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Resiliency in the Shadows of the Ivory Tower: Examining the Strategies Utilized by Undocumented Students to Succeed in Higher Education

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Resiliency in the Shadows of the Ivory Tower: Examining the strategies utilized by
undocumented students to succeed in higher education

Estefany Paniagua-Pardo

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Education

College of Education and Community Innovation

April 2022

Thesis Approval Form



The signatories of the committee members below indicate that they have read and approved the thesis of Estefany Paniagua-Pardo in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education, Higher Education.

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Dedication

This thesis was written in dedication to my parents, Guillermo and Angelica, who gave up everything to give me everything. While they were unable to achieve their own educational aspirations, from a very young age, they instilled in me a life-long love for education and learning. When you see me flying, remember that my accomplishments were only made possible because of a dream that began with a dreamer.

Thank you, mom and dad, for your hard work, support, and unconditional love. Your sacrifices have not been in vain, your dreams are only the beginning. We did it!

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-Estefany Paniagua-Pardo

Abstract

Undocumented students experience uniquely distinctive barriers in their pursuit of a postsecondary education. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which undocumented students make meaning of their lived experiences by examining the various dimensions of their educational journey outside of the broader legal and political context. The study specifically highlighted undocumented student stories to investigate the strategies used by individuals to survive, persevere, and navigate institutions of higher education. Rooted in Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model, this qualitative study used semi-structured interview methodology to unveil the ways in which undocumented students utilize numerous and intersecting forms of capital to reach their educational goals, specifically to gain college access, persist within institutional landscapes, and build resiliency. Through the documentation of student stories, research findings suggest that undocumented students use previously overlooked forms of capital obtained through non-normative avenues to survive and succeed within unsupportive educational environments.

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Abbreviations

DACA: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

During the last two decades, the United States has undergone a significant demographic transformation in part due to the influx of incoming immigration patterns (Lopez et al., 2021). While the immigrant population reached a record high of 44.8 million in 2018, it is currently estimated that 1.8 million of the nation's immigrants are undocumented children under the age of 18 old or younger (Adams & Boyne, 2015). Although the 1982 Supreme court case *Plyer v. Doe* prohibited states from denying undocumented students a public K-12 education, the court's decision did not extend this protection to postsecondary institutions of higher education (Adams & Boyne, 2015).

Consequently, undocumented students are forced to navigate a complicated and often confusing labyrinth of federal, state, and postsecondary institutional policies, resulting in exacerbated barriers to equal access and outcomes. According to Adams and Boyne (2015), each state differs in its laws regarding tuition rates, enrollment, support, and financial aid assistance for undocumented students. Nationally, only 19 states have tuition equity provisions that allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition while others have strict requirements obligating undocumented students to pay out-of-state or international student tuition fees, forcing individuals to pay more than 1.4 times the cost compared to in-state students. In extreme cases, in states such as Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia, undocumented students are fully banned from enrolling in some and/or all the state's public colleges and universities (Adams & Boyne, 2015).

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was created by President Barack Obama to expand new opportunities for about 1.9 million undocumented individuals: granting

two-year protection from deportation, work authorization, and a social security number. However, despite its passage on June 15th, 2012, DACA has only minimally advanced undocumented students' access to higher education. According to a national report, DACA recipients and students eligible for DACA (referred to as DACA-eligible) constitute less than half or about 216,000 out of the estimated 450,000 undocumented students in postsecondary institutions in the United States (New American Economy, 2021). This data largely reveals that although DACA has expanded some opportunities for recipients, the impact has been limited. DACA's strict eligibility criteria and pre-existing institutional, state, and federal regulations bar undocumented students (including DACA recipients and DACA-eligible students) from obtaining equal access to a postsecondary education (Macías, 2018; Suarez- Orozco et al., 2015).

With heightened socio-political barriers, limited opportunities, and enhanced emotional and psychological trauma, undocumented youth who enter post-secondary institutions are forced to navigate additional obstacles, which include but are not limited to admission, enrollment, and tuition barriers. As a result, out of the estimated 65,000 undocumented students graduating from high school annually, just five percent pursue a postsecondary education, and far fewer successfully graduate college with a degree (Gonzales, 2009).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to give voice to the lived experiences of undocumented individuals who are surviving, persevering, and navigating institutions of higher education in the shadows of the ivory tower. Through an in-depth examination of the impact of limited legality and the intersection of identities, the study sought to challenge conventional assumptions about the experience of undocumented students that are often overlooked or ignored unique stressors associated with attending a post-secondary institution. Additionally, this study intended to

highlight gaps in the literature regarding the undocumented student phenomenon and sought to provide an intimate view of the day-to-day experiences of these students to highlight the ways in which students access and persist in higher education. The research study's purpose is to educate leaders, administrators, policymakers, and student affairs professionals and promote the development of a more comprehensive and interconnected network of support and resources for undocumented students across institutions of higher education.

Scope

Previous research investigates the undocumented student experience through a legal and socio-political framework, examining the effects of state and federal policies on institutional issues such as tuition rates (Terriquez, 2014), financial accessibility (Hsin & Ortega, 2018), and admission requirements (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015). Although ample investigation exists on the effects of institutional, state, and federal policies on the attainment rates, enrollment patterns, and academic outcomes of undocumented students, limited research offers a comprehensive examination of the undocumented student experience. This critical investigation sought to specifically tell the story of these individuals and explore the ways in which undocumented students make meaning of their lived experiences by examining the various dimensions of their stories outside of the broader legal and political context. This study offered a comprehensive investigation of the undocumented student experience by exploring factors impacting equal access and equal outcomes such as social capital, campus climate, institutional engagement, etc.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of undocumented students in postsecondary institutions. The following questions guided this study:

1. What are the various strategies that undocumented students utilize to succeed within institutions of postsecondary education?
2. How do undocumented students make meaning of their experiences in postsecondary institutions?

Significance

Literature investigating the undocumented student experience currently investigates access barriers caused by institutional structures and policies established because of state and federal policies. These directives include but are not limited to state tuition policies, *Plyer v. Doe (1982)*, and financial aid restrictions. Existing research has guided best practices, administrative policies, and the ways student affairs professionals work with and alongside undocumented students. In a competitive economy, where it is estimated that by 2025, 62 percent of all jobs in the US will require some type of formal postsecondary education, undocumented students' inequitable access to equal education imposes a lifetime of hardship and underclass based on their legal status (Gonzales, 2010). Most significantly, inequitable access and outcome opportunities reject claims offered by postsecondary institutions as establishments of public good that promote objectivity, prosperity, meritocracy, and racial and social equality for all (Yosso, 2005). As a result of the direct link between education and social mobility, obtaining an all-encompassing understanding of the undocumented student experience could lead to the establishment of more equitable provisions that would be crucial for the educational success, economic advancement, and social inclusion of undocumented people (Gonzales, 2009).

Most importantly, however, this study's purpose was to provide a comprehensive, in-depth examination of students' access and persistence in higher education, considering intersecting identities to understand the complex and diverse perspectives of the undocumented

student experience. This study sought to add to the existing body of literature examining the postsecondary educational experiences of undocumented in the United States. The information gathered through the empirical research offers new dimensions and perspectives on the ways in which undocumented students navigate and make meaning of their college education outside of the researched political and legal context. As a result, findings from this study sought to expose gaps and provide directives for future research, which could result in implications for subsequent theory investigations and more inclusive and humanitarian policy and practice recommendations.

Definition of Terms

In this research study, although it is important to understand the differences in immigrant statuses among student populations and the legal terms used to categorize various immigrant populations, “undocumented” served as a blanket term for all undocumented students, including DACA recipients, as this term encompasses all individuals without U.S citizenship.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA): The executive order known as the Consideration for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) provided eligible undocumented youth with deferred action from deportation, a valid social security number, and work authorization for two years. To be granted DACA, individuals had to meet several specific requirements relating to the length of time in the United States, age, and criminal background checks (Macías, 2018).

Undocumented: Undocumented students are individuals who were not born in the US and who live and attend school in the United States, and who (1) entered without inspection at or with fraudulent documents at a United States border; or (2) entered legally as a nonimmigrant but then violated the terms of his or her visa status (Enyioha, 2019).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

During the last two decades, the United States has undergone a significant demographic transformation. While immigrant populations reached a record high in 2018, out of the approximated 11.3 million undocumented individuals living in the United States, 1.8 million are believed to be under the age of eighteen years (Feldblum et.al, 2018). Although *Plyer v. Doe (1982)* did not address public education beyond high school resulting in the creation of legal, political, and postsecondary institutional uncertainty for undocumented students, it is estimated that individuals with limited legality account for more than 427,000 or approximately 2 percent of all college students in the United States (New American Economy, 2021).

First, I present the conceptual framework that will be used as a method and analytical tool for the collection of data and analysis of research findings. Next, I present a review of existing literature that suggests that undocumented students face monumental barriers in their quest to obtain a bachelor's degree. Most literature examined specifically investigated the experience of undocumented students from a sociopolitical and legal framework. However, I draw connections between available research on the undocumented student experience and relate it to studies on first-generation, limited income, and other marginalized student populations.

The review of the literature aims to explore different themes found in previous research conducted on the experiences of undocumented students' pursuit of higher education. This review provides a critical analysis of available literature and highlights established and contemporary themes found within the research which include legal and political policies, financial capital, social support, campus climate, psychological stressors, and campus engagement.

Conceptual Framework

Community Cultural Wealth

Past research investigating undocumented students has utilized racial equity theory, specifically Latino and Latina Critical Theory (LatCrit theory), to examine undocumented college students' experience through the lens of immigration policy, culture, language rights, deportation, and discrimination based on skin color and national origin. However, the application of LatCrit theory is not generalizable and specific to the Latinx experience (Aguilar, 2019; Stefancic, 1997). According to national data from the Center for American Progress (2014), undocumented individuals represent nearly every major racial and ethnic subgroup, representing over 55 countries. The usage of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model provides a broad conceptualized framework that encourages the incorporation of diversified and varied voices among undocumented students and encourages the inclusion of previously excluded experiences and perspectives.

Deprived of theories related to social class and student development which describe how social class construction influences the experience and development of students in postsecondary institutions, the Community Cultural Wealth Model provides a framework for examining the intersectionality of experiences of how marginalized groups access and navigate college from a strengths-based perspective (Patton et al., 2016; Yosso, 2005).

Grounded in Critical Race Theory, which promotes the deconstruction and critique of institutions, laws, organizations, definitions, and practices to screen for power and inequalities, the Community Cultural Wealth Model challenges the idea that marginalized student populations (e.g., students of color) enter college "disadvantaged" or "deficient" compared to White peers. Yosso's (2005) model outlines six forms of capital that empower individuals and exemplify the

“underutilized assets people of color bring with them from their homes and communities into everyday life” (p. 70), highlighting the talents, strengths, and experiences that students of color bring that help them to navigate and succeed within institutions of higher education. The six forms of cultural capital in Yosso’s model are 1) aspirational capital, 2) linguistic capital, 3) familial capital, 4) social capital, 5) navigational capital, and 6) resistance capital.

Aspirational capital refers to the “hopes and dreams” students possess regardless of structured inequalities and deficient resources. Yosso (2005) explained that aspirations are constructed through “linguistic storytelling and advice that offer specific navigational goals and strategies to challenge (resist) oppressive conditions” (p. 77). For undocumented students, the endless dream of possibilities outside of current socio-political contexts represents the disruption of limited generational socio-economic statuses. *Linguistic* capital refers to the various language and communication skills obtained through experiences. Yosso (2005) discusses the value of storytelling, particularly for students of color, who engage in storytelling traditions and practices before their arrival on college campuses. Linguistic capital refers to the “skills [that] may include memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm and rhyme.” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Undocumented youth often possess multiple linguistic and communication skills because of being called upon to translate for family members and other community members.

Next, *familial* capital is explained as the social and personal human resources students have in their pre-college environment, drawn from their extended familial and community networks. Yosso (2005) explains that students’ pre-college experiences of kinship foster emotional, moral, educational, and occupational resources which can be leveraged in postsecondary institutions. *Social* capital is defined as the “network of people and community

resources” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). For undocumented students, these networks can be utilized to gain access to college and navigate other social institutions such as identifying financial resources and applying for college itself. *Navigational* capital, on the other hand, refers to the students’ skills and abilities to navigate educational spaces. Yosso (2005) explains that navigational capital empowers students to maneuver within unsupportive or hostile environments which places students at a disparate risk of academic vulnerability. Relating navigational capital to undocumented students, Yosso (2005) explains that immigrant youth utilize resiliency to draw from personal experiences, resources, social competencies, and cultural strategies to maneuver and thrive through institutional constraints and unsupportive systems.

Lastly, *resistance* capital refers to the knowledge and skills fostered in securing equal rights and collective freedom. According to Yosso (2005), the source of this capital comes from parents, community members, and historical legacies engaged in social justice. For undocumented students, the conscious awareness of oppressive structures from an early age leaves students of color disproportionately equipped with actionable tools and strategies to solve inequitable problems within structures of society (e.g., postsecondary institutions). As a result, students are motivated to work towards social and racial justice and to succeed within inequitable educational systems.

The Community Cultural Wealth Model is useful for the examination of the undocumented student experience because it provides a theoretical lens to better understand the strategies used to face structured inequalities. According to Martinez et al. (2021), Yosso’s (2005) theory provides researchers a framework to acknowledge the ways in which undocumented students and other marginalized students successfully network within constrictive

networks to obtain the knowledge, skills, and abilities, to not only survive and but also achieve academic success within postsecondary institutions.

Synthesis of Literature

Legal and Political Policies

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)

Unique to the undocumented student experience, federal immigration policies and laws have a direct impact on the ways in which undocumented youth both access and navigate postsecondary institutions (Regan & McDaniel, 2019). After failed attempts to pass the DREAM Act through Congress, which would have provided a path to U.S. citizenship and equitable tuition rates for undocumented students, President Barack Obama executively ordered Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) into law (Hsin & Ortega, 2018). Unlike the DREAM Act, DACA did not provide a path to U.S. citizenship and had stringent eligibility requirements. To be eligible, individuals must have:

- entered the United States before the age of 16;
- been physically and continuously residing in the United States since June 15, 2007, and at the time of application;
- been currently enrolled in school, have graduated from high school, or earned a GED, or be an honorably discharged veteran;
- not been convicted of a felony, significant misdemeanor, or three or more misdemeanors; or otherwise pose a threat to public safety or national security; and,
- entered the country illegally or overstayed their visa prior to June 15, 2012 (Adams & Boyne, 2015)

While the executive passage of DACA provided temporary relief for about 1.9 million undocumented individuals to obtain a social security number, work permit, and two-year protection from deportation, the New American Economy (2021) report suggests that the impact on students' access to higher education has been narrow. According to data findings, DACA recipients represent less than half of the estimated undocumented student population; constituting approximately 181,000 or 0.8 percent of all students in higher education, compared to 427,000 or 2 percent of enrolled undocumented youth (New American Economy, 2021). In their ethnographic study of 62 DACA recipients, Hamilton et al. (2021) concluded that while the program provided protections and relief for students, the program's inability to provide tuition equity protections, the uncertainty brought by the legal challenges to rescind DACA protections in Federal courts, and the short-term nature of the program all limited the extent to which recipients could not only access but also make meaningful, long-term investments in their education. These findings suggest that as a policy DACA has only minimally improved postsecondary access to undocumented immigrants since most enrolled in postsecondary institutions are not beneficiaries of DACA (New American Economy, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2021).

Tuition Equity Policies

In 1982, the Supreme Court case *Plyer v. Doe* prohibited states from denying undocumented children between the age of eighteen years old or younger a free public K-12 education based on their immigration status. However, the court's decision never extended nor denied equal protection beyond the twelfth grade (Adams & Boyne, 2015). As a result, in replacement of a Supreme Court directive, the federal government passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), which restricted

federal and state financial aid to undocumented students under the provision that “foreign nationals who were not qualified aliens were ineligible to receive public benefits” (Adams & Boyne, 2015, p. 51).

Under PRWORA, federal and state policies were established to either prohibit or limit undocumented immigrants from accessing federal financial assistance and other forms of state benefits, including student financial aid. In addition, states were also given the discretionary power to regulate tuition policies for federally funded institutions (Adams & Boyne, 2015). According to Neinhusser (2015), because of the rapid shifts in federal and state equitable educational policies, a significant percentage of undocumented youth faced legal and immigration-related barriers to higher education. To date, nine states have enacted restrictive tuition equity policies barring access to in-state tuition or financial aid for undocumented students, including DACA recipients. In extreme circumstances, three states (Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina) have prohibited enrollment in all or certain public institutions. Comparatively, 19 states have enacted inclusive and comprehensive tuition equity policies, providing access to in-state tuition and some financial aid and scholarships for residents who are either DACA recipients or undocumented (Neinhusser, 2015).

Although each state differs regarding tuition laws and access to state financial aid, on average, it is estimated that undocumented students pay over 1.4 times the cost of in-state tuition, compared to U.S. citizen counterparts (Adams & Boyne, 2015). As a result, although approximately 65,000 thousand undocumented students graduate from U.S high schools each year, only ten percent enroll in college compared to approximately 25 to 30 percent of legal and U.S. citizens (Capps et al., 2016). Reporting similar findings, New American Economy (2021) discovered a decrease in undocumented students’ postsecondary enrollment. Comparing

estimated enrollment rates from 2018, New American Economy (2021) found that enrollment dropped 5.1 percent for undocumented student populations, and 16.2 percent for DACA recipients. Although specific factors are unknown, it is hypothesized that strict immigration regulations, challenging legal policies, and the rising cost of tuition are contributing factors to high attrition rates among undocumented students within postsecondary institutions (New American Economy, 2021). This study investigated the role of legal, political, and institutional policies to analyze their effect and influence on the educational aspirations and academic outcomes of students with limited legality.

Financial Capital

Financial constraints related to funding education are one of the most prevalent obstacles impacting undocumented students aspiring to transition from secondary school to higher education (Regan & McDaniels, 2019). Undocumented students face uniquely exacerbated financial obstacles as it is estimated that 61.3 percent hail from low-income households (Pew Research Center, 2009). Unlike their U.S. citizen counterparts that cite academic preparedness as one of their most significant obstacles to obtaining a postsecondary degree, undocumented students typically cite finances as the most prevalent barrier. With most undocumented families reporting average incomes 40 percent lower than either native-born or legal immigrant families, the cost of college plays a vital role in the ways in which undocumented students plan for, experience, and succeed within higher education (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015). With the inability to access all forms of federal grants and loans, many institutional scholarships, and most types of private student loans, undocumented students, regardless of DACA status, are forced to find alternative methods to finance their education resulting in non-linear enrollment patterns (Hsin & Ortega, 2018).

Capturing the impact of financial challenges within the undocumented immigrant student population, Regan and McDaniel (2019) discovered that 56.7 percent of undocumented participants reported being extremely concerned about financing their college education. This study revealed that a “significantly higher percentage of undocumented and DACA students compared to U.S. citizen students reported paying for school using money from jobs, money from savings, money borrowed from family, and credit cards” (p. 566). Like Regan and McDaniel’s (2019) findings, Pérez (2012) found a greater percentage of undocumented students (72.4%) reported being forced to work 20 hours or more, compared to 63% of U.S. citizens who identified similar financial challenges.

As a result of limited financial opportunities and resources, literature examining the experiences of undocumented students within higher education indicates that financial capital plays a critical role in the experiences of undocumented students. According to the New American Economy (2021), 87.9 percent of students cited the cost of education as the most significant factor in the college choice process. More significantly, among respondents who reported taking a leave of absence from school, 73.9 percent of students that stopped out cited financial concerns as the root cause. Reporting similar findings, Terriquez (2015) discovered that financial hardships did not only stem from students’ inability to finance their education; 58 percent of student participants also reported being expected to inherit the financial responsibility of supporting themselves, their families, and others regardless of educational aspirations. Compared to their citizen counterparts, over half of the undocumented students reported being forced to pick between paying for tuition and fees and financially contributing to their family income (Contreras, 2009).

As a result, with no federal law in place to guarantee equal financial access to a postsecondary education, for a disproportionate number of undocumented students, education

begins and ends in K-12 (Contreras, 2009). Compared to other student populations in the U.S., exacerbated financial barriers result in low bachelor's completion rates, extended degree completion years, and higher stop-out, swirling, and drop-out enrollment patterns (Hsin & Ortega, 2018). The study investigated how and to the extent that financial capital impacted the educational aspirations, experiences, and outcomes of undocumented students pursuing a bachelor's degree.

Social Capital

Renn and Reason (2013) define social capital as the “accumulation of knowledge possessed and inherited by groups in society...which allows for greater opportunities, resources, and access to higher education” (p. 29). Social capital, which is linked to an individual's familial capital, not only plays a vital role in students' ability to successfully transition, navigate, and succeed within higher education, but also helps individuals advance within social structures of society (Renn & Reason, 2013).

Investigating the social capital of immigrant populations, Abrego and Gonzales (2010) estimated that 40 percent of undocumented adults living in the U.S. had not completed high school, held low-paying employment, and experienced unstable job conditions. According to Sibley and Brabeck (2017), because undocumented youth are generally the first in their families to pursue a postsecondary education, they often lack the familial capital, knowledge, and resources to navigate postsecondary institutions which can create a socioeconomic opportunity gap.

Similarly, Niehnusser et al. (2016) found that legal and economic constraints of undocumented parents contribute to disproportionate numbers of undocumented students living in de facto segregated communities of dense poverty and low-performing K-12 schools that were

often too overcrowded, under-resourced, segregated, and ill-equipped to assist undocumented students in their exploration of higher education. Contreras (2009) explained that even in well-funded K-12 feeder institutions that placed a greater emphasis on advancing graduates into post-secondary schools, undocumented students were rarely viewed as college-bound by high school counselors, teachers, and institutional agents, resulting in the continuation of information gaps about policies, scholarships, support, and resources.

Drawing similarities between the social capital of undocumented students to the experiences of first-generation and limited-income Black and Latinx students in K-12 institutions, Perna and Titus (2005) discovered parallel experiences within the classroom. According to the researchers, similarly to Black and Latinx students, undocumented youth were negatively stereotyped and perceived to be less academically skilled by staff, resulting in being assigned to lower academic tracks. Although undocumented students experienced similar challenges in navigating educational systems with limited social capital, unlike their legal counterparts, they experienced heightened isolation within all stages of the educational pipeline due to economic and legal constraints. For example, Gonzales (2010) explains that in addition to spending more time working and less time receiving vital institutional and community resources, undocumented students were particularly strained and vulnerable in their accumulation of knowledge about postsecondary education out of fear and the risks associated with disclosing their legal status to friends, institutional agents, and other community members. Due to institutional biases, poor expectations, and fear of disclosing legal status, undocumented youth were left to frequently rely on each other and their undocumented communities to obtain vital information (Contreras, 2009). Enriquez (2011) explains that limited personal capital and social support not only results in deficient social networks but also negatively impacts the accuracy of

information received and opportunities perceived available within the educational pipeline, resulting in low enrollment and retention patterns and far fewer postsecondary graduation rates. Through the in-depth investigation of lived experiences, the current study examined the role of social capital and its relationship with the attainment of undocumented college students within postsecondary institutions to analyze how social capitals impacts educational outcomes.

Institutional Support

Nienhusser et al. (2016) define institutional support as “the academic and personal support received both inside and outside the classroom provided by staff and faculty” (p. 23). In higher education, institutional support is found to contribute to student development, educational achievements, and the quality of the overall learning experience on campus (Nienhusser et al., 2016). Although retention of undocumented students increases through interactions with faculty, staff, and other student affairs professionals, the lack of institutional support for undocumented students is a recurring theme throughout the review of the literature on undocumented students’ experience on campus (Pérez et al., 2010).

Capturing the institutional support of undocumented students across forty-five institutions, Nienhusser et al. (2016) discovered an overall varying level of comfort, ease, and understanding in serving and working with undocumented student populations among faculty and staff which ranged from supportive to racist. Reporting similar findings, compared to other marginalized groups on campus, undocumented students were found to be disproportionately structurally locked out of campus resources, support services, and opportunities by institutional agents on campus (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Diaz et al., 2011; Southern, 2016). Frequently citing faculty insensitivity, the administration being misinformed about policies, outsider sentiments, and invalidation both inside and outside of the classroom (particularly when an

immigration discussion arose), undocumented students reported feeling like outcasts with few positive and supportive relationships on campus (Chan, 2010; Nienhusser, 2015; Southern, 2016). As a result, undocumented students overwhelmingly expressed feelings of invisibility, which greatly hindered their ability to pursue high-impact educational experiences such as internships, teacher assistantships, research assistantships, on-campus jobs, etc. (Contreras, 2009).

Although limited, literature researching the impact of institutional support on the retention and persistence of students, draw comparisons between the experiences of undocumented students to the experiences of other “hidden” student identities, such as sexual orientation and disabilities. (Rosario, Schrimshaw & Hunter, 2004; Seif, 2014). Although not directly interchangeable, the retention of students with “invisible identities” increases when they experience positive interactions with faculty and staff, which fosters a sense of *coming out* to trusted individuals. However, because most institutions rely on a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy when working with and along with marginalized student populations, like LGBTQ+ students, undocumented youth report discomfort among institutional agents when disclosing their legal status and frequently cite being forced to develop supportive relationships with faculty and staff through a trial-and-error process (Sief, 2014). Consequently, similar to LGBTQ+ and students with disabilities, undocumented students are prevented from fully engaging in an array of significant interactions with university agents resulting in disruptive, non-linear enrollment patterns and low completion rates (Stebbleton & Alexio, 2015). Capturing outsider sentiments experiences by undocumented students, Stebleton and Alexio (2015) discovered challenges when undocumented students disclosed their legal status. Undocumented participants reported staff being generally unaware and uncomfortable with supporting and working along with them,

resulting in the rescindment of experiences and opportunities, and in extreme circumstances, the discontinuation of faculty and staff interactions altogether. Through the detailed assessment of the postsecondary experiences of undocumented participants, this study examined the broader influence of institutional support (e.g., resources, guidance, and peer support) on students' ability to mitigate barriers throughout their educational experience.

Campus Climate

Schuh et al. (2017) defined campus climate as the “values, basic assumptions, and beliefs that shape community interactions on campus, [which] shapes the experiences (both positive and negative) of students and influences educational outcomes” (p. 66). According to Gildersleeve et al. (2015), although legality is an invisible social identity, due to the intersecting identities of undocumented students (e.g., race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation), the experiences of stereotypes, microaggressions, and biases on campus were manifold. Drawing comparisons between the experience of students of color to the campus climate experienced by undocumented students, Huber (2009) found that discrimination on college campuses displayed itself in nativist racism which is derived from the notion that Whites are “native”, and all non-Whites are foreigners and thus inferior.

Similar to the experiences of minority ethnic and racial student populations, exclusionary and hostile campus climates engendered feelings of fear, intimidation, and invisibility in undocumented students; students cited fear of being viewed as criminals because of how they identify (Pérez Huber & Malagon, 2007). Reporting similar findings, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) discovered that 67 percent of student participants cited “experiencing discrimination because of their legal status in the past month, with discrimination, most often coming from other students and financial aid advisors” (p. 445). As a result of exclusionary and chilly campus

environments which emerged from anti- anti-immigrant sentiments, undocumented students experienced elevated levels of isolation and depression.

Moreover, although research has shown that cultures have a positive influence on the experiences of marginalized student populations, for undocumented students, subcultures can have the opposite effect. Especially within predominantly white institutions, the separation of undocumented students can prevent the socio-cultural integration of students (Stebbleton & Alexio, 2015) and inhibit the creation of positive and supportive relationships, which can further reinforce hostile learning environments (Contreras, 2009).

Examining the role of campus climate, prior research on the impact of exclusionary campus climates has linked the general experiences of underrepresented student populations in higher education to undocumented youth. Commonly citing experiences of isolation, difficult interactions with institutional agents, and unsupportive relationships throughout campus (Contreras, 2009), underrepresented student populations disproportionately experience reduced academic engagement and performance, increased stress, compromised learning and development, and non-linear enrollment patterns (Valadez et al., 2021). Although extensive research on campus climate and its impact on the postsecondary experiences of undocumented students is limited, the impact of campus climate is theorized to be more significant for undocumented youth. According to Suarez-Orozco et al. (2015), the experience of exclusionary campus environments through interpersonal discrimination, microaggressions, and limited feelings of belonging not only can elevate isolation, but hostile campus environments caused by legal vulnerabilities also have significant implications on the academic success and engagement of undocumented students. Through my qualitative in-depth examination of the day-to-day experiences of undocumented students, this study highlighted the ways in which campus climate

impacts the educational outcomes of students and how individuals with limited legality reclaim their identity and succeed against unsupportive structures in society.

Psychological Stressors

For individuals with multiple, intersecting marginalized identities, social-psychological forces were manifold and an impactful influencer on the experiences and persistence of undocumented students (Gonzales et al., 2013). Although limited, recent literature surrounding the psychological impact on undocumented students' experience in higher education has revolved around the psychosocial trauma, emotional strain, and stress associated with limited legality. Unlike U.S. citizen counterparts, undocumented students commonly cited living in constant fear for their families, especially regarding the prospect of being "discovered", deported, and separated (Contreras, 2009). Pérez et al. (2010) explained that undocumented immigrants encounter a "triple minority status". Unique to the undocumented student experience, individuals encounter a strong social stigma behind their ethnic/racial origin, legal status, and economic disadvantages. Pérez et al. (2010) further stated that these factors pose significant socioemotional distress to undocumented immigrants because of the negative stigma associated with each label. Illustrating the triple minority phenomenon, Terriquez (2015) discovered that students often find themselves in an everlasting state of limbo; forced to finance their education, find legal support, navigate a new environment away from their familial support network, and experience the ongoing fear, anxiety, and depression of being discovered, all while pursuing a degree.

For both undocumented students, including DACA recipients, the hyper-awareness of vulnerability and fears of deportation fueled elevated anxiety levels (New American Economy, (2021). Reporting similar findings, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) found that as a result of

ongoing political and legal challenges, more than three-quarters (75%) of participants reported a concern about the deportation of themselves and their loved ones, which resulted in chronic stress, worry, and anxiety. Using the GAD-7 clinical anxiety score, in comparison to the national average of 7.25 percent, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) found that 35.7 percent of DACA and 28.5 percent of undocumented students experienced elevated anxiety rates above the clinical cut-off point. Although research on the impact of psychological strains on the experiences of undocumented students is limited, preliminary research has tied psycho-emotional trauma to compromised academic potential and increased attrition rates. According to Enriquez et al. (2019), immigration-related issues foster academic distractions which result in engagement and achievement gaps. Compared to their lawfully present counterparts, undocumented students not only cite attaining lower GPAs, educational aspirations, and academic preparedness (e.g., attendance, missing assignments, going to class unprepared), but they are also less likely to demonstrate lower socio-academic development (Kreisberg & Hsin, 2020). Due to the limited research available investigating the impact of physiological stressors, this study added to the existing literature by examining how limited legality impacts the mental health and educational aspirations, retention, and success of undocumented students within postsecondary institutions.

Campus Engagement

Educational engagement, including behavioral (participation in academic, social, and extracurricular activities), cognitive (academic investment and preparedness), and relational (interactions with institutional agents and peers) involvement is conceptualized to impact the academic outcomes and degree attainments rates of postsecondary students (Fredricks et al., 2004). Although the investigation of how immigration impacts the engagement of undocumented students is limited, studies investigating this phenomenon cite legal vulnerabilities as the most

significant factor negatively impacting engagement. According to Valadez et al. (2021), educational engagement, including the time and the quality of interactions, has significant implications for the postsecondary success of undocumented students. Specifically investigating factors associated with limited legality (e.g., campus climate, financial need), the authors discovered a correlation between legal vulnerability and negative academic engagement (Valadez et al., 2021). Similarly, Kuh (2009) found that financial strains among undocumented students impacts the behavioral engagement of students because they are less likely to engage in high-impact educational experiences such as internships, research, and capstone projects due to familial economic demands. As a result, preliminary findings suggest that due to legal vulnerabilities, behavioral engagement is impaired; students struggle to balance financial obligations and school which disrupts both their academic engagement and educational outcomes (Enriquez et al., 2019).

Drawing comparisons between the engagement of undocumented students to the experiences of ethnic and racial minority student populations, Quaye et al. (2019) found that cognitive engagement is influenced by four factors: a student being the only or few individual(s) of color, racial stereotype threats, absence of same race and/or ethnicity faculty, and culturally irrelevant course content. According to the authors, the perceived exclusionary and Eurocentric perspective on teaching and learning leads to higher levels of cognitive disengagement and performance; significantly diminishing opportunities to learn and academically develop compared to their White counterparts (Quaye et al., 2019). For undocumented students, scholars have found that immigration-related issues and concerns compromise their ability to balance school and personal concerns; limiting the ability of undocumented students to focus on academics and actively participate in the classroom (Contreras, 2009; Enriquez & Millán 2019).

Examining the impact of chilly or unwelcoming campus environments on the relational engagement of students of color, existing research finds that students of color disproportionately experience isolation and marginalization among social groups and campus organizations as a result of campus prejudice and discrimination that manifests in racial jokes, insensitive comments, and hostility (Quaye et al., 2019). Contreras (2009) also found that for undocumented students, chilly campus environments negatively magnify isolation. Students that reported negative campus experiences, feelings of hypervigilance, and outsider sentiments impaired the development of trusting relationships with faculty, staff, and peers who could support them and mitigate the negative effects of limited legality (Chavarria et al., 2021). To gain an in-depth examination of how undocumented students engage on college campuses, through the analysis of personal lived experiences, this study highlighted the relationships between campus engagement and the educational experiences and academic outcomes of undocumented students.

Critique

Through the in-depth examination of available literature, the review reveals that much of the undocumented student experience is largely excluded by existing research which is limited to socio-political and legal complexities. Although qualitative methods are used to deeply examine the lived experiences of students, current literature only investigates the legal-political dimension of the undocumented experience. Explaining the greater multi-dimensional undocumented experience within the broader post-secondary educational system, Eusebio and Mendoza (2015) discovered that:

undocumented students navigate the education system – often without family guidance; they must deal with complex, sometimes overlapping issues that impede their ability to access post-secondary education and succeed academically. These challenges include but

are not limited to poverty, assimilation, language barriers, violence, fear of deportation, unsupportive K-12 educational environments, need to financially support their families, lack of social capital, and pressure to seek full-time employment (p. 5).

Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to critically explore the ways in which undocumented students make meaning of their lived experiences within post-secondary institutions, focusing specifically on the multiple dimensions of the undocumented student experience outside of the broader legal and political context. Using qualitative research methods, the study took an in-depth examination of individual stories to gain insight into the strategies that undocumented students utilize to maneuver and succeed within unsupportive institutional constraints. To gain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the ways in which undocumented students experience higher education from the intimate viewpoint of participants, an ethnographic case study with purposive sampling was conducted to investigate the phenomena.

Ethnography is a type of social research that allows researchers to capture the “whole picture” of a situation (Fraenkel et al., 2012). As a constructivist-interpretive paradigm that explores a natural setting, this research approach “attempts to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4). Although believed to be one of the most complex and time-consuming research methodologies, ethnographic research is particularly beneficial because it can reveal relationships that past research might have missed (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Ethnographic research, specifically case study methodology, is the most appropriate research design for this investigation because it utilizes extensive participant observation and interviews to document the natural everyday experiences of undocumented individuals (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Wolcott, 1999).

The research questions that guided this ethnographic study include:

1. What are the various strategies that undocumented students utilize to succeed within institutions of postsecondary education?

2. How do undocumented students make meaning of their experiences in postsecondary institutions?

In this chapter, I will review sampling procedures, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, and positionality.

Sampling Procedures

To obtain an in-depth investigation and analysis of undocumented students' backgrounds, stories, and college experiences, I worked with my chairperson, Dr. Karyn Rabourn, to construct a recruitment email. The recruitment email included brief information about the research study, the purpose, eligibility requirements, a request to volunteer as a study participant, and contact information for interested students. To be an eligible research participant, subjects had to meet with following criteria: (a) self-identify as an undocumented student (including DACA recipient), (b) be 18 years of age or older, (c) currently be attending college or be a recent graduate (graduated from an undergraduate institution within the last five years).

In part, due to difficulty in recruiting individuals from a student population that is particularly vulnerable to legal and socio-political challenges, a recruitment email was sent to student members of a Support Group. The Support Group is a university program intentionally designed to provide support and build a community for students who meet one or more of the following criteria: (a) is undocumented (residing in the U.S. without legal status), (b) is a DACA recipient, or (c) is the child of an undocumented parent.

Additionally, to expand the participant pool outside of the Support Group, a recruitment message was also sent to a private Facebook group that provides postsecondary resource information, network opportunities, community building, and support for self-identified undocumented and/or DACA students. At the time of recruitment, the private Facebook group

had a total of 83 active members; all of whom had to submit a formal request to be admitted as members of the private group.

In addition to the Support Group and private Facebook group, I also utilized snowball sampling techniques to recruit subjects within the greater campus community. According to Geddes et al. (2018), snowball techniques are frequently utilized in qualitative research to investigate hard-to-reach student populations and/or sensitive topics. Given the sense of chronic psychosocial trauma, emotional strain, and fear associated with being “discovered” experienced by undocumented students (Contreras, 2009), snowball sampling was an appropriate research technique because referrals within a student’s own social network can provide participants with a pre-established sense of safety and trustworthiness with the researcher (Geddes et al., 2018). Although the sensitivity of both the research topic and student population resulted in a small sample size, participants gave an in-depth glimpse of what we assume to be a bigger undocumented student population. According to Fraenkel et al. (2012) “small sample sizes are justified by previous qualitative ethnographic research whose main applicability is to provide a more complete understanding of a particular situation” (p. 453). Once interested participants were vetted to ensure their compliance with eligibility criteria, subjects were given consent forms and information to set up interview date(s).

Instrumentation

I served as the primary researcher and interviewer of the research study. Participants were extended the opportunity to interview virtually. Given current COVID protocols and the real-time visual connection provided by virtual avenues such as Zoom, virtual interviews provided greater flexibility to research participants. Moreover, throughout the data collection process, a semi-structured interview format was utilized. This format was utilized to simultaneously elicit

specific information from interviewees while facilitating fluid and open-ended informal conversation and follow-up questions that allowed participants to share more of their lived experiences which varied from each research subject (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Data Collection

Data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews that ranged from an hour long to an hour and a half long. All questions asked in the interview process were conducted with pre-approved questions reviewed by the Internal Review Board. Before beginning the interview process, participants were asked for verbal consent to be recorded. The audio recorder served as a tool to ensure the reliability and accuracy of information. To protect both the identity and personal information of vulnerable participants, several steps were taken to ensure full confidentiality. To limit personal identifiers, participants' legal first and last names were not asked during the pre-interview survey or recorded session of the interview. Instead, participants were pre-assigned numbers at the beginning of the interview protocol. Additionally, during the transcription and coding of the interview, pseudonyms were assigned to individuals, family members, and institutions to ensure full anonymity.

Interview questions were divided into six different categories: background questions, questions related to their social capital, questions related to educational barriers, questions related to campus engagement, questions related to their educational success, and questions related to their future dreams and aspirations. Throughout the entirety of the research process, the accumulation of data was kept in a password-locked Microsoft Excel and Word document. For purposes of external auditing, my chairperson, Dr. Karyn Rabourn, was the only other person that had access to the collection of data.

All data collection took place over Zoom. To ease conversation and establish a comfortable and safe environment when discussing the difficult topic of immigration-related experiences, I first began by building a rapport with research participants. In addition to introducing myself and my role as a graduate student researcher, I also mentioned my professional interest in the topic, the rationale, and purpose of the study. After acquainting myself with subjects, I started the interview with non-threatening questions posed in a conversational manner before moving onto personal and highly sensitive topics of discussion. Throughout the entirety of the process, to check researcher accuracy, all interviews were audio recorded and field notes were taken throughout the entirety of the interview process. Within ethnographic educational research, descriptive and reflective field notes are important because it allows the researcher to keep a continuous written account of what they hear, see, and experience while gathering data (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

After data collection was conducted, I utilized member checking to ensure the reliability and validity of data points. In qualitative research, member checking entails taking raw research interpretations back to the participants to confirm the accurate representation of data and narrative accounts (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As the primary researcher in the study, in addition to conducting and recording interviews, my role included getting the interviews transcribed by a third-party transcription service, analyzing the data, and reporting the findings.

Data Analysis

To compare experiences across subjects, the data analysis of the research study was conducted in three parts: open initial coding, selective coding, and memo writing. These coding procedures were based on the Community Cultural Wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). To protect the identity of individuals, before beginning the interview procedure, research subjects were

asked to take a pre-interview questionnaire where demographic information was collected. During the interview process, I noted non-verbal cues, emotional reactions, questions that arose, and my own personal emotions and biases in my researcher's journal. At the conclusion of each interview, I wrote memos in my researcher's journal. The usage of memoing not only served as a reflection to process my own emotions and potential biases, but it also allowed me to detect emerging themes after each interview and make early connections between raw data. This process served as a method to fill in any emerging gaps between the initial interviews and the final transcripts. The remainder of the section will describe in more detail, the more formal coding methodology used in the analysis of data.

Coding Procedures

In this section, I discuss the procedures utilized to code the final transcripts of the raw data. The coding process included initial coding, selective coding, and memo writing. These coding procedures were based on the Community Cultural Wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). It is important to note that before beginning the coding procedure, I thoroughly read and re-read raw transcripts to become familiar with the data and detect preliminary emerging patterns.

Initial Coding

Open coding was the first stage in the coding process of the data analysis. During the open coding phase, I began with a line-by-line coding of raw transcripts to analytically break down information, minimize skipping over important emerging categories, and find relatable themes. According to Holton (2007), line-by-line coding forces the researcher to verify saturated categories, ensures the accuracy of raw data, and the relevancy of emerging themes. I coded a total of 67 pages, which generated a total of 215 initial codes. All initial coding was conducted by hand. I used the margins of the transcript to generate codes section-by-section.

Additionally, I color-coded each section to compare codes and begin visualizing patterns within and across subject transcripts to help me with the next step of the coding process. For ethnographic research, pattern recognition in line-by-line coding, although tedious, facilitates coding on a higher conceptual level and helps the researcher make in-depth descriptive and reflective field notes (Holton, 2007; Williams & Moser, 2019). The process of initial coding allowed me as the researcher to become very familiar with the raw transcripts. As a result, throughout the first stage of the coding process, I used my researcher journal to write down observations and initial similarities and differences discovered within and across transcripts. Some of the broad initial codes included social and economic disadvantages, familial capital, and the recognition of their undocumented social identity. After the generation of 215 initial codes, I moved on to the next step of the coding procedure which was selective coding. Selective coding helped me narrow down relating initial codes into larger and more manageable sets of central categories.

Selective Coding

The second and final stage of the coding process was the selective analysis of the data. During this stage, I made constant comparisons and connections between the previous coding cycle to create one centralized and overarching category. Utilizing Community Cultural Wealth Theory (Yosso, 2005) to provide a conceptual explanation of the data, I used theory to make connections between categories and subcategories to facilitate the construction of meaning and interpretation of the research findings. For this process, keeping the original research question in mind, I re-examined the four individual transcripts and the initial coding procedure using Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Theory to identify connections between the codes discovered in the first stage of the coding procedure; capturing recurring trends and overarching

categories. Using the six forms of cultural capital in Yosso's (2005) model which include: 1) aspirational capital, 2) linguistic capital, 3) familial capital, 4) social capital, 5) navigational capital, and 6) resistance capital, I reviewed all of the codes to identify connections between the six forms cultural capital and the 215 initial code sets. For this process, I color-coded all six forms of cultural capital and went through each initial code set to selectively code any data that related to the Community Cultural Wealth Theory (Yosso, 2005); highlighting each code that related to a form of capital. Throughout this process, I also utilized my researcher's journal to create mind maps which helped me visualize and outline the interconnectedness of emerging patterns and findings. Out of the 215 initial code sets discovered, three overarching categories were identified: forms of college access, forms of persistence, and forms of resiliency.

Memo Writing

Throughout the entirety of the data collection process, I utilized researcher journaling to mitigate bias and verify the accuracy of information gathered by subjects. The process of journaling was used to write initial observations and thoughts both during and after participant interviews, initial immersion of patterns and similarities, and the processing of my own emotions and potential biases. As a result, memo writing served as a tool for me to not only organize my thoughts throughout the data collection process, but it also served as a guide in the development of theoretical codes. According to Holton (2007), memo writing is particularly useful in qualitative research because it facilitates the thoughtful sorting of emerging data and helps theoretical codes to be conceptualized in a deep and more developed manner.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

According to Shaw et al. (2020), within the field of social science, the worldviews, and positions that researchers adopt within social and political contexts are particularly important

for the investigation of marginalized human subjects from vulnerable backgrounds. Because qualitative research investigating vulnerable groups is often sensitive, researchers have the duty to adopt ethical frameworks which ensure that research subjects feel safe, respected, and heard, and that data findings are disseminated with cultural and social relevance to honor the lived experiences of students (Shaw et al., 2020). In addition to affecting research design, positionality is also found to influence the relationship between participants and the researchers. When performing research on subjects from marginalized groups, there is a potential for unintentional power imbalances between the researcher and vulnerable participants as a result of identities and socio-cultural power inequalities (e.g., the limited legality of undocumented students). Understanding and protecting susceptible participants from preventable harms, such as emotional and psychological distress, is important for the exploration of authentic narratives (Shaw et al., 2020).

Supporting these findings, Jones et al. (2006) explain that because researchers act as the instrument of analysis in qualitative research, the interplay of the researchers' social identities, interests, values, and personal backgrounds can all influence the analysis of raw data findings. As a researcher, understanding my positionality before conducting research is imperative to preventing confirmation bias and "guarding against hearing, seeing, readings, and presenting results that confirm the researchers' experience and assumptions about self and others, rather than honoring the participants' experiences and voices in the study" (Jones et al., 2006, p. 41).

In consideration of my own values, background, and experiences as a researcher, I took intentional precautionary measures to ensure neutrality. While my lived experiences as a Latina, first-generation, limited-income, and daughter of immigrant agricultural farmworkers have all fueled my personal and professional passions, in order to limit bias, I did not disclose or speak about my own experience with immigration and my various marginalized intersecting identities.

While participants were recruited from the Support Group, which I facilitated on a bi-weekly basis, I minimized bias by carefully asking the same questions to each participant; only analyzing the information given during the interview, not gathered from the Support Group sessions.

As a second precautionary measure to limit pre-dispositioned knowledge, I used member checking to ensure accuracy in the representation and interpretation of data. As a result of my positionality, to achieve internal and external validity, external auditing was utilized as a third precautionary measure to limit biases. According to Schwandt and Halpern (1998), external auditing is useful in social science to control the quality of information gathered through the interpersonal and extensive in-depth assessment and interpretation of data. After the completion of the coding procedures, a qualified and experienced researcher, who was not involved in the initial research process, evaluated the analyzed data to verify for accuracy and determine whether the findings and conclusions were appropriate and acceptable based on the method of research.

Summary

This research study was guided by constructivist theory and the ways that undocumented students both make meaning of their experiences within higher education and navigate unsupportive structures in society (e.g., postsecondary institutions of higher education). Virtual semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather information and gain an in-depth examination of undocumented student stories. Throughout the data collection process, member checking was utilized to ensure the accurate representation of student experiences and backgrounds. To synthesize data and compare experiences across research participants, the coding process was conducted in three parts: open initial coding, selective coding, and memo writing. The codes and subcategories in the initial coding process were later utilized to create

core categories grounded in theory to make meaningful connections between the analysis of data. The research study began with an identification of a total of 215 initial codes and ended with three overarching theoretical codes or themes. In the next section, I will discuss the findings of the research study. In Chapter 5, the final section, I will offer conclusionary thoughts and recommendations.

Chapter Four: Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings of the research study. I begin by providing contextual information about the research study (e.g., where the study was conducted), followed by participant demographic information and participant narrative portraits. Next, I present the findings that emerged from the analysis of the data, which were organized by three main themes: forms of college access, forms of persistence, and forms of resiliency.

Context

The study recruited participants from the Support Group at a university, a private Facebook group, and through snowballing sampling techniques. The Support Group was created as a program intentionally designed to provide support and build a community for students who met one or more of the following criteria: (a) is undocumented (residing in the U.S. without legal status), (b) is a DACA recipient, or (c) is the child of an undocumented parent. The Support Group is a peer support program at University, a midsize public institution in the Midwestern region of the United States. University is a predominately White institution (PWI) serving 22,406 students according to an enrollment report from Fall 2021. In addition to the Support Group, participants were also recruited from a private Facebook group. As of February 2022, the private Facebook group had a total of 83 active members. The group was established by undocumented immigrants to provide a network of support and resources for self-identified undocumented and DACA students and young professionals who self-requested to join the group and who received formal admittance into the page. A total of four research participants were recruited for the qualitative study; three students were recruited from the Support Group and one student was recruited through snowball sampling.

Participants

A total of four participants were recruited to participate in the research study. Each study participant self-identified as 1) an undocumented student (including DACA recipient), 2) an individual that was 18 years or older, and 3) a current college student or recent graduate (graduated from an undergraduate institution within the last five years). Throughout the entire recruitment and interview process, participants were continuously reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation, their right not to answer questions they were uncomfortable with, and their ability to withdraw their participation at any time during the study without penalty. At the beginning of the interview protocol, each participant was given an overview of the consent form. All four participants provided verbal confirmation that they met eligibility requirements and their consent to participate in the research study.

To protect their safety and confidentiality, each research participant created a pseudonym to ensure full anonymity. While only essential demographic data was collected from research subjects, there were a total of two female and two male participants. All study participants were of Latin American nationality. The participants' ages at the time of the interview ranged from twenty-two to twenty-seven years of age. All four study participants were DACA recipients at the time of the interview. Additionally, the age of immigration to the United States among participants ranged between the ages of six months to seven years old. The demographic information of the study participants is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographical Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country of Origin	Immigration Status	Class Standing
Stephanie	25	Female	Mexico	DACA	Graduated
Rose	27	Female	Mexico	DACA	Graduated
Isaac	22	Male	Mexico	DACA	Junior
Joel	23	Male	Mexico	DACA	Senior

Next, I will provide relevant contextual background information for each study participant to highlight their unique story and honor their lived experiences. This information includes relevant information pertaining to their immigration story to the United States and family background.

Stephanie

Stephanie is a twenty-five-year-old DACA recipient. She graduated from a midsize Midwestern public 4-year university in 2018 with a social science degree. Prior to attending the Midwestern public university, she attended a regional community college. Stephanie was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States in 1996 at the age of six months. While she, her mother, and her nine-year-old sister traveled to the border as a unit, they were all brought into the United States separately. Stephanie recalls being told that she was given to strangers and brought to the United States in the middle of the night due to her non-stop crying because there was no one available to feed her. While she is unable to recall the specifics of her journey to the United States, Stephanie’s father was already living and working in the United States at the time

of their arrival. Stephanie and her family fled Mexico due to medical hardships, general danger, and to pursue a better life where she and her sister could live to their full potential.

Rose

Rose is a twenty-seven-year-old DACA recipient. Rose graduated in 2017 from a Midwestern private 4-year college with a health science degree. It is important to note that during Rose's undergraduate studies, she was undocumented and did not benefit from the two-year temporary protections given to DACA recipients. Rose was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States in 2001 at the age of seven. While she was unable to recall details from her immigration story because of the traumatic experience crossing the desert, Rose and her family fled Mexico as a result of economic and medical hardships which resulted in the death of her younger sister.

Isaac

Isaac is a twenty-two-year-old DACA recipient. He is currently a junior at a midsize Midwestern public 4-year university where he is majoring in a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics-related field. Isaac was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States in 2002 without his family at the age of four. His expectant mother and younger brother joined Isaac in the United States several weeks later. Isaac recalls being told one night to get in a Ford Boxcar without his family and holding onto a pole in refusal. While his father was already living and working in the United States at the time of his arrival, Isaac remembers looking up at the sky and missing his mother, brother, and father while he was separated from his family members. Isaac and his family left Mexico due to medical hardships, to pursue the American dream, and to obtain more general opportunities.

Joel

Joel is a twenty-three-year-old DACA recipient. Joel is currently a senior at a midsize Midwestern public 4-year university where he is majoring in a modern language and literature-related field. Prior to attending the Midwestern public university, he attended a regional community college. Joel was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States in 2001 at the age of three alongside his father and mother. Joel recounts being given away to strangers and brought to the United States using the identification of a young child while his parents were hidden in a makeshift compartment of a car. In Mexico, Joel, his parents, and his grandparents all shared a one-bedroom home. He and his family left Mexico because of economic hardships and to pursue a better life in the United States.

While the participants share collective experiences as undocumented and/or DACA recipients navigating institutions of postsecondary education, it is important to acknowledge and highlight the complexity of their individual stories and unique lived experiences before discussing the interwoven relationships and commonalities found between their educational experiences. It is vital to highlight these differences to gain an in-depth understanding and appreciation of their experiences and success strategies utilized within postsecondary institutions. Moreover, in the next section, I will discuss key research findings gathered from the analysis of data.

Findings

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the coding procedure of the research study was conducted in three separate parts: open initial coding, selective coding, and memo writing. The research study began with the identification of a total of 215 initial codes and through the process of selective coding, three overarching theoretical themes were identified which provided an

insight into the various strategies that undocumented students used to succeed within institutions of postsecondary education and the ways in which they made meaning of their experiences. These themes included: forms of college access, forms of persistence, and forms of resiliency. While in my findings I discuss how Yosso's (2005) six forms of capital led to expanded college access for individuals, it is important to point out that these forms of capital were not linear. Across the stories of study participants, individuals facilitated their expansion of college through the fluid intersection of multiple forms of capital.

Forms of College Access

Renn and Reason (2013) describe cultural capital as the accumulation of information and resources activated by a combination of parental education and social networks that allows for greater access to higher educational opportunities. According to the authors, students with historically limited cultural and social capital (e.g., students from economically disadvantaged and minoritized backgrounds) struggle to gain access to higher education as a result of insufficient avenues of information, limited financial resources, and minimal social networks. As a result, the first and most evident theme discovered in the analysis of the data was the ways in which undocumented students utilized forms of capital to gain access to college, despite limited cultural capital. Across the stories of study participants, individuals facilitated their expansion of college through the interweaving of multiple forms of capital. For example, the interconnectedness between aspirational capital and familial capital led to participants becoming more inspired to attend college, which ultimately led to the activation of social and navigational capital.

Aspirational Capital

Aspirational capital is described as the “hopes and dreams” students possess regardless of structured inequalities and deficient resources. For undocumented students, the endless dream of possibilities outside of current socio-political contexts represented the disruption of limited generational socio-economic statuses. In the research study, many participants shared stories of aspiring not only to *be* more but also to *do* more. For many participants, aspirations for a better future were intrinsic to their identity; many talked about being aware of their immigration status from an early age and using that awareness to empower themselves to not become discouraged by their current socio-economic status and legal and institutional barriers. For Rose, aspirational capital stemmed from her direct experiences as a young child:

I knew that I wanted to better myself. That I wanted to have a better job. That I wanted to live in a better place. Have a car. Have a house. And get out of the neighborhood that I was living in. I think that was my motivation...I would have to take two buses and walk home [from high school]. And I remember going on the bus and realizing that I wasn't going to do this forever.

For most participants, DACA, the executive immigration order mandated by President Obama, was the strand of hope that activated and fueled their aspirational capital. For Stephanie, her aspirational capital was initiated in high school:

I was a pretty smart kid, I was in IB and AP classes and, you know, I knew I wanted to further my education past high school, but I didn't really know what that would look like. Being undocumented, you know, my parents obviously didn't have money saved up from when I was born for me to go to college, so I didn't know what funding was going to look like. And I remember it was my 16th birthday. I remember blowing out my candles

and wishing that something would happen, that anything, just something would happen where I would be able to go to college... a small glimmer of hope. And a couple of days after I remember President Obama announced the executive order for DACA, and I remember just kind of like breaking down and being so happy, 'cause that meant that like I had a chance at a future... at essentially furthering my education

Similarly, for Isaac, aspirational capital came in the form of qualifying for and obtaining DACA protections:

I was a straight-A student, so I didn't really worry about that [college]... I thought I'd just find a way there, you know? Um, but then as the years grew, I started to realize a little bit more about, like, my limitations. When the Obama administration passed the DACA program through executive order, I was able to apply and get paperwork, and that was great! It was exciting!... I started working with my mom at a factory and I started to kind of feel like, "Hey! You know what? This isn't as bad. Maybe I can make a living and go to school" You know? I have the basic stuff. Like, it's just like a trial of America...like a limited-edition American Dream.

Adding that while he felt hindered by a "cloud" of uncertainty, especially during his senior year in high school, Isaac states that because of his aspirational capital, he was able to pick himself up and prove to himself and others that he was capable. "I had to prove to myself that I was not lesser to everyone else. I had, like, this whole burden like, I have to get into a really good school. I have to show myself. Show my work... I really wanted to just make it somewhere".

Familial Capital

In recounting their pre-college journey to higher education, many participants shared stories of encouragement received from their parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles,

cousins, and extended family. While most participants were categorized as coming from limited-income backgrounds in their native countries and described their parents as obtaining limited educational training, when discussing their path to higher education, participants described their aspirations being promoted by supportive family members who encouraged and supported their educational dreams. According to Yosso (2005) students' pre-college experiences of kinship foster emotional, moral, educational, and occupational resources which can be leveraged in postsecondary institutions. In this study, familial capital obtained by undocumented students in their pre-college environment led to the unlocking of aspirational capital and ultimately college access. For Joel, his parents' value and importance in education was the intrinsic motivation that led him to attend college:

[Education in my family] was very important. My parents always wanted me to go to school, and it was just like, I think in a way because they couldn't do it. My dad, I think he only went to like eighth grade, and my mom, she graduated high school, but she didn't pass the entrance exams for the university. So they focused on me going to school and they were big believers in that. They had a sheer belief in me, which, you know, maybe it's like 'cause I'm the oldest, right, but they were always like yeah, you can obviously do this, you can do this. We believe in you.

Like Joel's story, in addition to receiving moral and emotional support from family, many participants recalled the value of education being at the forefront of their upbringing; instilled from an early age. When asked about factors that shaped his educational trajectory in the United States, Isaac stated:

Around, I want to say, um grades six, seventh and eighth, I started to realize and be more politically awake in a sense. I started paying more attention to the news. And I

realized it was just kind of like one of those things, like one of those quirky facts about me, you know? That I'm not from this country. And during this time my parents were always asking me about college. Like, "Hey, you know you're not from here. How are you going to pay for college? Are you going to go to college? What's going on? I know it's a little bit early, but you know, try to think about that [college]."

Across research participants, the ability to obtain familial capital reinforced their aspirational capital which intrinsically motivated them to find alternative strategies to maneuver their environment. While many participants expressed frustration with their limited social capital, familial capital (obtained through emotional and moral support) empowered them to not only believe and strive outside of pre-established legal and socio-political limitations but also instilled a strong sense of educational consciousness from a young age.

Social Capital

The ability to obtain the knowledge, resources, information, and guidance needed to access college was a common theme found among research participants. Many participants discussed their struggle to find social capital even as high achieving students in feeder K-12 institutions. Describing his experience with the gatekeeping of vital information, Isaac shared that "while [his] high school was really good for college preparedness, they didn't really teach anything about the application, economics, or financing part of college. It was just like, "you guys have really good grades, so you should be able to get full rides. There's no reason why you shouldn't". And while that is relatively true for most people, you still have to teach basic stuff for everyone else." Across all participants, in order to access strategic social networks, which allowed them to gain access to college by identifying financial resources, supportive institutions, and applying for college itself, individuals had to make the difficult decision to disclose their

status to teachers, counselors, and other community members; risking the safety hood of themselves and their families. Recalling her experience in accessing social capital networks that helped her obtain a postsecondary education, Rose recalls:

I remember that in high school, I met out of pure coincidence, an undocumented student that was coming from [location], and we started just talking. I have no idea why I was in the library... I think I was just there for maybe volunteering or something like that? I don't remember. But I talked to her and told her my story, and she was like, "Yes, I'm undocumented as well." The president at our-our school is really welcoming to- to undocumented students, and he's actually, paying for their education through a scholarship." So she said, "Go ahead and apply. I'll connect you with him. I got accepted to the school. They gave me a full ride...I went to live there for four years. They paid for my books. They paid for my meals. They paid for my room and board. They were, honestly, the best.

Sharing similar experiences, Joel recalls that although it was frightening to disclose his status, confiding in this high school guidance counselor not only opened up educational opportunities, but it also forged his self-confidence:

In high school, I knew I had what it took to go to college. I got decent grades. I think I ended up with like a 3.5 or 3.6 GPA... [To navigate college] the big first step for me was to have enough confidence to tell my story to a guidance counselor. After I told her my situation she was like, okay, thank you for telling me, now these are going to be our next steps. At the time DACA was somewhat new... but she was a little ahead of the curve, and knew how to navigate financial aid and like all that. And so I think that was really the first step in [obtaining college] access. I had to be vulnerable with my guidance

counselor so that I could get the help 'cause I knew I wanted to go to college.

While access to college was a recurring barrier discovered among all research participants, students' familial and aspiration capital fueled their brave, savvy, and strategic strategies to obtain access to vital social networks. Although sparse, access to social capital enabled participants to create a patchwork of social resources from various resources which permitted participants to access college and ultimately advance their education.

Navigational Capital

Navigational capital refers to the students' skills and abilities to navigate educational spaces. Yosso (2005) explains that navigational capital empowers students to maneuver within unsupportive or hostile academic environments whose practices and policies place students at a disproportionate risk of academic vulnerability. For participants, navigational capital was interwoven with aspirational and familial capital. The desire for participants to obtain a postsecondary education coupled with the sense of empowerment and self-agency led individuals to obtain vital college access resources and information in unconventional ways. Describing her transfer experience from community college to a 4-year university, Stephanie recalls relying on online search engines to navigate her educational trajectory:

In high school I did a lot of research on my own to look up what the best options were. In community college, I figured it out that as long as I fulfilled the state transfer agreement that basically any state university had to accept all of my core prerequisites. And so once I learned that I just stuck to that guideline. I made sure that I was taking enough classes in each um category or right like academic categories. When it was time to transfer, I remember Googling the cheapest state schools in Michigan

...and in doing that, I just applied to and got accepted into three schools. I then started researching and looking at scholarship options and applying for things, and applying for everything and anything, even things that I probably didn't qualify for. But I was like, you know the worst thing that's going to happen is they're going to say no.

For many participants, navigational capital was activated through the process of self-actualization. Despite the institutional gatekeeping of crucial college information and resources, participants sought to overcome socio-economic barriers by reclaiming their experiences and untold stories and channeling adversity as motivation to overcome obstacles. Speaking about her navigational capital, Rose disclosed:

There were lots of times in high school that I told people my stories, and I sometimes would break out crying because I knew that I wanted to go to school...I was very excited to get the opportunity to go to college. There were lots of times that doors were closed on me, but I just kept asking, kept asking for help. I think that's the key to everything. It's like, if you want something, you can't just sit around and wait for things to happen to you. You have to go out there and look for opportunities. I think I was really sad for a long time. Especially when people would say, "No, you can't go to school because you're undocumented." Um, but somehow, I always woke up the next day and got up and there was always a sliver of hope...if I was meant to be here, I was meant to go above and beyond. As a result of that, I remember that one of my teachers in high school actually sat down, he had never written a college essay before or a personal statement, and he sat down with me, and he wrote one with me for like two hours... I have actually found him a couple of times and I thanked him. Because I felt like he was such a key part in helping me apply for college.

Forms of College Persistence

Persistence defined as the students' determination and/or ability to persevere onto the next term and academic school year to achieve their academic goal is found to be pertinent to the educational attainment of students (Renn & Reason, 2013). In the research study, all participants were able to successfully navigate unsupportive pre-college environments through the strategic acquisition of capital. Directly out of high school, two participants enrolled in community college, one enrolled at a private four-year institution, and one enrolled at a public four-year institution. However, while obtaining college entrance was cited as a significant barrier for all participants, successfully navigating and persisting within their new environment was one of the many barriers that students confronted once they stepped foot into institutions of higher education. These barriers included but were not limited to finding their sense of belonging on campus, finding trusting and supportive relationships, and accessing vital institutional networks. As a result of these barriers, the utilization of strategic forms of capital to overcome persistence barriers was the second theoretical theme that emerged from the analysis of data. Forms of capital used to overcome persistence barriers included aspirational capital, familial capital, social capital, and navigational capital.

Aspirational Capital

For undocumented students, their endless “hopes and dreams” which were not confined by legal and political limitations and boundaries allowed them to envision a future of endless possibility. When describing their motivation to persist in higher education in spite of institutional barriers, participants repeatedly described their aspirations to build a better life for not only themselves but also their loved ones. Illustrating his college persistence, Isaac states:

One of the more important driving factors is my family's well-being...my older brother,

he's always sacrificing for us...[because of this] we were able to buy a home and purchase vehicles and a lot of what I do is me thinking in relation to this. How will this help my family in the long run? I know I can't help them in the immediate because I'm a student and there's only so much I can do. But how are my actions going to affect my family in maybe like 10 years? 15 years? Am I going to be able to make enough to support my family through a crisis? Or like, what if my mom can't work? Will I be able to support her down the road? Or will I be able to provide a good life to her because she gave her life for us? I want to pay what is due. And pay what I owe back to her and make sure that I can take care of my family in the long run. I think that's why I keep doing this.

Sharing similar sentiments of working towards a more prosperous future, Joel expressed his motivation being directly tied to the possibility of changing his family lineage forever through his education. Reflecting on his persistence, Joel shares:

I wanna finish my degree and then see where it takes me, like I say, if I don't work on my degree, that's fine. But as long as I graduate, it can open opportunities for everyone you know. It is a big deal because it is just seen as the pinnacle... once I get it [degree/education], the other person will get it, my cousin will get it, and my family will get it over a lifetime.

Throughout the entirety of the study, the aspirational goal of validating the sacrifices of loved ones and creating the footsteps for family members to follow intersected with familial capital which intrinsically propelled students to persist towards their educational goals against external threats.

Familial Capital

Although most study participants described coming from limited cultural capital backgrounds, when reflecting on what led them to continue their educational enrollment at institutions of higher education, a common persistence factor was the support (both emotional and moral) received from parents and extended family members. While families were limited in their ability to provide participants with financial resources, information, and other resources, their socioemotional capital was a vital factor in the persistence of students within unsupportive educational environments. Reflecting on the strategies that she used to persist in college, Rose recalls:

While I think that every single year that I was in college, I gained more and more confidence in myself...I was also very sad lots of the time because I missed my family, and I didn't have a car to visit them. It was challenging being away from my family and feeling like you have to do this on your own, but my fiancé and my parents were incredibly supportive of me. My boyfriend in particular was always such a comforting point, I think listening to me every time that I felt sad or was upset about something... I think there were lots of times that I got really sad, and I would ask "why am I doing this if I'm not going to be able to hold a job in the future?"...the moral support from my family to be able to listen to just all the stress I had was vital because college was hard. Life is not easy.

While all participants shared receiving elevated levels of socioemotional support from parents and extended family members, some students also expressed receiving financial assistance which contributed to their persistence within institutions of higher education. Stephanie shares that

while her parents were always big supporters of her education, they also provided financial assistance which positively impacted her attainment:

My parents and I made the agreement that I would pay for my rent and living expenses and they would cover the other half of my tuition that wasn't paid for by scholarships... thankfully that was manageable for my parents financially. I worked campus jobs and donated plasma to get the extra money. That was how I navigated funding college and obtaining my degree.

When reflecting on their familial capital which led to higher educational persistent levels, it is also important to note, however, that through the analysis of data, familial capital was twofold; it generated both positive and negative repercussions for individuals. For two research participants, familial capital led to heightened levels of psychological and emotional stress. Reflecting on what led to her persistence despite personal and institutionalized barriers, Stephanie disclosed:

My parents were a big factor in what kept me going because I felt like I couldn't let them down. I had to accomplish what they had set out for me to do. College was probably one of the hardest points of my life and I just felt like I had to keep going... I kind of felt like I had no choice... quitting was just not even an option probably because of the disappointment that it would have brought my family, right?... culturally that's something that's just not acceptable. Within the Latin community, immigrant parents always had it harder than their children, and I was raised that it was just not an option, essentially, right? It's hard admitting it, it sounds bad, right? [CRYING] I have resentment towards my parents for putting me in this situation...they had every good intention in their hearts to give us a better life. [SNIFF] But at the end of the day, this is not the life that I asked for... I essentially had to live up to their sacrifice which is something that I've struggled

with because I feel like there was always this added pressure on me, right? To live up to my parents' expectations of doing things that they weren't able to do because they were trying to give me and my sister a different life. And while I'm grateful that I was given these opportunities, it has kind of created a love-hate relationship.

Sharing similar sentiments, Joel shares:

You get to a point when you get tired from writing papers and assignment after assignment...they see me nice and dry in my room on my computer. Like, that's what they see, you know? And they're probably never going to understand the struggle, which is fine. But sometimes it's hard. One day I called my mom, and I was like, mom, this fucking sucks, I hate being here, I hate doing my homework. I was in tears and stuff, and she's like, it's okay. Don't worry, like you'll figure it out. If you fail a class, it's okay. Just do it again. You have nothing to worry about or be stressed about. Which did help a lot, 'cause my parents being that supportive... my dad told me, if you don't get your college degree, you're still my son. But I still feel like I need to do this because of how hard it was for them to come over here and everything. What they went through, the shitty jobs they work, the long hours, the shitty pay... it is a lot of pressure because you feel like if you don't excel in education or get a degree, you failed them. In a way, because that's a central part of why we're here. I definitely do feel all that pressure sometimes.

Social Capital

Even though all research participants described obtaining limited cultural capital as first-year students, aspirational capital and positive familial capital mobilized participants' search for social capital which directly impacted their academic persistence in college. In the analysis of stories, participants expressed finding social capital through friends, professors,

and institutional agents across different functional areas on campus, with whom they were able to establish trusting and supportive relationships. Illustrating how he acquired social capital in unexpected ways, Isaac describes:

Some people [from the university] got in touch with me, and they were like, "Oh, like you're Hispanic, you applied to our school, we've got great support programs!" Like, we'd like you to come in and meet [NAME]. [NAME] he helped me with securing funds to stay on campus my first year. And that was incredible. He helped me a lot and really believed in me. Another strategy is going to offices and just asking questions. I talked to [NAME] who's at the Financial Office. She always explained to me how things were broken up. "This is how much tuition will cost this semester. Can you make those payments?" She was very understanding of my situation, very accommodating...when you have someone looking out for you that helps so much...I also had a lot of help from friends. I would say "Hey, I don't really know much about campus, could you ask? And, you know, that was a very big help for me.

Throughout the analysis of the research, in order to strategically access networks of people that were able to provide information, resources, support, and other vital materials needed to persist in college, participants also disclosed obtaining social capital through a trial-and-error process. Describing her experience obtaining social capital as a DACA student, Stephanie recalls sporadically disclosing her status to her college admissions counselor. As a result, this led to an array of unlocked resources:

"[NAME] actually reached out to me and she sent me links to scholarships and said, "Apply." And so I did. And they were scholarships geared toward immigrants and minorities. And next thing, I knew I had gotten them. I ended up

having about half my tuition paid for through that... she was informed about it [DACA]...she was also at one point the daughter of an undocumented immigrant...she was just someone I could lean on and someone who would listen. She helped me a lot. She helped me with finding campus jobs, helped me apply for scholarships, and connected me with resources that I needed in order to be successful at [INSTITUTION].

For Stephanie, the advantages of finding support through a trial-and-error basis not only allowed her to build supportive relationships on campus, but the obtainment of social capital also gave her the support and resources needed to persevere towards her academic success.

Navigational Capital

Among participants, aspirational capital coupled with positive familial capital motivated students to mobilize their navigational capital to piece together vital information and build a sense of community on campus. Reflecting on their experiences, participants described their persistence as being tied to their ability to socially integrate on campus and form support systems among peers, faculty, staff, and student organizations. While these individuals and programs did not provide students with tangible capital, they did provide students with a sense of belonging and a safe haven within a hostile environment which positively impacted their educational persistence. Describing his experience navigating his institution, Isaac states that in addition to finding support through clubs and extracurricular activities, an on-campus staff member also empowered him to persist at his institution:

[NAME] navigated me through everything that I had questions about or didn't know how to proceed. Even when I just felt anxious about something. He was always there, opening and welcoming... he opened up his arms and just welcomed me in and just

accepted me for who I was.

Describing his support on campus, Isaac also shared how he created community and navigated his institution in unforeseen ways. He describes:

I have a few friends who are on the other side of the political spectrum. And they respect me for who I am. They just might not agree with my method of entry to this country but they still see the hard work that I put in...they're like "we respect you as a person, but we got to be picky about the people we let in"...but they understood it. They had also compassion.. and so I guess I found support in very unexpected ways. Maybe backhanded ways too.

Sharing the importance of finding support within her institution, Stephanie describes finding community through a pro-immigrant rally hosted by the Latino student union and the Black student organization. In her reflection, Stephanie recalls this event as pivotal in the unfolding of her confidence which catalyzed her educational perseverance:

The biggest thing that probably gave me a lot of confidence was just the community behind like [INSTITUTION] and [STUDENT GROUP]...it definitely helped motivate me. It was nice to see more people than just undocumented immigrants want to support each other... it was very nice to feel like you have a community after years of feeling like you didn't have one.

In addition to navigating their environment through community building, one participant also shared how he utilized his navigational capital to successfully maneuver the transfer process from community college to a 4-year institution. Elaborating on his experience, Joel states:

[When researching for a school to transfer into] [INSTITUTION] had a tab for

undocumented students and I thought that was crazy. I didn't see any other school that I was looking at that had a tab for us, and I was like, okay, now like you at least give me some place to start... and I think that's all I needed. I needed one steppingstone and then I would just figure it out from there... the slight hope that I would be able to talk to someone about my situation at [INSTITUTION] was big. You know, hope is a big thing.

While Joel activated his navigational capital to obtain vital transfer information and resources, once at the 4-year institution, he also described building capital through his friendships who facilitated his intrinsic motivation to persist:

...they all come from similar backgrounds as me, although they are not necessarily Hispanic. I have a good friend whose parents emigrated from Vietnam, and still, we find parallels in our journey... being the first one to go to college I think that's a really big motivator, to have that support system on campus.

Forms of Resiliency

Resiliency, an umbrella term to describe how many marginalized groups (e.g., undocumented students) endure and persevere through unsupportive and harmful environments, is defined as an individual's ability to adapt and thrive despite adverse conditions (Quaye et al., 2019). According to Quaye et al. (2019), resiliency is not only related to traumatic experiences but it's also used as a coping mechanism by individuals to find more supportive pathways in their unsupportive environments; obtaining growth and empowerment from lived adversity. As a result, the third and final theoretical code discovered in the analysis of the data was the ways in which undocumented students utilized forms of capital to overcome adversity throughout their educational experience, both within K-12 and higher education. Across participant stories, individuals disclosed using linguistic capital, aspiration capital, and resistance capital to gain

critical consciousness and begin their journey out of the shadows which positively impacted their educational aspirations and attainment.

Linguistic Capital

In recounting their stories, research participants discussed their lived experiences in more than one language and through a comedic tone. According to Yosso (2005), beyond code-switching and linguistic flexibility, linguistic capital also encompasses parables, proverbs, and expressions acquired by individuals as a result of cross-cultural awareness. In examining their college access and academic persistence, participants (knowingly or unknowingly) employed comedic cross-cultural expressions to discuss their immigrant experience; a linguistic strategy to counteract negative experiences, hardships, and barriers encountered in their day-to-day life as a result of their status. Reflecting on the ways in which his status shaped his educational experiences, Isaac shares:

I always knew I was undocumented. I joked around with my friends in middle school, even, in elementary school. I would say “*Hay viene la migra*” [Border Patrol is coming] and like all those kinds of jokes. That's funny to me. I understood that I just wasn't from this country. And it was okay... I think for me being open about it and me being okay with that, I think I grew confidence in that. Obviously, there were reasons why other people didn't, and I understood that. It is scary living like that.

Expressing similar forms of native linguistic capital which provided him with the intrinsic motivation to aspire towards educational success, Joel discloses:

...You've heard that saying [LAUGHTER] “*¿Querías norte? Ahora chingale*” [You wanted the north? Now bust your a** for it]. I mean, technically speaking, I was a baby and my parents kind of brought me along, but that saying still holds chose for me. But I'm

here and so I'm going to make the best out of it... [the term] means getting what you want and working hard to obtain it. That's what that saying means to me.

For both Isaac and Joel, their cross-cultural linguistic capital not only allowed them to mentally and emotionally process the realities of their own lived experience and gain critical consciousness, but linguistic capital also served as a source of empowerment; activating their aspirational capital and perseverance toward academic success.

Resistance Capital

Among research participants, while each student varied on their comfortability in disclosing their immigration status, when asked to reflect on their educational trajectory, individuals discussed challenging sociopolitical injustices against undocumented immigrants through acts of defiance; challenging systemic injustices on campus and within their communities. Through the analysis of the research findings, participants disclosed engaging in an array of social and political involvements ranging from political protests, state and federal legislative initiatives, university protection demands, campaigns, and awareness efforts. For participants, their early awareness of oppressive systems as a result of their status activated an elevated level of social agency and the self-empowerment to challenge injustices. Reflecting on her activism on campus, Rose states:

I was a student who was very open about my situation with people who I trusted because I felt like if you don't spread awareness nobody's going to do anything about it. Nobody's going to know. I just was tired, you know? I don't like hiding. I like telling people the truth about who I am.... I along with a couple of other undocumented students did a presentation on undocumented students for the whole faculty. And it was challenging, but I think that it's always been important to share what our challenges are as

students on campus.

Sharing similar experiences engaging in advocacy efforts on campus which led to enhanced resiliency, Stephanie shares:

...I went to protest Donald Trump, Jr. coming to [INSTITUTION], this was probably my boldest move in college... My protest sign said “Without immigrants, Trump would have no wife” ...it was a very nerve-wracking situation... an old white man got in my friend’s face and was talking down to her... she was doing nothing to provoke him. I remember being very scared at that moment...I had to think about how much of a risk that meant for myself, right? Luckily, nothing happened... but that experience was empowering.

In addition to engaging in campus awareness efforts and political protests, many research participants also discussed ways in which they employed resistance capital in their regular day-to-day life. For example, when asked to reflect on how his identity has impacted his engagement on campus, Joel recounts:

I don't personally feel persecuted or anything like that, but I do feel like there's just like there's a little bit of ignorance... I remember, I had a professor that kept referring to undocumented people as illegals, and that rubbed me the wrong way. So I took the initiative to talk to him after class, and I was like, hey, why are you using the word illegal? And he said, “people that say that [undocumented] are brainwashed...I probably should have reported it but confronting him felt important to me at the moment.

Reflecting on this political engagement and activism on a national level, Isaac describes his experience as an inspirational awakening:

...2017 was the first year we went to D.C. I was part of the [REDACTED] campaign

where we put pressure on the Trump Administration to consider a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers...we had to talk to our representatives and there were people from all over the country...we were pressuring both Democrats and Republicans... the talks broke down, as always. But after that whole experience, I met so many people who were in my situation... it was so important to see that everyone else was also in this tiny boat. It is a tiny boat with a lot of issues. But we weren't alone. I wasn't alone. It was like a shared struggle.

Throughout the research study, when reflecting on the ways in which they engaged in acts of resistance, participants expressed obtaining critical consciousness through transformative activism. Whether on a national scale or in their classroom, oppositional behavior empowered individuals with the courage to challenge oppressive policies and fight for a future undefined by socio-political and legal boundaries.

Aspirational Capital

Through the narrative accounts of their untold stories, in the face of real and perceived barriers which included but were not limited to economic, social, institutional, legal, and political challenges, participants consistently described maintaining high hopes for their dreams and goals. While aspiration capital was tightly linked to familial and social capital, aspirations for a more prosperous future led individuals to view themselves in transcending ways. Unimpaired and empowered by the hardships that they experienced as a result of their status, participants shared the ways in which they were re-claiming their identity and lived realities. Reflecting on what it means to be undocumented, Joel discloses:

...it means everything. I never saw DACA as a crutch. I never did. Like, it did come with barriers, but doesn't everything? It's something I'm super proud of 'cause when I think

about being undocumented I think of my cultural background and I like my culture, I like everything that it brought to me and it's like a big part of my personality... with DACA it's the opportunity to take that job, and the opportunity to go to college and the opportunity to get a driver's license, you know, and make things so much easier for us. Um, so, yeah, I definitely wear that on my sleeve all the time.

Sharing similar sentiments of hope and empowerment, Rose shares how obtaining her educational goals changed her perspective and sense of self:

...in college, I started to realize that there was no end to what I could do...I realized that I could do anything that I wanted to do in the world. There were no limits to what I could do. If I wanted to do something, I would do it. I know that I've overcome so many things, and I'm just so proud of myself that I could do something that is incredibly hard and very challenging. Not a lot of us make it to school, so I felt extremely proud. I think that I also gained my voice during college. I used to be very shy and quiet, and I think that I got just the biggest confidence booster when I realized that I was a very strong person who could overcome a lot of challenges... I used to be so obedient...but now I'm very outspoken. Like, I don't let people mess with me. Nor do I tolerate people talking down to me or making me feel inferior because of who I am.

Reflecting on his educational trajectory from when he first arrived in the United States to the present day, Isaac shares:

Every time I look back, I'm like, *Wow! That was very stressful*. But I got over it. So I started to just trust my gut a little bit more and say like, *You know what? It may be stressful right now, but you'll be fine*. And even if you get booted one day from this country, you're going to be fine. Like, it'll be sad. It'll be tough, but you'll be fine. I think

that's kind of the attitude that I grew over the years. It's like, yes. I may have some limitations, but I'm still trying to prove to myself that despite that, I'm still here. I'm doing well, and I'm doing this for my family, and doing this for myself. I'm doing this so that one day I can give back to the community. They gave into me and invested in me...after many years of being stressed and afraid of not making it, I deserve a little bit of relaxing and a little bit of just going on autopilot...trusting my intuition a little bit more, and just feeling more determined over my destiny.... so just having a more, kind of, calm and collected perspective on life. I think I deserve that.

Sharing her story as a DACA recipient and how her educational experience has shaped her future dreams and aspirations, Stephanie shared in an emotional state:

All those experiences have helped me grow in finding my voice and kind of being more comfortable with who I am...in these last four years, two of the biggest changes that I've seen myself is not letting my undocumented status define my worth and who I am. Essentially focusing on like my successes, right, and you know, how far I've come kind of career wise in these last four years. Um you know, I didn't get these jobs because I'm undocumented. I got them because of my knowledge, my skills, and my abilities. So focusing on that has helped me realize that I'm more than just an undocumented immigrant.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the research findings of the study, which sought to investigate the strategies utilized by undocumented students to succeed within institutions of postsecondary education and how they made meaning of their educational experiences. As a result of legal vulnerabilities, to ensure full confidentiality, identifiable information such as participants' legal

first and last names, majors, and institutional names were not disclosed. While all participants arrived from Mexico to the United States as undocumented immigrants between the ages of 6 months to 7 years old, at the time that the research study, all participants self-identified as DACA recipients. In the study, a total of four research participants were recruited, two females and two males, whose ages ranged from twenty-two to twenty-seven years old. In the research study, interview questions were divided into six different categories: background questions, questions related to their social capital, questions related to educational barriers, questions related to campus engagement, questions related to their educational success, and questions related to their future dreams and aspirations.

While participation in the study resulted in minimal risks, some individuals experienced emotional vulnerabilities when asked to reflect on their educational journey which highlighted the complex nature of their immigrant stories and lived experiences. Through their thoughtful responses, participants expressed that while their status presented unique challenges to their postsecondary educational aspirations, they were thankful for the opportunities that obtaining an education permitted them to obtain; most notably the ability to come out of the shadows. In the next chapter, I offer discussion and recommendations for both practice and future research.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In this final chapter, I provide an overview of the research study and discuss how the research findings relate to the available literature. Later, I will provide recommendations for future research and practice before providing conclusionary thoughts.

Summary of Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to give voice to the lived experiences of undocumented individuals who are surviving, persevering, and navigating institutions of higher education in the shadows of the ivory tower. This critical investigation sought to tell the story of individuals and explore the ways in which undocumented students make meaning of their lived experiences by examining the various dimensions of their stories outside of the broader legal and political context through a strengths-based perspective. The study explored factors related to participants' background, social capital, educational barriers, campus engagement, educational success, and future dreams and aspirations.

Challenging the idea that marginalized student populations (e.g., undocumented students) enter college “disadvantaged” or “deficient” compared to White peers, Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model was used as a theoretical framework to guide the creation of the research questions, study design, and the analysis and interpretation of data results. The research questions that guided this research study included:

1. What are the various strategies that undocumented students utilize to succeed within institutions of postsecondary education?
2. How do undocumented students make meaning of their experiences in postsecondary institutions?

To investigate the two research questions, this qualitative study collected data from four participants through semi-structured interviews that were approximately an hour to an hour and a

half in length. The semi-structuring format of interviews was utilized to elicit specific information from interviewees while simultaneously allowing participants to share more of their stories. Participants were recruited from a Support Group, a private Facebook group created to support undocumented students and young professionals, and through snowballing sampling techniques. All participants identified as being 1) an undocumented student (including DACA recipient), 2) an individual that was 18 years or older, and 3) a current college student or recent graduate.

During the interview process, all participants gave their verbal consent to be audio-recorded and to have the recording sent to a third-party transcription service. After the interviews were transcribed, I used member checking to verify the accuracy of the information. During the analysis of the data, 67 pages of raw data were coded. Using Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model, a total of 215 initial codes were discovered which were later condensed into three selective codes. The three theoretical codes were: forms of college access, forms of persistence, and forms of resiliency.

Discussion

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the strategies utilized by undocumented students to succeed within institutions of postsecondary education and how students made meaning of their lived experiences. According to Yosso (2005), traditional research perspectives of capital which are narrowly defined by White, middle-class values perceive students from non-dominant communities as passive and deficient individuals. However, findings acquired through the in-depth analysis of the data revealed that while undocumented students encountered unique hardships in their quest to advance their education past the secondary school (e.g., limited financial, social, cultural capital, psychological stressors, tuition equity policies, and legal and

political laws, etc.), they overcame these barriers through the accumulation of valuable forms of capital obtained through non-normative and non-dominant avenues. Fluid avenues of capital that were interconnected and built on top of each other allowed undocumented students, who are from non-dominant cultures, to acquire an “array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

Specifically examining the first research question, the intersection of different forms of capital was most evident in the ways in which undocumented students obtained college access. Challenging traditional perspectives of capital, participants in this study discussed how they activated their self-agency to transcend outside of their current circumstances. When asked to reflect on their facilitation of postsecondary educational opportunities, participants described being motivated to achieve a college education as a result of the interconnectedness between familial capital and aspirational capital. Across all participants, the emotional and moral support received from immediate and extended family members who provided advice and encouragement, empowered individuals to persevere towards their academic goals outside of normative socio-political and legal constraints.

Moreover, as a result of the interconnectedness between familial and aspirational capital, navigational and social capital were activated by individuals who described becoming empowered by their upbringing and the positive reinforcement of education that was instilled from a young age. Participants disclosed maneuvering college access with limited information and resources through unconventional strategies such as disclosing their immigration status to community members (e.g., teachers and counselors) and by researching college options through the utilization of online search engines. Consistent with this finding, Huber (2009) reported that while undocumented students in her research study were often unsure if they would be able to

continue their education beyond high school, the strength they received from their families and communities was described by participants as the glue that held their dream of one day being a college graduate and career professional alive. According to the author, this desire to advance their education led individuals to creatively network within their communities by hosting garage sales, car washes, and donation drives to make vital social contacts and strategically navigate around and dismantle college access barriers to higher education (Huber, 2009).

In addition to college access strategies, this study also highlighted tactics utilized by undocumented students to maneuver and persist within institutions of higher education despite the institutional barriers encountered. In their reflection on college persistence, participants described activating the same diverse array of capital utilized in their college access experience to succeed within unsupportive environments within higher education. Throughout the research study, participants described using various forms of intersecting capital which included: aspirational capital, familial capital, social capital, and navigational capital. In their reflection on what enabled them to persist within higher education, all individuals disclosed becoming inspired to build a better future for themselves and their families. In their stories, the study found an interconnectedness between aspiration and familial capital. Participants' aspirations for a more prosperous future coupled with the emotional, moral, and economic support received from family members enabled participants to remain enrolled in college.

An unexpected finding of this research study, however, discovered that while the interconnectedness between aspirational and familial capital led to positive educational outcomes, this intersection of capital was a double edge sword. Two students in the research study described experiencing psychological and emotional distress because of the pressure placed on them to justify the sacrificial journey made by their family members and loved ones

who immigrated to the United States. As a result, participants described feeling imprisoned and unable to withdraw from higher education. Moreover, similar to their access to college access, the motivation (both good and bad) received from their familiar capital led to the acquisition of social and navigational capital. Throughout the study, participants shared obtaining access to vital resources and information from friends, roommates, professors, and institutional agents with whom they were able to establish trusting and supportive relationships. Participants' ability to acquire social capital provided students with the ability to socially integrate on campus and form supportive systems which assisted participants to persist in their educational goals.

While no current research identifies familial capital as a potential form of negative capital, this study builds upon the growing body of literature that suggests that inclusive educational environments lead to higher persistent levels for undocumented students in higher education. In his research study, Romo et al. (2019) discovered that the ability of undocumented students to find individuals who demonstrated a desire to support them through the usage of their cultural wealth allowed individuals to develop the resourceful skills necessary to strategically navigate their postsecondary institution which enabled them to persist in their educational journeys.

The last and most revealing finding in this research study suggests that in addition to acquiring college access and persistence skills through the activation and interconnectedness of different forms of capital, participants also obtained resiliency through linguistic capital, aspiration capital, and resistance capital. Unimpaired and empowered by the hardships that they experienced as a result of their status, participants described the ways in which they were reclaiming their identity and lived realities through the utilization of comedic cross-cultural language, defiant acts of resistance (e.g., political protests), and self-empowerment. Specifically

examining the second research question, the research study revealed that undocumented students obtained strength and self-agency from both the challenges faced and their usage of non-normative strategies to succeed within unsupportive institutions of postsecondary education. Throughout the research study, participants shared stories of accumulating self-confidence and empowerment through various forms of capital which allowed them to successfully access, navigate, and persist within higher education. Supporting this finding, Yosso (2000) found that the “prove others wrong” attitude inherited by undocumented students as a result of their undocumented experience activated transformative attitudes of resiliency and self-authorship which pushed students to persist toward their goals in the face of adversity.

Based on the research findings discovered from this qualitative study, in the following section, I offer practice and future research recommendations. While the study affirmed that undocumented students acquired the critical skillset and forms of capital necessary to persist in their postsecondary education, these findings also highlight various shortcomings discovered in institutions’ support of undocumented students.

Recommendations for Practice

Consistently throughout the research study, individuals expressed their sense of isolation throughout their educational experience because of a lack of resources and information, both at the K-12 and postsecondary levels. As a result, a notable practice recommendation would be the implementation of free bridge and early college access programs between institutions of higher education and K-12 schools. Modeled from the federal TRIO Upward Bound Programs that support underserved and marginalized student populations from underfunded high schools and targeted communities, these bridge programs would serve as a point of access for juniors and seniors to facilitate navigational and social capital and improve college access rates. These

programs would bridge the college readiness gap by providing general academic and career counseling such as assistance with the navigation of college application processes, securement of funds, network building, and the completion of eligible scholarship applications.

Furthermore, in addition to implementing pre-college access avenues, the ability of faculty and administrators to adequately serve undocumented in higher education is also crucial for the retainment of undocumented students throughout their postsecondary journey. Taking into consideration that all research participants disclosed contributing their college persistence to their ability to locate supportive individuals who were able to connect them with vital information to resources and services, the second policy recommendation would be to implement mandatory training for all faculty and staff. Modeled from contemporary diversity, equity, and inclusion professional workshops, these trainings would provide campus stakeholders with an understanding and preparedness to create inclusionary and supportive environments for undocumented students by providing information about federal and state immigration laws, the usage of appropriate terminology, institutional policies and regulations, and vital on-campus resources and support services. As a result, the implantation of trainings for primary stakeholders would not only cultivate aspirational, social, and navigational capital for undocumented students, but the facilitation of trusting relationships would also increase students' sense of belonging which would ultimately improve retention and graduation rates among this student population.

Lastly, a final practice recommendation would be for colleges and universities to update their websites to be more inclusive of undocumented students and their needs. Throughout the research study, individuals described relying on online resources to navigate both college access and the transfer process. Two individuals disclosed persisting because of the information found

on an institution's website which made the university appear safe, inclusive, and supportive of undocumented students. Because of the expressed dependence on online resources for both prospective and current students, institutions should facilitate navigational and social capital by strengthening their websites to include critical information regarding admission requirements (including tuition policies), financial aid, campus allies, and services pertaining specifically to undocumented individuals.

Recommendations for Future Research

Consistent with other research studies that have investigated the general educational experiences of undocumented students in the United States, more research is necessary to explore the ways in which undocumented students both experience and make meaning of their educational experience from a strengths-based perspective. While this research study exposed gaps in research and literature, as a result of the small sample size and the homogeneity of research participants specifically relating to their race, ethnicity, and immigration status, a more diversified study should be conducted to expand the reliability of findings. In addition to obtaining a larger participant pool, a future research study might include recruiting participants from diverse nationalities, regions, and demographic backgrounds. Additionally, future studies might also include incorporating immigrants with differing immigration statuses such as DACA, Temporary Protection Status, and refugees to compare and contrast postsecondary educational experiences.

Furthermore, given the elevated levels of psychological and emotional stress unveiled by the research study, a final recommendation for future research includes the need to comprehensively examine how cultural-based stressors impact undocumented students' mental and emotional health. While several studies report implications between legal, political, and

social barriers and the psychological and emotional well-being of students (Contreras, 2009; Pérez Huber & Malagon, 2007; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Terriquez, 2015), limited research investigates the relationship between mental health challenges and cultural norms. As a result, to create practices and policies that better support individuals, future research should be conducted to explore the ways in which experiences previously viewed as forms of capital (e.g., family support) may impact the mental well-being and educational persistence of undocumented students in higher education.

Conclusion

The research findings in this study investigated the strategies utilized by undocumented students to succeed within institutions of postsecondary education and the ways in which students made meaning of those lived experiences. While a semi-structured interview methodology was conducted to retrieve sensitive and often emotionally charged experiences, among most participants, this study provided individuals with their first opportunity to reflect upon and make meaning of their educational experience as an undocumented student living in the United States. At the conclusion of the research study, all participants expressed being astonished by their own strength, autonomy, and self-resiliency; something that they had never recognized as previously obtaining.

Overall, the findings acquired through the in-depth analysis of the data found a great amount of strategic resourcefulness, grit, and determination among research participants. By documenting voices and centering their lived stories at the forefront of the research, the study unveiled how undocumented students used previously hidden forms of capital obtained through non-normative avenues to survive unsupportive educational environments and persevere toward a brighter future in the face of legal, political, institutional, and social adversity.

Appendices

Appendix A

Recruitment Email

Dear Colleagues,

My name is Estefany Paniagua-Pardo and I am a current graduate student in the College Student Affairs Leadership program at Grand Valley State University. I am conducting a research study that focuses on attaining an in-depth examination of the unique experiences of undocumented students in higher education

I am seeking volunteer participants for my study. To participate in this study, participants **must meet the following criteria:**

- Self-identify as an undocumented student (including DACA recipient)
- Be 18 years of age or older
- Currently be attending college or be a recent graduate (graduated from an undergraduate institution within in the last five years)

Participation entails:

- One one-on-one interview with me that will last between 60-90 minutes
- A second follow-up interview that will last between 15-20 minutes

If you are interested in participating, please contact me directly at paniague@mail.gvsu.edu and I can send along the consent form that describes participation in more detail. We can then set up a time to conduct the interview.

Please contact me at paniague@mail.gvsu.edu if you have any additional questions.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you!

Best,

Estefany Paniagua-Pardo
Master's Degree Candidate, Higher Education
Grand Valley State University

Appendix B

Questions for semi-structured interview

Theme 1: Background

1. Tell me about your immigration story?

- Possible Probe: Are there any legal/political hardships?

2. How has immigration shaped into your educational experience?

- Possible Probe: Has immigration impacted your education and/or career path?

3. How would you describe your experience as an undocumented student during your first year on campus?

- Possible Probe: What are the ways that you navigate being undocumented at the University?

Theme 2: Social Capital

1. Can you describe your pre-educational experience and your path to college?

- Possible Probe: How did you navigate preparing and applying for college?
- Possible Probe: What were some reasons that you decided to attend this institution over others?
- Possible Probe: What motivated you to attend college? Did you ever feel that college was inaccessible?

Theme 3: Educational Barriers

1. What are some barriers you have experienced in college?

- Possible Probe: What experiences on campus stand out to you? Why do they stand out to you?
- Possible Probe: Have you experienced personally or been near when an insensitive comment about immigration and undocumented immigrants was made?

2. What are the ways that you navigate college?

- Possible Probe: Can you describe the ways you overcome financial barriers?
- Possible Probe: Do you believe college is financially affordable to you?

3. Do you believe your identity causes you to experience stress or anxiety?

- Possible Probe: What do you do when you get stressed or feel overwhelmed? What causes these feelings?
- Possible Probe: How often do you experience stress or anxiety?

4. Have you ever considered leaving the University? If so, why?

Theme 4: Campus Engagement

1. How would you describe your participation/involvement on campus?

- Possible Probe: What engagement experiences on campus stand out to you? Why do they stand out to you?
- Possible Probe: What are some ways in which you engage on campus? (personal, professional, academic)
- Possible Probe: Can you describe your interaction with faculty and staff?

- Possible Probe: How does being undocumented influence co-curricular activities and interaction with peers?
- Possible Probe: Tell me about your experiences within the classrooms?

2. How has your identity informed your relationship with others on campus

- Possible Probe: What are people like on campus when engaging with/talking about immigration?

Theme 5: Educational Success

1. Tell me about your successes on campus? Success in this reference is defined as actions, situations, or processes that lead to positive educational outcomes.

- Possible Probe: What are the ways that you navigate finding support and resources on campus?
- Possible Probe: Tell me about the way that you build relationships on campus?
- Possible Probe: What made it easier for you to establish relationships with these individuals? Do they all have something in common?

2. What motivates you to continue your education?

- Possible Probe: family, friends, spouse, children, etc.

3. What experiences, services, programs, individuals on campus, etc., had the biggest positive impact on your experience?

Theme 6: Future Dreams

1. What does it mean to identify as undocumented at the university?

2. Reflecting on your experience up to this point to your first year, have things changed? If so, explain?

3. Can you tell me about your long-term educational/career goals? How does obtaining an education impact your aspirations/dreams?

- Possible Probe: What does obtain an education/bachelor's degree mean to you?

Closing Question: Is there anything else you would like to add? Is there anything you wish I would have asked?

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form



1. **TITLE: Resiliency in the Shadows of the Ivory Tower: Examining the strategies utilized by undocumented students to succeed in higher education**
2. **RESEARCHERS**
Principal investigator: **Estefany Paniagua-Pardo, Graduate Student**
Faculty advisor: **Dr. Karyn Rabourn, Educational Leadership and Counseling**
3. **PURPOSE**
This study seeks to explore the ways in which undocumented students make meaning of their educational experience outside of the legal and political context. Participants will be asked a series of semi-structured questions to reflect on their experiences as an undocumented student in higher education.
4. **PROCEDURE**
A recruitment email will be sent to students through the GVSU Peer Support Group and the Michigan Network for Undocumented Immigrant Success Facebook group. After agreeing to participate, I will email participants to schedule a date and time for the interview. Interviews will be located at a neutral location, either in private University Library room or virtually, depending on the participant's preference. I will meet one-on-one with the participant for an initial audio-recorded interview. For the initial interview, the participants will be asked a series of questions that will take no more than 60-90 minutes. Prior to the start of the first interview, a Pre-Interview Questionnaire/Demographic survey will be given to participants. A second follow-up interview will occur to verify data collected. The second interview will be for no more than 15-20 minutes.
5. **RISKS**
While participating in this study will result in minimal risks, electronic data will be collected and/or stored for this research project. Throughout the entirety of the research process, the accumulation of data will be kept in a password-locked Excel and Word document. As with any use of electronic means to store data, however, there exists a minimal risk that data could be lost or stolen. However, as a preventative measure to lower risks, the accumulation of data will be kept in a password-locked Excel and Word document within a password protected computer.

Additionally, while interviews will be conducted in a way that should not inflict harm, there is minimal risk that this study will result in emotional discomfort because of interview questions that will ask you to reflect on your experiences. All interview questions are optional, and you do not need to answer anything that may make you uncomfortable. In the case of any emotional discomfort, the interview will be stopped.

6. **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO YOU**

This study will provide you with space to reflect on your unique experiences as a undocumented student in higher education.

7. **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SOCIETY**

This study will provide a better understanding of the postsecondary experience of undocumented students which could lead to the creation of future research, theory investigations, and policy and practice recommendations that are more supportive of undocumented students and their educational success.

8. **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate. You may quit at any time without any penalty to you.

9. **PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your name will not be given to anyone. All information collected from you or about you is for the sole purpose of this research study and will be kept confidential to the fullest extent allowed by law. Your personal information, including all responses to interview questions, will not be linked in any way to your identity as a study participant, nor will your identity be included in the final results. You will be asked to provide a pseudonym prior to the interview, and the pseudonym you provide may be used in the final results. Throughout the entirety of the research process, the accumulation of data will be kept in a password-locked Excel and Word document and stored in a password protected computer. In very rare circumstances specially authorized university or government officials may be given access to research records for purposes of protecting your rights and welfare or to make sure the research was done properly. To alleviate personal identifiers, participants will be given a pre-interview questionnaire which will later be physically cross shredded after the data is transferred to a password-protected Excel and Word document stored in a password-protected computer. Interviews will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy. After each recording, the recording of the audio will be transcribed by a third-party transcription service. The transcriber of the audio recordings will not know your identity. After the transcription of audio recordings and the verification of the transcription against the recording, the recordings will be erased. Anything discussed and recorded will remain confidential between the participant and I.

10. **AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE**

By participating in the research study, you are agreeing to the following:

- The details of this research study have been explained to me, including what I am being asked to do and the anticipated risks and benefits;
- I have had an opportunity to have my questions answered;
- I am voluntarily agreeing to participate in the research as described on this form;
- I may ask more questions or quit participating at any time without penalty.
- I give my consent to participate in this research project.

11. **CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact

NAME: Estefany Paniagua-Pardo, Graduate Student

PHONE: (616) 331-3401

E-MAIL: paniague@mail.gvsu.edu

NAME: Dr. Karyn Rabourn, Faculty Advisor

PHONE: (616) 331-6850

E-MAIL: rabournk@gvsu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the **Office of Research Compliance & Integrity** at Grand Valley State University, 1 Campus Drive, Allendale, MI. Phone: 616-331-3197. E-mail: rci@gvsu.edu.

This study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Grand Valley State University (Protocol # 22-168-H).

If you have any questions about how to use this consent template, please contact the Office of Research Compliance and Integrity at (616) 331-3197 or rci@gvsu.edu. The office observes all university holidays. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with our office.

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