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Undocumented Students' Perceptions of Institutional Support



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ABSTRACT

This study employed phenomenological, case study inquiry to provide an in-depth exploration into eight undocumented students' perceptions of campus supports to answer the research question: What are undocumented students' perceptions of the type, nature, and effectiveness of institutional programs and support services that contribute to their persistence? Findings include undocumented students' perceptions of limited institutional support systems, impact of student organization involvement, and funding challenges. Implications for supporting retention and graduation of undocumented students are provided.

Keywords: undocumented students, support, engagement, financial challenges

Undocumented college students, who are approximately 2% of the college student population (Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2020), face significant academic, financial, emotional, and social challenges in American higher education (Contreras, 2009; Pérez, 2014). Undocumented students may also be members of other underserved student populations (e.g., low-income, first generation, underrepresented racial groups), which further compounds challenges associated with their citizenship status. Many undocumented students came to the U.S. with their families seeking better education and

career opportunities and the ability to earn a college degree best positions these students to meet these aims. However, the challenges threaten their ability to access and persist through higher education.

Over the last two decades, the needs and lived experiences of undocumented college students have been illuminated through research (Abrego, 2006; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012). Yet, aside from the passing of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012, the federal government has failed to address the postsecondary educational disparities that undocumented immigrants face. In the absence of federal legislation, policies at the institutional and state levels have begun to provide additional support and resources to meet their unique needs, including institution-based financial aid and legislation for in-state tuition rates (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015; Teranishi et al., 2015).

Additionally, supportive faculty and staff are key resources in undocumented student success (Chen & Rhoads, 2016). As a result, some institutions have focused on educating faculty and staff about the needs and

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experiences of undocumented students by increasing their “undocu-competence” (Tapia-Fuselier, 2019). That is, some college campuses have started to invest in enhancing their institution’s capacity for serving undocumented students (Valenzuela et al., 2015). Finally, an equitable and undocufriendly (Suarez-Orosco et al., 2015) campus climate and adequate peer support provide additional layers of support. In an effort to do this, Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs) and other forms of dedicated safe spaces have been established at a small number of institutions in states with higher populations of undocumented immigrants (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020).

Although certain aspects of the undocumented student lived experience in higher education have been explored in the extant scholarship, there are still gaps that warrant examination (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012). For instance, colleges and universities are beginning to respond to the demonstrated needs of undocumented students by providing intentional physical, emotional, social, financial, and legal support. Yet, the undocumented students’ perceptions of and experiences with these support services remains unclear. Understanding undocumented students’ perceptions of the resources offered that are designed to contribute to their persistence through higher education is needed to better support them.

This study employed phenomenological, case study inquiry to provide an in-depth

exploration into eight undocumented students’ perceptions of campus supports to answer the research question: What are undocumented students’ perceptions of the type, nature, and effectiveness of institutional programs and support services that contribute to their persistence?

Theoretical Framework

Persistence has been well-explored through models to understand why college students stay at, or leave, their chosen institution (e.g., Nora, 2002, 2003, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Utilizing Nora’s (2002, 2003, 2006) Model of Student Engagement, a theoretical framework for college student retention, this study focused on academic and social experiences explicated in the model and how they contribute to undocumented students’ persistence. The academic and social experiences include formal and informal interactions with faculty, involvement in learning communities, social experiences, campus climates, validating experiences, and mentoring experiences (Nora, 2002, 2003, 2006). For the purposes of this study, student engagement encompasses all aspects of engagement with an institution of higher education, including but not limited to involvement in organizations, utilization of resources, and development of relationships with other campus supports, such as faculty, staff, and peers. Nora’s (2002, 2003, 2006) model is useful in the understanding of undocumented students’ perceptions of campus resources as it has also been applied

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to experiences of STEM students at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI).

Research Design and Methods

The phenomenological case study was conducted at a regional comprehensive HSI in the southwestern U.S., which we refer to as Norteno University. We collected data by conducting two in-person individual interviews with each participant as well as collecting journal entries. In particular, we sought phenomena from the participants' lived experience that disclosed the significance of everyday experiences that aided in constructing their social experiences (Dillon, 2015). By using methods consistent with phenomenological inquiry, an understanding of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions were gained (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Additionally, our utilization of case study methods allowed us to focus on the cultural, institutional, and organizational characteristics as an HSI. Moreover, our methodological approach enabled us to translate our findings into practice in ways that improves and reinforces the strategies, processes, and structures already in place to more effectively serve undocumented students (Cummings & Worley, 2008).

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2006) served as the sampling procedure to meet the study needs. The participants were self-identified first-generation (in the U.S.) undocumented

traditionally-aged (18-24 year old) students who had completed at least one year at the institution. The goal of selection was to represent a variety of experiences at the site, decipher generalizations, and identify differences with regards to institutional supports and student experiences.

Considering that students' citizenship status was not systematically collected at the site, we recruited potential participants through flyers distributed on campus bulletin boards, email listservs, Facebook, residence halls, cultural and diversity centers, and classroom announcements. Additionally, snowball sampling from initially interested participants encouraged other students to volunteer to participate in the study. It is understandable that students who identify as undocumented may be apprehensive about participating in a study of this nature. We took these concerns seriously and worked to build trust and rapport with participants. We also engaged in practices to ensure that participants' identities and undocumented status would remain confidential, including assigning pseudonyms to all participants, and collecting data in a private location.

Participants

Ultimately, the study included a sample of eight students who met the study criteria. Table 1 provides age, academic standing, major, method of entry to the U.S., years in the U.S., and country of origin.

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Table 1.
Participant Demographics.

Name	Age	Academic Standing	Major	Years in the U.S.	Country of Origin
Rogelio	22	Junior	Engineering	20	Mexico
Jadir	23	Junior	Business & Spanish	18	Mexico
Isabella	24	Sophomore	Nursing & Spanish	12	Mexico
Raul	24	Senior	Business & Spanish	20	Mexico
Rubi`	22	Junior	Social Work & Spanish	18	Mexico
Cesar	20	Sophomore	Spanish & undecided	16	Peru
Anjana	20	Sophomore	Spanish	5	Mexico
Alberto	24	Junior	Business & Spanish	11	Mexico

Data Collection

In congruence with a phenomenological approach, data was collected through interviews, which provided a rich, in-depth description of the contextual experiences and perceptions of undocumented students on campus (Stake, 2000). Interviews allowed for probing with profound questions while exploring the context in which undocumented students navigate their institution. A semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions was utilized during two 90-minute individual interviews with participants to provide structure as well as the opportunity to explore specific responses in depth based on each participant's approach to the questions (Creswell, 2006; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Participants also journaled during data collection and submitted them between the two interviews so that the content of the journals could be utilized to further inform the structure of the second 90-minute interview.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, the coding process began by segmenting and labeling the data using an open coding process that allowed us to see the links between experiences. The researchers also used open coding when reviewing and analyzing the journal submissions that were completed by each participant. Following initial open coding of both data sources, themes began to emerge from commonalities among participants' experiences. In order to further explore the emergent themes, questions for the second round of interviews were developed to gain further insight and explore the accuracy of this initial analysis approach. Data analysis for the second interviews involved a deductive approach as the first round of coding and themes provided a framework to analyze the second interview data. To ensure that all participants remained anonymous, all identifiers collected, coded, and analyzed were removed from the data.

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Trustworthiness

Engaging in validation procedures is necessary to provide accuracy in data collection and reporting. This study followed Creswell's (2012) validation procedures by having external reviewers and participants provide evidence that the information collected and disseminated was accurate and concise. Once the initial interview was completed, participants received a copy of the transcript for member checking (Creswell, 2012). Triangulation (Creswell, 2010) supported the confirmability of the findings as data collection involved the use of two interviews and journal data.

Findings

Although undocumented students share a parallel experience, each has a unique story and it is important to represent their varied experiences in the findings. Their stories present the intersectionality of their identities, their varying needs, and the importance they attached to institutional support they received which enabled them to persist. When asking each participant what persistence meant to them, it was clear that persistence was not only from year to year; it was also from semester to semester. Moreover, their short-term goals, which led them towards their end goal of attaining a degree, included on-going attendance and involvement on their campus. We sought to understand their persistence by examining their perception of supports on campus which ultimately influenced their experiences as undocumented students at

Norteno University.

Despite the risk involved with being identified as an undocumented student, participants showed interest and enthusiasm in sharing their stories. The interest in sharing their experiences was driven by their desire to create positive change for current and future undocumented students. The themes that emerged were 1) limited institutional support systems, 2) impact of student organization involvement, and 3) funding challenges.

Limited Institutional Support Systems

Participants found that campus faculty and staff served as both supports and challenges to their persistence. While limited faculty and staff knowledge of undocumented students' needs and restrictions frustrated participants, the presence of trusted and invested campus faculty and staff, once identified, were major supports. Unfortunately, not all faculty and staff provided the same level of knowledge and support, which led participants to have to navigate who they could rely on instead of experiencing universal support throughout campus.

While an institution may promote inclusion through policies and communication, the participants perceived inconsistency with faculty and staff members' knowledge and ability to provide support. For example, Isabella was struggling academically in her nursing program and also financially with an inability to meet deadlines for on-time payments. As a non-native English speaker,

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the material was hard to grasp at times. She shared:

I am facing a problem currently in my program in college which is my GPA. Sometimes, I think I should tell my advisor my story, but I, deep down, know that won't help because they won't understand and may not support me. Isabella, Anjana, and Alberto all stated that they also do not talk to anyone about their status.

Jadir took the opposite approach and disclosed his status, but did not perceive that the faculty member understood the importance of his status on his college experience. He shared, "I disclosed my situation to a person in my department, and they just didn't seem to really pay much importance to it." Jadir was vulnerable and sought validation of his identity as an undocumented student, but did not receive it. These faculty attitudes were also experienced by Rubi: "There are some people who try to ignore it. Most of the time, they just pretend like it's not a problem. To this day, students and staff think that there aren't problems for undocumented people." Raul found both sources of support and sources of disconnection with different campus entities:

I feel like I'm connected to certain departments like the School of Business, the Hispanic Student Union, and the Foundation, but then at the same time, I feel like I'm not connected at all to other departments. Like, Student Engagement, I don't know Student Government, honestly, and I don't think they care to know me.

Cesar did not feel that the campus supported him. He lived in fear that he would be deported and wanted his university to provide more support. "I don't think that they do enough to help us through school. I have my student group, my cousin, and some staff who do. If they were not here, I don't think I would be here." Jadir found gaps in staff members' knowledge of how to assist undocumented students:

I don't believe that they were prepared at all. People in financial aid, you tell them you're a DACA student, and they have no idea what that is. There hasn't been anything that says, hey, if you're an undocumented student, we have a meeting to help you out, to get the resources you need to come to college, and to stay in college, and to be successful in college.

Rogelio reiterated that individuals on campus are not educated enough on how to support students when he stated, "We do not have the same needs as other students, and people in departments such as financial aid don't understand that."

The participants only mentioned four people who they saw as advocates on campus. Two were Chicana/Latina administrators in student affairs and two were Chicana/Latina faculty members in social science disciplines. Raul shared:

I think there are certain people on campus that are super-resourceful like Magdalena, Violeta, and Dr. Dominguez, and people that are on that side of the school, but for the most part, I feel like the system

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doesn't really have the resources, or doesn't have all the answers to my questions.

In addition to the limited staff and faculty support, there were also limitations to spaces of support. While Rubi saw herself as a student just like any other (“I’m a 21-year-old girl, like anybody else, but without documents”), there are unique experiences that come with being undocumented and having an undocumented identity requires additional safe spaces, both physical and emotional. Norteno University, the site of this study, had a cultural center, but it was not specific for undocumented students.

Cesar stated, “I know we have a cultural center on campus, but if there was a center for undocumented students, which had staff that could help us, we can feel more support and like we belong.” While Rubi agreed and sought to “have an office where we could go that we wouldn’t feel so different.” Anjana reiterated, “If we had a space we can go to talk about our struggles with other people who understand, it would be a way to find others like us, and know we are not alone.” Jadir went on to say, “Safe spaces are important because we can be a collective and feel more connected to the campus, and hopefully find more resources on campus.” Despite having minoritized identities along with their peers, the participants viewed their undocumented status as salient and needing an additional layer of support in a physical space. Cultural centers provide avenues for students to not only feel safe while on

campus, but the ability to connect with other students, who may look like them or have similar backgrounds and experiences.

Impact of Student Organization Involvement

All eight participants were engaged in culturally-based student organizations, which provided them opportunities to develop relationships with students from similar backgrounds and feel a sense of belonging on campus (Rendón, 1994). Extensive research demonstrates the connection between student involvement and academic success (Astin, 1985; Kuh, 1995) and the participants emphasized the importance of their involvement in their persistence in college.

In deciding to become involved, several participants shared their reasons and how they learned about the organizations. Raul stated: “I decided to join my student organization to be a part of something that represented my culture,” so the presence of organizations that represent their cultural identities can begin the process of validation through visibility. Cesar’s previous family connections at the institution quickly engaged him with the organization: “My cousin was the one who told me to join because it would help me meet new people.”

Anjana shared how her co-curricular involvement helped her develop community and understand her situation as an undocumented student as well as the persistent struggles of her peers:

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I didn't know anybody else, but, once I started HSU and my Greek organization, it was like, oh, my God, there is more than just me on campus because I felt like I was the only one. It's another side of motivation and I realize there's more stories, and there are worse stories than mine, but people achieve where they want to go, and there are other dreamers, too, so I know I am not alone.

Anjana's engagement allowed her to see her experiences in relation to others, which provided a sense of strength knowing that others had even greater struggles but persisted.

Because participants recognized the value of involvement on campus, they also shared their desire to be even more involved, but barriers prevented it. One of the barriers noted by Rubi was travel restrictions for undocumented students. A challenge that student organization leaders need to address is how international travel limits and possibly alienates engagement of undocumented students. Rubi stated:

I love being a part of HSU because I am able to give back to the community and be more connected as a student to my campus. Unfortunately, because of my status, I am not able to do many of the things my peers do, like attend the Mexico trip we fundraised for.

Cesar also noted the value of involvement, but also the limitations he had:

Had I not been involved with HSU I wouldn't feel connected or that I belong on this campus. Although I can't be involved the way I would like to, I try to do what I can...Had it not been for me reaching out and joining organizations I don't think I would be as successful on campus.

Rogelio shared a similar experience with limitations on his time despite his desire to engage more fully in his organizations. Rogelio's level of involvement on campus was impacted by his priority of earning financial resources to attend school:

I just don't have time for anything. I don't even have time for myself. I have to work to pay for my school out of pocket. If I didn't have to work, I could be more involved and get the support that I need.

Cesar acknowledged the conflicts between paying for his education and simultaneously trying to fully engage in the opportunities available as part of the education:

Since I have to pay for school right away, I have to mostly try to work as many hours as I can. Then, it limits me from trying to volunteer other places, to try to, maybe, get hours to apply for scholarships, which they mostly require you to volunteer for an organization.

For the participants who were involved on campus, the positive impact of that involvement was made clear. Yet, for other participants, there were limited opportunities

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for involvement because of external financial and documentation issues. These tensions are difficult to navigate and ultimately necessitate that undocumented students consider how to best maximize their time available if they are to engage with student organizations.

Funding Challenges

Undocumented students' academic abilities allowed them to access to higher education, but the financial barriers and inability to utilize funding resources available to other students was a major difference in their experience and perception of support. Even prior to the financial relationship with a campus, participants were concerned with how to secure financial support from their families. When it came time for Isabella to continue her studies onto what, in Mexico, is university, she had to ask her parents as it was no longer free:

When I was going to ask my parents about continuing my education past high school, I was really scared. I was scared that they would tell me no. My parents allowed me to keep studying, and I began my journey two hours from home to keep going with my education. Unfortunately, it became really expensive and we could not afford it, even though my mother really tried.

Isabella then became financially responsible for her education without her family's ability to contribute.

Undocumented students may also incur additional costs to achieve their degree because of additional academic development

needed. Alberto had to spend the first year in college learning English with foreign exchange students from around the world. He was not ready for that extra expense of the English class, but he knew he could not give up "because you, as an immigrant, you can't be like the other students. You have to study harder at your class. You can't fail any class because you know you can't afford it." However, in attempts to pay for their education, some participants noted that their work detracted from their ability to be successful academically. Raul stated:

I was working and I had to take a full-time job because there were no part time jobs that would work with my schedule. I had to take a full-time job at a call center overnight. I started failing my classes just because I was running on three hours of sleep every night. And then I did end up failing that semester. If I had more funding that would not have happened.

Cesar also stated "I have to work a lot to pay school and pay my cousin who lent me money for school. That affects my classes because I can't get to class or do my homework all the time." Rogelio also experienced Cesar's pressures.

I don't do some homework. I'm fine taking a zero, I'm kind of satisfied sometimes because I'd rather sleep. I don't want to go to sleep until three, two in the morning every night. As I have to come home late from work and then have to wake up in the early in the morning.

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Another confounding financial concern arose for Isabella who wanted to pursue a degree that would require additional credits and thus additional funds. She felt her academic goals were impacted by her financial ability. Isabella stated, “Yes because of my major, the cost is going to affect me and I’m going to have to drop it. I have to take a lot of credits and it’s costly.”

The funding challenges created barriers to involvement and to accessing academic resources because of the time spent balancing work and being a college student. Rogelio stated that he did not feel academically prepared because he was not working to his full potential putting the effort in to do well. While there are programs such as TRiO that are designed to help students, particularly first-generation college students by offering academic preparedness workshops, tutoring, and study skills, undocumented students are not eligible for these services as they are funded through federal grant dollars. Moreover, the availability of alternative tutoring services on campus often conflicted with the limited amount of time working students have to be on campus.

In many ways, these types of financial challenges are unique for undocumented students because they are ineligible for

federal financial aid opportunities that are granted to other college students (Federal Student Aid, 2021). As the participants shared, the lack of financial means to pay for college led to concerns about being able to achieve academic goals, missed opportunities to utilize academic resources, and having to make decisions between work and study time.

Discussion and Recommendations

The themes align with the social and academic experiences in Nora’s (2002, 2003, 2006) Model of Student Engagement, which should be used more frequently to understand aspects of the college environment that contribute to the persistence of undocumented students. Participants highlighted the importance of campus community and advocates to help them engage, gain the strength to tell their stories, and discover their own resilience to contribute to persisting through college. The supportive staff and faculty experiences of participants emphasize the following aspects of Nora’s (2002, 2003, 2006) model: staff and faculty interactions, campus climate, and validating and mentoring experiences. However, while the institution had policies in place for undocumented students, participants did not view the support as campus-wide, but rather with specific entities they could count on one hand. The findings of



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this study further demonstrate the importance of hiring faculty and staff with an understanding of undocumented students' experiences or the ability to train faculty and staff to transform their perspectives to support undocumented students proactively and intentionally.

According to Southern (2016), "Student affairs professionals, faculty members, and other campus representatives play key roles translating policies set at the state and federal levels into the conditions undocumented college students experience" (p. 308). Therefore, when working with the undocumented student population, it is important that staff, faculty, and administrators are informed of resources and policies that assist these students reach completion. Gaps between policy and practice related to the needs of undocumented students must be closed to promote their persistence. Creating a culture of educating faculty and staff to meet these needs can contribute to undocumented students' persistence by extending their network of support (Nienhausser & Espino, 2017). Enhancing institutional undocu-competence (Tapia-Fuselier & Young, 2019; Valenzuela et al., 2015) can help provide an understanding of the diversity of undocumented students' backgrounds and experiences, financial support opportunities and restrictions, and legal structures inhibiting their academic experience.

Participants' involvement with various student organizations led to stronger connections to the campus, which contributed to persistence towards their degree. Specifically, culturally-based organizations provided participants with meaningful connections, which validated their presence and allowed them to create connections with others with an undocumented status. The main characteristics of student organization gatherings that support undocumented students can be extended to physical spaces. Cultural centers provide avenues for students to not only feel safe while on campus, but the ability to connect with other students, who may look like them or have similar backgrounds and experiences. Safe spaces on campus can range from cultural centers to administrative staff or faculty members' offices. Once these locations are identified, undocumented students begin to garner services at these locations that aid in the persistence. Information about safe spaces and people was shared informally among the network of undocumented student participants. Information necessary for undocumented students' persistence must not be haphazard; institutions should seek out safe and non-threatening opportunities for undocumented students to self-identify their status to ensure they are connected to resources, services, and supports early in their transition to the institution.

Considering the funding challenges explained by the participants, it is important to note that this study was conducted in a state where

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eligible undocumented immigrants can take advantage of in-state tuition. Still, the participants made clear that financial barriers are pervasive. If the study had been conducted in a state where undocumented students could not receive in-state tuition, we expect that this finding may be even more pronounced. With finances already a major issue related to access to higher education by historically excluded populations, the lack of available federal funding for undocumented students was a major issue identified as a barrier to their success in post-secondary education. Funding concerns impacted participants' abilities to engage with campus resources and involvement opportunities that are integral to their persistence.

This study emphasizes how undocumented students' financial need to work to support their education while in college further disadvantages their likelihood to persist as they must then sacrifice involvement opportunities due to limited time.

Undocumented students strive to contribute to their institutions and communities, so institutions should develop opportunities to combine involvement with earning funds for their education. Future research should focus on how to create financial structures that comprehensively meet undocumented students' needs for support, connection, and learning.

Conclusion

Recommendations for research and practice enable administration, faculty, and staff in higher education to not only hear undocumented students' voices, but also contribute to their efforts to develop and provide effective opportunities and institutional supports. The participants shared how involvement contributes to persisting to a college degree and described barriers to involvement that must be considered by higher education institutions. Intentionally engaging undocumented students in involvement opportunities on campus, particularly those relevant to their immigration status and cultural backgrounds, can contribute to their academic achievement. Finally, equipping all faculty and staff on campus with the tools and resources to support undocumented students would create an undocu-competent culture that seeks to promote their success in sustained and universal ways. 

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