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Heightened Uncertainty and Determination: The “Trump Effect” and College Aspirations for Undocumented Students

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Recommended Citation

Valdivia, Carolina; Clark-Ibáñez, Marisol; Schacht, Lucas; Duran, Juan; and Mendoza, Sussana (201)
"Heightened Uncertainty and Determination: The “Trump Effect” and College Aspirations for
Undocumented Students," *Journal of College Access*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol6/iss2/4>

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Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank the students, educators, counselors, and administrators who participated in the UndocuResearch project. Thank you for your time, trust, and support of the project. A very special thank you as well to Students Without Limits for their ongoing partnership and support. We acknowledge with deep gratitude our funders for this project: North County Higher Education Alliance, Latino Center for Leadership Development, ACT, the Sociological Initiatives Foundation, National Latino Research Center, and UndocuScholars at UCLA. We appreciate the support of space and resources from: Palomar College, Mira Costa College, and California State University San Marcos.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the educational experiences of undocumented high school students during the Trump administration—a time marked by the intensification and expansion of immigration enforcement practices. Drawing on 24 in-depth interviews, we find that undocumented high school students experienced increased instances of bullying near the time of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. Our respondents also worried about the growing uncertainty surrounding immigration policies and the future of DACA. This uncertainty shaped their plans; many students felt compelled to prioritize working and delay starting college to make use of their work permit while they had access to DACA and build emergency savings. While the current political climate gravely exacerbated students’ fear and anxiety, students demonstrated a tremendous amount of resiliency, agency, and determination to achieve their goals. We find that access to a support network and encouraging school personnel played a key role. Thus, we conclude this article with a set of key recommendations for educators and counselors who are working with undocumented students and their families on the ground.

Keywords: immigration, undocumented students, college, enforcement

Special Acknowledgement

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Introduction

When Trump ended DACA, I was just like, ‘What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to work? How am I supposed to be able to provide for myself and go to school and not be scared?’ I literally cried when he got elected.

Leticia, a high school senior and DACA beneficiary, shared how she felt about the 2016 U.S. presidential election and actions of the Trump administration thereafter. For many undocumented students, it marked a critical juncture in their lives. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump mobilized anti-immigrant sentiment by calling for the deportation of all undocumented immigrants and the fortification of a physical wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. Within a few months of its inauguration, the Trump administration also sought to terminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provides eligible undocumented young adults with a temporary work permit and



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protection from deportation¹. Until recently, approximately 98,000 undocumented students were graduating from U.S. high schools each year *without* being able to apply for DACA. Youth, such as Leticia, live with the uncertainty that they may not be able to continue renewing their permits should the program end in the foreseeable future. In this article, we examine how the Trump administration's mobilization of anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies – what has been termed as the “Trump effect” (Andrade, 2017; Rodgers et al., 2017) – has permeated classroom walls and subsequently affected undocumented high school students' educational experiences, including their mental health, ability to concentrate at school, relationships with their peers/school personnel, and plans.

Without access to a legal immigration status, undocumented students are unable to legally work, drive, travel, and are ineligible to receive federal financial aid. While DACA and state-level policies such as Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540) in California have improved access to a higher education for those eligible (Abrego, 2006; Clark-Ibañez, 2015; Gonzales, 2016; Wong & Valdivia, 2014), significant barriers remain in the context of a rapidly changing and increasingly anti-immigrant

political climate. With a few important exceptions (Muñoz et al., 2018; Nienhuser & Oshio, 2018; Valdivia, 2020), the literature has left largely unexplored the consequences that the current political climate is having on undocumented students, especially when it comes to those who are currently enrolled in high school.

Drawing on 24 in-depth interviews with undocumented students enrolled in a high school in San Diego County, California, or recently graduated, we find that undocumented high school students experienced increased instances of bullying near the time of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. Reports of discrimination and bullying, which mirrored the language utilized by Trump during his campaign, continued after inauguration. During this time, undocumented high school students also worried about the growing uncertainty surrounding immigration policies and the future of DACA. This uncertainty shaped their plans; many students felt compelled to prioritize working and delay starting college to make use of their work permit while they had access to DACA and build emergency savings. While the current political climate gravely exacerbated students' fear and anxiety, students demonstrated a tremendous amount of resiliency, agency, and determination to achieve their goals. We find that access to a support network and encouraging school personnel played a key role. Thus, we conclude this article with a set of key recommendations for educators and counselors who are working with

¹ The Obama administration first announced DACA on June 15, 2012. Five years later, on September 5th of 2017, the Trump administration terminated the program. Several lawsuits followed thereafter. On June 18, 2020, the U.S. Supreme Court blocked the Trump administration's attempt to end DACA. At the time of this writing (April 2021), USCIS has resumed accepting DACA applications, but the future of the program remains uncertain.

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undocumented students and their families on the ground.

Literature Review

Undocumented students often begin to learn about the limitations that their immigration status presents during high school (Gonzales, 2011, 2016; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). This stage in the life cycle coincides with increasing adult responsibilities, such as the need to work and drive. This is often a time when undocumented students learn that, unlike their documented peers, they cannot legally work, travel, drive, or apply for federal financial aid without a legal immigration status.

This awareness informs undocumented students' decisions of pursuing a higher education and may lower their aspirations (Abrego, 2006; Abrego and Gonzales, 2010; Greenman and Hall, 2013). In a study among undocumented students before and after high school graduation, for example, Abrego (2006) found that two of the students she interviewed decided not to even bother applying to college because they realized that even if they were admitted, they would not be able to afford tuition. Three students who did apply and were admitted to several universities opted for the more affordable community college, again, because of the lack of financial aid to help cover increasing tuition costs. Indeed, the inability to receive federal financial aid is often the biggest barrier that prevents undocumented students

from enrolling in and successfully graduating from college (Contreras, 2009; Flores, 2010).

The limitations that come with being undocumented extend beyond the financial and into the psychological. Studies note that undocumented students experience acute levels of hopelessness, stress, and uncertainty as illegality disrupts their sense of belonging, severely limits their opportunities, and constraints their future (Abrego, 2006; Canseco and Clark-Ibáñez, 2015; Contreras, 2009; Gonzales, 2010, 2011, 2016; Valdivia, 2020). Additional challenges that undocumented students face in their pursuit of a higher education include the lack of institutional support and encounters with discriminatory school personnel (Contreras, 2009; Gonzales, 2010, 2016; Mondragon, 2020; Perez, 2009). Notably, school personnel are not always prepared to positively respond and serve undocumented students. Drawing on 20 in-depth interviews with undocumented students, Contreras (2009) found that when undocumented students disclosed their immigration status to ask for help, they were often discouraged from pursuing their goals. For example, when seeking information about pursuing graduate school, an undocumented student was told not to even bother applying because the student would not be able to legally work after graduation with their degree. In this article, we contribute to these studies by shedding light on the wide range of information that is available (or not) to undocumented students at the high school

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level, and how this in turn shapes students' post-high school plans.

Lastly, while existing studies have made great strides with respect to understanding the unique challenges and limitations that undocumented students face, we know much less about undocumented students' forms of agency (for notable exceptions, see e.g., Garcia Cruz, 2020; Mondragon, 2020; Monico, 2020; Silvestre, 2020). In this article, we examine how the current political climate has not only exacerbated many of the barriers facing undocumented students, but also how it has prompted students to respond with a tremendous amount of resiliency.

Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) were instrumental in guiding our study. Critical race theory acknowledges the centrality of race in everyday life and that racism is forged into legal and social institutions (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001b). The theory has roots in legal studies and has become more extensively used in education studies (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso, et al., 2004). There are five foundational themes: (a) racism exists, (b) dominant ideology must be challenged, (c) commitment to social justice, (d) experiential knowledge is valued, and (e) transdisciplinary analysis must be done within the historical and contemporary context (Solorzano & Yosso 2001a; Yosso et al., 2004). Several of these tenets are

particularly salient for our study. We found that the students acknowledged the racist ideology espoused by other students and other educators. We value the experiential knowledge of the students who also shared profound recommendations to transform schools and opportunities for future undocumented students. CRT provides the framework "to engage individuals that perpetuate oppression and systems of oppression through critical discourse, analysis, and human agency" (Lara, 2018, p. 20). In particular, the emphasis on agency in CRT is essential because our work is ultimately focused on social change and improving schools.

LatCrit is also crucial for the foundation of our study. Originating in the mid-1990s, LatCrit sought to include the experiences of Latinx individuals and communities into the CRT framework (Valdes, 2005). It added an important analysis of immigration, xenophobia, phenotype, and language into the CRT framework, all of which are key to understanding the experiences of Latinx undocumented communities (Pérez Huber, 2010). For example, Pérez Huber and Malagon (2007) utilized LatCrit to understand undocumented college students who identified structural barriers through "institutional neglect" that may not have otherwise been discovered. Similarly, Wiemelt and Maldonado (2018) drew upon LatCrit theory to help understand how systemic and institutionalized practices in schools privilege white, monolingual students, and further marginalized

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undocumented bilingual students of color. Relatedly, UndocuCrit is a theoretical framework that emerged from LatCrit and it focuses on undocumented critical theory. The tenets include acknowledging the role and source of fear, differential experiences of liminality, familial *sacrificio* as a form of capital, and a collective approach to knowledge produced by and for undocumented immigrants (Aguilar, 2019). Taken together, LatCrit demands that research be focused on ameliorating oppression, which is strongly aligned to the focus of our study on undocumented high school students. Finally, the framework allows for previously unrecognized or unelevated voices to be amplified. In our study, participants illuminated the struggle and resiliency that can shape future directions in efforts to support undocumented students.

Methods

This study is based on the collective work of the UndocuResearch Project, which was initiated in January 2017. We are co-led by Dr. Carolina Valdivia and Dr. Marisol Clark-Ibáñez. The project aims to understand the experiences of undocumented high school students and the school personnel who work with them in San Diego County during the Trump administration. The study entailed three phases: 1) educator interviews, 2) interviews with high school students who identified as undocumented and/or were members of mixed-status families, and 3) ethnography in newcomer high school classrooms. For this article, we primarily

draw upon in-depth interviews with 24 undocumented students who currently or recently attended a high school in San Diego County, California².

To recruit participants, we shared information about the project, eligibility requirements, and our contact information with undocumented students, educators, counselors, and community organizers in our personal networks. We distributed recruitment flyers when invited to present at various local high schools. We also conducted outreach through a local non-profit, Students Without Limits (SWOL), which supports undocumented high school students with legal and mental health services. SWOL offers direct services to students and professional development training to educators (e.g., teachers, counselors, staff, administrators).

Everyone in this sample was born in México. All but one participant came to the United States when they were young children. Most lived with immediate family members. Six disclosed they did not have DACA while 13 shared that they did have DACA. Two-thirds were females and one-third were males. We utilize pseudonyms to protect the identity of our participants and do not report identifiable information shared in the interviews, such as the name of specific high schools.

Interviews gathered information about students' educational experience, interactions with peers and school personnel, immigration background, views on immigration policy,

² Our project was approved as a full review by the IRB at California State University San Marcos (#1204785-1).

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and the future. Students shared multiple examples of how immigration enforcement practices at the local level impacted them and their families. Interviews lasted from 40 to 90 minutes, after which each student received \$20 gift card compensation for their time and participation, as well as a resource packet containing information about health, education, scholarships, and legal services available to undocumented immigrants in San Diego County.

Findings

Impact of Political Context

During and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaigns, undocumented high school students in our project reported experiencing an increasingly hostile climate in their schools. Leticia, who was born in Tijuana and migrated to the U.S. when she was five years old, shared she frequently overheard anti-immigrant and pro-Trump views expressed by her peers. She described,

I remember a lot of people [were] talking about “building the wall” and supporting President Trump and [saying] “We need to take all those illegal aliens [sic] out of here,” [...] This would be in lunch, this would be in passing breaks, this would be in my social media.

These messages were all around students like Leticia, including through side conversations at lunch or classroom discussions. Notably, teachers were often present but would not intervene. This silence further enabled peers to express their anti-immigrant views. When

asked about teachers’ responses, Leticia explained, “[Teachers] would just ignore it. Regardless, if it was good or bad [...] In a way, [students] dominated the teachers. I know that all the bad things I heard... they were never stopped. I know that for a fact.” Interviews with undocumented high school students like Leticia revealed that the anti-immigrant sentiment mobilized by the Trump campaign permeated classroom walls even before the administration’s inauguration. These messages illustrate the pervasive and porous nature of the political climate in schools.

While these messages did not directly target a specific student, undocumented students were negatively impacted. Several students expressed feeling hurt by their peers’ comments. Maribel, a senior in high school, shared:

For me it doesn’t come up often in like a classroom setting [...] but my classmates do really have strong opinions politically about immigration. And they feel really confident saying that aloud regardless of who’s listening and stuff. So, I do hear it come up a lot and, honestly, it really hurts.

Maribel reflected how fellow students’ anti-immigrant politics felt quite personal. While students described teachers’ negative views about immigration, the frequency of comments by peers was far more pervasive. In addition to the rhetoric in the news and social media (which presumably students could turn on or off), peers’ comments in the hallway or cafeteria became painful assaults

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on their very existence that they could not avoid.

Outside of the school setting, undocumented students were also frequently hearing about, and at times, witnessing immigration activity in their neighborhood. This further exacerbated students' levels of fear, stress, and anxiety. Teresa, a high school student who migrated to the U.S. when she was only a few months old, recalled:

Once there was this time where there was a truck in front of my window and he [a neighbor] was ready to go to work and he had a daughter. They were our neighbors. She was inside and he was coming in with his lunch box and they were about to leave. And we just heard the girl scream and it was at like 6 in the morning. She screamed and I just looked outside my window and there was this car in the back. A man and women came out and they had guns that said ICE. And then, as they get out of the car and the girl was crying and I knew she knew what was going on. (Begins sobbing)

During the interview, it was difficult for Teresa to hold back her tears as she described what it was like to witness her neighbor's apprehension and the pain the entire family had to endure. Even months after the traumatic event, the nature of the arrest and the emotions it created continued to affect her. The fear that rushed to the surface was vivid in Teresa's memory.

She continued: "That day, it was a weekday. I was getting ready for school. My dad and mom didn't want to go out. It's, like, they're

right in front of my house (begins crying) and they could be there any day for my parents. Ever since then, I have been scared."

Witnessing the arrest impacted Teresa's parents and her their worry about her leaving the house even to go to school. The event had taken place the year before, but in the interview, Teresa's strong emotional reaction indicated that it had long lasting effects (see also e.g., Valdivia 2019, 2020). Given the political climate and high level of ICE activity in San Diego County (Garcia, 2019; Valdivia, 2019), many of our respondents recalled frequently hearing about a community member's arrest. Every participant had either witnessed an event like Teresa described or had heard such an arrest recounted by family members (or both). Coupled with indirect comments at school, participants' well-being, daily routines, and participation at school were informed by the community context, along with anti-immigrant political and media rhetoric.

Mixed Emotions

Under the anti-immigrant political climate fostered by the Trump administration, our respondents experienced mixed emotions. That is, while on the one hand students experienced a tremendous amount of fear and uncertainty as discussed on the previous section, students also maintained a sense of hope, actively searched for support and opportunities, and remained committed to their short- and long-term educational goals. Viviana, for example, has lived in the U.S. for over two decades and aspires to be a teacher.

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She recently graduated from a local public high school in San Diego and, at the time of the interview, was attending community college. She reflected on her emotions immediately after Trump was elected in 2016:

The night when he was elected, I was very upset... emotional. I remember one of the professors here emailed me [and said], 'I am sorry. Just don't lose hope.' Overall, my hope, my motivation towards obtaining my teaching credential and teaching and being in the classroom have never really gone [away]. Even though the political climate is very toxic and negative towards immigrants, I know, and I always had faith and hope that I will be a teacher and will have my classroom and I will be able to teach students, whether I am getting paid or not, I am still going to do it.

Viviana shared that her professor bolstered her spirits and mentioned her personal resolve to commit to her goal and not lose hope. Like Viviana, many of the students we interviewed dreamed of becoming teachers, doctors, social workers, or lawyers. They were eager to pursue a career that would enable them to help others in various capacities. Although the anti-immigrant political climate fostered by the Trump administration negatively affected students' emotional well-being, many students remained undeterred and verbalized how they would continue to pursue their goals.

Some students also remained hopeful of one day being able to adjust their immigration status. We found this sentiment expressed by participants who were currently enrolled in

college and had an immediate family member who was a U.S. citizen. When asked about his plans, for example, Adam shared,

In 5 years, [I will] hopefully [be] in medical school. And, in 10 years, I hope medical school pays off and I hopefully get citizenship at that point because by then my sister will be able to file for my mom and for me. And just hoping I am employed, at least... I really want some form of economic stability and, at least have a job because, if I can't have a job, I really can't do much.

Adam aspired to be a doctor and indicated his priority of having steady employment. His goal centered around his sister being able to adjust his and his mother's immigration status.

We found several factors informed students' determination to keep going and remain hopeful about the future. Among these were a sense of responsibility to give back to one's parents for their many sacrifices, as well as a commitment to give back to others for the support that students have themselves received along the way. Viviana and Adam, for example, aspired to professions that help others.

Elizabeth, who has lived in the U.S. since she was one year old, noted, "I hope to give back... somehow give back to the people who helped me get to where I am and give resources to younger generations and be a resource." Elizabeth gave the example of creating scholarship opportunities for the future generation of undocumented students.

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At the time of the interview, Elizabeth had recently graduated from high school. Along her journey, she received the support from her mother, counselors, and teachers. She also received mentorship and advice, including information about internships she could pursue regardless of her immigration status. This support in turn motivated students like Elizabeth to continue pursuing their education to one day be able to help others. As we will discuss in the following section, however, not all students received support from their teachers or counselors.

College Access

We also found patterns of dismissive sentiments and behaviors from school personnel towards undocumented high school students, which played a significant role in college access awareness and attainment among participants. Existing research indicates that teachers' interactions with students impacts student success. This is especially the case for students who are traditionally underrepresented in college, such as undocumented students (Clark-Ibañez, 2015; Gonzales, 2016, Stronge, 2013). Our participants were excited about pursuing higher education and had a keen awareness about the lack of resources they were being provided compared to other students at their high school.

While many participants were enthusiastic about college, most lacked knowledge of the various requirements involved in making college choices. Applying to college is no easy task; this is especially true for undocumented high school students who often must navigate extra paperwork (e.g., the California AB 540 certification process) than the general population. As we conversed with participants about their experiences with getting information about college, most of

them shared they did not receive adequate assistance from their school counselors. Carlos simply stated: "They didn't really say." Meaning, he never received any guidance from teachers or counselors about going to college as an undocumented student.

The role of school counselors should include mitigating pre-college stress or concerns by equipping students with the appropriate resources to

succeed in higher education. In critical education research, school counselors operate like gatekeepers and are supporting the status quo (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Leticia, for example, expressed: "I felt that [my counselor] didn't like me. She was very exclusive. I felt that she was just there...to assign teachers and classes and she really wasn't any help [with college preparation]."



"We also found patterns of dismissive sentiments and behaviors from school personnel towards undocumented high school students, which played a significant role in college access awareness and attainment among participants."

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Similarly, Rosa shared that her counselor... “didn’t even tell us about opportunities [like] the SAT or like how to write essays for college and stuff.” Unfortunately, experiences like these were common and detrimental for students like Leticia and Rosa. Ideally, their counselors should have been sharing potential college resources tailored for undocumented students, but Leticia and Rosa missed out on important college related resources that previous research indicates can make the difference in whether they apply to college or not (Flores, 2016).

Studies have also shown that students who partake in college preparatory coursework, such as AP courses, often are more likely to apply and succeed in college because they are on track to take required classes for university enrollment and can earn college credit while in high school (Shifrer, 2013). Yet, our students felt they were not given equal academic participation and opportunities on campus. For example, Rosa who had not received assistance about college, also shared: Like, if I wanted to choose AP classes, she would be, like, ‘Oh no, maybe you should take regular classes because most kids don’t do well in AP classes’...She never encouraged [us] to do well or challenge [ourselves].

Rosa described how she was excluded from a class with more academic rigor. Rosa’s counselor preconception biases are often what contribute to the academic success gap of underrepresented students in the public school system.

Tellingly, nearly every participant shared a negative interaction related to undocumented immigration and it seems that this anti-immigrant perspective may lead to less support to see the students as viable college going students. Fatima, who had just graduated from high school and had begun her first year at a local university, stated that she wished her high school teachers would “get rid of their nasty comments, their indirects [sic] about undocumented students, one hundred percent keep their political life outside of school.” Emilia shared that she thought her teachers might be anti-immigrant and that they are thinking, “Okay, F them! Get ‘em out of here!” She continued, “I feel like [teachers should] just be more positive about it. You know? Because we’re human! I’m not a dog, you know?! I’m a human! I want the same thing that you do.” Emilia powerfully reflected that she demands that her teachers treat her with dignity and that they recognize their shared humanity. As has been noted in other studies, the election of Trump invited more anti-negative rhetoric to be expressed more openly (Andrade, 2017, Muñoz et al., 2018).

Finally, the overall anti-immigrant climate at school results in students potentially being less likely to access resources if they do not have explicit information that the educator is supportive of undocumented students. For example, Leticia described: “My school has something where there’s a group and if you ask for material things, they give it to you. It’s through the social worker, but I don’t feel comfortable talking to her... She’s very nice,

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but she's just not someone I feel comfortable [with], well, just because she's white and I don't think she would understand and that's just me." Leticia believed that the white social worker may not understand her situation, even though the program is in place to help students who need resources. However, she has not seen outward signs of allyship and subsequently deemed this school personnel untrustworthy.

Though negative experiences were very prevalent among interviews, a few students expressed positive interactions with school personnel. Students identified support from Girl Scout troop leaders, coaches, and other school connected programs that they joined. For example, Imelda spoke about her experience in a robotics club in middle school. She recalls joining the club and seeing many girls drop out due to a lack of interest, but not her. She enjoyed the club very much. In fact, the teacher in charge of the club made a very positive impact on her. Imelda described her as "someone you want to surround yourself with because she's so positive and encouraging." She noticed Imelda's talent for coding and personally invited her to take her talents to a non-profit organization that would further help her develop her skills in coding.

Imelda's positive experience with school personnel demonstrates the powerful, positive role that educators have as positive role models and mentors (see also e.g., Gonzales 2016). Imelda's robotics teacher is someone who introduced students to new

social and educational opportunities. Her involvement was not restricted based on immigration status. Because of this positive experience, she decided to pursue a career in STEM, specifically computer science. In a field that is predominately male and white, Imelda knows her journey will not be easy, but her teacher has already planted a seed of confidence in her that will undoubtedly take her far in life.

In addition to individual educators or school related programs, Students Without Limits (SWOL) also stood out as an important resource that participants found incredibly helpful to their growth as valued students. Those involved in SWOL mentioned the regular support in group meetings, one-on-one attention by organizational leaders, and constant stream of resources that mitigated the stress and isolation that they felt at their high school. Maribel shared, "[the Director of SWOL] was a really big help because she's helped us be able to get more opportunities at the school as well as sign up for college. And this has been really helpful for me because I don't have anybody that went through this process. So, for me, everything is new. It helps me because without her I would basically be lost. I wouldn't know where to apply for scholarships or certain things."

The presence of SWOL also led to the creation of high school dreamer clubs where students could be a more integral part in planning, organizing, and advocating as a group. Additionally, SWOL worked with high school Dreamer Clubs to set up workshops,

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speakers, and family events. Oftentimes, students reported that it was the only source of support at the high school level. Esteban explained, “The only person that I can think of that you know, that really tried to bring it into the table was [the director of SWOL] that I’ve been talking about. Her efforts of bringing... speakers to help students or parents.... She created events after school to get parents to get together and then talk about any issues you know, about transferring to a CSU or a community college or a UC.” As Esteban explained, SWOL represents a model of collaboration that schools can develop to bring high quality information, resources, and support to students and their families.

In sum, students’ legal status is not what is restricting their ambitions. The lack of support from school personnel presents numerous challenges and diminishes opportunities for undocumented students. Previous studies have noted that undocumented students are faced with the lack of institutional support and encounters with discriminatory school personnel as they pursue their college aspirations (Contreras, 2009; Clark-Ibáñez, 2015; Gonzales, 2010, 2016; Mondragon, 2020; Perez, 2009; Valdivia & Clark-Ibáñez, 2018). While our study confirms previous findings about the interactions that lead to lower graduation rates and college enrollment, we also found promising practices through individual educators who understood what undocumented students needed and various extracurricular programs where undocumented students found support and resources.

Conclusion:

Recommendations and A Call for Change

I just really hope that what I said in this interview actually gets considered enough to help the generation that follows me. I hope that the generation that follows me doesn't go through the same struggles that I'm going through. Obviously, there's a beauty in the struggle because you learn, but with learning there's a lot of emotional stress that goes on. So, if I could alleviate that for the generation to come with this information, I hope this is taken into very much consideration.

-Maribel, undocumented high school senior

At the end of each interview, we asked the students what they would like to see changed at their high school and beyond. Maribel hopes that by sharing her story, this research project would help improve the conditions and opportunities for undocumented students. Their direct recommendations coupled with the findings in this study resulted in powerful mandates presented below.

First, resources, information, and support must be provided to both students and educators in a safe manner. School personnel should strive to support and learn about the unique hardships that undocumented students encounter. Our participants found the creation of Dreamer Clubs or AVID programs at their high schools to be instrumental in providing safe and affirming spaces for students to share their experiences. The educators and advisors supporting these

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programs were essential to build trust and a sense of community.

Second, students also emphasized the need for educators and staff across campus who “get it” and are willing to act proactively in expressing their support. They described the need for more educators of color as well as for assertive allies. It is critical for educators to establish themselves as a safe and confidential person for students to be able to talk to because some students may not feel comfortable asking for help. Educators must outwardly and explicitly express their support for undocumented students and then follow through with language and behavior to support them. As Clark-Ibáñez and Swan (2019) state, “Being an ally means that you are never done listening and learning” (pg. 92).

Third, students described needing schools to deliver intentional outreach and support. One participant suggested having regular check-ins with school counselors and developing an institutional hotline for students and families to be able to quickly access bilingual support when needed. Another student suggested providing support with getting school supplies, but also items that are often overlooked, such as an alarm clock. Schools should focus on the institutional strategic plan to support undocumented students and their families and not only rely on a few trusted educators or counselors, which leads to burn out with being “the only one” (Valdivia & Clark-Ibáñez, 2018) and cannot possibly extend the reach to all undocumented students.

Fourth, increased support for college access is also critical to develop at the institutional level³. Students appreciated workshops designed to help with college applications and financial aid that were delivered in the evenings and weekends so that their parents could also attend. Schools partnering with trusted grassroots organizations or non-profits is a way for schools to capitalize on community resources. These organizations could also provide professional development to educators and counselors, so that the information about college could ultimately be communicated by the personnel from the students’ school.

College readiness also includes students demonstrating their participation in extracurricular opportunities. Our participants collectively shared there were few opportunities they could participate in due to financial constraints and/or not being able to stay after school. A student in our study suggested creating opportunities for students to participate in free extracurricular activities during regular school hours so that undocumented students can access supplemental educational experiences. Sixth, robust community partnerships are essential to provide holistic support for undocumented students. Through these partnerships, information about regional concerns can inform school practices and serve to expand resources for students. In our study, students shared the impact of SWOL,

³ For additional recommendations on culturally responsive college application advising and support, see Camilo (2021).

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for example. Through our ethnography, it was noted that SWOL conducted “Know Your Rights” workshops, provided legal assistance, delivered immigration policy updates, and offered mental health support. High schools in the San Diego region can also partner with non-profit immigration legal organizations, grassroots organizations, and universities to offer similar workshops. We believe that the key to these collaborations is for organizations to also work with students’ families. Finally, students’ experiences strongly indicated the need for comprehensive, inclusive, and humane immigration reform. Policymakers must also address immigration and policing activities on the ground which terrorize immigrant communities daily. Undocumented students want to be given the same opportunity as everyone else. Sarai implored educators to consider: “I would like them to know not to treat me as a different person. I want to have the same opportunity.”



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