

**Academic, Social, and Emotional Resilience Produces Higher Education Graduates
Amongst Undocumented Students**

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Abstract

Background: Undocumented students require academic, social, and emotional resilience to succeed in higher education.

Objective: This research study aims to bring awareness to the struggles and barriers undocumented students face in their everyday school experience and the resilience they require in order to be successful in a system that is not designed or equipped to help them.

Design and Method: This research includes scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. These articles were found using the keywords: “undocumented,” “higher education,” “Latino students,” “DACA,” and “ENL.” The result was eight articles relevant to the objective of this study.

Results: The results of this study are significant because they conclude that undocumented students are at a disadvantage in higher education due to a lack of resources, which creates academic, emotional, and social barriers.

Conclusion: To rectify the burdens unique to undocumented students, the U.S. higher education system should consider creating a place (online, in person, or both) where all resources can be found in the student’s native language. Resources in the student’s native language would eliminate the stress of searching multiple places and translating imperative information to succeed in their higher education goals.

Keywords: Undocumented, Latino students, higher education, resiliency, DACA, ENL, social-emotional education, non-citizen.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

According to Passel (2006), approximately 80,000 undocumented students reach high school graduation age each year. However, of these high school graduates, only approximately 13,000 enroll in public colleges and universities across the country. Due to inadequate resources for these students with linguistic and other barriers associated with their undocumented status, pursuing higher education is more difficult for an undocumented student on academic, social, and emotional levels.

Over the years, there have been questions on whether these students first and foremost deserve to be in the United States (U.S.) education system, let alone if they are entitled to the additional help required for them to be on an equal playing field as their citizen counterparts. Unless American-born citizens have prior generations in their family who faced these challenges, it is more than likely they do not understand the added struggles undocumented students face because it is not relevant to their experience and invisible to anyone who doesn't need to figure it out on their own. For the undocumented individuals who come to the U.S. for better opportunities through formal education, these barriers are a wall dividing them from the goals they want to achieve. There are some forms of support, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which provides students with some rights and support by law. Unfortunately, these protections are limited and not enforced equally throughout the U.S. higher education institutions, which leaves students with two options: give up and drop/fail out or become resilient to graduate. A few examples of the challenges the majority of undocumented students experience

are literacy barriers during the application process, eligibility barriers to financial aid, and social stereotypes from both students and faculty.

Overview

Throughout my research study, the literature review encapsulates peer-reviewed research behind the academic, social, and emotional stresses unique to a student's undocumented status. From an academic standpoint, it is found that undocumented students require a "safe space," both in school and at home that is distraction-free. Socially and emotionally, students are confronted with racism and judgment while trying to acclimate to the American culture, which adds difficulties in their school setting. Violations in educational rights are yet another barrier explored by the scholars invested in this topic. The linguistic barriers that separate the English Language Learners (ELL) population from the general education students are evident. Yet, universities lack readily available resources and academic support to help them navigate and succeed in day-to-day student life.

All in all, these researchers contributed important findings to understanding the barriers and difficulties undocumented students face in the higher education system. Each scholarly article explores one or more of these barriers. Still, the conclusion they draw is this same: "Not only do these [undocumented] students endure the same stressors and risk factors as other Latino and immigrant youth, they also face constant institutional and societal exclusion and rejection due to their undocumented status" (Perez et al., 2009, p. 150).

It is essential to continue this type of research, and when COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, to interview undocumented students face to face, to hear their first-hand accounts of their experiences. Many students feel rejected by the system and need to focus all their energy on staying in this country and surviving school with the additional barriers, so they are much less

likely to fill out a survey in fear of judgment or backlash. This paper challenges those who believe undocumented students have no place in this country to see the amount of grit and perseverance it takes to succeed in an environment that works against you. It poses questions like, 'if U.S. colleges and universities accept these students, why aren't there systems in place to support them on their academic journey? From training faculty to providing inclusive activities and easily-accessible resources, U.S. higher education institutions have the ability and opportunity to make minor changes that will significantly influence the experiences these students have.

As a first-generation citizen, a second-generation student in the U.S., and now an ENL teaching assistant and interpreter/translator, I have witnessed the struggles, lack of resources, and social/emotional cruelties that undocumented students face while pursuing higher education in this country. Yet, I have witnessed firsthand the extra mile these individuals go through to achieve their goals and create better futures for themselves and their future generations. Like myself, I am hopeful that these students will continue to be resilient and work toward positive change in their industries across the country and the world.

Definition of Terms

DACA: An acronym for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, is a policy that protects around 800,000 young people — known as “DREAMers” — who entered the United States unlawfully as children. The program does not grant them official legal status or a pathway to citizenship, but it does allow them to apply for a driver’s license, social security number, and work permit.

DREAMers: a person who has lived in the US without official authorization since coming to the country as a minor. People of this description who met certain conditions would be eligible for special immigration status under federal legislation first proposed in 2001.

ENL: English as a New Language: English vocabulary can be taught through content-based thematic units. Instruction can occur in the mainstream classroom or the ENL classroom on a pull-out basis

ELL: English Language Learners: refers to a student who is age five or older and who is learning English as a second language

ESL: English as a Second Language: an approach in which students who are not native English speakers are mainly taught in English.

Undocumented: The term ‘undocumented immigrant’ refers to anyone residing in any given country without legal documentation. It includes people who entered the U.S. without inspection and proper permission from the government and those who entered with a legal visa that is no longer valid.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Background

No student is created equal. Regardless of demographic, academic strengths and weaknesses, financial status, or otherwise, there are always challenges outside the classroom that students are facing. In the United States (U.S.) higher education system, this rings true for undocumented (noncitizen) students more than documented (citizen) students). In addition, noncitizen students have access to fewer resources than those who are citizens, making existing challenges even more difficult to overcome and presenting other challenges unique to their citizen status.

Literacy barriers during the application process, eligibility barriers to financial aid, and social stereotypes from students and faculty are only a few examples of why undocumented students need to be even more resilient than their documented classmates to graduate.

Literacy barriers have been problematic for all undocumented students generation after generation in this country, and likely have only been felt by those experiencing these disadvantages until recently. Today, it has been brought to the public's attention due to the Internet and social media making these stories, conversations, and studies more easily accessible. Yet, although visibility to these problems are more public than they have ever been, laws and change in human behavior to protect and provide aid for undocumented students to succeed in higher education are still lacking.

The disadvantages noncitizen students face are of particular interest to me because I can directly relate to them. As a first-generation citizen and a second-generation student in the

United States, I have watched my parents' frustrations trying to understand my school paperwork and have heard stories of the additional frustrations they faced when applying to higher education here in the United States. This frustration sparked my passion for working with undocumented students as my career path and is what I currently do today. In addition to my other experiences, I work in the education system with undocumented students and see firsthand that the issues have not gotten better. As a multilingual ENL teaching assistant and interpreter\translator, I know how much these students had to overcome every day to get to the country and how much more they have to face once they arrive and look to better themselves through education.

So, all of these draw the question: *Do undocumented students experience barriers when pursuing higher education?* My theory is yes; undocumented students need resiliency to succeed in the U.S. higher education system. Research and related peer review literature from 2009 until now was used to support this theory from academic, social, and emotional standpoints.

Literature Review

Pérez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009) touched on critical factors of being an undocumented student. This article explains how academic resilience plays a considerable role in the students' long-term success and their ability to continue and receive higher education. The authors include subtopics such as bilingualism, the importance of schooling to the student and their families, and their living environment. Of the 90% surveyed in these studies, students lived in a single or studio apartment where everyone slept in the same room. This research gives readers concrete examples of how these conditions negatively affect their social and emotional states, reflected in their academic work. In addition, their homes serve

as distractions that create concentration difficulties, which can cause students to fall behind in homework and understanding lessons.

Contreras (2009) discusses the additional challenges undocumented students face when searching for information and access to applications, qualifying documents, and other resources needed to attend a college or university. The amount of time and effort it takes these students to simply figure out the information needed, let alone how to fill it out and submit it, is astronomically more than citizen students who have websites tailored to application needs. Emotional stress (and for those who complete the documents, emotional resilience) comes from finding all the information on how to gain access to schooling. The emotional stress goes past the initial application - financial support, available resources, online forums, and more are difficult for undocumented students to find access to. Some barriers they may face are linguistic barriers, parents who do not understand the application process due to language, education, or otherwise. Guidance counselors for those in high school may not be equipped or willing enough to look up the extra-legal factors/documents, and those entering the country after high school don't know who or where to turn to receive guidance. Moreover, there is an associated fear of asking for help, in case they may be judged, dismissed, or even risk deportation. The emotional disadvantages can lead to these undocumented students feeling defeated or helpless, so they decide higher education is not for them regardless of their potential.

Castro-Salazar and Bagley's (2010) title translates to "*Neither here nor from there.*" It focuses specifically on undocumented Mexican students who feel that once they arrive in America, they do not fit in here or with the people in Mexico anymore. From a social and cultural standpoint, being in America creates a physical and emotional barrier to their Mexican culture. Social challenges in the forms of racism, judgment, and discrimination arise, and this

research shows it directly affects their success compared to their peers born in America. This article concludes that although the United States is a melting pot of many cultures, the country can feel small and exclusionary for certain populations. Social behaviors and activities that are popular in Mexico are likely not customs in America. Undocumented students in these situations have to develop social resilience on two fronts: from their past culture in Mexico, where they feel they no longer belong, and their new American culture, where they think they never had a place.

Goodnight (2017) discusses the importance and fluctuation of academic self-confidence for higher education students based on faculty and student interactions. It dives into how these interactions affect these noncitizens and the undocumented population as a whole. Without the support of faculty and peers, their self-confidence takes a negative hit which can be detrimental on academic, social, and emotional levels. In terms of barriers, having limited positive interactions with campus staff and fellow students creates negative emotions about themselves, their capabilities, and their futures. Additionally, for those who do not speak English as a first language, the linguistic barriers make for further social isolation and emotional distress. This research strengthens the argument that significant barriers exist for the undocumented population looking to pursue higher education.

Méndez-Pounds, Nicholas, Gonzalez, and Whiting (2018) analyze how The DREAM Act supports undocumented students. This article argues that undocumented students are given the same opportunities for higher education as American citizens. They have equal access to in-state tuition (more affordable than out-of-state or international tuition), language resources, and the opportunity to apply and excel like every other student who is accepted to the college or university. These undocumented students often take these educational opportunities equally or

even more seriously than others, as their legal status depends on it. “DREAMers often attain high distinctions, such as being valedictorian and making the dean’s list, yet they encounter roadblocks to a college education” (Méndez et al., 2010, p. 443). One theme of this research study is that their educational identity is empowered by having access to American higher education. Unlike the argument that barriers exist emotionally and socially, this research shows that colleges and universities create positive feelings of confidence and healthy, challenging environments.

Punti (2018) discusses how schools create barriers for students by categorizing undocumented students into ‘improvers’ and ‘decliners.’ This type of division separates them academically in terms of what classes they take, how their teachers/peers view them, and how they view themselves. Students of all legal statuses, backgrounds, and ages are in higher education to better themselves, so labeling them essentially as ‘those who can achieve and those who cannot’ is devastating for emotional, social, and academic satisfaction and growth. This article provided new insight into the dangers of these types of categorization. They can create invisible emotional barriers that they are not expected to excel or go further, prompting thoughts such as “*why try my best, or even at all?*” This barrier leads to higher dropout rates since there is no support or encouragement that they all *can* succeed.

Nájera (2020) researches the importance of a “safe space” for undocumented students on a particular campus. Bringing the students together to feel safe enough even to disclose their immigration status was a giant leap in itself. The research ended, but the group continued to meet and became a place where undocumented students joined together to help each other and incoming students. The group also became a place where the parents of these students could receive help and advice. Having this safe space set up gave these students a sense of belonging.

The fact that there needs to be a group like this so that undocumented students can be successful adds to the point that these students have to be academically resilient to persevere in these academic environments.

Rodriguez (2020) finds that in two schools in South Carolina, Latino youths are marginalized in systemic ways. In an already racially-fueled environment, the South creates even more barriers for undocumented individuals due to intimidation, harm, and exclusion through surveillance and profiling. This marginalization is relevant to the barriers that undocumented students face. The data shows that in a population of 50,000 students, only 10% are Hispanic and receive school district language learning and academic support services. This marginalization damages their likelihood of success when resources are allocated to other populations instead of these undocumented students. In addition, these issues are violations of civil and educational rights because these students have a legal, educational right to a certain amount of serviced minutes for ESL support. Without these dedicated minutes, these students are not given the opportunities to grow and reach the same playing field as students with English as a first language.

The research methods between Pérez et al. (2010) and Puntí (2018) differed. However, they both support the conclusion that there are additional academic barriers for noncitizen students. Castro-Salazar (2010) and Rodriguez (2020) focus on racism and discrimination (social challenges). Castro-Salazar analyzes racism and discrimination. Mexican immigrants experience in the U.S. and their home country, and Rodriguez researched Latino youths in South Carolina. Goodnight (2017) and Najera (2020) focus on the importance of academic self-confidence, based on emotional support from peers and faculty, and the importance of a 'safe space' and a sense of belonging, respectively. Contreras (2009) discusses the emotional resilience needed to find

application information and assistance without help from standard resources. Finally, Mendez-Pounds et al. (2018) article serve as a devil's advocate to the theory that undocumented students experience barriers; however, not all schools offer equal resources, and the invisible barriers (social and emotional) associated with humanity and being accepting of people who are different individuals, exist undoubtedly across the country.

Chapter 3: Methods

Research Question

Do undocumented students experience barriers when pursuing higher education?

Study Design

The design of my study was based on finding key terms through the Purchase Library database. My key term was undocumented paired with: undocumented, higher education, noncitizen, education, accessibility. The equipment I used was a computer to access the database.

Population

Undocumented, Latino students between the ages of 18-25

Describe the nature of the data you will use to answer your research questions.

Scholarly (peer-reviewed) research and studies published between 2007 and 2021 were used to answer my research question. These pieces of literature were written by individuals and groups of people who performed research around this topic. Their research contributes to the larger conversation of if and how an undocumented status as a student affects individuals in the higher education system.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations:

- Political consideration: When DACA, a U.S. immigration policy, was proposed, approved, and passed through President Obama's presidency

- Type of literature/Publishing dates: Scholarly articles and research published from 2007 to 2021 (the beginning of Obama's presidency through the present day)
- Population: Undocumented, Latino students pursuing higher education in the United States
- Amount of research: Seven theory-supporting scholarly articles and one article with a different perspective
- Ethical approval
- Inability to go to the International Review Board (IRB) to add information to my study

Delimitations:

- COVID-19, the virus that led to a global pandemic, did not allow me to collect information from libraries or other in-person sources due to closures. So, everything had to be sourced online, from home.
- Undocumented students fear deportation, judgment, or otherwise negative consequences for disclosing their status with researchers; therefore, they do not want to participate in research studies which limits the data.

Paradigm

In line with the common themes I have found throughout my research, my paradigm to solving the problematic barriers undocumented students face in the U.S. higher education system is multifaceted. First, undocumented students need academic, social, and emotional barriers to be addressed to truly make a change in their experience with higher education.

First, students require additional academic support and resources to help them navigate everything from their initial applications to their financial aid to their homework and class assignments. These resources should include faculty, staff, and mentoring peers (i.e., student-teachers, club/activity captains and leaders, floor advisors, etc.) who are trained to help identify students struggling from language challenges, social isolation, or other barriers consistent with those undocumented students face from their documented peers. Secondly, online resources in a user-friendly, multilingual website can help students help themselves. Providing these types of in-person and online resources (and associated training for involved parties) will improve not only their academic self-esteem but also their social and emotional confidence.

Bias

Working with undocumented students gives me a very specific bias towards this research topic. Working on an individual basis with many undocumented Latino students gives me direct access to their frustrations, fears, and overall point of view. Also, as a first-generation citizen and second-generation student, I have heard my parent's personal school experiences and had to navigate my paperwork and assignments without help from my parents and family (a privilege many of my peers had).

Chapter 4: Results

Undocumented students face many barriers when pursuing higher education. However, due to social, emotional, and academic resilience, these individuals can overcome such barriers.

The literature review includes information from eight sources. Seven studies support the theory that undocumented students need academic, social, and emotional resilience to graduate in the United States higher education system. Further, the studies showed that these students face barriers unique to their citizenship status that documented students do not. In this section, I will discuss the results from each peer-reviewed article that support this theory.

Pérez's article's main point is about the academic difficulties the students face in the school setting. The results demonstrated that going home to a crowded room is one of the additional barriers these students face when seeking higher education. The findings in Perez's article are consistent with research found in Puntí's article showing that students face academic difficulties in more than one way. Puntí discusses how students are grouped into categories that make it even more difficult for them to overcome stereotypes in terms of their academic statuses. Najera's results were also broadly in line with the academic challenges these students face. Her research demonstrates the importance of having a "safe space" for students to come together and share experiences, hardships and generally support one another as they work toward their academic goals. Her study was conducted at a specific university that created a group for undocumented Latino students that gave them a sense of belonging; following her research; her

research was further proven when the group continued to meet afterward due to the demand for academic and general support in this marginalized group.

In addition to the academic challenges pointed out in Perez, Puntí, and Najera's articles, Castro-Salazar and Rodríguez discuss the social challenges undocumented students face — such as racial discrimination and marginalization. Castro-Salazar's article concludes that although the United States is a melting pot of many cultures, the country can feel small and exclusionary for certain populations. Rodríguez focuses on how the school systems and their lack of resources being utilized and provided for undocumented students are causing a further rift in helping undocumented students succeed in school and society.

Contreras (2009) further analyzes how school systems are not built for undocumented students to thrive as early as the application process. He concludes that undocumented students must go the extra mile to be self-sufficient when it comes to navigating documents such as initial applications and financial aid to assignments in class and textbook readings. The results provide insight into the emotional resilience necessary to battle additional frustration and stress as they move forward in higher education. Goodnight (2017) expands on the idea of emotional resilience by showing the emotional effects on undocumented students due to linguistic barriers. The self-confidence of these students takes a hit because these barriers create challenges engaging with students and faculty alike. Goodnight (2017) concludes that this can cause detrimental effects on all aspects of their academic careers due to feeling outcasted, unheard, and overlooked.

Contrary to the findings of the authors above, Mendez's research shows that undocumented students are equipped with the same amount of support that documented students are. Furthermore, he uses the DREAM Act to prove that undocumented students are set up for success to play on the same levels as students with citizen status.

Chapter 5: Discussions

The significant findings of the peer-reviewed articles are that undocumented students face barriers unique to their citizenship status. In order to overcome these barriers, these students must become resilient on a day-to-day basis. These findings go beyond linguistic challenges; barriers are presented on academic, emotional, and social fronts, where difficulties come from fellow students, staff, and society.

The conclusions from this research prompt people to think about why undocumented students are struggling to succeed in higher education and how changes to school resources and societal biases can make all the difference for these students. Multiple sources have concluded that when these resources are put in place, students feel more confident in their academic work and more fulfilled in their emotional and social states, which leads to higher graduation rates and generally more successful individuals. Providing these resources is particularly important because they are legally obligated to receive them through the DREAM Act. Unfortunately, the reality is that many schools do not allocate the time or resources to thoroughly put these programs and systems in place, which is creating an even greater disservice for these students because they are expecting help and do not receive it.

So, why are these resources not being allocated? If these students are being accepted into these universities, why are not they supported in their academic journey? The conclusion drawn from the majority of the articles shows that faculty and peers find these undocumented individuals to be a burden. To assist these students, additional training for faculty and additional integration efforts for students would have to be made. The results show that this extra effort is not encouraged or enforced because many citizens are biased against these students. The bias can

range from believing they should ‘go back to their country,’ to ‘they won’t understand/succeed anyway,’ and everything in between. They are dismissed from the beginning, and without research like this, no one is shining a light on these problems.

In terms of limitations, COVID-19 did not allow for first-hand research, such as the opportunity to survey or talk with the community. Instead, the research was limited to what was available on Purchase College’s online database. If given more time, conducting interviews to find additional viewpoints from staff, peers, undocumented students, and parents would be extremely beneficial. The main question to focus on was if these groups are aware that undocumented students are entitled by law to receive specific services and resources that help them in their academic careers. Additional questions specifically for the undocumented students would include: ‘Do you have a job after school? What are your living conditions like? Are they a good environment to complete your work?’ These questions are important to research because understanding the social and emotional aspects of these students’ lives can shape their academic likelihood of success just as much as campus resources.

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