

2023

## Exploring Challenges of Undocumented Students in Their Pursuit of Post-Secondary Education

Yveline Gaspard Dulis

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Exploring Challenges of Undocumented Students  
in Their Pursuit of Post-Secondary Education


by  
Yveline Gaspard-Dulis


An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
and School of Criminal Justice in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Nova Southeastern University  
2023

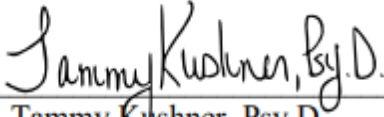
## Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Yveline Gaspard Dulis, under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Philosophy at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

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Name

March 16, 2023

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## **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family for their love and support. I know being the first one in my family to earn a doctorate degree make you guys so proud. Without your love and encouragement, this achievement would not have been possible.

To my children- Thank you for understanding my journey. I will always be grateful and proud to be your mother.

To my husband- You are my number one fan. You have supported me throughout many seasons in my life and for that I am forever grateful.

Special thanks to my committee members: Dr. James Pann, I would like to thank you for your insight and advice throughout the years.

Dr. Tina Jaeckle, I appreciate our Zoom meetings and words of encouragement throughout this process.

Dr. Marcelo Castro, I am so grateful our paths crossed. From the bottom of my heart, I want to say thank you for always listening to all my stories and guiding me with constructive criticism. You were always a phone call away. You all gave me resources to help me succeed.

A special thanks to all my participants who willingly shared their stories. There were many times when you all could have walked away but instead chose to trust me to tell your stories. I admire your courage.

## **Abstract**

Exploring Challenges of Undocumented Students in Their Pursuit of Post-Secondary Education. Yveline Gaspard-Dulis, 2023: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: Undocumented Latino students, financial aid, In-state tuition policies, college students, counselors, Dream Act, DACA.

The purpose of this study was to explore the mindsets and challenges faced by undocumented Latino students who are pursuing a post-secondary education. The study sought to explain the challenges of the DREAM Act and DACA and its challenges for approval in Congress. This study also sought to examine how undocumented students pursue a college education without financial assistance. Understanding immigration laws helped shape Americans' perception of undocumented Latino students' status, struggles, and financial hardships. Three leading factors that contribute to undocumented students' persistence were analyzed in this study: financial assistance, academic issues, and legal issues. This study was conducted using face-to-face interviews. The goal for this study was two-fold: 1) to understand the journeys of undocumented Latino students and their desire to continue a post-secondary education under challenging and inconvenient circumstances and 2) to understand the tone of undocumented students' political activism trajectories. There are legal issues implicating undocumented students in the criminal justice system. In the future, to better serve the undocumented population institutional policy makers ought to create solutions on bridging the gap between state or local law enforcement agencies and educational outcomes of undocumented college students.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Nature of the Research Problem

Political thoughts shape our immigration policies. Immigration laws that were mandated to protect our country have significantly changed many lives, including the lives of undocumented Latino students. While the federal government is the ultimate authority for regulating immigration in the United States, it allowed states to establish their own immigration laws concerning undocumented immigrants. This issue remained significant, as immigration laws changed according to state and federal policies. Undocumented students' access to education was primarily linked by federal, state, and local legislation. After the Supreme Court's ruling in *Plyler v Doe*, undocumented students were finally permitted to attend public primary and secondary schools (Kooragayala, 2019). In 1975, the Texas legislature revised its education laws to withhold state funds and deny public school enrollment to undocumented children, and the class protested this decision. However, the District Court and Supreme Court determined that illegal aliens were entitled to the protection of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and that the Texas legislation had violated the clause. As a result, this case quickly became monumental and paved the way for undocumented students to obtain free education from kindergarten to high school. Rodriguez and McCorkle (2019) agree, finding that the Latinx immigrant population and their subsequent public-school attendance have rapidly increased in the last decade. The rules are different for post-secondary education, though. For example, certain states have banned enrollment for undocumented students while others allow undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition.



Undocumented students face many struggles. Federal and state laws require students to show legal documents for college enrollment. Undocumented students do not qualify to receive federal financial assistance for college, which many students rely on. Latinos represent the largest immigrant group in the United States and are the fastest growing population (Rohde, 2018). Although nearly 65,000 undocumented students graduate U.S. high schools every year, only 5-10% of these students attend college (Raza et al., 2019). As the struggle faced by undocumented students remains a major hindrance in our society, political views continue to play out on a national level, highlighting the lack of legal pathways.

College and university policies across the U.S. vary regarding admissions, tuition costs, and financial aid resources. For example, some college enrollment policies require applicants to submit proof of citizenship or legal residency, refusing to admit any students without documentation. Colleges in such states as Arizona, Georgia, and Indiana accept undocumented students and treat them as foreign students, thereby making them ineligible for state aid and the lower tuition cost for state residents. Alabama and South Carolina prohibit undocumented students from enrolling in college. Amending current in-state tuition policy is not straightforward. Even though tuition desperately needs a solution, it is a thorny issue (Dorador, 2019). This issue is unending because undocumented students, including DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) students and Dreamers (DREAM Act- Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act), who were promised educational opportunities are still ineligible for federal student aid. Introduced in August 2001, the DREAM Act would have granted legal status to undocumented children who met certain requirements. The most recent version of the

DREAM Act was re-introduced in July 2017 but did not pass in Congress. The DREAM Act was favored by the Democrats, as it would provide a path to citizenship and could help undocumented Latino students attend college, qualify for financial aid, and reduce economical burdens.

The public perception of undocumented Latino students raises questions that have impacted the students' mindsets about post-secondary education. Many Americans' attitudes toward undocumented Latino students are directly linked to demographic, economical, and political contexts (Garibay et al., 2016). Democrats supported immigration rights and believed the DREAM Act served as a practical pathway for undocumented students to fulfill their American dream and, in return, helped boost current American economy. On the other hand, Republicans wanted immigration reform and viewed undocumented students as law breakers and opportunists. Meanwhile, the truth for many students was to graduate from college and earn a decent living.

Undocumented youths are excluded from many education and labor market opportunities because they cannot travel abroad and do not have a social security number (Lauby, 2018). Certainly, several Americans' views toward undocumented immigrants have significantly affected immigrants' own ideologies and goals. The reasons that some Americans did not welcome undocumented immigrants in the United States are diverse. For instance, some believed undocumented immigrants committed more crimes than Whites or Blacks and while others believed undocumented immigrants stole many jobs from them. A study conducted by Pew Research found that, while Blacks were 10 percentage points less likely than Whites to believe that the children of illegal children should not be allowed to attend public schools, they were eight percentage points more

likely than Whites to believe that “illegal” immigrants take away jobs (Herrera et al., 2013).

Americans’ perception of immigration continued to shift when legislation policies remained at a state level. The media also played an important role in the educational system. The media remained influential and was used often to convey selected messages to the public. Policymakers and legislators were often swayed in favor of the public’s opinion. Access to public education for undocumented immigrants continues to be a highly polarized issue with national opinion polls showing that a large proportion of Americans continue to oppose access for these students. Research demonstrates that higher levels of education are consistently associated with more supportive views on immigration, research has shown that public opinions regarding immigration legislation are linked political, demographic and economic contexts (Garibay et al., 2016).

Undocumented Latino immigrants understood the opposition surrounding immigration laws. The negative perception formed by Americans about undocumented students was molded by demographic misrepresentations, immigration policies, and our current criminal justice system. The term “home” held different meanings to undocumented Latino students. While they considered the United States their home, they were consistently reminded of the reasons why they did not belong in this country. This issue caused many of them to question the current immigration laws by participating in local community rallies to emphasize the issue and try to bring about change.

This topic is relevant to the current conditions in the United States and the field of criminal justice as undocumented students’ lives are affected by economic and immigrant policies. Living in the shadows of uncertainty, students rely heavily on the educational

system to help them accomplish their dreams. Originally, immigrants fled their native countries and illegally entered the United States with their young children to obtain a better education.

Additionally, it is important to examine how federal and state laws influence tuition rates of colleges and institutions. Learning about undocumented students' experiences and activism becomes monumental and influential while shaping how states alter their policies. Furthermore, one of the biggest fears of undocumented students is deportation to their native countries. Indeed, deportation creates a dilemma for undocumented students to return to a country they never knew or to forcibly stay in a country they never called home. In addition to these deportation concerns, undocumented college students face unique structural barriers in higher education—e.g., financial strains, immigration-related distractions, and exclusionary campus contexts—that can compromise their academic engagement, performance, and retention (Sarabia et al., 2021).

This study is important as the researcher sought to explore the mindsets and challenges faced by undocumented Latino students who are pursuing a post-secondary education. Several factors—financial, academic, and legal—prevent them from doing so. The lack of financial assistance contributes to the lack of college enrollment. Undocumented Latino students make difficult economical choices regarding their education. Many undocumented students enter the workforce upon high school graduation to lessen the financial burden of college enrollment; otherwise, earning a college degree is unattainable. Job opportunities motivate students to pursue their education because competitive jobs create economic leverage. Therefore, high school

diplomas were only the start of their academic journeys. However, denying access to admission, in-state tuition, or federal and state financial aid are merely a few examples of the ways in which the government and its agents marginalize undocumented students (Cisneros et al., 2022).

The researcher learned that undocumented Latino students are young children who were brought to the United States illegally by their parents; these students are called Dreamers. However, the fact remains that current immigration laws have created unequal access to education for undocumented students. Undocumented Latino students do not deny their realities and choose not to become victims of their circumstances. Instead, these young children learn English, complete their high school education, and integrate themselves into their local communities. They consider themselves Americans, but that notion is short-lived. Some undocumented students are unaware of their legal status until their junior or senior year of high school as they plan for their college journeys. Misguidance and a lack of information about their legal status shape their academic trajectories toward earning a post-secondary education. Financial assistance is the only factor that stands in their way.

This study explored the experiences of undocumented Latino students pursuing a post-secondary education under challenging and inconvenient circumstances. The researcher explored these students' experiences and determination throughout their journeys and helped others understand the complexity of this issue. It is imperative to acknowledge the impact that the lack of legal documentation had on undocumented Latino students, how it affected their daily lives, and how they turned their challenges into opportunities by overcoming their present hurdles. The researcher gained an

understanding of how federal and state governments influenced immigration policies, such as the DREAM Act. State governments were responsible for establishing and governing nearly all public institutions of higher education. Previous research on state policies is largely focused on the effects of tuition and need-based financial access to public colleges and universities by all potential students or underrepresented minorities (Lowry, 2019). In addition, we learned how undocumented students mandated changes in their local state while still abiding by the current immigration laws. Forenza et al. (2017) note that it is surprising that undocumented immigrants have recently come out of the darkness to advocate for opportunities that seemed impossible to previous generations of undocumented students. This advocacy happened despite the known risk of deportation after publicly disclosing their undocumented status to the political world.

### **Background and Significance**

The 1982 Plyler v Doe case, denying undocumented children public education, was found to be unconstitutional (Valdez, 2016). Originally, the issue concerned whether denying undocumented children the right to attend schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which the Supreme Court confirmed. The pressing issue, which is lost in much of the current debate, is that the immigrant children and the children of immigrants in our country, not illegal aliens, comprise a significant portion of the students in our increasingly diverse classrooms (Merchant & Osterling, 2008).

The federal law of the Higher Education Act requires that applicants for financial aid be legal U.S. residents. Federal legislation is essential because denying undocumented students the opportunity to earn a college education negatively impacts the health of the U.S. economy (Wheelhouse, 2009). Federal and state policies initially created or

proposed laws to combat the tide of illegal immigration, including controlling the availability of public benefits for undocumented immigrants (Seo, 2011). However, the question of who controlled immigration laws and policies was not clearly answered by the Constitution. While it stated that immigration is a federal law issue, states and local authorities still played an important role in influencing immigration laws within their borders. As Aboytes (2009) points out, the ambiguity in federal law allowing states to legislate immigration has created an imbalance in immigration policy among the states. Congress played a major role in creating pathways for naturalization; however, as Chacon (2014) highlights, control over naturalization does not require full control over immigration, as many states enacted laws regulating and controlling immigration within their own borders. Therefore, because states' legislatures had limited control immigration laws, states had the power to grant undocumented students in-state tuition. Many states debated whether to allow in-state tuition for undocumented students, but this proposal led to much opposition as to who should have access to post-secondary education. Diaz-Strong et al. (2011) state that only ten states—California, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin—have policies that allow students who attend and graduate from in-state high schools to qualify for in-state tuition regardless of immigration policies. Three states—Arizona, Colorado, and Georgia—have laws that ban undocumented students from receiving in-state tuition. In addition, South Carolina and Alabama ban undocumented students from attending community colleges altogether. The cost of college in different states have a direct impact on undocumented Latino students' college enrollment. Castellon (2022) agrees that policies in select states can increase college enrollment access for undocumented

students.

Learning about undocumented students' experiences has made a significant contribution to the field of criminal justice as we learn, for instance, the reasons why many states exercised the power to ban undocumented students from enrolling in colleges/universities and why certain states passed legislation prohibiting students from paying in-state tuition fees. Pierotte et al. (2018) claim that the boundary between federal and state control of immigration policy is still actively debated. Although immigration legislation is a mandated federal domain, states have taken on an increasingly active role in legislation over the past 15 years.

It was critical to explore the views of undocumented students regarding academic achievement, financial stability, and legal concerns. Exploring these concerns emphasizes the importance of recognizing the students' struggles as they navigate through their academic journey. Furthermore, the study brought to light the need to analyze the reasoning behind federal and state laws as they relate to undocumented Latino students.

### **Barriers and Issues**

Finding undocumented Latino participants who were willing to openly discuss their immigration status and academic journey was challenging. Earning their trust and confidentiality was the nucleus of this study. Ensuring that participants' identities were concealed throughout the study was mandatory and conveying the importance of this to participants was essential. Limited resources, such as a lack of funds for traveling expenses and incentives for subjects' participation, or potentially created barriers for this research. Understanding how to analyze and present the data collected became time-consuming but necessary. Preserving the integrity of data collection while remaining



unbiased throughout this research remained a priority of this study.

### **Definitions of Terms**

*Undocumented Latino Students*: Children who were brought to the United States at a young age illegally by their parents but have adopted to the American culture while earning a high school diploma; also called Dreamers.

*DREAM Act* (Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act ): A legislation proposal granting undocumented minors' access to education and creating a pathway to citizenship in the United States.

*DACA* (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals): Provides temporary work authorization and temporary relief to undocumented immigrant children brought illegally to the United States.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This review includes literature concerning immigration laws and how they affected post-education for undocumented students. Literature about specific students or immigrant students who have legal documents was excluded from this review.

### **Synthesis**

This study presents the resiliency of undocumented students and their desire to pursue a post-secondary education under challenging and inconvenient circumstances. It also explores undocumented Latino students who had successfully earned a four-year college education without financial assistance. Following an introduction on this topic, the researcher will present a literature review of the 1982 Fourteenth Amendment landmark case of *Plyler v Doe*. In addition, the researcher will explain the origin of the DREAM Act, which held a pivotal mark in history, and its influence on changing politics of immigration policymaking in Congress. The origin of federal and state laws regarding undocumented Latino students and how the laws drastically changed in different states will also be discussed. The public perception toward undocumented Latino students and the complexity of acceptance of these students' rejection within communities will be discussed. Lastly, as undocumented Latino students become public targets, the fear of deportation will also be explored.

### ***Plyler v Doe***

One of the most important cases related to undocumented students' access to education was the 1982 *Plyler v Doe* case, which ruled that denying undocumented children public education is unconstitutional (Valdez, 2016). The U.S. Supreme Court aimed at protecting undocumented students against the state and federal laws. Calabresi

and Barsky (2017) state that, in *Plyler v Doe*, the Supreme Court held that state laws and regulations that discriminated against illegal aliens should be subject to the rational basis test under the Equal Protection Clause. The *Plyler v Doe* case is making it possible for undocumented students to attend public school from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, the *Plyler V Doe* case symbolized victory and a pathway to post-secondary education for undocumented students. Muñoz and Alleman (2016) discuss how undocumented students' access to post-secondary education found its contemporary roots in *Plyler v Doe*. Although the Supreme Court's ruling regarded public K-12 education, it left the decision for higher education access to individual states.

### **Immigration Laws**

Although no laws directly prohibited undocumented students from attending college, immigration laws have significantly affected their education. Immigration is a federal law issue; however, these laws are interpreted differently from state to state. Aboytes (2009) argues that states should not rely on inaccurate information when making policy decisions that would negatively impact the state and the people being targeted. In examining the state laws of Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico, Aboytes (2009) pinpoints current immigration laws that prohibit undocumented high school graduates from pursuing further education and applying their expertise in industry. After highlighting the way the three states responded to undocumented students who want a post-secondary education, Aboytes (2009) ultimately argues that other states should adopt New Mexico's approach, which valued undocumented students' well-being. New Mexico had implemented a pro-undocumented student approach, and the legislature had committed to protect undocumented students' access to higher education.

The issue of undocumented students' education remains problematic because immigration laws are constantly modified to fit the political narratives of the educational system. Murillo (2021) reveals that, until recently, the educational experiences of undocumented youth had remained relatively visible. While navigating through the educational system, undocumented Latino students are aware of the constant changes of immigration laws that significantly affect their legal status. Emerging research has described the unique education challenges and barriers that undocumented students encounter because of their legal status. The immigration laws created stumbling blocks that have hindered the undocumented college students' education journey. As Muñoz (2009) observes, undocumented students are systematically denied access to a college education by a flawed immigration system that has roots in institutionalized racism. Thus, contemporary immigration policy is inherently flawed because it seeks an individual solution to a structural problem.

Changing immigration laws to benefit undocumented students requires a demographic shift in Congress. Elected officials from different geographical background ought to be more attentive to the needs of this population. As Nelson et al. (2014) note, the presence of minority elected officials is positively correlated with public policies that bring benefits to the minority community. Party affiliations also shape immigration policy that affects undocumented students. The partisan makeup of Congress is the blueprint who can vote on legal status issues for undocumented students.

### **Federal and State Laws**

There are many obstacles, some erected by states, that affect higher education access for undocumented students. The federal government has not been successful in

resolving a crisis that it created (Martinez Hoy & Nguyen, 2019). While these students wait for immigration policy mandates to take effect, federal and states laws move at a significantly slower pace. Robinson and Glaubitz (2014) agree that America's national interests must shape our immigration policy. In their study, the authors raised concerns because the policy question of whether to award in-state tuition to undocumented immigrant students had been an issue of contention for Congress and state legislatures for more than a decade. In the absence of federal legislation, states have acted to address in-state tuition fees for undocumented students. Nelson et al. (2014) reiterates in detail how some states created legislation or policies that provide undocumented students access to higher education institutions as well as in-state tuition. Studies show that while some states created favorable pathways, other states had been more restrictive in their policies—not only denying in-state tuition to undocumented students but also denying admission to their state's higher education institutions (Nelson et al., 2014). After reporting that 14 states allow undocumented students to pay state tuition while seven states deny state tuition to the same population, the authors conclude that a lack of consistency exists between states' approaches to in-state tuition rates.

Other states followed similar models to further exclude undocumented Latino students from obtaining a college degree. Loya et al. (2017) claim that some states are passing punitive immigration laws, such as Arizona's, Indiana's, and Alabama's recent laws targeting and criminalizing undocumented immigrants. Furthermore, Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama have established anti-immigrant policies and imposed restrictive enrollment policies. In addition, undocumented students cannot obtain a driver's license, limiting their ability to travel freely within the states. The treatment of undocumented

students and many of the policies that impact their lives depend on decisions by states, educational systems, and institutions and are extremely inconsistent (Loya et al., 2017).

According to Johnson and Janosik (2008), research estimated that by 2015 the children of immigrants would make up as much as 30 percent of the nation's public-school population. The federal government attempted on many occasions to legislate issues regarding the presence of immigrants in the United States that often overlapped, confused, and contradicted with current laws for undocumented students. Some declared that immigrants' presence is a violation of federal law. For example, the Supreme Court protected immigrants even as a federal statute punished them for the same behavior. Johnson and Janosik (2008) explored state and federal regulations to help illuminate higher education issues. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 denied undocumented students' access to public education. Because of this act, undocumented students were forced to change their status and became naturalized citizens. But there was no pathway created until the DREAM Act. Over the years, state policies have significantly been modified, in part fighting for undocumented students and granting equal college enrollment opportunities across the country.

### **The DREAM Act**

Created in 2001 by Democrats from California, the DREAM Act emphasized the importance of creating a pathway to citizenship for undocumented children who were brought illegally to the United States by their parents. This bill helped undocumented students qualify for financial aid for college and helped them become naturalized citizens. Many scholars agreed that the benefits of the DREAM Act for undocumented

students helped many generations work and contribute to the United States' economy. Undocumented Latino students saw this bill as an opportunity to realize their own dreams while helping their loved ones financially. Schmid (2013) claims the DREAM Act is a proposed partial solution by the democratic party of Congress. Latino groups and immigrants lobbied, as well as students who strongly favored the DREAM Act. However, various forms of the DREAM Act have been re-introduced in the Senate since 2001 with no success. Research showed that 98,000 undocumented students graduated from high schools each year and about 200,000-225,000 were enrolled in higher education across the nation (Matos, 2021). The Dream Act creates a pathway to increase college enrollment for undocumented students.

The DREAM Act affected the lives of undocumented students in various ways. Examining their current status while seeking their own identities became a cruel daily reminder. Undocumented students lived in a conflicted mindset, calculating their next steps while enrolled for college. Bjorklund (2018) states that undocumented students reside in a state of "ambiguous belonging," which increases as they grew older. Despite their deep roots in the United States and shared American values, these students were never allowed to fully belong in U.S. society. They were simultaneously included and excluded. Their education depended on key players in politics that controlled immigration laws in their state. Therefore, with limited resources, they have learned to accept their situation.

Understanding the background of the DREAM Act is necessary in order to grasp its significance for many undocumented students. It allowed minors who entered this country illegally a chance to earn a college degree. However, this act was denied multiple

times in Congress. On June 15, 2012, President Obama introduced a new bill called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) as an immigration policy that allowed undocumented minors two-year protection from deportation. Although DACA did not create a legal pathway to citizenship, it alleviated the financial burdens by creating job opportunities. Nicholls (2015) reports that the importance of the Dreamers should be understood broadly: they achieved gains for undocumented youths, and they unleashed political and legal dynamics that stand to alter the status of the broader undocumented population.

The federal government blocked and alienated undocumented immigrant students from qualifying for the DREAM Act. College students rely heavily on financial assistance for college, so the low percentage of undocumented Latino students who sought to pursue higher education is due to a financial inability to pay for college. Diaz-Strong et al. (2011) believe the immigration system did not provide a pathway to citizenship for most undocumented immigrants, including the thousands of high school students who have been living in this country since they were young. The federal and state financial aid systems did not provide the financial assistance required to direct their pathway to post-secondary education. Sadly, it did not take much political convincing to exclude undocumented students from enrolling in college in Congress. Although the education system did not stop undocumented students from applying for college, the real struggle for undocumented students was finding ways to pay for their college tuition. Undocumented students' cases are prime examples of how state policies have operated throughout the United States of America.



## **In-State Tuition**

Undocumented Latino students assume that all students qualified for financial assistance. After all, to be employed, undocumented Latino students are required to provide only a social security card and work permit. However, while these students are legal enough to work a full- or part-time job, they are not legal enough to attend college with financial assistance. In-state tuition solely rests with the state, and the federal government does not interfere with the states' decisions regarding in-state tuition for undocumented Latino students. Olivas (2009) states that although most of the major immigrant-receiver states allow undocumented students to enroll and receive resident tuition after establishing prolonged periods of presence in the state, this issue has been contested in several court cases and statutes. The undocumented students are ineligible for federal financial aid and, in virtually all states, for state financial aid as well. Studies indicate there are stumbling blocks associated with the policymaking process for approving in-state tuition laws for undocumented students. Kantamneni et al. (2016) observes that due to political, historical, and social complexities surrounding the issue of immigration, undocumented students encounter many obstacles unique to their immigration status when attempting to access higher education and while enrolled in college and universities.

State tuition rates have caused problems for undocumented students. The struggle of unemployment and stressful college decisions have placed students on an emotional rollercoaster ride. Lack of citizenship and certainty about their future creates feelings of confusion and defeat among undocumented students. Although policymakers have made major strides in creating affordable ways to pay for in-state tuition, financial aid

programs have never changed their requirements (Ngo & Astudillo, 2019). These students are blocked from participating in internships and study abroad programs. Gámez et al. (2017) state that even if undocumented students are admitted to college and willing, like many other students, to work and pay their tuition, they would encounter work restrictions that limited their ability to find employment.

In-state tuition creates an educational separation among undocumented and native-born students. Findings suggest that undocumented students are more than twice as likely as native-born Americans to drop out of high school. Although attaining an education is the goal for undocumented Latino students, they feel less valuable than their White counterparts regarding pursuing a post-secondary education. Wheelhouse (2009) claims that by denying higher education opportunities to undocumented children, current federal legislation has created second-class students. Moreover, denying access to a post-secondary education has had detrimental effects on society: decreased earnings, increased taxes, and higher crimes and poverty rates. Undocumented students' tuition benefits have been challenged by the state educational system and immigration policies. Flores (2010) reveals that in-state residency is a state-determined benefit. State benefits can be extended to or withheld from undocumented students because tuition benefits and state residency determinations are designated as state classifications and may incorporate, but not determine, immigrant status. Latino students try moving to states that offer cheaper in-state tuition, but the benefits of in-state tuition have little effect on college enrollment. Cebula and Nair-Reichart (2015) suggest that the lack of access to financial aid to help pay for in-state tuition and other college expenses has limited undocumented immigrants' prospect of obtaining higher-level jobs.

## **Public Perception of Immigrants**

Immigration laws for undocumented students remain a divisive issue among many Americans. While a majority of people support protection laws to legalize undocumented children's status, opponents challenge these laws and expect immigrant parents and their children to return to their native country. Ultimately, many Americans would like a system in place that benefits both sides of immigration issues. Berg (2009) states that the U.S. government needs to control the situation by creating pathways to legalize the approximately 12 million unauthorized residents or by-passing public policies that would both compel them to return to their countries of origin and minimize future unauthorized migration.

Across racial groups, Americans perceive immigration laws differently. In comparison to native Whites, many African Americans are more lenient toward immigration changes benefitting immigrants. Nteta (2014) states that African Americans are less likely than native Whites to express support for restrictive immigration policies and are less likely to hold negative attitudes toward immigrants. Nevertheless, many Americans' attitudes toward undocumented immigrants remain hostile. Okongwu et al. (2013) explains that during the 1990s, California passed Proposition 187, a measure that effectively ended state benefits for illegal immigrants. Over the last two decades, immigration has repeatedly proven to be a contentious issue and has recently taken center stage again. For many Americans, the ongoing issue was understanding the intention of immigrants once they migrated to the United States. Supporters believed that immigration laws benefitted the United States while opponents considered immigrants as an economic burden for the country. There was a need to peel immigration issues layer by layer.

believes such immigration opinions reflect the extent to which the United States and its communities offer a welcoming environment for immigrants.

Other immigrant issues that angered many Americans were keeping tighter border security for unauthorized immigrants and the language barrier imposed on Americans. Taylor et al. (2017) claim that tighter controls of the U.S. Mexico border has been a major point of contention. Locating and deporting undocumented immigrants, or at least restricting their activities, is another issue. In addition, Spanish, the native tongue of the largest immigrant group, has become more prominent in U.S. schools, businesses, and civic life, to the dismay of many non-Spanish speakers. The pressure of learning a second language for greater work opportunity creates friction and tension.

### **Expectation and Resources**

The expectation for undocumented students is to graduate from high school and move to the next stage. Their aspiration of attending college is inspiring; however, their effort is less monumental when opportunities and resources available to them narrow significantly. Research has shown that parental education is a strong predictor of children's educational attainment (Baum & Flores, 2011). One of the struggles that undocumented Latino students face is the lack of parental support because their parents did not possess the right tools and personal experiences in general education to help with their college enrollment applications. Immigrant students whose parents are foreign-born receive significantly less parental academic support/involvement compared to their peers with a least one parent who was born in the U.S. (Mwangi et al., 2021). Research shows that immigrants' parents are disadvantaged regarding the college enrollment process with their undocumented high school graduates. Parents and students are presented with an

increasingly diminished value proposition with respect to post-secondary educational pathways (Nieves, 2021). Because of legal and financial barriers, these young people face many challenges. Their undocumented parents were less educated than the average American and were often disadvantaged in helping in the school system (Gonzales et al., 2015). Moreover, the expectation to pursue college seemed far-fetched as it disrupted undocumented students' academic engagement and limited their professional development. Forenza et al. (2017) agrees, citing how even fewer undocumented students pursue higher education, as they are largely excluded from both public and private colleges and universities in the United States. Some were prevented from applying to college in the first place due to lack of citizenship and, in-turn, inaccessible financial aid.

These students expect constant pitfalls as they expose themselves to criticism, fear, discouragement, and lack of information. The term *illegal* holds a negative connotation for them, making them feel lesser than in society. Besides being perceived as "illegal," undocumented individuals report that the social environment makes them feel that they were "inferior," "cheating the system," or "committing crimes all the time" (Shi et al., 2018). Disclosing their immigration status for college enrollment purposes displays their vulnerabilities and determination to pursue college. Cuevas and Cheung (2015) report that when educational settings do not provide students spaces for telling and disclosure, students experience a silencing of not only their status but also their lived experiences. The fear of the unknown dominates their minds, and the impact of laws and policies on their educational experiences hinders their dreams of pursuing college. Restrictive immigration laws and law enforcement generate fear and stress, disrupt families and communities, and undermine the economic well-being of immigrants in the

United States (Hamilton et al., 2022). Undocumented students' legal status issues are difficult conversations that take place with school counselors and at family dining tables. For undocumented students to navigate college resources, Muñoz (2016) explains, they must disclose their legal status to individuals who could potentially withhold information, knowledge, and access to college resources. As they develop their legal consciousness, their perception of realities catches up with them as they make college choices upon high school graduation. Little and Mitchell (2018) note that the lack of citizenship had a notable effect on the academic performance and identity formation of undocumented students. Researchers note the way undocumented students often struggle to conceptualize the benefit of a post-secondary degree when faced with limited career options after high school graduation. Their mindsets shift back and forth between giving up on colleges or fighting harder to pave a pathway. It is a transition phase where shaping their futures revolves around the legal status. Allard (2015) expresses that, during their childhood years, many undocumented youths live in a state of "suspended illegality" in which they have yet to learn about their lack of legal status or to experience its limitations. With limited resources and a short time span for college enrollment preparation, students feel the pressure to create pathways to afford college tuition.

Accordingly, school agents (e.g., teachers and counselors) and peers play a crucial role for undocumented students in identifying and securing financial resources for college and facilitating their transitions to college (Diaz-Strong, 2021). Undocumented Latino students rely on their schools' counselors acting as educators and mentors to navigate through their educational journey and provide resources, college application advice, and financial aid preparation. Research shows that providing needed support, advice, and

information to these students helps remove barriers to access (Serna, 2017).

Undocumented students have limited resources available to help them get through their college enrollment process. When high school counselors lack information about the college enrollment process, undocumented students turn to their college counselors, expecting to receive concrete information on college enrollment and financial assistance. The reality, however, is that undocumented Latino students receive limited information from their college counselors as well. Jaffe-Walter et al. (2019) explain that immigration politics is a difficult topic for educators to navigate, particularly in classrooms with immigrants and undocumented students. However, scholars have found that when teachers remain silent on immigration policies, students interpret their silences as an implicit sanctioning of those policies. Crawford et al. (2019) state that school counselors are in a critical position to take a leadership role in advocating for undocumented students' educational access. These counselors are challenged to understand immigration laws and policies relating to undocumented students. In addition, counselors are tasked with informing students about different options that are available to them. Counselors learn of students' struggles when students are referred to them, and they can ally with students to help them make it through psychological, academic, and social-emotional challenges. Given this reality, college administrators need to understand the experiences of students who face everyday life without legal status. Heese (2017) explains that college admissions counselors should modify their recruitment efforts relative to undocumented students. They should become more visible members of the social capital networks of this population that lived in the shadows. Because students believe the education system has failed them, many create their own peer network group or become

activists to protest immigration laws and policies. Halett (2013) claims that social networks are important for undocumented students. School counselors and teachers provide them with information and guidance. However, some undocumented Latino students have had negative experiences with school personnel and find more support within their community. To better serve the undocumented Latino population, community colleges and universities must restructure their professional practices. French and Covington (2019) state that in order to serve the students effectively, institutional agents must know how to implement and execute post-secondary education policies and lawmakers must make clearer guidelines regarding grants and scholarships. Understanding the effects of implementation and the importance of clear guidelines could reshape post-secondary practices that cater to the needs of unauthorized students.

Despite their immigration and socioeconomic status, some students are willing to apply for college and hope to become college graduates. Financial assistance plays a major role for undocumented Latino students' college enrollment process. Though they expect to qualify for financial assistance throughout their post-secondary education, their realities affect their educational and socioeconomic trajectories. Research on college opportunity and access suggests that students' perceptions of financial aid and college cost play an important role in students' college aspirations and decision-making (Greenfield, 2015). Many students are led to start their educational path in community colleges, expecting a more affordable pathway to afford a college degree, yet in-state tuition greatly affect their experiences. Hsin and Reed (2020) find that many high-achieving undocumented students may be channeled into lower-cost community colleges because they are denied access to financial aid and scholarships that would have allowed



them to attend four-year colleges or more selective institutions. The truth is that in-state tuition fees for community college are significantly lower and seem reasonable for most undocumented students. Kim and Chambers (2015) agree that many undocumented students perceive community college as the most accessible path to post-secondary education and a bachelor's degree. The authors also note that while some research shows that in-state tuition policies help to increase undocumented students' access to post-secondary institutions, various factors—increasing tuition rates and a lack of financial assistance, combined with low socioeconomic status and an inability to work legally—still make it challenging for undocumented students to attend a post-secondary institution and complete a college education. These students want access to enroll in any university of their choice but are financially incapable. For this reason, they rely heavily on community colleges to alleviate some financial burdens. Elvira and Martinez (2016) state that the majority of students of color begin their post-secondary journey at community colleges; these institutions continue to play a critical role in shaping the landscape of opportunity in higher education. This is especially true for Latino students who are already the majority population.

Furthermore, deportation removal proceedings are expected and unavoidable for undocumented students once Congress votes not to change its current immigration laws and policies. While living with an undocumented status and pursuing a post-secondary education, these students often struggle with the fear of deportation. Cisneros and Valdivia (2020) state that the fear of deportation is reported as the single most debilitating factor for undocumented students, leading to higher-than-average levels of anxiety and stress. Learning about their deportation status is enormously stressful, and

regrettably, the American dream diminishes at the discovery. The thought of undocumented immigrants leaving the only place they called home to live in a country they never knew or rejected is troubling. Becerra et al. (2017) express that increased immigration enforcement efforts dramatically increase detainments and deportations, which continued to increase during the Obama administration. The fear of deportation affects how many undocumented immigrants carry themselves in the United States. For instance, this fear is one major reason why undocumented Latino students do not report crimes committed against them and do not request assistance from police. Messing et al. (2015) state that victims fear the deportation of even their loved ones when an offender or other family members are undocumented, whether or not they were concerned about their own documentation status and deportation.

Many undocumented Latino students are still hopeful the DREAM Act or DACA will become law. The failure of Congress to pass the DREAM Act several times left them unprotected and heightened their fear of deportation. Hsin and Ortega (2018) claim that, since 2001, legislators have attempted to enact the DREAM Act. In 2010, the DREAM Act failed to pass in the U.S. Senate. On June 15, 2012, President Barack Obama established the DACA program. According to Volpp (2019), it authorized eligible individuals to request temporary relief from deportation proceedings and provided the chance to apply for work authorization. By extending work authorization to recipients, DACA also increased return rates to a college degree, which incentivized recipients to stay in school, focus on coursework, and complete their degrees promptly (Hsin & Ortega, 2018). DACA alleviated financial burdens and increased better quality lifestyle to many students.

Often referred to as Dreamers—a term coined from the original bill—there have been over 767,000 DACA recipients since its beginning (Carranco et al., 2022). Students re-applied every two years for renewal. The DACA program was in full effect for five years until it was rescinded on September 5, 2017, under the direction of President Donald Trump (Gomez & Huber, 2019). The repeal left many undocumented immigrants in legal challenges and increased their chances of deportation. According to Santellano (2019), the Trump era ushered in fears about detention and deportation for undocumented immigrants. Many of those in fear were young undocumented college students who benefitted from the program. Alulema(2019) points out that the rescission of the DACA program in 2017 affected not only the then-current DACA recipients but also the new generation of undocumented immigrants who were too young to apply for the program.

The changing political landscape of immigration policies and the rising cost of education make higher education inaccessible for undocumented students. As Ruth (2018) explains, undocumented students face greater financial obstacles while pursuing higher education and have limited access to information on how to apply for college and succeed in the American higher education system. When pursuing college, their geographic location plays a major role. The educational system does not have uniform laws that bind all states under the same immigration rules; therefore, some states' rules are more lenient than others. Some undocumented students have more opportunities for college enrollment than others, simply based of where they reside. Additionally, many colleges and universities have developed programs to support undocumented students (Enriquez et al., 2019). For example, faculty members from the University of Georgia (UGA) took an aggressive step in creating college opportunities for undocumented Latino

students. Trivette and English (2017) report that faculty members, along with volunteers and community members, created a place where undocumented students could gather, attend regularly held classes, and work to gain admission into post-secondary institutions. The space was called “Freedom University,” an unaccredited school where 30+ students came together each week to further their dreams of earning a college degree.

There are resources available to help students overcome academic barriers. Social support and civic engagement are beneficial tools created to help students navigate throughout their academic journey. Such support is specifically beneficial for students who feel like outcasts. As Cisneros and Valdivia (2020) report, students who enroll in post-secondary institutions often report being treated unfairly or negatively on campus as a result of their immigration status. Social support groups inspire confidence to face common issues. Katsiaficas et al. (2019) agree that such social support allows students to develop a shared collective identity as members of a marginalized campus group who faced similar challenges. This support reduces feelings of isolation and provides access to additional opportunities for civic engagement. For many undocumented students, civic engagement is an inspirational movement created to bring changes and awareness to immigration issues. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2015) express that, for many students, civic engagement is a source of hope. Several undocumented students got involved in the Dreamer movement to bring awareness and social change in the communities. While the Dreamer movement did not guarantee changes, it provoked conversations and aimed to shift political views in Congress. Ultimately, it gave participants a sense of hope, identity, and purpose.

## Summary

This literature review discussed the experiences, perceptions, challenges, and limited knowledge of undocumented Latino students. Because of the Supreme Court ruling in 1975, young undocumented students were provided with a free K-12 education. Therefore, pursuing a post-secondary education without financial aid assistance presents its own challenges. Immigration laws have constantly changed and directly affected undocumented students. Throughout the years, they have been continuously disappointed with politicians who promised false hopes and resurrected dead dreams. The DREAM Act was never passed and DACA was never granted to the new applicants after being repealed. The DACA program provided protection from deportation and the ability to apply for a driver's license, work permit, social security. Aside from their already mentioned challenges, undocumented students also deal with many Americans' misconception of their struggles. In addition, these students feel motivated to create student movements in their respective communities. Therefore, the prior research for this study is vital and reveals the struggles of undocumented Latino students' college enrollment, DACA and DREAM Act laws, and the uprising student movement in the communities.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The primary function of a methodological section is to explain how the research was conducted. It was important for the researcher to comprehend the lived experience of these undocumented Latino students from Broward County in Florida so that their stories accentuated the depth of the situation in a vivid manner. Creswell (2014) states that narrative research is a design of inquiry from the humanities in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals to provide stories about their lives. Because of this focus, the narrative approach of qualitative research was the best method for this study. Narrative research allowed undocumented Latino students to explain their resiliency and desire to pursue a post-secondary education. This approach allowed the researcher to carefully relate the participants' stories in a narrative chronology.

#### **Research Questions**

1. What are the expectations of undocumented Latino students who have attempted to earn a post-secondary education?
2. How do undocumented Latino students describe their knowledge of available resources to help them get through their college enrollment process?

#### **Participants**

The target population of this study was undocumented students, and a sample of this population was undocumented Latino students. The sample size included ten undocumented Latino students selected from Broward County, Florida. The participants included both men and women between the ages of 18 and 40 years old. This study targeted undocumented Latino adults who were brought to the United States illegally as children by their parents and pursued a post-secondary education.

Naderifar et al. (2017) state that snowball sampling is a convenience sampling method in which existing study subjects recruit future subjects among their acquaintances. This method is applied when accessing subjects with the target characteristics proves difficult. Due to the nature of the study, snowball sampling was best suited because the potential participants were hard to access. The snowball sampling approach is a recruitment technique in which participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential subjects. Sampling continued until data saturation.

This study took place at the Greater Caribbean and Latino American Cultural Coalition, located in Lauderdale Lakes, Florida. This organization was created for individuals of Caribbean and Latin descent and offered cultural education, including youth motivational workshops, adult empowerment workshops, cultural sensitivity, awareness to the community through business, health expositions, and an international cultural exchange program. In addition, this organization was a support group for many undocumented students, including those who never went to college, college students who could not complete college, and college students who graduated without financial assistance. Participants from the Greater Caribbean and Latino American Cultural Coalition addressed relevant issues about undocumented college students. This sample was beneficial as it targeted undocumented Latinos from different educational backgrounds who understood the process of pursuing a post-secondary education.

For the integrity of this study, it was necessary to maintain participants' confidentiality of information collected. In the case that participants felt reluctant sharing personal detailed information, the researcher reassured participants that their information remained confidential throughout the study. Therefore, it was important to inform

participants about the method in which their identities remained confidential and concealed. The researcher limited access to identifiable information of participants; for example, participants' names were changed. Unused research data were properly disposed of and, upon completion of the research, participants' interview results were properly secured in a password-protected account on the researcher's computer to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. The researcher received ethical approval from the institutional review board.

### **Instruments**

Observation and interviews were two methods that were used to collect data for this study. Vivar et al. (2007) state that direct observation potentially provides more comprehensive data about how a person behaves in a particular situation. Observation was considered a valuable tool as it captured the emotions, posture, and tone of voice throughout the interviews. Observation cues helped support the credibility of this study. Conducting face-to-face interviews was another valuable tool in this study as it unraveled the story behind every participant's experiences. This method enabled the researcher to inquire about participants' past and present journeys. In addition, the interviews opened dialogues and allowed follow-up questions to be asked as the interviewer saw fit. Open-ended questions allowed participants to give fuller responses and deepen understanding. This interview method kept the interviewees focused on the specific issues, thereby making it useful for gathering data. Due to the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19, precautions were taken in case participants were uncomfortable talking during face-to-face interviews. The researcher offered participants the option of interviewing through Zoom and provided the meeting ID, password, and time via email.



## Procedures

After meeting with the president of the coalition, the researcher discussed the research purpose, goals, incentives, and subjects' privacy. The president then introduced the researcher to members of the coalition. The researcher drafted a research study invitation to the members of the club and discussed three major points: the nature, the duration, and the goal of the study. The researcher anticipated that members would encourage others to participate and share their stories. Leads and referrals from members were necessary to conduct this study successfully. Members were required to sign a consent form giving their permission to participate in the study. Consent forms were explained before signing; the explanation included the purpose for the study and incentives for voluntary participation. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to all participants so that they remained confidential and their information, concealed.

Both the researcher and the participants arranged a mutual time to conduct the initial interviews. Prior to the interview, the researcher kept a checklist, which included the signed consent form, an explanation of study, and the method of audio recording. The researcher began each interview by welcoming and thanking the participants for their willingness to be part of the study. The researcher asked participants' permission to record. If participants did not consent to be recorded, then written or typed notes were taken during the interviews. The interviews were conducted in an organized and timely manner in a study room at the Northwest Regional Library located in Coral Springs, FL. Despite having a virtual interview option amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants felt safer physically meeting with the researcher due to the study's sensitivity. The researcher reserved a study room to provide privacy for participants so that there was

little chance of others knowing why they were being interviewed. COVID safety protocols, such as mask-wearing and sitting six feet apart, took place during the interview process. The initial session for conducting these interviews was for one hour, with ten minutes of completing demographic forms. Over a period of two weeks, the researcher met with ten undocumented Latino students for face-to-face interviews that lasted about twelve hours in total. The interview questions covered issues on their migration to the United States, college enrollment, deportation, and immigration law reforms. Many responses required further clarification to ensure the integrity of the study. In addition, as a token of appreciation, \$25.00 Visa gift card was given to all participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Upon completion of all participants' interviews, the recorded audio for each participant was transferred to a third-party transcriptionist. The transcription was returned as a Microsoft Word document to the researcher. Destruction of audio was planned once the accuracy of data transcription was confirmed. The transcripts were sent via email to the participants to be viewed for correctness and then returned to the researcher in a timely manner.

To become a competent qualitative analyst, Chenail (2012) claimed that a researcher will spend a considerable amount of time learning how to work through transcripts and field notes, noting undivided units of qualitative significance, naming significant qualitative differences, and reflecting upon the relationships between these bits of coded information until the researcher can make an evidence-based pronouncement of what has been learned. Qualitative data analysis required the coding process. After the interview, the researcher read each transcript to label relevant words,

phrases, or sentences in search of patterns, similarities, and relationships. The researcher used codes that were specific to the research questions and assigned each code a color or a number through the NVivo software, which contains features that benefit this study (Lumiviero, 2023). Hilal and Alabri (2013) state the software indeed reduces a great number of manual tasks and gives the researcher more time to discover tendencies, recognize themes, and derive conclusions. NVivo transcribed the recorded interviews, stored and organized qualitative open-ended questions and interviews, and enabled the researcher to categorize and classify data.

The researcher decided which codes were salient and created categories by bringing several codes together. The researcher then labeled categories and decided which were the most relevant and how they connected to each other. The categories and the connections were the main result of the study. The researcher documented the results, described the categories, and explained how they were connected. The researcher documented descriptions, discussed the findings, and compared results with previous studies.

The researcher described and collected stories about individual experiences and help dispelled common perceptions held by society. The researcher used time sequence or chronology of events to help readers understand the triumphs and challenges of participants. In addition, the researcher drew similar and different perspectives among participants. This design enabled the researcher to address the problem and answer each question accordingly.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore the challenges that undocumented Latino students faced with the financial, academic, and legal factors affecting their pursuit of post-secondary education. Broadly, qualitative research supports a researcher in generating a deep and nuanced understanding of a given phenomenon (Lester et al., 2020). The participants for this study lived in South Florida, were of Hispanic ancestry, had left their country when very young, had fluency in English, and had graduated from high school (see Table 1). These participants were willing to share their life stories and offered suggestions to lawmakers to improve illegal immigration reform law policies. The research questions were created to understand each participant's journey. An interview guide using open-ended questions was used to gain a better understanding of the participants' journey (see Appendix). The research questions identified the similarities and differences that many undocumented Latino students faced, and the data were gathered using interview questions and observations. The researcher assured the participants of equal time for this interview. This research further amplified the importance of this study and how younger undocumented Latino students are affected by our current immigration laws.

The researcher faced a few challenges such as lack of trust, fear of asking the wrong questions, and dishonest responses from participants. Between the ages of 18 and 40, some participants were initially timid and reserved while others were friendly and eager to tell their stories. Some participants brought their spouses along for moral support. The researcher noticed that some participants were nervous to tell their stories, as they asked several questions about confidentiality and identity protection. The

Table 1. Demographics of the Participants

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Birth Country</b>	<b>Years in the United States</b>
1	30	Male	Mexico	20
2	25	Male	Honduras	15
3	21	Male	Nicaragua	10
4	18	Male	Mexico	11
5	28	Male	Mexico	18
6	32	Female	Columbia	20
7	21	Female	Chile	15
8	18	Female	Argentina	12
9	35	Female	Uruguay	25
10	40	Female	Honduras	32

researcher reassured participants that their identities would be protected and concealed.

Two research questions guided this study:

1. What are the expectations of undocumented Latino students who have attempted to earn a post-secondary education?
2. How do undocumented Latino students describe their knowledge of available resources to help them get through their college enrollment process?

All participants had graduated from their respective high schools and maintained full-time employment to support their parents and themselves financially (see Table 2). All participants were considered first-generation college students and wished they had learned of their immigration status sooner in life. Seven participants felt embarrassed learning about their immigration status from their parents before their high school graduation. Unless they had been DACA recipients or had become naturalized American citizens, the participants struggled to get their state identification and legal documents, such as driver's license, social security card, and employment permit. Immigration laws reduced the chances for undocumented students to work legally. Based on the country of

Table 2: Characteristics of the Participants

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Completed High School</b>	<b>Grants and Scholarships</b>	<b>Two Years of College</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>
1	Yes	No	Yes	No
2	Yes	No	No	No
3	Yes	No	Yes	No
4	Yes	No	Yes	No
5	Yes	No	No	Yes
6	Yes	No	No	Yes
7	Yes	No	Yes	No
8	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
9	Yes	No	No	No
10	Yes	No	Yes	No

their origin, some participants qualified for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), a program that granted temporarily status to selective countries that were deemed unsafe due to the conditions in the country. This temporary protected status enabled participants to get driver's license and work permit; otherwise, they would not have been allowed to work legally in the United States. However, Temporary Protective Status did not grant legal status to undocumented students. Driver's licenses and employment authorization cards were renewed yearly for immigrants who carried undocumented status, and both permits were contingent to the United States current immigration laws. Durand (2022) stated that, for these Central American migrants with TPS, many of whom have lived for over thirty years in the United States, the situation remains precarious, temporary, and subject to various threats. One such threat came from President Trump in 2017, as he intended to eliminate said status grants, claiming that the conditions that led to them no longer applied to the countries. The rest of the participants who were not qualified for TPS worked jobs without proper legal documents. Participants explained they had worked jobs making the bare minimum to support their families. Often, participants forcefully

resigned from their employments around their yearly auditing periods to avoid termination for not producing legal employment documentation. Participants struggled to keep employment for more than two years at a time. All participants expressed their fear of deportation removal proceedings throughout their adult lives and were still concerned with the current immigration policies.

All participants admitted they had received limited knowledge and resources from their high school and college counselor staff. They addressed how financial aid resources, grants, and scholarships were not accessible to them and how they felt excluded from integrating into higher education. They agreed that their college counselors did not fully comprehend their financial aid struggles and frustrations. Participants complained educators needed to ensure quality education for all students. They felt discriminated against because the federal government ought to affordably educate undocumented immigrants in the United States. Five participants had completed only two years of community college, dropping out due to yearly tuition increases. Two participants had decided not to enroll in classes after speaking to their college counselors. Three participants had completed college over the course of eight years and earned a 4-year degree. One DACA recipient, who graduated from college, had earned two thousand dollars in scholarships. Another participant had received grants and a scholarship to pursue a nursing degree. She stated she was elated upon learning she had a chance to pursue her education. Participants were hopeful of permanent legislative protection for Dreamers or DACA recipients. They explained their journeys clearly and confidently. Their hope was for a change to the current immigration policy. They did not want the next generation to go through the same financial hurdles and challenges. Participants

responded to all interview questions and expressed their opinions openly about federal, state, and immigration policies. Participants also spoke in abundance about their mental health state, financial hurdles, immigration regulations, and lack of support networks.

## **Results**

This study consists of five themes (see Table 3). Theme 1 describes participants' emotional journey as they pursued a post-secondary education. Theme 2 describes the financial aid barriers participants have experienced and its impact on their education. Theme 3 describes the counselor's impact. Theme 4 describes social network support. Theme 5 describes immigration laws.

Analysis of this data indicated that all participants learned of their immigration status between the ages of 17 and 18 years old and were informed by their parents. Four participants had been informed of their status while filling out their financial aid forms for college, three participants were informed during their junior years in high school, and the last three participants were informed during the senior years in high school. Participants understood the severity of their situations when they enrolled in college and were asked to submit proof of their green card or American passport. Participants were shocked and upset learning their legal documents were non-existent. Notably, all participants acknowledged they were highly stressed by their immigration status and were relentlessly searching for academic and legal counsel.

Participants admitted they were raised in the United States and felt as American as their peers. Participants also admitted they had minimal memories of their native countries. Family and stress played a significant role in their journeys. All participants agreed that their continuous undocumented status conversations with their parents



Table 3: Theme Alignment

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Themes</b>
What are the expectations of undocumented Latino students who have attempted to earn a post-secondary education?	1. Emotional Journey 2. Financial Aid Barriers
How do undocumented students described their knowledge of available resources to help them get through their college enrollment process?	3. Counselors Impact 4. Social Network Support 5. Immigration Laws

became overwhelmingly embarrassing as they felt more confused and vulnerable.

According to some participants, these conversations created more fear and despair.

Deportation became the number one topic in their households. Prior to DACA, they had been concerned about being on the deportation removal list. Participants could not understand the reasons for deportation proceedings when they had lived in the United States for most of their lives. Participants explained how their psychological transitions went from living as an American to living while knowing that a deportation order could knock at their doors. They explained it was a difficult period in which they felt defeated and alone. They were fearful of being deported to their native countries to which they had no emotional connections.

Participants had received support from their parents to pursue higher education. Although some parents were unable to support them financially, they encouraged their children to apply for scholarships and grants. All participants had maintained a full-time job upon their high schools' graduation. Some participants had obtained employment through false social security cards. They admitted they were scared, but working was necessary to financially support themselves and their family. Participants were fearful of

getting discovered by their employer because of their immigration status. They explained the challenges of juggling both school and work during their interviews.

The most challenging issue for participants was the lack of financial assistance. All participants were required to pay in-state tuition fees for college because they were not qualified for financial assistance. One challenge that some participants faced was not being capable of leaving the state of Florida to explore other college options due to family ties and financial responsibilities. While exploring, participants had realized that many college organizations did not carry a strong presence of undocumented Latino students' organizations. Participants expressed their disappointment regarding the lack of undocumented Latino support groups and networks available to them on campus. On campus, they felt vulnerable and alienated from the general population of students because of the lack of club organizations. Many participants voiced their voids on and off campus; some participants stood in the gap for their fellow undocumented peers and became local activists and resourceful in their communities.

Participants hoped college administrators and staff would take a learning approach to help guide and support undocumented Latino students' enrollment. They admitted that faculty staff and counselors kept an open-door policy and made them feel welcomed but were not as resourceful as participants anticipated. Participants complained of not receiving adequate information about scholarships from their counselors. They also complained that financial aid officers were not knowledgeable enough about grants and scholarships available to undocumented students. Participants researched out-of-state university options that they believed held different tuition policies on admitting undocumented students. Participants emphasized the importance of having faculty

members who were knowledgeable about school-related immigration policies during their college enrollment process. They hoped college institutions would remain committed to supporting undocumented students. The uncertainty of participants' future remained daunting. Participants were hoping for a political immigration shift in federal and state policies regarding undocumented Latino students.

### ***Theme 1: Emotional Journey***

All participants played little to no role in their decisions to leave behind their native countries. They vaguely remembered political hardships that caused their parents to leave their respective countries; their parents simply explained that they had felt forced to leave. All participants understood that their parents had left their native countries to provide a better future, and they applauded their parents for their bravery in crossing borders. The participants embraced the American culture and grew up as Americans, yet America's immigration laws have severed a pathway to citizenship.

Most participants were informed of their immigration status months before their high school graduation. Participants were disappointed with their parents for keeping their immigration status an unnecessary secret. This hidden knowledge provoked unsettled emotions that they carried over the years. Participants had been furious but empathized with their parents, eventually forgiving them. They chose to forgive their parents because, growing up as children, they had watched their parents' make many sacrifices to create a better future for them. Participants admitted that their parents and peers encouraged them to enroll in college. Their parents had completed high school in their respective countries, and the participants believed that their parents' educational level was related to their socio-economic status. Parents were financially unable to

complete college, yet their main concern was to encourage their children to strive for better lives. Some participants expressed that their immigration-status barriers even brought them closer to their parents as college enrollment approached. Parents were willing to support the participants' college enrollment, financial aid, and scholarship process. Although one participant stated that her parents had discouraged her from pursuing her education, the other participants were highly encouraged to enroll in college as they chose to overcome their social, academic, and legal barriers.

**Participant 1:** I was highly stressed, but my parents convinced me to pursue my education. I graduated from high school and completed only two years of college due to financial hardships. I promised myself to complete my degree once I was in a better financial position.

**Participant 2:** I will admit that my parents discouraged me to pursue college. They encouraged me to work and save money instead. I worked under the table, meaning I did not pay taxes for a while. I felt horrible, but I felt I was not going to be in this situation forever. My parents told me everything will fall in place in due time eventually. I was going through a very dark moment in my life because I felt betrayed by the American system I grew up on.

**Participant 3:** My parents encouraged me to pursue a college degree even when my back was against the wall. They helped me pay for some of my tuition along the way. I completed only two years of college. I wished I left Florida to explore other options, but financially I could not afford it. The goal was to complete two years of community college and then transfer to a university.

**Participant 4:** They highly encouraged college because I knew first off being an

immigrant, I was already at a disadvantage of making advancements in society. Having an immigrant status can take a toll on your mental state. I was disappointed for a long time. I could not believe I was in this position. I pep-talked myself [into believing that] being in a new environment would be more challenging for me, but my college education was my major priority.

**Participant 5:** My parents always encouraged me to go to college, to have a better life. That was one of the reasons why they came to the United States. They encouraged my siblings and I to enroll in college, but I was not able to finish all my courses because it costs a lot of money. I tried to earn a college degree, but it was just too hard to stay in classes.

**Participant 6:** In my family a lot of information was kept a secret, and my mom did not understand the route for me to go to college. I was almost suicidal, so that is how bad it was. My stepdad was all about education, but I don't think he understood the ins and outs of going to school because it was so hard. It was not easy scraping up money to go to school.

**Participant 7:** My family encouraged me to take one class at a time. I'm one of those people who like to do things on my own and not put the burden on my parents. I tried to alleviate the burden of my parents. They told me they would help me however they could. There were times I would enroll for one semester per school year. It became extremely hard paying tuition.

**Participant 8:** My parents encouraged me because education is key to success. Completing college was monumental in our family. The journey has been very challenging, stressful, and very discouraging. I wanted to make my parents proud

so bad.

**Participant 9:** They still encouraged me because there are other ways to earn a college degree. My mom said it would take time to complete school. She said to work hard and pay for two classes per semester and not to be discouraged. I never allowed my challenges to stop me from attaining my goal. I must admit I was very stressed during the college enrollment process.

**Participant 10:** Although there were many challenges, my parents supported my decisions to pursue college. I wanted to set an example for my siblings. I hid my emotions from my family and friends and put on a brave face and acted like I was fine, but in the inside, I was dying of fear and embarrassment. My friends were so excited to travel to out-of-state universities while I was struggling to afford colleges in my backyard.

During the interview, two participants were terribly worried about their employment because of their undocumented status. Other participants explained how the lack of financial assistance or their immigration status embarrassment delayed their goals.

**Participant 4:** My work permit expired in my second year of community college, so I could not continue my education. I stopped working, so I had to stop and get everything situated. Every time I went to work, I used to be scared because I knew my work permit was falsely fabricated, and I would get caught at some point. My daily stress levels were always sky high.

**Participant 5:** To be honest, I was always worried every time I went to work. There were many instances when my employer informed me that my work permit card was close to expire. A lot of companies had to release me from work because

of my undocumented status. It was very depressing and stressful. For every job I had, I wondered how long before they fired me for lack of a work permit. It was a truly an emotional rollercoaster.

**Participant 1:** I experienced a lot of challenges when I enrolled in college, being afraid that they will ask you for your legal documents and the financial aid officer asked so many questions. Still, even with all those questions, I applied for financial aid and waited to hear from them. I did not qualify, so I ended up paying out of pocket for school.

**Participant 2:** Being able to experience freedom as an individual and not having my legal documents is truly devastating. Then again, it opened my eyes and showed me the value of having these documents. It is an eye-opener for sure. I was truly sad thinking I've spent almost my whole childhood in America, and yet I was labeled immigrant.

**Participant 3:** Well, I had a lot of barriers. Fortunately, I entered the country as such a young age [that] I did not have a language barrier. However, they were a lot of barriers of being undocumented to receive financial assistance or scholarship. I spoke to my counselor about applying for scholarships, and it was embarrassing. My counselor was not helpful at all. My story was always hidden and embarrassing to share. I was in search of and a true path to college. I felt punished for being born in a different country.

**Participant 5:** Money was always an issue. The fact we are immigrant and do not have the same privileges as other people who are born here, it infuriated me. I had to come out-of-pocket and was not able to get the help I desperately needed.

**Participant 6:** I would say watching all my friends went to college. Every time graduation season rolled around, I would feel sad. It hit hard. I would hate when people would ask me in college, “Did you vote?” I would always tell them I already voted. I lied a lot. I feel like people would judge me on my stance for certain topics. Watching everyone you grew up with graduating and moving on without you was very disheartening. College enrollment and financial assistance should be mutually inclusive.

**Participant 7:** I found that college was something I was not able to pursue. I shifted focus and said to myself if I cannot go through door A, then I will create door B. Door B was photography. Now I am very successful in my business, but I still wished I pursued a college education even if I had to pay for it.

**Participant 8:** There are so many rules and regulations that I was not aware of. I was not instructed that I needed certain documents to go to college. I was completely lost. Having certain fears like, “Can I really afford college? Financially are you able to work? Can you do it legally?” There was a plethora of things going through my head.

**Participant 9:** The registrar office staff looked over my situation and informed me that I would receive in-state tuition. I was in total shock. My parents did not have my legal documents that would help me qualify for financial aid. I had to work two jobs getting paid under the table in order to attend college.

**Participant 10:** I had no sense of direction that I could attend college and choose whatever career I wanted. I was discouraged and lost track of who I wanted to become. I was living at my parents’ home comfortably, and I never had a teacher



or counselor that gave me that extra push to go the extra mile. It took me awhile before realizing that I needed to do something to change my path and at least tried college.

### ***Theme 2: Financial Aid Assistance Barriers***

Financial aid assistance remained the greatest concern for undocumented students. They also researched in-state and out-of-state tuition fees. Many participants struggled with filling out financial aid applications. Participants learned about different type of loans and grants available as they navigated through their educational journey. They explained the importance of having a college education or their pursuit. As one participant stated, “I experienced a lot of barriers, especially financial aid assistance. Unfortunately, I was not approved and paid in-state tuition fee 100% out-of-pocket. I just dealt with it day-by-day. Ultimately, the goal was to graduate college.” Initially, most participants did not understand the in-state and out-of-state tuition fee concept. Tuition fees fluctuate from state to state. Therefore, when some participants considered moving out of Florida to gain the full out-of-state college experienced, out-of-state tuition fees held them back in Florida. Participants had limited options. Only one participant managed to move out of Florida to attend college. Overall, though participants were grateful the state of Florida granted in-state tuition to undocumented students, their financial status remained unchanged. Participants agreed that, without financial aid, it was almost impossible to earn a college degree.

**Participant 1:** In-state tuition fees are very expensive; it is almost impossible to pay for college.

**Participant 2:** No ma’am, I cannot afford college because it will be too hard

because I do not have the best job that will take care of my bills and pay school tuition at the same time. No, school is not cheap.

**Participant 3:** Without financial aid, it is almost impossible to earn a 4-year college degree. You need money to attend college. You need money to support your family. I did not qualify for any grants, and with my credit score, I could not get a loan.

**Participant 4:** My parents assured me that it was possible to earn a college degree without financial aid. Ultimately, I worked two full-time jobs as a freshman in college while my friends were living in a dorm. Not until my senior year I understood the value to get involved in student organization and the value of connecting and learning of more resources. It was quite challenging. It was extremely difficult.

**Participant 5:** First, it was a mission filling out FAFSA. I sought help filling out the form. I was not qualified. I could not attend college because tuition was too high, and I could not afford it.

**Participant 6:** Nope. I mean I tried so hard to qualify for financial aid, but they always asked for the legal proof I did not have. In-state tuition fee was too high.

**Participant 7:** I used my scholarship to go to nursing school. I omitted certain things and somehow used my bright future scholarships to pay for LPN school. I paid the rest of my tuition with some money from my real estate. I literally left Broward County and moved to the Panhandle to pursue college. It was \$99 per credit. At one point, they wanted to charge me out-of-state tuition, but I told them I have been living in Florida since 1992. So, they made an exception. Otherwise,

it was hard to enroll in college.

**Participant 8:** It was going to be very costly to pursue college without financial aid.

**Participant 9:** Yes, I just earned my college degree without financial aid. There are several ways to afford college. There are scholarships out there that do not require the person to be an American citizen. They have scholarships for foreign students. There was a Senate bill that came out in 2014 that waives out-of-state tuition for students that are in that position. There are private donor scholarships available. Besides working and paying for school, there are scholarships that are offered without needing the type of requirement that is needed like the other students.

**Participant 10:** Yes, there are other ways. You do not necessarily need financial aid to pursue college. There are scholarships available for academic and sports achievements. Some parents can pay for their kids' tuition, and some parents cannot. There are some undocumented students who have decided to work and pay for college.

### ***Theme 3: Counselors Impact***

The school structure was important in the lives of undocumented students. According to the participants, their counselors provided career advancement services, these services benefitted students with legal status. The participants stated that school counselors were critical to undocumented students' success. Some participants felt shameful about their immigrant status and chose not to speak to a counselor. Other participants admitted high school guidance counselors were no different from college

counselors. Participants agreed the lack of information received on immigration issues negatively impacted their school experiences. Participants complained that counselors did not explain the requirements for federal financial aid. They felt uncomfortable talking about financial aid to their counselors. While some participants were grateful for their limited advice, others explained counselors were not fully equipped to guide undocumented students on how to successfully complete college. Many participants walked away from their counselors feeling frustrated, worrying that they would not graduate college in a timely manner. Some participants suggested that counselors need to be trained in varied issues pertaining to undocumented students. They also suggested that counselors be a safe space for students to seek advice and help. The participants concluded that counselors were not aware of the challenges that they faced and that the educational system was responsible for equipping counselors to provide information and resources necessary for undocumented students' success.

**Participant 1:** No, I did not seek advice because my situation was very depressing and embarrassing. I chose to figure out. I could do it on my own. I did not think they were equipped to help me.

**Participant 2:** Yes, I did seek advice. I wanted to know the pros and cons for college enrollment. She was completely clueless about my immigration situation. My counselor gave me a link of scholarships and grants to research. She was indifferent to my situation and wished me good luck. As I went through the list, there were none available for undocumented students. I was so disappointed and sad.

**Participant 3:** I received advice from a guidance counselor and was told there

was nothing he could do because it was a legal matter. They did just give me a few websites for scholarships and grants. There were no words of encouragement exchanged in the office. I felt defeated.

**Participant 4:** Yes, it was a standard thing for students to seek advice from their advice counselors. It was called BRACE in high school where they send students to speak to counselors. I was not as informed or aware about these guidance counselors looking back in memory lane. I do not think I understood much of what was shared with me because of my parents, because they did not understand the system. I did not take much of their advice because I did not understand the magnitude of what was shared with me.

**Participant 5:** No, I did not. I do not think it was necessary to go to a counselor to talk about my immigration status because it was a private issue I was embarrassed to talk about. Honestly, I chose to be private and keep it between my family.

**Participant 6:** I feel like college counselors are different than the ones in high school because they do not care. There were some counselors who would try to help me find a grant. Grants were hard to find for undocumented students because they would always ask for important documents I did not have. Some counselors act like they care, and others do not. I always told them I could only take one class or maybe two classes. They kept saying if I kept taking these 2 classes I would never graduate on time and in your head, you are trying to make sense of the situation. After speaking to my counselor, I questioned myself, "Is it worth it?" Some people do not go to college, and they are fine. You feel like when you

are financially stable you can always go back.

**Participant 7:** Yes, I did, but in high school I already thought I had my documents. I sought advice from my counselors just to stay on track to go to college. By the time I hit the finish line, I got the news that I cannot go. Schools in America do not really question your immigration status. They want you to join clubs and keep up with your GPA. High schools asked you for certain documents like your social security, which I had. I would only need to show it as proof for certain things.

**Participant 8:** I did. I had the Bright Future scholarship and a couple of other scholarships for writing essays. There was not a doubt in my mind that college was not my next step.

**Participant 9:** I did, I sought advice in high school about basketball scholarships. I wanted to play ball in college. I needed to know how to pursue my education without paying for it.

**Participant 10:** I did. I sought advice about being admitting to colleges. The admissions requirement and SAT test scores. Ways of financial aids and scholarships and grants on how to afford college. I was given a lot of information but none of them applied to me.

#### ***Theme 4: Social Network Support***

Participants reported that on-campus organizations were non-existent for them in college. While in college, they were not involved in any undocumented student programs because it was never an option. The lack of social network support created isolation. There were no groups or communities to run to. They felt invisible in the educational

system and left to find opportunities to pursue their education with no financial aid. Participants explained they had so many questions about the DREAM Act and other immigration policies. A few participants wanted to know their options but did not have the funds to consult an immigration attorney. Participants explained that, during their time in college, social media was not an active platform to voice their opinions. They explained how the media painted immigrants in a negative light, and that perception made them realize that immigration issues controlled the narrative in Congress. They discussed how they suffered in silence. They had researched different college and university organizations and watched how other students participated in rallies to support the DREAM Act or DACA. Some participants explained they did not have the courage to reach out to other undocumented students. Participants admitted that college campuses need to create a designated place for undocumented students and acknowledged that on-campus undocumented student programs would have been beneficial for their emotional support in college. Some participants shared that out-of-state colleges with a larger undocumented student presence are more likely to create an organization that caters to that population. Participants encouraged communities to stand with undocumented students.

**Participant 1:** While in college, out of curiosity I went to student services to ask them about club organizations on campus. Surprisingly enough, they did not have clubs tailored for undocumented students. I was completely clueless about immigration laws, and I could not afford an attorney.

**Participant 2:** There were no advocacy groups on campus while I was in college, and I felt the impact. I wished we had a community to run to. Not too long ago, I

watched undocumented students protesting through the city of Los Angeles in support of DACA.

**Participant 3:** I felt alone in my situation while going to college. I made friends around campus but was still embarrassed about my situation and could not talk to my friends about it. I did my own research about other college and university tuition fees and organizations.

**Participant 4:** Well, there were moments when I think back how impactful my college years could have been if we had a club organization tailored for the undocumented. I wished I was more involved in college, but I had to work every day, and it left no room for school involvement. If only I had the bravery to protest or rally up the troupe, many things could have been different.

**Participant 5:** There were times when I wished I had an outlet to vent out my fears and frustrations. It was challenging hiding out my feelings and pretending that I was a happy student.

**Participant 6:** Looking back, I wish I were bold enough to initiate an organization for the undocumented. I wanted our voice to be heard from everywhere. I know a few students that were in the same situation, but we suffer in silence for so many years.

**Participant 7:** I was afraid of deportation, and it stressed me out a lot. I didn't realize how much of a support system I was missing. Besides, my current school schedule and work kept me occupied and from being too depressed.

**Participant 8:** If we had an organization on campus that focused on my needs, I would have felt more empowered and knowledgeable in my situation. A few



years ago, I remembered watching on television all the rallies for DACA or the DREAM Act that were being held around the country.

**Participant 9:** I recommend for all colleges and universities to think about undocumented students and create organizations that can perhaps help them all out. Nowadays, social media is a powerful tool that students can use. I would like to see policymakers making changes on federal and state immigration policies.

**Participant 10:** I felt very discouraged because I was lacking a lot of resources. I wanted to visit an attorney for a free consultation, but my shame kept me from visiting. I wish I had a community to run to. I think we are so ashamed of our situation that we don't fight back and are grateful for whatever token we received from our government. I hope the next generation of undocumented students become bold and courageous to voice their opinions across their communities demanding for changes.

#### ***Theme 5: Current Immigration Laws and Policies***

Participants discussed how laws and policies had a direct impact on undocumented students. Federal and state laws held different functions. Federal laws allow undocumented students to attend college but prohibit them from getting federal student aid. Meanwhile, some state laws prevent undocumented students from enrolling in college altogether. Participants expressed their disappointment and frustrations about current immigration law changes due to political and cultural factors. They stated that immigration laws were never designed to create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented students. The DREAM Act was proposed to help protect and create a legal pathway for undocumented immigrants who came to the United States at a young age but

never became lawful. Many participants remembered waiting and hoping for the DREAM Act to pass prior to their college enrollment or even during their college years. Participants explained that the DREAM Act would have alleviated their financial burdens significantly while granting them legal status in the United States. In addition, participants reported every year a different version of the DREAM Act was introduced but kept getting voted out by the Republicans in Congress. Although the DREAM Act never became law, participants adopted being called Dreamers instead of immigrants. Participants were hopeful when the Obama Administration established DACA in June 2012. DACA went through many political chains of events. Participants shared how President Trump ended DACA in 2017, stating the president thought it was illegal to begin with. DACA is currently going through the appeal process, and participants are hoping that the Department of Homeland Security will reinstate it. Participants discussed how DACA was beneficial only for students who had been enrolled since June 2012. They explained currently DACA remained unlawful for new recipients. Scholars have hypothesized that a complete repeal of DACA, without a permanent solution, would have dire consequences (De Maio & Rodriguez, 2022).

**Participant 1:** Immigrant laws need to be more lenient toward undocumented children. They make it so hard for us to enroll in college. In other countries like France, college is free. Therefore, they need to change some laws because we want to become college graduates, but I don't think we should pay all the fees for an education. Congress has the power to approve the DREAM Act or DACA and change undocumented student lives significantly. The DREAM Act is the ideal law.

**Participant 2:** It is very discouraging because paying out for college is ridiculous. How are you supposed to pay for college at this tuition rate? It's a very depressing issue. State laws ought to make it easier for undocumented Latino students. We are humans and want the same benefits as native-born citizens. We all want to have a degree. Throughout the years, one thing that helped me a lot is having a support group, meaning my family.

**Participant 3:** State policies have affected students' enrollment significantly. With the policies put in place, undocumented students must pay in-state tuition fees, and they do not qualify for financial aid assistance. Congress can create a pathway to citizenship to make the journey more feasible and affordable to attend college. The DREAM Act is the most reasonable pathway to earn our citizenship, and we are still waiting on it. The DREAM Act was introduced in the early 2000s, and I cannot believe it is still not passed. Now, instead of being called immigrant students, we are called Dreamers.

**Participant 4:** Well, depending on some state policies. I will give you an example. There's something called public charge. There are a variety of policies that affect children. Local federal policies can have an impact on undocumented students. The unfortunate thing is the students did not choose to be in this predicament, and often we are being penalized for policies whether it's from the education system or the workforce. I can easily be deported to my family. Ultimately, it had me paranoid throughout my college years. State and federal policies have a significant impact on undocumented students' lives. Well, I think the DREAM Act is setting a true path to citizenship for students to fall under that

category. In general, undocumented students that are in school pursue their dreams. The government can place more policies and lessen the restrictions that impact the student ability to enroll in school. Unfortunately, undocumented families are afraid because they think their information is being shared with the policies concerning deportation.

**Participant 5:** There is no help when it comes to undocumented students. You must find your own help. As far as undocumented immigrants are concerned, laws such as DREAM Act or DACA was truly our only hope. A program created by the government can reduce the college fee to help more immigrants go to college. With the fee they have right now, I cannot afford it. To have a policy in place to encourage immigrants with school and work would be helpful. Meanwhile, you must create your own support system or network in order to vent and help your fellow friends.

**Participant 6:** I felt like DACA should be a possibility, but it's been crushed down so many times already. The whole American dream was always sold to us as immigrants, but every time I tried to get my license permit, I was very disappointed that I couldn't get it. If you've been here for so long, you have entered the country legally with a birth certificate and you have never got into trouble, the American system should favor you to go to college. People want to show they came from nothing to be something. They need to implement better payment plans, give us something to make it easier. You feel stuck in a position for the rest of your life. I'm not super educated when it comes to state policies because the laws keep tweaking, but overall it always stays the same. Favoring

students that are undocumented and honor our work ethic taking that leap to go to college. Someone must break that generational challenge. Will the government do it? I do not know.

**Participant 7:** DREAM Act has been around longer than DACA. I think the DREAM Act has evolved into DACA. Some DACA recipients have gotten their work permit. A lot of states have been gracious and have afforded students with in-state tuition, and for some of the scholarships, you do not have to be a U.S. citizen. I think making the DREAM Act an initiative and not a barrier will be the solution. There is always going to be undocumented people, so we will always have an issue. Once you are here, it should not be a factor. Let them have 100% ride to pursue their college education.

**Participant 8:** State legislators cannot relate to our issues because they have never lived a day in our shoes. Our only solution is to reinstate the DREAM Act. In some way, I wished for legislatures to hear us out, for them to understand the culture and the barriers we are experiencing. Undocumented people in the United States are one of the most hardworking people I know. We are not criminals. I believe this country was built on the back of immigrants. Hopefully, they can hear our stories and frustration. If they open their ears, laws can be change.

**Participant 9:** Immigration laws determine whether you can attend college or not. For example, the Senate bill that came out in 2014 allowed students who did not qualify for in-state tuition to qualify. I think the government is trying to help us. They are policies that are in place to help students qualify. There have been private companies who have established private scholarships. There are things in

place, and I hope they continue to help students.

**Participant 10:** It all depends what state it is. Certain policies hinder certain people from accomplishing their goals. State policies can discourage students from applying to college. If there are states that are making positive changes, it may encourage students to enroll. The government ought to make better effort to show students different pathways to legalize their undocumented status.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Implications

The findings of this study are relevant for further research on undocumented Latino students' challenges and ongoing immigration policies. Currently, these students represent a significant number in our population. More than 450,000 undocumented individuals are enrolled in higher education in the United States. Latino individuals constitute 46% of the undocumented undergraduate population, and among DACA-eligible undergraduates, 65% were Latino in 2018 (Flores Morales & Garcia 2021).

This study covered the social, financial, and legal obstacles that undocumented Latino students faced throughout their post-secondary education journeys. All three obstacles connect with the two research questions of this study. These findings suggested that the undocumented Latino students came to the United States very young, grew up cultivating American values and integrating into normal societal lifestyles, and lived the American Dream. For the purpose of this study, it was important to examine the similar and different patterns of undocumented Latino students' childhood. Their sense of belonging, self-esteem, and driven purposes in life were abruptly disturbed upon learning of their undocumented status on the heels of their high school graduation and while filling out their college application. Belonging is a fundamental human need and has long been linked to the wellness of individuals and communities (Souto-Manning et al., 2021). Their sense of belonging was met with various social obstacles. They inherited the title of "immigrant student," which they never desired. To be labeled "undocumented Latino students" instead of Latin Americans is a harsh reality they do not want to face or accept. The fear of deportation rang loudly as their new identities settled in. The fear of getting

arrested and the worries of their families chased out their out-of-state college opportunities. This information is understandably relevant to today's context. Given the growing impact and wide reach of immigration arrests, it is imperative to understand the consequences on undocumented immigrants and their family members (Valdivia, 2021). Their emotional barriers created trust issues with their close friends. As some participants mentioned, high school graduation ought to be filled with excitement moments that transition into new chapters of college memories and beyond. However, upon learning about their status, participants explained how their mindsets shifted quickly from excitement to anxiety. The negative stigma attached to undocumented immigrants was enough to feel shameful while making college enrollment decisions. The results from the present study are consistent with those of prior research studies, supporting the concept of undocumented Latino students being brought to this country at young age while getting a full understanding of their immigrant status much later in life. Most undocumented persons understand their legal status from a young age, but it may be only during adolescence that the "mounting exclusions" bring full comprehension of its ramifications of the situation (Cummins, 2020).

Another reflective finding of this study is the financial obstacles that undocumented Latino students face. All participants described their challenges with paying out-of-pocket for their college tuition. Some students could not afford to enroll in their local community college, let alone a four-year institution. During the interview, several students explained that if they could afford tuition on a community college level, they would more than likely attend a four-year college institution to pursue a bachelor's degree. Studies show that Latino students who begin their post-secondary education at



the community college have high aspirations to transfer to a four-year institution and obtain a bachelor's degree (Viramontes, 2020).

Participants detailed their college experiences, explaining the different phases of coping with the college enrollment process. Feeling that college enrollment and financial aid assistance should be mutually inclusive, the participants reiterated that they had felt punished for being born in a different country while being raised in the United States. All participants agreed that they could not afford to pay for college. They also stated undocumented students' enrollment is significantly linked to state tuition fees, which is consistent with other studies that show that money indeed affects students' enrollment decisions but exerts different influence across different contexts (Allen & Wolniak, 2019).

Students also discussed the disparity of scholarships and grants available for undocumented Latino students. They believed scholarships and grants are tailored to students with legal status than undocumented Latino students. These findings relate to other similar studies. When it comes to community-engaged research and scholarship, opportunities for participation have historically been reserved for the most privileged and have been located within predominantly White institutions (Syeed et al., 2022). The participants who researched scholarships noticed there were not many scholarships tailored to their immigration status. Most scholarship guidelines required legal documents for qualification.

The discussion of undocumented students pursuing a post-secondary education is relevant to studies that were conducted pertaining to the advancement of immigration policies. Compelling scholarship has portrayed the challenges undocumented students

often encounter in their pursuit of higher education and the sources of resiliency upon which they draw to overcome those challenges (Southern, 2016). Students expressed their vulnerability and helplessness for being part of a school system that does not benefit them, and they are concerned for the next generation of undocumented Latino students.

Another trending issue in this study is the lack of information received from career guidance counselors. Students expressed their frustration about their experiences with school counselors, confessing that they had felt mistreated and misinformed due to their immigration status. Their beliefs are consistent with recent studies. Empirical studies consistently highlight how undocumented students experience eminent racism and discrimination from faculty, staff, and peers, as well as from exclusionary higher education policies and practices (Cisneros et al., 2020). Participants believed their college enrollment experiences would have been better had the school counselors had some knowledge about immigration laws concerning undocumented students. Students have recommended that career guidance counselors familiarize themselves with certain immigration laws concerning undocumented students and create a safe space to provide better service to that specific population. Professionals can take an active role in supporting immigrant students by extending their own knowledge and professional development about current issues that inevitably impact students (Stebbleton et al., 2017). Most career guidance counselors are not aware of current immigration policies related to undocumented students. Learning about immigration laws to aid students might be outside the scope of their job. The problem is that students view counselors as their “first line of defense” in their college enrollment process, but usually students are shameful to disclose their undocumented status. Students ought to build relationships with their career

guidance counselors to ensure a better college experience. Current studies explain the importance of having educated counselors in our school institutions. Since student affairs practitioners are uniquely positioned to advocate for their undocumented students, they must also stay informed about law and policies that extend beyond their institution (Martinez Hoy & Nguyen, 2020). The relationship between school counselors and undocumented Latino students is important to investigate for future research.

The last finding is vital to this study as it reveals the importance of future research on immigration laws affecting undocumented Latino students. In addition, it highlights the legal obstacles that are presently dominant and relevant in the legal battlegrounds of immigration laws. Students have experienced how immigration policies have drastically changed their lives, restricting employment opportunities and limiting authorized immigration documents. Students revealed that the federal government played a significant role in shifting the DREAM Act or DACA. Currently, there is no path to permanent residency or citizenship for undocumented Latino students. Students believed that, with the passing of the DREAM Act or DACA, they can significantly contribute and help strengthen U.S. economy. Recent studies have explained the need to identify the loopholes that hinder the legalization of undocumented Latino students. Although the importance of identifying barriers to success for undocumented and DACA students is clear, there is a need to move beyond a deficit model, which “sees students as lacking capital as opposed to valuing and utilizing the capital they do have” (Banh & Radovic-Fanta, 2021). Many students have become activists in their local communities to fight for a better future. A social network support is globally necessary to support undocumented Latino students in preparing for college enrollment and updated immigration laws.

Protests and rallies around the country have sounded the alarm about the DREAM Act and DACA. The next generation of undocumented Latino students enrolling in post-secondary education is eagerly waiting on Congress to enact better immigration policies after former President Trump dismantled all opportunities for undocumented students. The Trump administration's desire to limit lawful immigration is well-documented and was implemented through various executive actions and regulatory initiatives by governmental agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security, Labor, and State (Cuic, 2022). Participants indicated their journey motivated them to get involved in their local communities, participating in statewide rallies while fixing their eyes on federal and state policies. As they march across the country for their dire cause, these students have become activists to keep the DREAM Act or DACA conversations relevant in the chambers of Congress.

Based on these findings, I support both research questions of this study. The first research question asked, "What are the expectations of undocumented Latino students who have attempted to earn a post-secondary education?" The findings suggest that undocumented Latino students were expecting to enroll in college, apply for financial aid, and graduate in four years. Their expectations and realities for college were mutually exclusive throughout their journeys. Financial aid assistance was the main reason that some participants could not enroll college or complete their four-year college degree. All participants of this study had grown up in the United States, so they were groomed to be treated as legal citizens of the United States of America. They have all expected to hold full-time employment while in college and carry a driver license, but some participants have limited access because they are still illegal in this country. Many students have

stated their goals are no different from the goals of their American friends. They have all agreed their journeys have been extremely difficult because they were not emotionally and financially ready to embark this journey. Their undocumented immigration status has significantly changed their lives' trajectory.

The second question asked, "How do undocumented Latino students describe their knowledge of available resources to help them get through their college enrollment process?" Based on these findings, undocumented Latino students explained that they were not aware of all of the available resources, sharing how their high school and college counselors were not knowledgeable about the DREAM Act, DACA or what their immigration status meant. Counselors were unaware of scholarships and grants tailored to undocumented Latino students. Students expressed that trust takes time to establish between counselors and students. In addition, they mentioned that counselors should understand admissions and enrollment policies for undocumented students. These issues are important to discuss because they explain the challenges undocumented students face while pursuing a post-secondary education. Every participant in this study expressed their frustrations for the lack of empathy received throughout their school journey. Counselors did not understand their situation but instead informed them of the documents needed to enroll in college and the classes they needed to take. The mistrust and miscommunication between students and counselors are continuing and complicated issues that require further research for the next first-generation undocumented students. Research studies have drawn the same conclusion of the relationships between undocumented students and counselors. Schools often struggle to support undocumented immigrants' students through "don't ask, don't tell" policies, which maintain a "culture of silence" around

immigration status issues that deeply impact schooling experiences and belonging (Rodriguez & McCorkle, 2020).

Lack of school and community support is an issue discussed in this study. Some students did not experience Latino student organizations. Undocumented students felt invisible on campus as they relied heavily on the support of other undocumented college students. Some students mentioned the necessity of creating space to air out their problems within school organizations. They explained the importance of having conversations with other students about their goals and challenges. They lacked up-to-date information and resources from their local communities. Embarrassment and fear of the unknown have kept many students silent or afraid to spark uncomfortable conversations. Undocumented students have kept quiet, staying under the radar to avoid possible deportation. Participants of this study explained that they need to become the solution of their problem by stop hiding behind the shadow of immigration policies and getting involved within their local communities and staying updated on immigration reform policies.

Undocumented students are highly implicated in the criminal justice system. Undocumented students' legal challenges put them at a greater risk of becoming law breakers in society. Therefore, bridging the gap between the undocumented population and law enforcement agencies remains a priority. It is important to further research on how police and undocumented communities can move forward together. Police-community relationships in highly undocumented populated communities can create mutual trust and strong relationships. These unique relationships have the potential to educate both parties and lessen many unwarranted confrontations created by the system.

Enhancing state and local law enforcement agencies' leadership can create a culture of equity that eliminates racial and ethnic bias. Law enforcement agencies ought to build networks with the school systems to educate ~~the~~ undocumented students of the legal issues they are subject to encounter based on their immigration status. In addition, law enforcement agencies can bring programs into their local community focusing on the educational advancement of undocumented students by supplying information about scholarships and grants. To mitigate the implications that undocumented students face, the education system and law enforcement agencies must work cohesively and build pathways for these students.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations while conducting a research study. It is imperative for researchers to recognize that scope and limitations are integral parts of the dissertation process and, therefore, merit discussion. Creswell (2014) stated that designing and conducting a qualitative study is a difficult and time-consuming process. Interviewing is not a perfect way of collecting and analyzing data because it is time-consuming. Another limitation is that the researcher has little control over the sampling method. Qualitative research is affected using a small sample, which limits the ability to disseminate the information to a similar population. It is challenging to verify qualitative information when the study is not statistically representative of the whole population and the study findings cannot be measured with previous study literature. According to Creswell (2014), deficiencies in past literature may exist because topics have not been explored with a particular group, sample, or population; the literature may need to be replicated or repeated to see whether the same findings hold or need to be given new samples of

people or new sites for study; otherwise, the voices of underrepresented groups will not be heard in the published literature.

In addition, sampling bias is a possibility if all participants share the same traits and characteristics. Creswell (2009) claims that, in qualitative research, the role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study. Lastly, participants' unwillingness to openly discuss their experiences as undocumented Latinos pursuing post-secondary education may have created a challenge because the participants would have influenced the content of data collection by deciding what information to share.

The researcher attempted to mitigate these challenges by reminding their participants of the purpose of this study and assuring them that confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study. The researcher kept the questions clear. Additionally, prior to the interview, the researcher reminded participants of their right to withdraw from the study once they started feeling uncomfortable.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of ten undocumented Latino students who lived in South Florida. This study covered the social, academic, and legal factors that contributed to undocumented students' journey in pursuit of a higher education. This case study utilized face-to-face interviews and open-ended questions to gain better insight of participants' stories.

This study highlighted undocumented Latino students' pathway to college. Each participant shared similar stories. They were brought to America as young children, adopted the American language and culture, and graduated from their respective high



schools. However, their stories took a different course upon high school graduation. Many themes emerged during the interviews. Their emotional journeys, financial barriers, counselors' impact, social network supports, and immigration laws were all common issues undocumented students faced throughout their college years and beyond. These issues are still relevant today because immigration laws have not significantly changed for undocumented students. Many first-generation families are still caught in the same situation. Now, the differences are social media and better supportive groups. There were many layers to peel off the educational system. Layers described by the students that enabled or crippled undocumented students from moving forward with their academic goals. Participants named themselves "Dreamers" during the interview, reflecting the notion of chasing the DREAM Act and DACA. Participants also offer suggestions on how our government can improve their immigration laws for the next generation of undocumented Latino students.

### **Recommendations**

This research study discussed the current challenges that undocumented Latino students faced while pursuing a post-secondary education. The social, financial, and legal obstacles that stemmed from this study are caused by the lack of immigration reform policies for undocumented Latino students. The participants' stories strike multiple similarities. Participants were enthusiastic when talking about their childhood, counselors, the DREAM Act, and DACA. Several things are recommended to alleviate their current situation. Community colleges and universities should create on-campus immigration legal services that can educate students about immigration laws. These services are specifically beneficial for students who are usually embarrassed when talking

about their status. Immigration legal services would consist of updated information about local, state, and federal immigration policies changes. In addition, this service could eliminate misinformation received from family, peers, school counselors, and the community. School counselors play a vital role in the lives of undocumented students. Counselors ought to become more understanding of undocumented students' financial hardships. Undocumented Latino students should create support groups from their respective colleges and universities. Within each support group systems, students could learn, ask for, and share survival tips about their journeys. The passing of DREAM Act or DACA remains ideal for these students. These two policies have gone through Congress numerous times, but the outcomes remain the same.

### **Conclusion**

This study has contributed many insights and recommendations to the topic of undocumented Latino students pursuing a post-secondary education. This study provided an overview of the challenges these students faced from their high school graduation to their college enrollment process. The study brought to light challenges such as financial aid assistance, career counselor discrepancies, and immigration law and policies. In addition, it shed light on deportation removal proceedings for young undocumented children who enter this country. DREAM Act or DACA policies are designed to increase the rate of undocumented Latino students' college enrollment and future employments. The legalization of the DREAM Act or DACA holds the key for greater access and success for post-secondary education to undocumented Latino students. Undocumented Latino students have pled for immigration policy shifts from the federal government, shifts that would benefit and strengthen U.S. economy and would increase college

enrollment for the next first-generation of undocumented Latino students.

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Appendix  
Interview Protocol

1. At what age did you learn of your immigration status?
2. Who informed you about your immigration status?
3. How did you feel upon learning of your immigration status?
4. Tell me how did your family members encourage or discourage your pursuit for a college degree?
5. In high school did you seek college advice from your counselor? If yes, please explain.
6. In your attempt to attend college what barriers did you experience? How did you deal with the barriers?
7. Without financial aid assistance are you able to earn a 4-year college degree in the United States? Please explain.
8. What has been your challenges as an undocumented Latino(a) student? Please explain.
9. Do you think your immigration status have influenced the person you have become today? Please explain.
10. How might state policies affect undocumented Latino(a) students' enrollment in college?
11. In your opinion, what changes can the government make to encourage undocumented students to enroll in college? Please explain.