totally different from where I grew up. I was like, I really like the fact that they have a lot of resources because once you go to the website, then you see all of those things that are so clear and if we need anything that we know where to go to, we can go to our own undocumented center. So I was like this, I feel like this is where I would feel at home, even though I'll be away from family. And that is the reason why I ended up here, and I chose this university too.

Sofia took the risk to move away from her family to be able to gain a supportive community with resources that included her and her status. She felt that the undocumented center would feel like home and provide a community.

In Lily's case, after the disappointment of not being able to go to Chicago due to not having enough financial aid to provide housing, which was her first choice, and as she became more aware of what this university had to offer, her perspective on the decision to stay started to shape:

For orientation, we have those meetings where we go to different places according to what you want to learn about or things like that. So I didn't know about the undocumented center, but when I went to the meeting, there was the director of the center, and he was talking about all the

resources and things that we can find here and even help with financial aid, with scholarships, with fellowship opportunities and things like that.

And I was like, oh, then yeah, I made the right decision. And then College Corps, there was another thing that made me happy because it was open to undocumented students.

As she started to see the resources in place, meet people who were available for undocumented students, and learn about programs, she felt much more confident that the university was, ultimately, a good choice. Slowly, she created a community of support to which she could reach out.

Having faculty and staff knowledgeable and dedicated to providing guidance and support was critical for the participants. Unfortunately, not everyone was equipped with the knowledge or was up to date with the most current policies or practices. Robbie recalled a situation that prevented him from accessing financial aid:

I was struggling with Selective Service. I didn't know I had to do that. And it was because of you (advisor present) and the undocumented center that I got that information. It was because of Carlos at the time. And he told me what I had to do, what, who I had to email, what I had to see, I think. And thanks to him I was able to get my financial aid. I was paying out of pocket at the time. So once he taught me what I had to do and where I had to go and I got that aid, I felt more calm, I would say, because I know I don't have to pay any more now, thankfully.

Robbie knew that he could reach out to this advisor who was able to connect him with Carlos. Carlos then guided him in the process of signing up to Selective Service as an undocumented student to be able to have access to financial aid. This supportive network plays an important role in the right direction for information, access and success for students.

Similarly, Clarissa knew that information was not just going to show up at her doorstep and she would need to reach out and learn about resources and possibilities.

I used every resource from the undocumented center to the career center. Financial aid has also been very helpful filling out the resources and like I said, during the pandemic openings happened for the master's program. And it's basically been a journey of always living in the offices in your free time and always trying to ask over and over again, is there an opportunity for this? Is there a chance for me to do that? Even if the conferences or seminars they gave seemed very boring; I made sure to be there and hear the same things over and over again because there was always this one moment where someone knew some useful piece of information would come up. And I would have never found out if I just tried to mind my business and just waited for the email or the social media post to find me.

Initiative takes an important role in the success of undocumented students.

Clarissa shares importance and takes advantage of any possible piece of

information or questions she may have. As she shared, this information is not always just going to show up in her email or social media feeds.

### More Supportive Faculty

The participants found spaces of community and safety in places like the undocumented center, academic program advisor and, as shared, even in financial aid offices. This did not mean that they have felt completely included or part of a class, club, or department. Robbie vividly recalled a very positive experience he had with one of his professors:

I have a Criminal Justice professor, his name is Gibbs and he's the only one that I've actually seen that on his syllabus, he includes undocumented information, he says he's an ally and he mentions the center. He mentions that if there's ever a need to reach out to him for information like that or help or want to talk, he's there. And like I said, he's the only one I've seen actually add something like that into his syllabus. Yeah, no other professor has done that before. So I was like, wow, it's crazy. I have someone to talk to now, a professor that I can go up to and he's an ally I trust.

As good as an experience that was, it was also unfortunate that in the two years Robbie attended the university, that was the first time a professor was inclusive and welcoming in the syllabus. This made Robbie feel ecstatic that a professor explicitly shared his support for undocumented students, and that beyond the undocumented center, he could also count on this faculty member.

This comment opened a discussion on inclusivity of undocumented students and to be something that can be as normalized as sharing information about services for students with disabilities. Sofia shared her thoughts on this topic:

So you just be more inclusive in how they talk about, oh, for example, oh don't forget to do your FAFSA. Right? Oh you're like, right. What about me? So be more inclusive of, and you don't have to say, oh, for my undocumented students, do this. Don't. No. Right. So just don't forget to do your FAFSA, don't forget to do your California Dream Act application. Look out for all, just be very welcoming.

Sofia's comment reflected the common comments, generalizing aspects such as reminding every student to fill out their FAFSA, but forgetting to recognize that not all students use FAFSA. Clarissa pointed this out as well by sharing:

I feel like one thing I would like for them to really know is, again, that's a very good one to put a disclaimer on the syllabus, maybe point out some resources and then get in touch with the centers that are the ones that affect us the most. Being financial aid, student financial services.

Robbie added more on this topic of the discussion by sharing:

Yeah, because I feel like just, even if it's just not on the syllabus, but just when you're adding onto special needs students, maybe at the end say something. Maybe just verbalize something like that and not necessarily,

maybe not put it on the syllabus but at least maybe just verbalize the same thing and we are also welcome. Something like that. I don't know.

All of them agreed that it would not take a great amount of effort for faculty to make undocumented students feel welcomed; even a small gesture like verbalizing and normalizing their support would be meaningful.

### Access to Professional Development Training to Understand Undocumented Students

Having a space such as the undocumented center fostered the sense of safety, support, and community at the university. There were also offices that had individuals either trained or knowledgeable of the needs of undocumented students and policies to support them. Unfortunately, not the entire campus was fully prepared and some key areas needed the knowledge and training to do so.

Robbie mentioned an instance when he went for support to a department, but the individual was not able to provide that support in that moment:

I think a place that didn't know how to handle my situation was a Career Center. Because freshman year I was looking for an internship at a legal office or something like that. And when I told the person that was helping me that I was an AB 540 student, he's like, what is that? And then I explained it to him. He's like, well I told him I didn't have a social, so how would that work out for payments and stuff? He told me, we'll get there when we get there. And I don't think that was helpful at all. Because I'm like, what happens if I do get there? The opportunity? And they're like, oh sorry, we can't take it because you don't have a social or you don't have

this or you don't have that. So I was like, okay. So I haven't been to the career center ever since. I just go to the undocumented center now.

It was very possible that the person who was meeting with Robbie was a new employee or someone who did not have the training or familiarity with undocumented students. However, this should be a training that the university requires from every new employee while onboarding. This single incident caused Robbie to never return to the career center, which is unfortunate because there are others who had better experiences with other staff members.

Sofia shared her experiences walking into other spaces where they were aware of how to support her:

I believe that, I think that other offices or clubs need to be more aware of undocumented students because sometimes when we come in they just don't know where to go or how to manage or speak to us and we're just like, you know what? Just forget about it. And then we just go, yeah, we just want to just avoid the whole situation.

Having to explain themselves was a draining process for undocumented students. Needing to inform others on how to better support them creates this additional weight on undocumented students and in instances, like Sofia mentioned, they rather just avoid the interaction completely. Robbie concurred this comment:

So, and then also for us, we're just like, okay, you know what? Just forget about it. Because we don't want to go into details because some stuff is

just personal to us. So we don't want to blast someone right away with it.

So we're just like, you know what? Forget about it.

In addition to being a draining process, like Robbie mentioned it was very personal and not something that they felt comfortable sharing with anyone at any time. Moreover, it took a toll on the students being the ones providing information to the individuals who were supposed to be there to support them.

Clarissa, as a graduate student who was more aware of her status as something that was imposed on her, and who has matured throughout her undergraduate and graduate journey, shared with Lily, Robbie and Sofia how she handles these situations:

And I've noticed you guys are so polite, but when someone just gets awkward with your status, I always, if I know they can't help me, I'm pretty sure I make sure to at least force them to listen to me and make sure that they learn something. Because I'm just like Clarissa, if you don't know if you can do your homework, then I'm going to make sure that you don't forget to do it again. So I feel like I'm one of those people who, once I sense a certain vibe that they're not helpful but they're not outright malicious, I'll try to push the manner of, okay, you don't get to do anything for my status, but where are volunteer opportunities? Where is this, where is that? What do you know this thing? And I think that's how we've gotten through not focusing on the status, but how can I go around it? And that's very important because sometimes people with the solution have such a



small mindset, don't have any perspective and they think, look, yeah, there's nothing you can do.

Clarissa's approach to the lack of knowledge from campus staff on how to help and support undocumented students is more intentional to try to make that individual better prepared. The importance of *pláticas* methodology and the healing elements became evident, the more we met. In this excerpt, it was clear that Clarissa helped the other three participants see an example of how to advocate for themselves. At the same time, this emotional labor was draining work and the burden was falling on Clarissa and other undocumented students who were also trying to do the same by advocating for themselves. When in reality this responsibility should fall on the institutional leaders to ensure all staff are trained and that there is continuous training for current employees and on the onboarding process for new employees.

### Inclusiveness

Aside from the participants requesting intentional inclusion efforts from faculty and for staff to be better prepared to guide and support undocumented students, there were many other ways that they experienced a lack of inclusivity. Typically, in many presentations or workshops the California Dream Act (CADA) was an afterthought as most presenters for the most part mostly mention FAFSA only. The same happened when undocumented students login to apply to scholarships through the university website. Even though it was advertised saying that all students qualify, the application did not reflect students who use

CADA to apply for financial aid. The scholarship application only has three statements: I have already filed a FAFSA; I have not filed a FAFSA but intend to do so; and I will not file a FAFSA. As undocumented students apply, they cannot select any of those options because it would imply they do use FAFSA, and that is a lie that could have repercussions.

Another area of inclusion that was highlighted and that needs to be addressed was employment of non-DACA students. There was a need for an infrastructure to compensate these student workers. Clarissa, who did not have DACA or work authorization, shared:

One of the topics that I know that I'm going to be leaving soon and I will probably benefit from this idea, but I know that there's opportunities for DACA style students, but I wondered, has the university considered implementing a system where you can work with independent contractors? Because I understand people with my particular status, I had to decline being a student teacher twice, even though I took the shadowship, I did all the work. But because I cannot be an employee, I need to be like, I cannot work because they are legally not able to pay me, which could be avoided if there was a system to hire independent contractors. And I've had a lot of various sort of tenacious teachers trying to help me. But it's very much in the higher ups because it's never done before. And if anyone can pass a voice or at least put the idea out there to implement this kind of system, it would help us undocumented students so

much more to not have to resort to less than legal forms to try and bring bread to the table.

Having to confront systematic issues represents an institutional task that needs to be addressed by the administration. Being a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) that proudly displays this title, and also the title of being an undocu-friendly campus, but has not created a system to properly compensate their undocumented students who, like Clarissa, could have been a student teacher twice but had to decline because the university does not have a way to pay her as an employee.

#### Transformative Ruptures Foster a Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

While hesitant at first, all participants were excited to participate, share, get to know others with similar stories, and have an impact on the experiences of others who are just like them. From the youngest one who was still finding a way to navigate and engage with others about their status, to the graduate student who was intentional in participating in this research and action project. Once they met and engaged, their pláticas became a natural conversation of experiences, challenges, rewards and aspirations. They felt empowered at the symposium to share their experiences, and give recommendations and suggestions to educators and administrators on how undocumented students feel and what they can do better than just good intentions and words of encouragement.

### Participatory Action Research Involvement

While I met with all four students separately and engaged in individual pláticas with them, they all agreed to participate in an Undocumented Student Symposium being developed as part of this work, which was the action research project portion of the study. They all felt compelled to participate in this study with hopes that beyond just being another research study, there would be an action taken to the benefit of undocumented students. They explained that they would like to see more changes beyond what has been accomplished because there are still a number of unmet needs for students. Also, they wanted to make sure the university did better for all undocumented students with different status, and not just assume that all undocumented students are the same. Clarissa shared her purpose for participating openly in our last *plática*:

And that's mostly the point I'm trying to get across because I understand people don't automatically know about our situation. And like I said, I hate disappointing people too, and not sounding grateful and not sounding encouraging, but it's also important to tell them, yes, I want to celebrate the somewhat progress that we've made, but don't, don't call it finished yet. Because that's usually how a lot of people get left behind. And yeah, that's the only thing I went out of that situation to start educating the higher up so that they start at least considering these are tasks to be done instead of just relegated, delegating to people who don't necessarily have the power to change them.

Clarissa's involvement in this study was intentional, which is something that she has learned to do throughout her life. Their need to confront injustices became apparent. "Living in crisis" has made her more intentional and strategic in every decision, every step, and every connection that she has with others.

### Undocumented Student Symposium

For the product of our pláticas to result in an action research project, we agreed to do an Undocumented Student Symposium where the student participants would be panelists to share our pláticas and give their testimonio of their journey, experiences, challenges, recommendations and aspirations after completing their current degree. The aim was for this symposium to represent a step toward creating awareness for the university community as a whole. The symposium was sponsored by the university's College of Education as part of their inclusion and equity efforts to bring light to and hear the voices of underrepresented populations at the university. The sponsorship consisted of providing lunch for attendees and providing a small honorarium for a keynote speaker.

The keynote speaker was a campus professor from the College of Education who had expertise regarding access to college for undocumented students. Her role in the symposium was to set the stage for the student panelists by giving a research background on the work done to support undocumented students throughout the years, and to provide resources for

students, but also, for any student advocate who could benefit to better serve undocumented students.

The symposium was attended by the Dean of the College of Education, campus community members who wanted to learn and be more aware, an undocumented campus educator who felt comfortable sharing their status, a graduate teaching assistant, and a high school counselor from the local community. All four student panelists, Lilly, Robbie, Sofia and Clarissa arrived feeling somewhat nervous about being in an open space to discuss their status, but at the same time, they felt it was a supportive environment with people who were supportive of their status. Additionally, they were driven by the need to create a change, a transformative rupture, which is why they elected to participate in this study and this participatory action research project.

As the symposium went on, it became a *plática* that included the audience members once the students felt more comfortable. I started the *plática* with some questions, but then it started to take its own shape. The attendees started to ask questions such as, “What do students need from faculty?” To which student answered some of the findings shared earlier regarding inclusivity in the syllabus, classrooms, center and offices. It was also asked, “What kind of community do you have?” The question was answered by a variety of communities for each. Robbie mentioned his family, friends and the undocumented center. Lily mentioned her involvement with CollegeCorps, the undocumented center, and attending a state conference with an educational program she is part of. Sofia

shared that she also had become familiarized with the undocumented center and often used their resources; she also found the advisor from the same educational program that Lily was part of to be helpful and welcoming. Clarissa shared also that the undocumented center was a community space that she utilized often. Additionally, she found a supportive community of faculty members in her graduate program which has been very helpful and powerful.

A faculty member asked the participants if they had any questions to the attendees because the majority were campus community faculty and staff. Instead of asking a question, the participants took the time to discuss their need for campus employment opportunities that non-DACA undocumented students can access. They explained that there was nothing in place to support undocumented students without work authorization. This became a topic of conversation among everyone in the room and the possibilities of creative ways to hire and pay undocumented students without work authorization were shared. The undocu-educator who was in attendance shed some light on the intrinsic human resources policies at this university that has even made it harder for undocumented students to work on campus. This was one of the main topics of discussion for students because while they aim to earn a degree, they also want to be able to earn a living with the degree they will be earning.

During the final *plática* that we have after the symposium, we continued having this conversation and Clarissa made an excellent point regarding the well-intentioned commitment of the university with undocumented students:

I also saw from the dean, and I hope this didn't come off as rude on my part because we were talking in the beginning of the conference of how DACA students are employed. And I told him, and he was just pushing, I would love to have more teachers. And I was just like, "Oh, well, yeah, that's great. And I did try, but because of the lack of infrastructure for non DACA students, that didn't happen." And I could see the little dimness in his eyes. And sometimes it's disappointing to have to remind other people of, "Yes, we really appreciate you being a Hispanic Serving Institution. We really appreciate the fact that you don't have all this hostile bigotry in your head. We really do. But sometimes I feel like people want to celebrate too quickly and then when we tell them the reality check of...but we have to remember we're also dealing with this, this, and this and that." And that's still very real for us.

Clarissa's understanding and stance on the issues that affected her fellow undocumented students was clear and unapologetic. She said she did not want to sound "rude" in the clarification she made to the dean because anything else beyond being grateful and pleasant for a Latina student, who is undocumented could be seen as rude and ungrateful. She demonstrated intentional transformational resistance (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001) with every step she took to ensure that others do not just ignore the challenges undocumented students face every day, and/or try to delegate the issue to someone else.



The final plática, being more intimate than the symposium, allowed for a space for healing. As the plática became more vulnerable, the topic of burden and mental health arose naturally. All participants shared their frustrations and weight that they carry, not only personally but also for their families. Each also shared ways in which they coped with this stress. It ranged from keeping it to themselves until they can no longer with it; to keeping themselves occupied and distracted in order to forget about it momentarily; working out and sweating it out; to understanding their circumstances and applying the right mentality to a better option, rather than focusing on the wrong mentality to the same problem; and finally by reaching out to campus therapists, that is covered by their tuition.

Clarissa said it best:

But I just want to remind everybody else that therapy is meant to be the way, the same way as a normal doctor, the same way as a plumber or the same way as a counselor. They're not supposed to fix your life. It's your job to reflect and see. I think I'm not handling the ex-situation constructively and I just want to talk about them, about that. They're just advisors who are supposed to have studied ways to handle different situations constructively, taking up rejection or calming down when something doesn't go your way. And that's the way that I have been able to implement a lot of those things into my life. The colonial theory has helped me a lot. I am, I'm very happy to have found it in my graduate studies because I feel like it helps me reframe my situation as to this is not

something that's happening to me, it's something that's happening for me that there's always a hidden gift. This, guys, is a very impossible situation because that has proved to be true throughout my life. If I had known exactly, if I had had my papers in high school, I probably would have not met the down to earth people that I met.

Clarissa has become the group's natural mentor by providing them with a different perspective to their circumstances, guidance and support.

### Summary of Findings

In this chapter, I shared the results of the testimonios and *pláticas* I witnessed and engaged in with the student participants. I have presented and discussed main themes that emerged from the interactions we had on three different occasions. All the participants felt compelled to participate, were nervous, but eager and brave to participate. They were comfortable and open about their status. They all demonstrate a sense of awareness of their condition and resilience to continue moving forward when most of the time the future is unsure. Even when they have moments that could be discouraging, they find a way to move forward to continue working towards their goals. Additionally, as a result of participating in this project together, they have created an “underground network” to stay connected to support each other, and hopefully, be a resource for other undocumented students.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Throughout my personal and professional experiences, I have seen many talented and bright individuals who have had to settle to live in hiding and see their aspirations disappear because they were undocumented. I have had family, friends, and former students who had all the potential to be successful never reach those professional goals. Some of them were able to change their status by working for many years to earn their residency, and eventual naturalization. Many others have had to settle to continue living in the shadows of their undocumented status and navigate the underworld of the shadowed world. This has driven since my early professional trajectory to focus my efforts on reaching out, informing and assisting undocumented students both in secondary and higher education.

By designing a Critical Race Feminista Praxis project, I wanted to use this study to provide a platform for the voices of Latina/o/x undocumented college students. I do not want to speak for them, but rather learn from them, their experiences, challenges, aspirations, and recommendations on what, those of use who work in higher education, can do to better support undocumented students. I wanted to hear directly from them what the institutions were doing well, what needed improvement, and the ways to better support and guide undocumented students. For this reason, *pláticas* and *testimonios* were ideal

methodologies to gain these results for the study. I believe this was the right choice because I was able to use Chicana/Latina methodological praxis to better understand the meaning of our pláticas.

The five aspects of our pláticas were accomplished: 1) view an honor participant as co-constructors of knowledge; 2) incorporate everyday lived experiences; 3) two-directional and based on reciprocity, vulnerability, and researcher reflexivity; 4) provide a potential space for healing; and 5) draw heavily on the oral history and tradition from Chicana/Latina Feminist Theory (Flores & Morales, 2021). We were able to accomplish this due to the openness and willingness for the student participants to engage and share their experiences and vulnerabilities.

### Overview of Findings

Three different pláticas were set up with four student participants to complete this study. The first participant was a first-year female student out of high school who at the time of the study, she had only been to the United States for four years before she arrived from Peru. The second participant was a second-year male out of high school who arrived in the United States from Mexico at the age of one. The third participant was a first-year transfer female student who arrived from El Salvador at the age of 15, and the fourth participant was a graduate female student who was in the last semester of her graduate

program and who arrived in the United States from Mexico at the age of seven years old. In the recruitment process we were in contact via email or phone.

Of the three pláticas we had, the first contact was an individual testimonio and the preliminary stage of a three-phase data analysis. For two participants it was in person at a location on campus, while for another participant it was via Zoom, and the last one was via telephone. The second contact was in the undocumented student symposium, which was our collaborative data analysis phase. This was the first time all four met and were able to connect. The symposium was the main plática to start diving into the praxis. During this plática we were able to engage in a conversation where the student participants were the co-constructors of knowledge, incorporating everyday lived experiences, and this was done by relying on traditional oral history. In the third and final plática and final data analysis, we were able to reflect on the symposium and check in with them as the researcher. I also took the opportunity to check for accuracy with the students and give the opportunity to make any changes or share additional thoughts. In the third and final part of data analysis is the part where they had already come together as an “underground network” among themselves to support each other. In this final plática we were able to engage in two-directional reciprocity and vulnerability, and they also allowed me to engage with them in reflection.

## The High School Hurdle

The intention with this study was to focus on the experiences of undocumented students in college, but the topic of the hurdles in high school was apparent since the beginning of our pláticas. It was evident that for the four student participants getting to college was a difficult journey, not because of the lack of academic knowledge and abilities, but because of the lack of guidance and support from, mainly, their high school counselors. The lack of knowledge, resources, and updates on policies regarding access to higher education for undocumented students, combined with preconceptions and assumptions about them, made it very difficult for the four student participants to take the step out of high school into higher education. These students had to advocate for themselves, more than the rest of their college bound, citizens and permanent residents peers. While not all high school counselors fit this example and there are many with accurate information who provide support and guidance for undocumented students, these were the experiences of the co-researchers.

Additionally, most high school counselors are overwhelmed with large student caseloads and additional responsibilities that their administrators and district officials give to them. It is an overwhelming job, and it makes it difficult to be all they need to be for all the students and serve all the different student populations with their specific needs. High school counselors need to have continual training sessions on serving undocumented students, just like they have it for special education and other student populations.

### Institutional Agents

Even when the support for the student participants was not the strongest from their high school counselors, they were able to find other institutional agents who were supportive and provided guidance and encouragement, as well as a safe environment for students to feel comfortable sharing their status. These institutional agents came in the form of teachers who knew about the resources available. They also came in the form of specialized programs that serve underrepresented populations and they did some kind of outreach for students to see, or students had to find on their own, mostly at the community college setting already.

### Creating Community at the University

It was evident that undocumented students at this university found the Undocumented Center as a space where they felt comfortable and reached out to the staff for support, resources, guidance, and programming. When making the decision to attend this university, the information from the undocumented center was critical in making their final decision to attend. The guidance on specific campus procedures and policies has been reassuring, as well as the legal support it is provided. One student expressed a concern of the center's location and expressed the need to have a more discreet location. Thus, not all students felt comfortable enough to be as open as others; having such a public and accessible location on campus could make a student who is not ready for

that unapologetic stance yet actually not reach out or go in to find out what they have to offer.

### Supportive Faculty

One student found it relieving that one of their faculty members added to their syllabus a statement in support of undocumented students. Also, the professor shared in class that if any undocumented students in his class needed support or anyone to talk that they were available. Students shared that inclusiveness in the syllabus is very important. They compared it to the statements of services for students with disabilities. Inclusion in the syllabus translates to having a place in the classroom for these students and for faculty to demonstrate that they are aware that students have different needs. As they shared, at the very least, make a verbal statement at the beginning of the term of their awareness of the needs of undocumented students, and not make them feel like an afterthought, like it usually feels for them with faculty and other staff.

### Ongoing Undocumented Training

Even with the support of the undocumented center, the student participants shared experiences with other offices, departments, and staff that lack the training necessary to support them. They shared instances when they approached these places or staff, and they explained to the staff their circumstances, explained their status, and how these places could support them. In most instances, they did not know how to deal with them. Student participants also shared that many times, they stopped reaching out for support because it



was too consuming sharing something so personal, and that they still would not get the support needed. One of the participants, who was more intentional in her approach, shared that at the very least, she would share with them of her status and possible way to support undocumented students. She made sure that if they did not know how to support her at the moment, she would at least try to educate them so when the next undocumented student reaches out, they would be more knowledgeable.

### Research Contributions and Recommendations

For many of us who grew up learning from the stories of our elders, our families, and found them funny, boring, revealing, intriguing, but most importantly, stories help us feel connected to them. The *pláticas* that many times have been at a dining table while having a meal, or while driving home from a trip, or while waiting in the hospital for an appointment, became a way to feel connected to them and, remembering, became a way to honor their journey, experiences, and challenges. Their journey and challenges are typically a way to ensure future generations like us get to have a better life, better experiences, and opportunities.

My mother was at one point an undocumented worker who experienced many challenges. She was someone who loved telling stories and especially enjoyed retelling us the same stories multiple times. Many times, with more details than others. She shared stories of marching with César Chávez in

Delano and throughout California. She would tell us that, from her experience, she met with Filipino field workers and Dolores Huerta and it was them who did all the work for the movement, but César Chávez received most of the credit. It was through these stories that I learned to understand the dynamics of sexism within social justice movements.

She also shared stories of her group of friends from Mexicali, who would travel together to follow the harvest of grapes, would sleep on abandoned train carts because they could not afford to rent a space to work for the season. Once, she stopped working *en los files* and was working as a custodian at the local school district, she was approached by her supervisor to hand select her to clean a school for the special visit by President Obama. He was visiting the city to meet with family members of victims of a mass shooting, and it was requested to pick custodians who were excellent at their job. She had many more stories, where the personal was interwoven with the political. It was through her stories that I learned about various contributions that are devalued and ignored in U.S. society.

Passing these stories to our future generations is not only a way to honor them, but also to learn our history and to learn from them. Learn from the struggles of those who have faced challenges. Because of the cultural ties, the research methodologies of *pláticas* and *testimonios* has one of the greatest values, to honor and better understand the challenges of underrepresented, oppressed, and marginalized communities. In these spaces between challenges

and confusion, *nepantla* is where new knowledge is created, and growth and transformation is happening as well. The contributions that the Chicana feminista provides to research are more human and closer to the self, than typical neutral and unbiased research that is allegedly objective but actually enacting a Eurocentric lens.

Additionally, *pláticas* provide more than just the creation of new knowledge and honoring the struggles of others to learn from them. It also provides a healing process that happens during and after the *pláticas*. Those engaged in *pláticas*, including the researcher, can engage in the process of healing. The healing happens in the moments when the *pláticas* are happening as those involved share their thoughts, feelings, fears, aspirations. They can cry, laugh, release frustration, and also find support in each other. The healing also happens after the *pláticas*, once individuals have additional time to process, reflect, and learn.

## Recommendations for Policy

### Employment Opportunities for Undocumented Students

As shared in the findings, students expressed frustration that the university does not have the infrastructure or systems in place to be able to hire and properly compensate undocumented students, specifically non-DACA students without work authorization. Thus, a key policy recommendation is for college leaders to ensure that undocumented students can gain employment

through the college. The university is part of a system of state universities, many of which are HSIs. As an HSI university, part of their promotion is being a haven for Latina/o/x students and being undocu-friendly campuses. While universities have different advisory councils for diversity and inclusion, curriculum, and strategic planning, it is essential to include an advisory council for undocumented students related concerns. It should be a goal of this advisory council for undocumented students' concerns to focus their efforts on creating a way to provide lawful employment opportunities to be able to hire and compensate non-DACA undocumented students without work authorization. Beyond finding ways to fundraise and provide scholarships to undocumented students, which is also a great need, all undocumented students need a system to be able to lawfully work on campus while they are enrolled at the university. For many undocumented students without work authorization, it is important to be able to work as teaching assistants, lab assistants, student assistants or many other campus jobs that would provide both career experience and financial support. Unfortunately, the university has not provided a way to hire these students. Many graduate students in their programs are required to be graduate teaching assistants, but undocumented students cannot participate because of the lack of infrastructure to hire undocumented student employees.

Such hiring policies are something that a university system that champions their commitment to undocumented students should have in place. A recent example of taking steps to provide meaningful employment opportunities

for all students came from the University of California (UC) regents in May of 2023, when the announcement was made that “they support an equitable education for all, unanimously agreed Thursday to find a pathway to enact a bold policy to hire students who lack legal status and work permits” (Watanabe, 2023, para. 1). The UC system believes that just like they provide equitable access to higher education for all students, they should also provide the same access to employment on their campuses to all students, including students without work authorization. Similarly, other colleges should enact policies that stay true to the commitment of higher education and access to all students, regardless of immigration status.

### Recommendations for Practice

#### Required Ongoing Undocumented Training

As shared in the findings, students felt comfortable at the undocumented center, and they could talk with institutional agents who were knowledgeable and supportive towards them. Unfortunately, there is a lack of ongoing required institutional training for all faculty, staff and administrators. A training focused on understanding the different policies and practices that are supportive of undocumented students. Such training should be required for all campus employees, similar to the yearly Title IX, and other required training modules that need to be completed. Undocumented students should not be an afterthought at any university, but much less at an HSI that considers itself an undocu-friendly

institution. There are many staff and faculty members who have attended all trainings that have been done on campus in the past, but it should be an institutional requirement.

Every year, employees leave and many get hired every time a new employee is hired they should be required to be trained. Otherwise, there will be new employees who will not be ready or trained to know how to serve undocumented students. This should be a responsibility that falls on the institution, and not for undocumented students to explain their status and try to educate a new employee on how to help them. This will also make every employee feel ready, or at least prepared to serve undocumented students, and not feel like they have a good intention to help and support but letting students down.

#### Inclusiveness in Faculty Syllabus

Another recommendation for practice is for institutional leaders to ensure that all faculty include a statement or paragraph in their syllabi that includes information for undocumented students. In the commitment of inclusion and equity, this should be an important step for any university, faculty senate and university president. Undocumented students need to feel welcomed in all areas of the university, including in the classrooms and feel reflected in the syllabus. They should not feel like they still have to live in the shadows of their immigrant status in a university that supports them and is committed to their advancement.

Equally important, students should feel included in financial aid workshops and access to scholarships. Within California, access to information on the California Dream Act, scholarships for all, and any other financial support for undocumented students should be a normalized system in an undocu-friendly campus. Thus, counselors and academic advisors should be familiar with the deadlines and updates in policies and resources.

### Action Research Next Steps

This study was designed as a critical race feminista praxis project (Delgado Bernal & Aleman, 2016). Thus, the aim was never only to publish the traditional five chapter dissertation. Instead, CRFP aims to produce ruptures in the marginalizing systems that maintain the status quo. The project will continue through engagement in an advocacy group and a mentoring network, detailed below.

#### Advocacy Group

With the upcoming decision from a federal judge in Texas to decide on the future of DACA, the researcher will meet with undocumented advocates and undocumented students and alumni to prepare for the implications of any possible decision. The aim is to be ready to support our undocumented students and staff who will be the most affected by any possible decision. Additionally, this group will discuss the UC system's announcement to hire undocumented students who lack work authorization. This group will come together to discuss

ways to use this momentum created by the UC decision to advocate for other higher education institutions, including community colleges, to join this step that the UC system has taken. This is an ideal scenario to continue to advocate for employment for any and all students enrolled at the university.

### Mentoring Network

The four undocumented students who participated in this study felt that it was necessary to create a mentoring network of undocumented students. They started with themselves by creating a group chat they called an “underground network” This is an idea they shared because they expressed a need to support and mentor each other. They expressed the need to share knowledge about navigating campus policies and procedures and to be a support system because they are the ones going through these experiences, challenges and aspirations. As Robbie said, “I know what I have to do every year and I can spread that same information to others.” The aim includes eventually creating an Undocumented Students Advisory Council. Listening and learning directly from undocumented students can sometimes be more important and meaningful than staff and administrators telling students what they need.

### Recommendations for Future Studies

Through the findings of this study we were able to see even when there has been progress there has been a lack of follow up. There has been a lack of continuous commitment towards the improvement of better support, guidance,



and experiences of undocumented students at higher education institutions. Many of the conversations that are happening now, were happening 15 years ago at this and other institutions, with little progress made. Such context becomes tiring for many who have been advocating for undocumented students for years. It becomes a race against time of who gets tired from fighting the good fight, or who forgets about it through the erasure of institutional memory, and the fight has to start all over again. My recommendation for future research is to study and analyze how successful institutions of higher education have been at institutionally supporting undocumented students through university training modules, student employment and faculty support. This will help to hold institutions accountable to better support undocumented students beyond being HSIs and undocu-friendly campuses due to enrollment. Assisting undocumented students to create Undocumented Students Advisory Councils that are run by students with the guidance of undercut-educators, and potentially undocu-administrators as well.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Undocumented Latino/a/x students have faced major hurdles and challenges throughout their education, from elementary to graduate school. Undocumented students have over and over again demonstrated the grit, resilience, and transformational resistance to occupy spaces that are not designed for them. Throughout history, policy changes, and presidencies,

undocumented people have been treated like an after-thought as if their lives, experiences and contributions to this country are not real, needed or a priority. Nevertheless, they continue to demonstrate being an integral part of this society. They own businesses, create jobs, pay taxes, and of course, go to school and get degrees to be able to fulfill their aspirations and continue to contribute to a country that sees them as second-class citizens. This research reaffirmed what is already known about undocumented students, but at the same time it gave an opportunity for students to connect, give recommendations and suggestions, and share their intentionality to occupy spaces not created for them. More has to be done for our undocumented students, from policy to practice. From normalization and access to financial aid to inclusivity in all areas of higher education. From mentoring to going beyond good intentions to creating campus funds, fellowships, and pathways for students to put into practice what was learned in the classroom. Undocumented students deserve more than being just an afterthought and be treated as a second-class student at institutions that call themselves advocates for all students.

APPENDIX A  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Review Complete

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IRB-FY2022-295 - Padelante: Prácticas and Testimonios of Undocumented Latina/o/x College Students to Engage in Critical Race Feminista Praxis

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PI:  
Nancy Acevedo

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- Approvals
- Task History
- Letters
- Attachments

**Research Team**

Name	Role	Result	Date
Nancy Acevedo	Principal Investigator	Certified	10-10-2022 4:39 PM
Fernando Villalpando	Co-Principal Investigator	Certified	10-10-2022 9:14 PM

APPENDIX B  
PLATICAS AND TESTIMONIOS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



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College of Education  
*Office of Doctoral Studies*

**Pláticas & Testimonios of Undocumented Latina/o/x Students to  
Engage in Critical Race Feminista Praxis**

Pláticas and Testimonios Interview Questions

1. How was your journey to get to college as an undocumented Latina/o/x student?
2. What resources did you know were available to you at your college?
3. How do you access resources at your campus?
4. Who are some of the individuals on campus who have helped you and their role?
5. What are your experiences with academic counselors/advisors?
6. Is there a space or center dedicated to your student population?
  - a. Is that space in an area that makes you feel safe and heard?
7. What policies and practices do you have to navigate when developing a sense of belonging at your college?
8. What transformative ruptures and recommendation do you envision need to happen that can foster a sense of belonging at your campus?

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