**The Everlasting Battle: Undocumented Youth Navigating Higher Education**

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**Overview**

The primary goal of this paper is to provide insight on the lives of undocumented students at institutions of higher education in the United States. Research highlighted in these studies suggests that students encounter various soci-emotional factors impacting their identity development and their educational attainment. Students from this section will be an array of college-bound seniors, students at 4-year intuitions, undocumented students enrolled in community colleges, as well as high school students. Through narratives and qualitative studies authors inform us of the struggles faced by undocumented youth in our higher education system and speak on the areas of growth informing us of the constraints that our current system places on this marginalized population. In taking the time to learn about undocumented students we will be better able to serve the development and educational attainment of these aspirating students.

**Defining “*illegal*”**

Before immersing ourselves in the literature that examines undocumented student’s in the US higher education system, it is important to fully comprehend how this population gained such a negative connotation and became known as “illegal” immigrants and have thereafter been criminalized by the US language and policy.

Until 1890 there was no national immigration system or agency in the United States. Individual states enforced existing immigration laws until the US government began the federal inspections at Elis Island 1892. Suddenly certain groups found themselves in the “excluded” category like Chinese contract workers, prostitutes, and convicted criminals. 1907 formalized the inspection process requiring all entering immigrants coming by sea to pass through inspection. The 1924 Immigration Act established the quota system but also created the concept of “illegality” by making entry without inspection “illegal” and making deportability permanent and possible.

The earliest reference to “illegal” immigration referred to workers from China. This occurred directly after the passing of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. With the exclusion of Asians and the restrictions on southern and eastern Europe migration the 1920s, “illegal immigration” became the term most commonly referred to the persons who jumped ship (Chomsky, 2014). Mexicans where not considered immigrants until about 1965 and were exempted from immigration restrictions until this time.

Today however, the term “illegal immigrant” has become a commonality and most frequently refers to the largest population of undocumented immigrants, Mexicans and Guatemalans'. While there are many tales of immigrant’s journey to the United States the process of entering occurs one of two ways. Immigrants will enter *with* inspection or *without* inspection (Chomsky, 2014).

Mo, was born in Iran. At the age of 3 his father was accepted to study at the University of Michigan consequently moving his family to Ann Arbor Michigan. When his father finished his studies and his student Visa had expired they decided extend their stay. However, it won’t be until high school graduation that Mo will begin to understand the implications of his immigration status. (Chomsky, 2014; 31)

Children like Mo are a result of their parent’s actions, at no culpability, transgressing immigration laws they became undocumented without knowledge and against their will, unconscious of how this would affect every aspect of their life (Tirman, 2015). The students examined are all products of their parent’s action are a classified as “illegal” immigrants.

Moving forward with the literature this population will referred to as undocumented, unauthorized, immigrants, students, or scholars, and DREAMers to best align with viewpoints of many of the authors. Terminology referencing “illegal” immigrants denotes the assumption that world is naturally divided into countries and that every human being somehow *belongs* to one country or another” (Chomsky, 2014; 23).

Further examining the classifications and intersecting labels of undocumented children we find that they are often referred to as the 1.5 generation in literature. Until the 1980’s undocumented immigrants were mostly seasonal labor migrants who left their families in their countries of origin, traveling back and forth. Recent trends have shown that accompaniment of these workers has increased settlement and has changed what the immigrant family looks like in the US. Children that relocate with their families at an early age are essentially are forced to balance two worlds, fitting somewhere in between first and second generation. The youth in this category are not first generation because they had no input in migrating to this country and they are not second generation because they were born outside of the US and spent a portion of their childhood in another country. Despite the distinctions, students from this population generally align with the views of their native-born peers, valuing school, are encouraged to do well, and have high aspirations; however, they risk being marginalized into the shadows of society (Gonzales, 2009). A changing economy now holds occupations require a postsecondary education, so it is the utmost importance to provide undocumented students with the opportunity to attend and graduate from a college without the fears and challenges they presently encounter (ASHE Higher Education Report).

**Historical Context: Undocumented Students Access to Education in the US**

Prior to 1982 various school districts across the country tried to prohibit the entry of undocumented students from attending public schools. In 1982 access to education for undocumented students came in the form of the Plyer vs. Doe case ruling. The court indicated that denying these students this education would lead to a lifetime of hardship as they were powerless in seeking a resolution to citizenship (Perez, W. 2010). Although the court found value investing in public education for students K-12, the flawed system neglected the access to college and higher education became an elusive dream for these students with only about 10 percent of high school graduates enrolling in college (Fortuny, Capps, Passel 2007). William Perez’s “*Coursed and Blessed”* highlights the experience of Guillermo an undocumented student who shares some insight on being non-documented and the impact it played in his choice of post-secondary institution (Perez, Cortes, Ramos, & Coronado. 2010).

Being an undocumented student in the United States is like being “cursed and blessed” at the same time. Cursed, in that you are marginalized by society, and you have to live in fear almost every day. Blessed, in the fact that you use that experience, and you become a much better person because of every- thing that you have struggled with. You work ten times as hard as, maybe, somebody who takes it for granted because they were born in this country, or somebody who is a legal resident (Perez, Cortes, Ramos, & Coronado. 2010; 35)

Guillermo was labeled as a gifted student throughout his high school career, was admitted to UC Berkley and found himself turning down admission because he did not qualify for federal or institutional aid. As he exhausted all means to raise money for tuition he enrolled in community college due to its affordability and knew that this would become a stepping-stone to transfer to a four-year institution. In many ways community colleges have turned into the gateway to higher education due to the affordability (Perez, W. 2010). Anecdotes such as Guillermos call to question the access to higher education for a marginalized population and brings us to question what other factors hinder access for these students.

As a result of frustrations like Guillermo’s, various organizations across the country began pressing congress to introduce federal legislation that would provide a path to citizenship for undocumented students, THE DREAM ACT was introduced in 2011. The bill would require undocumented students have entered the United States prior to the age of 16, remained continuously in the US for a period of 5 years prior to the enactment of the bill, must have completed high school or an equivalent (i.e. GED), and finally have demonstrated good moral character.

If approved students would enter a 6 year conditional status that would allow them to complete a degree or serve in the military. However, the bill fell 5 votes short from passing in the senate. Since then no further efforts have been successful in establishing anything close to a pathway to citizenship for students. The DREAM Act was the legislation that gave way to the term DREAMers, many undocumented immigrants/ students now refer to themselves as DREAMers (Perez, 2012).

Most recently DACA (Differed Action for Childhood Arrivals) was introduced as an executive action by president Obama on June 15, 2012; a date chosen to honor the 30th anniversary of Plyer v. Doe. Under this executive DREAMers can now apply for temporary work permits, Social Security Numbers and protection from deportation.

This was a striking move by the president that validated the struggles facing this young population; “they are Americans in their heart, in their minds, in every single way but one-on paper” Obama said at his announcement of the executive order. Since then more than 600,000 have applied for DACA, this is estimated to be about half of those eligible and only 3% have been denied this permit. Students now say, “instead of worrying about deportation, we can now focus on our education, for our own benefit and the of this nation. Because we’re not leaving the US, this is our country” (Tirman, 2015; 103)

Some felt that DACA was a huge victory for this population however critics said this was not enough. DACA lacked a pathway to citizenship and did not provide enough support for undocumented students to persist at post secondary institutions, financial barriers were still an issue. One of the greatest hurdles for this population is access to financial resources to pay for college given that they are ineligible to to apply for FAFSA or any type of government aid. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act barred students access to financial aid for post secondary education. IIRAIRA (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act) reaffirmed a no access policy regarding any type of public financial aid for undocumented students in higher education (Chomsky, 2014) . Although neither of these policies ban undocumented students from attending an institution it does make it very challenging for them to enroll at institutions and this why we see enrollment in disproportionate numbers.

According to the 2007-2008 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 66% of all undergraduates receive some type of financial aid (Diaz-Strong, Gomez, Luna-Duarte, Meiner, 2011). Missing from this statistic are the number of students who are ineligible for any form of financial aid and are consequently invisible to nation although they account for 65,000 of students eligible to enroll in college. These are students who predominately stem from low-income families and are considered first generation. Authors from the Journal of Hispanic Higher Education argue that in fact these students are being *purged* from access to higher education (Diaz-Strong, Gomez, Luna-Duarte, Meiner, 2011). As defined by previous historical circumstances denial of resources has been marked as “underserving” and “criminal” these young undocumented migrants are facing some of greatest marginalization, ultimately limiting their success in life.

Unfortunately, household data is not available from this population to determine what their financial need would be but it can be inferred that many of parents of undocumented students come from low-income families given that they too have limited opportunity for prosperity without a Social Security Number (SSN). Limitations of not having a valid SSN are also seen in the denial of state and federal aid to pay for tuition meaning they must pay out of pocket the full cost of attendance. Tuition is a challenge for many low-income students a as whole, but undocumented students’ ineligibility for financial aid places them at further disadvantage given that they are unable to use federal resources to pay for education (Terriquez, 2014). Additionally, some students feel compelled to provide financial support to their families of origin which further complicates the issue of financial barriers (Fuligni and Pedersen 2002).

Data collected reinforces what many students articulate in personal narrative, that the greatest theme among those interviewed was financial resources scarcity. Even in states where students pay instate tuition rates this theme persists. In the United States there are 19 states that offer in-state tuition. Students who are offered in-state tuition see an average decrease in tuition by $8,249 annually which becomes a crucial deciding factor for students weighing their decisions on financial concerns (Nienhusser, 2013). These inclusive states require undocumented students to have attended U.S. primary and secondary schools for a certain number of years and have graduated from high school in that state in order to be grated this benefit. In addition, the majority of these states require DREAMers to sign an affidavit promising that they have applied or will apply to legalize their status before receiving benefits. States where in-state tuition is not an option undocumented students find themselves forced to reevaluate their school choice and opt to select institutions closer to home such as community colleges. It is important to know that there are also states who further deny access to undocumented students by not allowing in-state tuition but also have restrictive enrollment policies, states include Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina (Teranishi., Suárez-Orozco, C., & Suárez-Orozco, M., 2014). Research tells us that financial need not only impacts the decision making process but the persistence too (Nienhusser, 2013).

**Negative Rhetoric**

In a sense immigration is one of the most complex issues we have in politics, it a domestic, international, and global concern; involving culture, politics, and economics. Many are under the belief, “they are illegals, they are going to use our services” negligent to the fact the undocumented people also pay taxes via tax deductions and essentially many times over-paying since the cannot claim deductions. One students (Oscar) speaks up about his frustration with the misconception that undocumented individuals do not pay taxes he wishes people would know that he has an assigned tax ID number and states:

I pay my taxes. My parents pay their taxes. Each month, I look to see how much of my money goes to social security and other programs that I will never be able to utilize. We own our house. I am not a drain on the system. (Hernandez. S., Hernandez. I., Gadson.., Huftalin, Ortiz, Calleroz, Yocum-Gaffney, 2010; 77).

By 2011, 306 laws and resolutions have passed state legislatures restricting or excluding the presence of unauthorized immigrants in 43 states (Tirman, 2015). There is a negative stigma that is followed with paranoia and is greatly emphasized by our media outlets, referring to authorized people as welfare queens and drug smugglers. It is within these social contexts that students find themselves attempting to make strides to excel academically. Undocumented youth experience discriminatory actions as a group and as individuals, placing the tremendous task of reconciling their sense of belonging (Sullivan & Rehm, 2015). Negative connotations heavily influences people’s opinions consequently impacts the rhetoric used to shape policy negatively affecting the educational attainment of this population. Policies prohibiting educational achievement inevitably lead to disengagement from educational pursuits (Guidino, Nadeem, Kataoka & Lau, 2001).

**Limitations to College Access**

The effects of negative language severely impact legislation and tolerance of this population therefore we see direct impact in their access to higher education because their needs are neglected. Undocumented students are often faced with with challenges including minority status, poverty, low levels of education and discrimination (Guidino, Nadeem, Kataoka & Lau, 2001). Nearly 40% of undocumented students live below the poverty line this is compared to 17% of US born children (Perez, 2012) these differences in household income are greater resonated because they have more workers per household. Availability of quality jobs without a social security keeps these families living in the shadows. Simply not being able to apply for a license hinders families’ possibility of commuting to a job. For undocumented youth even the trivial things that *documented* people take for granted such as renting a movie, voting, getting into clubs and going into college are reminders of their differences. Youth quickly become mindful of who they can trust about disclosing information about their status.

Furthermore, amongst immigrants, mixed-status families are a commonality; they are defined as families with variety of legal statuses in the household. Data collected on this population revels that educational attainment of adult unauthorized immigrants differs significantly from that of US-born adults. For the purposes of their study (Passel, & Cohn., 2009) identified unauthorized immigrant adults from ages 25-64, and found them to have very low education levels. Nearly 23% have less than a 9th grade education and 18% have some high school, but not completed (Passel, & Cohn., 2009). Examining the resources available to undocumented youth when it comes to navigating college access we find that unfortunately their parents are not a reliable source of guidance. Unauthorized immigrants also have very low college completion, only 1 in 4 have attended or gradated from college. Respectively this compares to 61% of US born adults (Passel, & Cohn., 2009). Ultimately these factors impact their children and undocumented youth are forced to seek outside resources in order to make college a reality.

The postsecondary outcomes for undocumented students are hard to assess. Although no reliable study documents where undocumented students attend college, available research shows that they are overrepresented in two-year colleges, proportionate to their four-year college or university attendance and their native peers (Gibson, 2003; Kurleander, 2006; Person and Rosenbaum, 2006).

Struggling students find that the role of community colleges has become the backbone of higher education in the United States especially for the non-traditional ones. Since their appearance over 100 years ago community colleges have been charged with the task to prep students to transfer to 4-year institutions and to train them for the workforce. In particular, for undocumented students this becomes the most feasible option given the low tuition rates, convenient locations, and mobility between full and part-time enrollment.

As continuous efforts are being made to level the playing field for these eager students. community colleges seem to hold the key in allowing undocumented students set foot in a higher education classroom. Community colleges in many ways are the right fit for undocumented students because they are able to alternate between fulltime and part time enrollment allowing them to lower the cost of attendance. They are institutions of higher learning for a fraction of the price, making them economically accessible for students like Jessica who is now a public interest lawyer and describes her experience at a community college.

My whole time at community college was influential because it was when I became aware of the limitation that my status had and obviously that changed me. It made me realize that it wasn’t just me, it was a bunch of people. So that was very powerful and led me to immigration type work (Perez, 2012, 128)

For some students, like Jessica, community colleges can serve as a positive space to learn to better navigate resources to then be able to transfer however others have a slightly different perspective. Community colleges account for a large portion of the education of undocumented students and yet there is a lag in the resources available to this population. Their mixed legacy community colleges have been seen as both gateways and gatekeepers of higher education. They are open to students may not any other way to a bachelor degree and yet they hinder the process of degree completion which can be very limiting in their efforts to graduate (Perez, 2012).

**Mental Health and Stressors**

As a result of such frustration, immigrant youth reported much greater exposure to stressors than their native born counterparts. A great portion of their stress can be related to immigrant-related trauma in part this can be due to their family’s journey of coming to US. Traumas can include robbery, physical assault, sexual assault and frightening pursuits of boarder officials (Guidino, Nadeem, Kataoka & Lau, 2001). To an extent research suggest that negative impacts of illegality are multi- dimensional, creating bureaucratic, financial, social and health-related challenges that might interfere with students’ ability to stay in school (Terriquez, 2014;1306). Being undocumented shapes students lives in everyway imaginable. In particular undocumented Latina and Latino immigrant college student are not only affected by typical environmental factors such as poverty, violence, lack of resources, and dis- crimination that affect a large percentage of low-income minority children (Kozol, 1991, 1995, 2005), but they also suffer from outside systemic barriers that prevent them from enjoying all of the social and financial benefits society has in place for authorized citizens (Perez, Cortes, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). Irene describes some of the frustrations she battles with in defending her status:

We’re not criminals, or we’re not trying to steal anything from anybody. It’s just that we want to continue the dream that our parents started when they brought us here for a better future. So it’s . . . really hard when some people don’t know about it and they say, . . . “Oh, you must be weird, you must be an alien. You don’t belong in this world.” So it’s hard because it’s like you find people that will put you down, and you’re like, “Okay, should I continue? Is this going to get harder, or this is going to get better?”

Irene is not alone in feeling a sense of rejection and hopelessness. Her views express the struggle of many students who daily need to be reminded that they have to continue fighting for their education.

**Looking for Support**

At the high school level there are efforts being made to educate these students about their options. The limited knowledge their parents possess places a great responsibility on the student to become aware of scholarships and resources they can take advantage of to make college more affordable. It becomes essential for high school staff to develop a rapport with this group so they can feel at ease discussing issues related to their documented status (Nienhusser, 2013). So many of theses students do not need reaffirmation that they will succeed their natural drive really takes care of this however for students who were fortunate enough to have someone to support at the high school level we see that they are able to release some of the stress and share their accomplishments with professionals, giving them an extra push to do well (Perez 2012). Many of them reflect on the influence a few people had on their post secondary attainment. Penelope describes the influence one of her teachers had on her:

He got a guy from California University to do college awareness with us. He actually got him to come to our classroom and tell us about college opportunities. That really had an impact on me. I started thinking about going to college rather than finishing high school and getting a hob. He had guest speakers. Most of them were college educated people. Some of them were community leaders (Perez, 2012; 36).

This student’s aspirations grew directly of the extra measures and attention one of her teachers had for his students. Influential teachers are able to set high expectations and increase their confidence. In a similar way counselors also played a significant role, Adolfo describes:

Nobody in my family has been to college, so no one knows, so I would just go ask her all those questions. She probably got tired of me. She really heled me, telling me about fee waivers, about scholarships, about websites where you go to apply for college (Perez, 2012; 37).

Narratives such as the ones described provide optimism for such a vulnerable population. Unfortunately, when we examine their adaptation to campus spaces we find that they are left searching for support systems and there appears to be a disconnect between campus professionals and administrators. With respect to this issue, students have reported that professors did not even know how being undocumented affected their performance. The National Forum has gathered data on the specific approaches campuses took with respect to undocumented students and it became abundantly clear that there was a tremendous amount of uncertainty regarding administrative practices and the stance of the university in reference to these students. In particular, the research conducted demonstrated that 17% of financial aid, 10% of admissions officers and registrars did not know or were not aware of the particular stance on their college with respect to undocumented students’ enrollment (Barnhardt, Ramos, Reyes, 2013). Students express a fear of university administrators not being receptive and consequently resulting in student’s unwillingness to trust educators, this they revealed, was a significant impediment to their educational experience (Hernandez. S., Hernandez. I., Gadson., Huftalin, Ortiz, Calleroz, Yocum-Gaffney, 2010). As we can imagine this can be very troubling for students searching for the best option to enroll or persist for the following term. Given the lack of knowledge on behalf of campus personal students are less able to make an informed decision about their college choice and may be misdirected to the community college route. The disconnect between school personal and students ultimately becomes a disservice to students. At first glance one would imagine that administrative practices would be clearly outlined by statute but the reality is quite different.

Other areas of disconnect stem from of Hispanic Serving Institutions. It may seem logical to imply that some of the leaders in fostering undocumented student success would be these special serving institutions the reality is unintentionally the opposite. Given recent trends of immigration suggesting that the majority of undocumented immigrants are Latino we imply that these institutions of higher education must be providing an abundance of resources to fulfill their students needs. Unlike the *other* minority serving institutions who were explicitly created for the sole purpose of advancing the specific minority populations the area of higher education such as Historically Black Colleges, Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions, and Tribal Colleges. Statistics tell us that 53% of all HSI’s are community colleges (Benítez and DeAro, 2004) given the institutions original purpose is non-specific to the Latino population there is a lag in policy and resources in comparison to the quickly changing demographics.

And while there is little to be said about the programs or facilities they have in place there is federal funding that is readily becoming available for schools to apply and better address the needs of their growing demographics and among those needs, begin building rhetoric about undocumented students on their campus. Other notable initiatives and areas of support include professional organization such as ACAPA who have taken a stance in solidarity with educating undocumented students and commit to ensuring that educators have access to resources to support the learning of this population. The ACAPA *Voices* newsletter published a synopsis on the the struggles of undocumented college-bound students. The hope is that student affairs educators will use these resources and stay true to their commitment to educational opportunity for all (Barnhardt, Ramos, Reyes, 2013)

**Secrets to Survival**

Students interviewed in many of these studies reported creative ways to build a sense of inclusion and took a proactive approach to their higher education. They were intentional about their learning and took maximum advantage to the opportunities presented to them. They valued the opportunity of experience and learning above all else. Without incentive many of students on campus participated in activities such as volunteer work rather than paid positions. Nonetheless they saw this as an opportunity for development (Hernandez. S., Hernandez. I., Gadson., Huftalin, Ortiz, Calleroz, Yocum-Gaffney, 2010; 77). Such high levels of participation stem back to middle school and high school customs. Undocumented students are involved in an array of leadership positions in clubs that existed at their school but they also took initiative to begin organizations that they saw a need for and this carried onto their respective campuses (Perez, 2012). While applying for internships was a direct result of fear of being asked for a Social Security Number, it forced many to think outside the box and determine creative ways to address this challenge. But not all students were as proactive about their limited access to internships one student shared how this fear delayed her degree completion:

I get scared of applying for scholarships. I still haven’t done my internship in broadcasting because I’m scared that whenever I get to go to a radio station, they might ask me for a social security card, and that I won’t be able to get a job if I get to get my degree. That’s my biggest thing. I do get depressedand I get disappointedthat, you know, I am doing all this work, and for me to graduate and not be able to work in the field that I want. (Perez, 2012; 54).

These emotions often are derived from experiences of discrimination, anti-immigrant sentiment, fear of deportation, and systemic barriers such as ineligibility for college financial assistance. Studies found that some students combated these native feelings by becoming involved in areas of student government. Some found this as a way to be able to positively contribute to society (Hernandez. S., Hernandez. I., Gadson., Huftalin, Ortiz, Calleroz, Yocum-Gaffney, 2010; 77).

**Conclusions**

Immigration is in fact one of the most complex issues facing our country today, it affects the lives of so many nationally, internationally, and as a society as a whole. Further complicating the intense dialogue that centers around immigration reform is that of undocumented students who at no fault of their own were brought to this country in an authorized manner. As they grow up they believe they are American and it is not until the early stages of adolescence that they begin to see the significant distinctions from that of their native born peers. One of the most significant ways that the undocumented population remains a marginalized group is through education. It is easily agreeable that the key to success and social mobility is education, for this reason we strongly encourage students to go to college, in particular we emphasize this point to our first generation/ low income students. However, this looks a little different for undocumented students who have to surpass many obstacles in order to be able to enroll in post secondary institutions. Their financial barriers place a huge hindrance in their enrollment rates and show us a common trend of continual stopping out. I believe that our nation is failing our undocumented citizens, raised Americans and treated as equals until the time they reach early adolescence. Laws permit that they enroll grades K-12, they become educated, high achieving individuals and are forced to come to halt. These students are abruptly no logger supported and forced to join the workforce for below acceptable wages. Undocumented scholars are capable of achieving tremendous mile-stones they are being admitted to four-year institutions across the country and still our laws prohibit financial support for them to persist. They are denied scholarship consideration and students loan approval. Very few people in the US are capable or affording the rising costs in tuition and yet in many stories we hear of students paying course by course only what they can afford to pay at the time ultimately prolonging their time at the university, absorbing all costs out of pocket.

I believe that policy need to be aligned in a way the revisits the equity of our education system. By continuing to bar and marginalize enrollment for these students we are neglecting a whole generation of growth.

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