



Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume 13 Issue 1

2019

AMAΕ Open Issue

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La Lucha Sigue: Making the Case for Institutional Support of Undocumented and DACAmented Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

This project used a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach to explore the experiences of undocumented and DACAmented college students in Southern Nevada. CBPR is a collaborative approach to research that involves members of the community being studied to be a part of the entire research process and builds on the strengths of the community. Relying heavily on the knowledge and voices of our community partners, the UndocuNetwork, we conducted interviews with undocumented and DACAmented student activists about their experiences in higher education. We discuss the findings from in-depth interviews with twelve undocumented and DACAmented student activists who are leading the movement at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas to make higher education more accessible and supportive of undocumented and DACAmented students. The questions were written broadly to foster discussion on three main topics: institutional activism, access and barriers to student resources, and campus climate. Participants shared a sense of responsibility to engage in institutional change work, and embraced their agency and exhibited resiliency for navigating higher education through their peer support network. We argue that undocumented and DACAmented students in the UndocuNetwork fill a gap within the institution in sharing resources and helping each other navigate higher education.

Keywords: DACA, Undocumented Students, Higher Education, Immigration, CBPR

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24974/amae.13.1.445>

Introduction

It is estimated that 98,000 undocumented students are expected to graduate from high school each year nationally. In Nevada alone, about 1,000 undocumented students graduate high school annually (Zong & Batalova, 2019). Of these 98,000, five to ten percent enroll in a college or university, and a mere one percent graduate (Contreras, 2009; Passel & Cohn, 2009; Russell, 2011). Nevada has one of the fastest growing immigrant populations, however, research regarding this population is almost non-existent. As a result, in Nevada, we have a limited empirical understanding of the experiences of college-bound and college attending undocumented and DACAmented students, and we lack comprehensive institutionalized resources across the state.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the 2012 Executive Order, offered protections from deportation and a work permit to qualifying undocumented youth. DACA was issued by President Barack Obama on the 30th anniversary of *Plyler v. Doe*—this court case stipulated that a state cannot constitutionally deny a child their right to attend a tuition-free, U.S. public school for grades K-12 based on their immigration status (Batalova & Mittelstadt, 2012). Among potential beneficiaries of DACA are 1.76 million students often referred to as “DREAMers.” However, in September of 2017, DACA was rescinded and currently, only renewals are accepted, dropping the number of actual beneficiaries to 660,880 (USCIS, 2019). Although these students are foreign-born, they have been raised in the United States. Yet, they do not have access to the same postsecondary educational benefits, such as federal grants and loans that U.S. born students and legal permanent residents have access to through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Although DACA is far from being the solution to equitable access to financial resources for higher education, it has proven beneficial for undocumented students who qualified by providing them a quasi-legal status. DACA has also positively impacted its beneficiaries by increasing feelings of belonging, access to formal employment, and higher college-going rates (Abrego, 2018; Gonzales, 2016).

However, the rescission of DACA on September 5, 2017 terminated the program as it was originally conceived. The program has continued under tenuous direction after many lawsuits were filed to question the legality of the Trump administration’s decision and is now scheduled to go to the Supreme Court on November 12, 2019. Our undocumented and DACAmented students are not only facing uncertainty while trying to navigate higher

education, but they are also being attacked by anti-immigrant sentiment at the national level. Upon the announcement of the rescission of DACA, Attorney General Sessions claimed that DACA as an executive order was unconstitutional and further claimed that DACA was an amnesty policy which had negatively impacted the employment opportunities of “hundreds of thousands of Americans” (Romo, Stewart, & Naylor, 2017) adding to the narrative of immigrants as a threat to American prosperity.

In the local context, undocumented and DACAmented students experience periods of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion through policies and practices within the institution and through the local government. In 2007, Nevada Senate Bill 415 was proposed in an effort to ban in-state tuition or state-based aid to undocumented students (Senate Bill 415, 2007). While this bill did not pass, there is still no state legislation in place that protects undocumented students officially. Currently, the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) Board of Regents (BoR) has adopted the practice of granting in-state tuition to students who graduate from a Nevada high school. In addition to these specific policies and practices within the institution, locally the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department has signed on to participate in the Secure Communities 287g agreement which allows certain law enforcement officers to perform tasks that are reserved for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents (ICE, 1996). But there has been a shift in policies in support of undocumented immigrants in Nevada. In 2013, the state Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) began issuing “Driver’s Authorization Cards” to residents who could not meet proof of identity requirements to obtain a standard driver’s license, thereby, providing an opportunity for undocumented residents to drive legally and making Nevada one of 14 states issuing similar authorization cards (McDonald, 2017). Alexis Silver (2018) discusses the ways in which undocumented immigrants experience inclusion and exclusion, the aforementioned policies and practices being one example. While there are moments where there is explicit language to exclude undocumented immigrants there are also unofficial practices like tuition equity for undocumented immigrants that contribute to the multilayered and varied experiences of undocumented immigrants. It is because of the current climate that we continue this work in an effort to create community-based recommendations for Nevada’s institutions of higher education to standardize support for their undocumented and DACAmented students.

Literature Review

There is a growing body of literature that examines the experiences of undocumented students in higher education. Much of it finds that, while navigating college, undocumented and DACAmented students report exclusionary experiences and institutional neglect (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011, 2016). These isolating experiences can begin early, as undocumented students are deciding whether or not to attend college. Educational professionals, such as high school and college counselors, are not proficient in federal, state, and local policies that may affect undocumented student access and admission to postsecondary institutions (Nienhusser, Vega, & Carquin, 2016). This lack of knowledge and misinformation continues once undocumented students attend college (Abrego, 2006; Barnhardt, Reyes, Rodriguez, & Ramos, 2016; Contreras, 2009; Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017; Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015; Murillo, 2017).

In addition to finding limited information about how to navigate the admissions process, equally concerning is the lack of access to financial resources for undocumented students. Undocumented and DACAmented students are not eligible for federally funded programs, such as the Pell Grant or federal student loans. This ineligibility creates uncertainty about paying for tuition which can affect a student's persistence and decision to attend college (Abrego, 2006; Adams & Boyne, 2015; Contreras, 2009; Nienhusser et al., 2016). State and local policies also vary by state, making access to financial assistance inconsistent and unreliable (Silver, 2018). In states like Nevada, there is no legislation that determines whether undocumented and DACAmented students are eligible for in-state tuition and state funding, as opposed to its geographical neighbor, California, which has the California DREAM Act, providing access to state financial aid and opening up grants for undocumented students. As a result, access to monetary aid also varies based on where the student attends college.

In spite of the barriers to admissions and financial aid that undocumented and DACAmented students encounter while pursuing higher education, some remain a resilient group of students (Gonzales, 2008). In addition to navigating a system that was not built to facilitate their success, undocumented and DACAmented students exhibit resiliency through taking on roles of activists and advocates for others (Gonzales, 2008). They empathize and want to pay it forward to ensure the success of students, like themselves, who are forced to face obstacles while pursuing a postsecondary degree (Abrego, 2008; Aguilar, Marquez, &

Romo, 2017; Borjian, 2018; Craven, Montero, Ramirez, M. Robles, & R. Robles, 2017; DeAngelo, Schuster, & Stebleton, 2016; Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2008).

Our study contributes to the growing body of literature on the experiences of undocumented students in higher education by using a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach to examine college access for undocumented and DACAmented students in a much understudied state like Nevada. To date, we have found that much of the research on undocumented and DACAmented students' access to higher education occurs in California, Texas, and New York. These states have legislation in support of college-bound undocumented and DACAmented students and have enacted state Dream Acts like the California Dream Act, which we previously noted, and have resource centers for these students. Unlike California, New York, and Texas, Nevada is both unstipulated in legislation for postsecondary benefits for undocumented students and at the time of the study, there were no institutionalized efforts to support undocumented students; yet, it is home to the largest proportion of undocumented and DACAmented immigrants in the country. In Nevada, 7.2% of our population is undocumented, compared to the 3.5% national average (Brown & Stepler, 2016).

Methodology

A Community Based Participatory Approach

Southern Nevada is home to three higher education institutions, each has recently earned their Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) designation. While collectively they have various resources available for undocumented students—an alternative need determination form that replaces the FAFSA for establishing financial need, a scholarship specifically for undocumented students, a legal clinic that provides support to undocumented students, multiple registered student organizations (RSO), a website with resources for undocumented students, and language designating that some resources are also available for undocumented students—at the time of this study between 2016 and 2018 not one institution had a resource center with staff specifically assigned to serve undocumented students.

This study is part of the Nevada Undocu, Education, Visibility, and Opportunity (NUEVO) Project, a larger initiative that was designed to help increase access to resources for undocumented students in higher education in southern Nevada. We use a larger community-based participatory research (CBPR) project approach to this work that is also inspired by

Freirian approaches in which we engaged community members who already possess the knowledge on how to transform the structures that perpetuate further marginalization through action (Freire, 1970). Our CBPR team is a partnership between researchers from Service-Learning Initiative for Community Engagement in Sociology (SLICES) and leadership from the UndocuNetwork, a registered student organization at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) which was founded to support undocumented students' success in college.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation defines CBPR as, “a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings” (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2009). Though there is a spectrum of CBPR practices and a variety of community partner participation across individual projects, the NUEVO Project emerged out of a long-term collaboration between the UndocuNetwork and SLICES. We began our work together in 2015 as part of a service-learning course taught in the Department of Sociology called *Ethnic Groups in Contemporary Societies*. The projects with UndocuNetwork have examined resources for undocumented students in higher education and have documented the best practices from other colleges and universities that have institutionalized resources for undocumented students. The projects were first framed as small CBPR projects. Each semester the student research team would complete a literature review, collect data, participate in the RSOs community and campus initiatives, and disseminate their findings in a report to the UndocuNetwork and at UNLV's undergraduate research fair. Through our continued collaboration as the NUEVO Project, we were able to bring this project to life and include community member researchers in every step of the process, from the early stages in 2016 of the study design to the dissemination of findings in public presentations and this article in 2018. The NUEVO project was comprised of four team members—our Principal Investigator who is a white woman engaged in racial justice work through her research, two DACAmented community research partners who are also undocuactivist students, and myself, a second-generation immigrant Latina graduate student.

The CBPR approach was important to this project because community members' voices helped us more accurately define our focus, including the operationalization of our key concepts. It allowed us to access an increasingly hard-to-reach population given the assault on undocumented immigrants during the Trump presidential campaign and presidency. It also helped ensure the protection and the comfort of our study participants, and made the

production and ownership of knowledge a shared experience across institutional researchers and communities. We began by attending UndocuNetwork meetings before having our own informal small-group meetings. We then met with our community research partners to define the scope of the project, the goals of the project, the research question, and the key concepts that guided the project. When meeting with community members to define our key terms, we expanded our study's definition of resources for undocumented students in higher education from largely academic based, such as scholarships, to include more community-based resources, such as mental health and legal resources for both students and their families.

Research Design

Our research question was: how do undocumented and DACAmented students navigate access to resources for higher education? The sample for this study was very specific. At the time of data collection, all 12 participants (see Table 1) who were interviewed were actively engaging in institutional activism at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), a large state university in the southwestern US with HSI and Minority Serving Institution (MSI) designation. Through their activism for undocumented and DACAmented students, they advocate and petition for resources as well as a more inclusive and welcoming college campus environment. They are not only active on campus, but also engage in various forms of activism within the larger Las Vegas community and at the national level.

We originally planned to conduct focus groups in which undocumented and DACAmented students would discuss their experiences navigating access to resources. Using Wilkinson's (1999) methodology, we had intended to use focus groups to create an environment where the students would have a space to begin a collective sense-making of undocumented student needs and have control over the narrative and definition of their issues. However, when we began the recruitment process just after Trump's election in 2016, we found it difficult to schedule the focus groups due to varying levels of comfort from participants about disclosing their status among peers and the availability of students as well. After several unsuccessful attempts to schedule focus groups, we began interviewing participants individually or in small-groups, depending on the needs and requests of each individual participant. Our semi-structured interviews followed a set of questions developed as part of an interview protocol that was written broadly to foster discussion on three main topics: institutional activism, access and barriers to student resources, and campus climate. We audio recorded

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Name	Sex	Age	Country of Origin	Education	Immigration Status
Marcela	F	21	Mexico	Enrolled in B.A.	DACA
Araceli	F	21	Mexico	Enrolled in B.A.	DACA
Mario	M	21	Colombia	Enrolled in B.A.	DACA
Luchita	F	22	Mexico	Enrolled in B.A.	DACA
Ximena	F	22	Mexico	Enrolled in B.A.	DACA
Giovana	F	22	Mexico	Enrolled in B.A.	DACA
Adelita	F	23	Mexico	Enrolled in M.A.	DACA
Ulises	M	24	Mexico	Enrolled in B.A.	Undocumented
Modesto	M	26	Mexico	Enrolled in M.A.	Undocumented
Luz	F	27	Mexico	Earned B.A.	DACA
Carmen	F	28	Mexico	Enrolled in B.A.	Undocumented
Iliana	F	28	Mexico	Enrolled in B.A.	DACA

Key: B.A. = Bachelor of Arts, M.A = Master of Arts, DACA = Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

Note. Participants were assigned a pseudonym (N= 12)

each interview session that lasted between 60 to 120 minutes. In this article, we discuss the findings from eight interviews with all twelve participants living in southern Nevada—five individual interviews and three small-group interviews. Of the three small-group interviews, one had 3 participants and the other two had two participants each. Our study participants all identify as undocu activists and are engaging in institutional activism with the intent of making college in southern Nevada more accessible for undocumented students.

Community Driven Data Collection and Analysis

One of our community partner research team members scheduled all of the interviews for the study. As part of our IRB protocol, at no point was the name of any participant

documented. Our UNLV research team members were notified of the time and location and arrived without knowing who they were interviewing. This strategy ensured that we did not document the names of our participants either in written or electronic spaces (i.e. Google calendar). Having the community partner actively engaged in the project in this way helped us connect with undocumented students that we did not know personally and also facilitated the preservation of the privacy of the participants. Our community partner was both present for and actively involved in the interview process for each of our interviews as well as the transcription of the interviews. The PI and graduate student worked closely with the community research partners to do a brief training on interviewing and building good interview questions. The training was not extensive because the community partner researchers were also undergraduate students who had training through their methods course and participation in the SLICES course where they led and conducted small CBPR projects.

Once all of the interviews were transcribed, the research team met to hand code the transcripts and identify emerging themes individually. After we got through the first round of coding, the PI gave a brief overview on condensing the themes into larger codes, which we then worked on individually. We then came back as a team and utilized a white board to write out all of the themes and codes we had developed. From there we found four main themes, two of which are discussed in this paper. It is important to note that we invited all participants to the analysis retreat but most had other obligations that prevented them in participating in this part of the project. Collaboration with the community member researchers were important because it helped us more rigorously interpret the findings based on the experiences of undocumented students in higher education. After coding and identifying the major themes, a draft of the manuscript was sent to each of our participants for a member check with a request that they review it for: accuracy interpreting their interviews, thorough protection of their individual identities, and the inclusion of all relevant information in the manuscript. The member check process took about six weeks. Once we received the feedback, we began incorporating their comments into the manuscript and began the revision process alongside our community partners.

Findings and Discussion

From the larger study we agreed on four overarching themes: 1) participants feel a sense of responsibility to engage in institutional change work, 2) a shared experience of

institutional neglect, 3) the need for resources and support varied based on undocumented or DACAmented status, and 4) the participants embraced their agency and exhibited resiliency in navigating UNLV. Others have also found institutions of higher education are not adequately supporting undocumented students, and therefore, these students are forced to navigate and advocate for themselves (Gonzales, 2008; Pérez, Cortes, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). Our participants all expressed a shared experience of institutional neglect (Gonzales, 2016; Pérez et al., 2010) and a sense of responsibility to engage in work for institutional change dedicated to the development of resources and guidance for undocumented and DACAmented students (Gonzales, 2008) in southern Nevada. While navigating a less than transparent institution, all of our participants embraced their agency and used their collective identity to be social change makers (Gonzales, 2008; Seif, 2004) and exhibiting resiliency (Pérez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009; Gámez et al., 2017) while in college in southern Nevada. This article focuses on two themes: the sense of responsibility to engage in institutional change work and the ways the participants embraced their agency and exhibited resiliency through their work as part of the UndocuNetwork.

Sense of Responsibility, Isolation, and Collective Support

Throughout our interviews, many participants posited that their own experience in navigating higher education is what influenced them to become involved in activism on campus regarding undocumented student access to higher education (Seif, 2004). They expressed that they were responsible for finding out whether they were eligible to attend college, whether it be a community college or a four-year institution, because the experts in high school and college, their counselors, were not sure if undocumented students could pursue higher education (Abrego, 2008; Gonzales, 2010; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017). While others have found the support of teachers and counselors, or others who have gone through the process invaluable (Enriquez, 2011; Gámez et al., 2017), our participants shared that was not their experience in transitioning from high school to college. Ulises, a then senior at UNLV reflected on his experience with a high school counselor in seeking information regarding eligibility to attend college as an undocumented person. He shared:

Now that I'm thinking about it, my high school counselor was very ignorant about it.

There was a counselor for ESL students. You know, he never really talked to us about

that. I think I remember he didn't even ... he wasn't even sure, you know, what he was talking about. He wasn't even really sure about it.

Ximena, a junior at UNLV, shared that she did receive support, but her counselor was still unsure. She mentions:

I've been in that place, right, I've been that student that's just thinking "Oh I can't go to college" and I had to have one person just one person tell me "yes you can!" I didn't realize about my situation much less at my high school but my counselor told me "yeah you can go to college, I think" you know she wasn't very sure at the time.

In each of the participants' experience, even when they were given information, it was unreliable and unconfirmed at best. The majority mentioned that when they inquired about their eligibility to attend college, they were given incorrect information since most were told that they could not attend. While Nevada has no clear policy on postsecondary benefits for undocumented students, it does not ban their admission to any college or university.

Our participants express that they engage in activism in support of undocumented student access to higher education because they felt alone in their own struggle. They emphasized that they wanted to meet others who were like them so that, together, they could create change (Abrego, 2008) and show others they were not alone and wanted to give back in this way (Borjian, 2018). They wanted to show there were other undocumented folks who were students at UNLV and needed access to resources so that they could also advocate for change, making visibility of others who are undocumented an empowering experience that has the potential to connect them to a network of other undocumented students and assert their agency (Corrunker, 2012; Gonzales, 2008). Adelita, a UNLV graduate, while reflecting on why she participated in activism through the UndocuNetwork shared:

I think that also in trying to create institutional change, I had this need to connect with other people that were going through the same things and to not feel alone... I wanted to meet people, you know, and feel not alone in this struggle. Because, when you're alone and you're trying to create this change it feels like nothing is happening. But when you have other people with you, you can complain, you can vent, you can be happy together, you know?

This renewed sense of solidarity has inspired and pushed many of our participants to continue fighting for educational equity. It also allows for a shared space to create joy, keep hope alive,

and share in the victories when change begins along with increasing feelings of belonging and membership (Aguilar et al., 2017). Adelita reflects on her experiences and realizes that she has a responsibility to other undocumented students and states:

What drives me is hope, right, like hope that we are creating some kind of dent on this issue and we are calling attention at least to something. I think what pushed me was community members and the administration and other staff members... So, it was like all the questions I was continuously being asked, like *you can't... how am I gonna not find the answer to your question?* How do I do that? How do I completely ignore you and be like well I guess it's whatever? *Nooo!* And I just can't do that! Because of that I start getting more knowledge and then it's like if I am already doing this then I might as well start doing this. But then, like I mentioned, the community starts looking up to you.

Furthermore, our respondents constantly emphasize having an added responsibility to themselves and others (Oliver, 1984) who are DACAmented and undocumented. While most would say that they enjoy what they do, they also share that being a resource also comes with its own set of challenges and pressure. Ximena shares:

Just also creating knowledge can be very heavy. Like people will ask us do you need a social security to have this, to go to school, and if you say yes then that is dangerous. Because, you know, it's a student's life... whatever comes out of your mouth can completely change a person's life or it can completely destroy it especially if they are DACA or undocumented... That's the biggest fear that I have and then what if I forget, I mean, I forget a lot. People ask me a question and if I never reply and their life depended on it, I fucked up. Like, I did that. I caused their issues and it sucks. It's like the worst thing.

Nonetheless, this sense of community has empowered them and has created an opportunity to provide others like them with more guidance. But this is further complicated for these knowledge holders because misinformation in any case for other undocumented or DACAmented students can be incredibly life altering. Navigating higher education is not an easy feat for anyone, and based on our findings, we would argue that campus personnel have done little to help undocumented students find information that is reliable and trustworthy. The activism as a result of their sense of responsibility to others leads to a model of empowerment (Enriquez, 2011) where undocumented students engage in this type of work for

the betterment of others in their position instead of expectations of mutuality. In addition, this type of institutional change work bolsters their social capital and networks (Aguilar et al., 2017).

The Role of UndocuNetwork: Academic Resiliency and Agency through Peer Networks

A major role in facilitating the process of gathering resources on campus is played by the UndocuNetwork on campus, a student organization whose mission is to empower and find resources for undocumented students. Many of the participants reported a primary source of information about resources that are available to them comes either from direct conversations with UndocuNetwork members or by browsing the group's Facebook page. Having a connection to the UndocuNetwork also helped alleviate the sense of alienation that many once felt. The UndocuNetwork was formally established after campus protests in solidarity with the University of Missouri in 2015. Up until then, UNLV had no space for undocumented folks on campus and had not even acknowledged their existence. As a result, a few students came together and created a manifesto that allowed them to start important conversations while being the knowers, the change makers, and a source of support for undocumented students.

The group of students we interviewed are very resilient; they have persevered and have found ways to make it through many challenges. They are often their own knowledge makers and have created a network within the community to find resources for others and themselves that extend beyond education (Suárez-Orozco, Hernández, & Casanova, 2015; Montiel, 2016). Pérez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortez (2009) further argue that academic resilience relies on protective and environmental resources—that is what many of our participants consider the UndocuNetwork, a protective resource. Many of the participants expressed their gratitude for having an organization like UndocuNetwork around to help them navigate their undergraduate career. MariCarmen a senior, shared with us that even though she only found the UndocuNetwork in her last two semesters they were life changing. She goes on to say:

I mean really, UndocuNetwork has taught me more about my situation than, I don't know, than literally anything. UndocuNetwork has taught me more about my situation as a college undocumented student than the actual school has.

To many of the members of UndocuNetwork, it sometimes seems like they are not doing enough. However, we argue that they are filling a gap within the institution. They have produced workshops and seminars for students to learn about advanced parole for study

abroad before the rescission of DACA. They have organized and come together as a group to help fundraise for DACA renewals. They have hosted DREAMZone trainings, providing knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to effectively respond to the academic needs of undocumented students for both staff and faculty members even when there was pushback. Furthermore, they are continuously meeting with university administrators to advocate for resources and more welcoming campus environments. Adelita and Ximena both told us in their interviews what they were able to accomplish through the UndocuNetwork. They shared:

And sometimes we have to remind ourselves that some of the changes we made are real, like we made that website happen, we made the committee happen [name redacted for privacy], we made DREAMZone happen, we're making undocuweek happen, and these are real things!

Community Based Recommendations

The findings in this CBPR study support what other researchers have found: undocumented students have needs that can be better met if faculty and other university staff are educated on undocumented student issues and policies (Abrego, 2006; Barnhardt et al., 2016; Contreras, 2009; Gámez et al., 2017; Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015; Gonzalez, 2016; Pérez et al., 2010; Murillo, 2017). Part of our interview was dedicated to engaging students in conversation about what successful change would look like and what they see as the most immediate and important needs. All agreed that education by way of training, whether through DREAMZone or another form of training, is vital to help staff and faculty become more knowledgeable on policies and issues affecting our undocumented and DACAmented students in southern Nevada. Our participants suggested that training is especially important for frontline staff in offices such as Recruitment and Admissions, Cashiering and Financial Aid, Registrar, and Academic Advising.

Our participants also all advocated for a dedicated undocumented and DACAmented student resources center at each institution of higher education in southern Nevada. As part of the center, a full-time coordinator could maintain and find resources, such as funding for college, jobs, and internships, and connect our students and their families to local resources like healthcare. The resource coordinator would not have to be omniscient on all undocumented student issues, but they could serve as a liaison to other offices so that students would feel comfortable asking for help in those areas. As of January 2019, UNLV hired the first

undocumented student resource coordinator as a direct result of student activism and demands. Our participants also made very practical and easy-to-institute recommendations, such as creating a textbook loan program within university libraries that undocumented students could utilize for classes.

Based on their experiences, our participants also suggested that we need more culturally competent mental health services for college students in southern Nevada and have requested increased legal aid support for undocumented and DACAmented students. Lastly, while many of our participants recognize that universities have shown support for their community, especially since the election of Donald Trump to office, they also maintain there is a need for tangible changes to institutional practices to occur in order to make college more accessible.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Our project explicitly included the voices of undocumented and DACAmented students in the study of their access to higher education in southern Nevada, home to three recently designated HSIs, by using a community based participatory approach to research. We found that the institutions of higher education in southern Nevada excluded our undocumented and DACAmented students. Our participants have had difficulties navigating a less than clear admissions process and accessing financial resources. They have received inconsistent information from higher education professionals, yet they have remained resilient and successful while being advocates for other students and institutional change. Through our partnership with the UndocuNetwork our community-based recommendations advocate for institutionalizing resources for undocumented students across southern Nevada.

Our findings build upon previous research which suggest that higher education fails to consistently provide the support that contributes to the success of our undocumented and DACAmented students. Future research should identify best-practice strategies for serving undocumented students that explicitly incorporate the voices of the community members. With this project we make a call-to-action for higher education to transparently, systematically, and effectively support our undocumented students by actively recruiting undocumented students, funding and disseminating financial resources, and educating higher education professionals.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr. Anita Revilla and Dr. Robert Futrell for their feedback, comments, and encouragement throughout this process. We would also like to acknowledge and thank the UndocuNetwork for their endless support of students and for welcoming us in to do this work collaboratively. Lastly, we recognize that this work would not exist without the 12 fierce and courageous students who shared their stories and experiences with us. Your joy, resilience, persistence and lucha are what drove this work. *Mil gracias!*

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