

**Undocumented/DACAmented Students' Journey Towards College: Is K-12
Equipped and Prepared to Address Their Needs?**

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Dedication

My study is dedicated to the research participants, the Undocumented students in this country, and their families who through countless barriers faced, continue to strive towards the American Dream. For the immigrant families who ground their determination to succeed in relentless aspiration, hope, and commitment for themselves and those around them. *Si Se Puede!*

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Abstract

Background: An estimated 100,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools each year (Federis, 2019). Current immigration policies continue to change, leaving many undocumented students with unclear pathways for educational success beyond K-12. Beyond the legal barriers faced, undocumented students also encounter sociocultural influences that shape their educational experiences. A resource as part of that journey is the K-12 school district, which often provides the sole necessary guidance for undocumented students as they consider higher education. **Purpose:** This study examines the voices and experiences of undocumented college students and College Access Professionals' (CAPs) as they progressed through the college access journey. The theoretical lenses of Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) and Social Mentality Theory through Compassionate Counseling were used to guide the study design and to identify and interpret themes that surfaced later across the data. **Research Questions:** The questions that guided this study were; 1) How did undocumented/DACAmented college students make sense of their K-12 college advising experiences? 2) What political and sociocultural factors were at play for the undocumented student and their family during the journey towards higher education? 3) How did college advisors address political and sociocultural factors when advising undocumented students towards higher education? **Methods:** Seven undocumented undergraduate college students and six CAPs who previously served as college counselors were identified through snowball sampling. With the use of semi-structured interview guides, participants were interviewed with questions aimed to trigger in-depth reflection of the K-12 college counseling experience. Responses were digitally recorded, transcribed, coded, and content analyzed by using Dedoose

software to identify themes that surfaced across the data. **Findings:** Several themes emerged from the findings in which students and CAPs identified varying factors that ultimately impact college trajectories. These factors stem from both political and sociocultural elements which usually are outside of student or CAP direct control. Beyond the continued barriers that documentation status presents, undocumented students continue to persist to and through college by overcoming challenges. One theme that emerged across participants centered on the influence of relationships between students and CAPs when grounded in compassion and empathy. Intentional spaces for community also strengthened undocumented students' positive outlooks on higher education and increased their confidence in their college access journeys. Participant data also revealed that despite political and sociocultural factors and the need for relationships between undocumented students and CAPs, K-12 organizations should provide the proper knowledge and training needed to equip CAPs with best practices and resources for college advising undocumented students. **Conclusion:** The findings suggest that experiences of undocumented students and CAPs, as related to the college advising resources and guidance provided, were primarily influenced by relationships and not necessarily the formal tools made available to them. This research contributes knowledge about how K-12 organizations can best develop college access resources for undocumented students.

Keywords: undocumented, college access, LatCrit, K-12, college counselor

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Chapter I

Introduction

There are both political and sociocultural factors that impact the higher education opportunities undocumented¹ students have. In 2015, escaping the country of El Salvador, 15-year-old Enrique (pseudonym) came to the United States in search of the “American Dream.” Enrique traveled the dangerous journey to America accompanied by only his brother and a small group of Salvadorans. After arriving to a large city in Texas, he faced navigating the American education system as an undocumented immigrant, without knowing the English language, and with limited guidance provided to his mother, his main advocate. Enrique had the opportunity to attend a middle school for newcomer students in a Texas school district, a campus focused on newcomers’ immersion to American culture. He quickly learned English and soon transitioned into one of the best high schools in the city. At the high performing high school, Enrique focused on his academics and extracurricular activities successfully until he faced the reality of applying to and accessing college. His high school course load had not fully prepared him to meet the requirements needed to be considered “college ready.” He knew little of the opportunities or restrictions that would pose challenges in his journey due to his undocumented status. With strategic assistance from his college access advisor and allies who understood his story, he was able to adjust his plan and earn a full financial

¹ Undocumented refers to individuals with no legal status in the United States, and DACAmented refers to those with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Undocumented status occurs when individuals have entered the United States without documentation or they have extended their stay in the country beyond the time allowed via a U.S. Visa (Dozier, 2001). DACA, which I discuss in more detail further in this chapter, is temporary, and it allows individuals to reside, study, and work in the United States while deferring deportation to their country of origin (Anaya, Del Rosario & Hayes-Bautista, 2014). I will use “undocumented students” as a term that encompasses students who may have different immigration statuses, such as DACA, Temporary Protective Status (TPC), or none of the above.

scholarship to a local Tier I university. The guidance that he received was because of his own proactive measures and the assistance of an advisor who understood the political and sociocultural factors that influence opportunities. Although there are many stories of students who share this journey, there are many more who face an unknown future with unsupported guidance and end up lost in the process.

A study conducted in 2008 found that in Texas alone, community college enrollment of undocumented students increased year after year at a rate of no less than 25% growth (Jauregui et al., 2008, p.351). These numbers only brush the surface of the population of students across other two and four-year institutions of higher education. The undocumented student population continues to grow primarily because of reasons grounded in parents' and extended family members' needs to seek better living conditions, employment opportunities, and education access that lends to escaping danger and poverty in their respective home countries (Jauregui et al., 2008). Targeted approaches to advising these students is becoming more prevalent as the number of undocumented students seeking higher education increases year after year.

Although policymakers and leaders in higher education have created pathways and implemented resources to increase access for underrepresented populations, undocumented students, who may also identify as other underrepresented groups such as first-generation and/or students of color, experience additional hurdles to college access due to their undocumented status (Kim & Diaz, 2013). In personal experience with college access space as a College Success Manager, I witnessed varying levels of quality in the advising process of undocumented students. My perception from those experiences was that the supports in place and being provided to students, specifically undocumented

students, were lacking. For example, one of the high schools that I visited did not have knowledge of how many students identified as undocumented and required district level support in assisting students who identified as undocumented. District level supports included translation services and guidance on the process of submitting state level financial aid documents. For many of these campuses, I anticipate that there was limited knowledge on how to best support undocumented students and also limited capacity regarding student-to-counselor ratio. It is important to note that public school districts do not gather information on documented status when students register for a K-12 education given their access to public education through Supreme Court case, *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), which I will discuss later in this chapter (Olivas, 2012). In not gathering citizenship information during K-12 enrollment, education systems and college access professionals are unable to identify which students classify as undocumented unless the students or parents disclose that information directly during formal/informal settings; a risk too high to take for many of these students and families. Although this protects them against discrimination based on legal status, this can indirectly lead to barriers in being unable to guide undocumented students accordingly through the college advising process. Current college advising practices do not always take into account individual students' circumstances, such as documentation status, which can present additional barriers with a "one size fits all" approach. Because of these circumstances, I aim to better understand the political and sociocultural factors that influence college advising practices provided by the K-12 system to undocumented students.

In this chapter, I address the statement of the problem and research questions. With providing additional context and structure on how I conducted the research, I also

describe the participant population that was interviewed, the methodology used to identify and conduct interviews, the theoretical framework used to analyze the data qualitatively, the research assumptions given personal experiences and knowledge, and the key terms used throughout the study.

Statement of the Problem

According to the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD), Texas's average student-to-counselor ratio is 449:1 as of the 2014-2015 school year. The large gap in this ratio is prevalent in schools and districts across the state and is becoming an area of focus for these organizations, including a large local school district in the Gulf Coast region of Texas, Urban ISD. To provide an example of the investments that some districts are making to bridge this gap, within Urban ISD is the Department of College Readiness, a centrally housed department which expanded in the 2015-2016 school year with grant support, including one large grant from a local endowment non-profit organization. These grants allowed for the team to tend to the disparity in student-to-counselor ratios while also having a presence across all high schools in the district by either part-time or full-time College Access Professionals (CAP) and with the Top Tier College (TTC) team. Urban ISD states that this funding will:

Boost college attendance and completion rates by 20 percent over the next three years. The district also hopes to increase the number of high school graduates attending a four-year college, the number of students who complete their freshman year and return for their sophomore year, and the number of scholarship and financial aid applications and awards — all by the same percentage.²

² Source withheld.

Within this objective, which impacts all high school students across Urban ISD, also lies the need to serve the population of undocumented or DACAmented students. As shared thus far, the undocumented population faces multiple barriers beyond the K-12 environment that influence the path which they take towards higher education. The CAP would need to be knowledgeable of these barriers to advise the students accordingly. One reality that exists is that undocumented students do not always publicly voice their status, but schools must be mindful and inclusive with the established college advising practices and its impact on this group. With an unknown formal number of undocumented students that attend public schools, CAPs should be properly equipped to guide undocumented students accordingly, regardless of whether they identify themselves as undocumented or not. A stronger focus should investigate the quality of college access advising that happens within the K-12 systems between the CAP and undocumented students.

To better equip the CAPs on campuses and district level leaders within the College Readiness department, the district has provided professional development and catered resources that best support undocumented students. In order to elevate the knowledge across the team, external community organizations that specialize in providing services for undocumented families are frequently engaged to provide feedback, insight, and training to staff. Two of the organizations involved are non-profit organizations in the local area that advocate for the undocumented population. Through service, policy lobbying, and even legal counseling, these organizations have made a presence in education as beneficial partners that focus on a wide variety of areas.

Additionally, Urban ISD launched an annual Immigrant Support Summit with the support of district level leaders and the Board of Education. This summit focuses on

engaging students, families, and community members to learn more about specific opportunities available for higher education. The sessions focus on assistance with legal status, college applications, and financial aid; and empowering undocumented students and CAPs to not lose confidence on the journey. While many of these sessions are facilitated by subject matter experts, district leaders also play a role in developing sessions relevant to the students and the issues. Although it is a space that provides beneficial information and resources, it remains an optional event for district staff, CAPs, students, and families. This leads to gaps in knowledge or understanding of how to best support an undocumented student through the college advising process.

Research Questions

Rivera (2014) points out that, “counselors in a reasonably resourced high school believed individual agency, one form of resiliency, often determined whether students from immigrant families applied to college or not” (p. 286). The impact that a college access professional has on an undocumented student can influence their trajectory to college and beyond. For this reason, understanding the political and sociocultural factors that impact undocumented and DACAmented students is vital in building a relationship which allows for transparent/genuine college advising to take place. It is with this outlook and approach towards undocumented students that they have greater opportunity to transition to college. This leads to exploring the following research questions:

1. How did undocumented/DACAmented college students make sense of their K-12 college advising experiences?
2. What political and sociocultural factors were at play for the undocumented student and their family during the journey towards higher education?

3. How did college advisors address political and sociocultural factors when advising undocumented students towards higher education?

Regardless of one's citizenship status, everyone should have equal access to education, but the reality is that undocumented students do not have equal access beyond K-12 (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). The first research question focused on understanding how this group of students perceived the college support and resources exposed to them in K-12, and whether these aspects were beneficial as they made their college choices. The second research question centered on identifying and understanding the external and internal political and sociocultural factors that undocumented students face that may impact their college journey. This question further explored the understanding of those factors as they present opportunities or barriers to accessing higher education for undocumented students. The final question focused on understanding the approach that CAPs took when providing undocumented students with college advice. This question also aimed to identify the level of knowledge that CAPs had of the internal and external factors that impact the lives of undocumented students and their families when considering college options.

Findings of this study may be utilized to better inform education leaders across K-12 systems who oversee programming and professional development that support exposure and education focused on college access for undocumented students. Programming focused on better serving undocumented students is an important component which exposes college access professionals to effective best practices and skills needed to properly advise undocumented students (Yasuike, 2019). It is with intentional professional development for CAPs and dedicated college resources focused

on supporting undocumented students that they can be better positioned to make decisions about college.

Background to the Study – Political Factors

There are an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States with approximately 11% of them living in Texas (Budiman, 2020). Although the number of undocumented students is difficult to formally calculate, it is estimated that Texas has 169,000 undocumented young people between the ages of 3 and 17, with around 17,000 of them graduating high school annually (Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2019). The population's growth has increased over decades and been influenced by growing invasions of dictatorships and repressive military regimes in Central and South American along with exploitation of those countries' resources (Lawston & Murillo, 2009). What has been prevalent in recent years is the increase of undocumented populations in the United States originating from Central and South America as opposed to Mexico. Mexico has seen a decrease in numbers due to the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008 which protects immigrants from certain countries not including Mexico or Canada (National Immigration Forum [NIF], 2018). Despite this, immigrants from Mexico continue being the largest undocumented population of people at 47% (Passel, D'Vera, & Cohn, 2014). Additionally, undocumented Mexicans are the most likely undocumented population to qualify for certain higher education benefits (i.e., in-state tuition) if they meet certain state qualifications, such as those set forth by Texas Senate Bill 1528 which is addressed in the next section.

The journey towards America and the experience of undocumented populations is historically influenced by immigration policies previously set forth by the federal government. Such policies include the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) and the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), both of which aimed to regulate and punish immigrants, especially those who were nonwhite (Hernández, 2008). Although such policies have been implemented throughout history, undocumented students are guaranteed a K-12 education due to the 1982 Supreme Court decision in *Plyer v. Doe* which set precedent legislation on how the United States would deliver K-12 education access for immigrant students including undocumented groups (Olivas, 2012; Yates, 2004). The K-12 focus of *Plyer v. Doe* did not translate into protections in accessing higher education, but almost ten years after its passage some states enacted policies at the state level which provided education access to undocumented students beyond K-12. Texas House Bill 1403 (HB 1403), which passed in 2001 and is also known as the Noriega Bill, allowed certain non-immigrant students, including undocumented students, the opportunity to qualify for in-state tuition and receive state aid (National Conference of State Legislators [NCSL], 2014). The efforts to support and pass HB 1403 were historic in Texas and across the nation. It was a focus that incorporated collaborative efforts across communities, including undocumented students and immigration supporters, while leveraging the energy already being rallied around access to community college for this population (Perez, 2009). HB 1403 was then followed by the 2005 passage of Texas Senate Bill 1528 (SB1528), which amended the 2001 bill and expanded access to all Texas residents; citizens, residents, non-immigrants who would be able to claim state residency and state financial aid. Legislation in Texas

set precedence in state level policy regarding noncitizen rights. Currently, Texas is one of twenty-one states that offer in-state tuition to undocumented students, either by state legislation or institutional provisions (Ali, 2017). By 2015, close to 2%, or nearly 25,000, of Texas college students had benefitted from HB 1403/SB1528, and this number continues to rise (Ura & McCullough, 2015). Of these students, and mainly based on the high cost of tuition at four-year universities, 71.6% attend a community college and 28.3% attend a four-year university, which can impact matriculation and graduation rates (Ura & McCullough, 2015). At the national level, previous legislation of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act did not pass in 2010. Despite this, President Barack Obama focused on the issue after much advocacy from immigrant rights groups, and through executive action stated the consideration of the Deferred Actions for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012 (Gonzales et al., 2014). Unfortunately, DACA was rescinded in September 2017 by President Trump, and its status continues to constantly change as this research developed (Romo et al., 2017). These policy decisions impact the educational opportunities and trajectory that the undocumented population is able to pursue. Additional research on the role that politics play in the lives of undocumented students is provided in more detail in Chapter 2.

Background to the Study – Sociocultural Factors

Being a first-generation Mexican American born to immigrant parents myself, I personally understand the role of values, morals, and hard work amongst the Latino community in succeeding educationally and financially while also balancing the obligations needing to be undertaken at home. This is further explained in the literature review to provide context into those factors. In my case, coming from two parents who

worked blue-collared jobs in South Texas, there was an expectation of success in academics with a stronger expectation to self-sustain living expenses. Researchers Jaffe-Walter and Lee (2011) speak to a reality where, “although working-class poor immigrants have been found to have high educational aspirations for their children, they often lack the cultural and social capital necessary to navigate U.S. schools” (p. 282). Jaffe-Walter and Lee (2011) also share that in addition to unequal academic preparation, undocumented students are “likely to receive limited guidance regarding college admissions and financial aid” (p. 283). These researchers ultimately found that to effectively guide this population of students, they also need the resources associated with family and community-based networks on top of campus support (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Yoshikawa et al., 2016). The approach that is taken with these students goes beyond the one-on-one guidance that they receive and moves into how the family as a whole is impacted by their college decisions.

To deepen understanding of the matter, it is important to consider the college advising practices provided and how they are positioned to best confront the political and sociocultural factors at play for undocumented students. Gin (2010) shares that one of the best ways to support undocumented students is to “be open-minded... be knowledgeable about specific government and college admissions policies that affect undocumented students,” because “many students will be too scared to reveal their status or not know their status” (p. 20). Knowing that this population currently does not have the same rights and privileges as U.S. citizens do, such policies along with the existing political immigration climate can easily lead to impacting the support and college access guidance that a district or high school college advisor provides to an undocumented student. This

situation can stem from a lack of knowledge, lack of training, or even lack of cultural awareness of the internal and external factors that undocumented students and families face. In some cases, the influencing factor can include anti-immigrant or racist sentiments held by educators (Salas et al., 2013). This, along with additional political and sociocultural factors that impact undocumented students, will be included in Chapter 2.

Participants and Setting

This research was conducted by gathering the perspectives of undocumented students who graduated from Urban ISD or other urban school districts in Texas and have now matriculated into a four-year college or university. Additional findings resulted from providing the lens of College Access Professionals who previously held a direct role serving in this capacity within Urban ISD or other urban school districts in the area, and who have also served to provide college access guidance to undocumented students. College Access Professionals across all high schools in the area are tasked with ensuring that students are guided accordingly through the college selection, application, and financial aid processes. Additionally, students do not always receive college guidance directly from the formal college access contact on campus but from others on campus instead.

Methodology

I used a qualitative approach to gather insight from college level students who identified as undocumented and transitioned through K-12 within Urban ISD or another local school district. I also took a deeper look at the factors which influenced the level of knowledge and counseling approach of College Access Professionals by interviewing that population and getting their perspectives of the college advising experience. This allowed

access to direct perspectives from both students and counselors. I identified students and College Access Professionals to interview using a snowball sampling approach and by recruiting potential study participants directly from four-year colleges or universities in the area of study. Given my former role as a College Access Manager, I oversaw district-level programs and initiatives focused on creating college access pathways for students across campus. In this role, I had the opportunity to meet CAPs and undocumented students, which allowed me to build relationships and have access to individuals to engage in this study. I conducted formal interviews with structured questions around the research topic focused the research questions stated. I analyzed data by identifying common themes across interviews that further supported the research questions grounded in the theoretical frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

In the research, I was guided by LatCrit, which is an extension of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT provides a lens that examines racism and its role in oppressing people of color and how that impacts their experiences or opportunities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). It is also used to better position educators in challenging the history of racism in this country and to contextualize current practices in education (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). CRT acknowledges the racial disparities that exist and challenges those dominant ideologies ranging from explicit racism to colorblindness as they play out across systems (Pérez Huber, 2010). Additionally, this framework guides the research process and centers findings through a lens of how race and racism play a role in education and in turn influences work in equity and social justice. To further assess the research from a lens of Latinos, I used LatCrit because researchers have used it to

understand experiences of the Latino community as it intersects with immigration status (Yosso, 2005). LatCrit evolved as a branch of CRT, focused on understanding systemic inequities that result from race and power for Latino communities such as immigration, language rights, discrimination based on accent or national origin, or census categories (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The anti-immigrant rhetoric that is prevalent in society drives feelings that undocumented populations in America have broken the law and are seen as criminals, but it fails to discuss the role of racism and white supremacy across the systems that drive America every day (Lawston & Murillo, 2009; López & Matos, 2018). Although the issue of access to higher education for the undocumented population is not solely a Latino issue, Latino students make up a larger population of the students that are served in the environment being studied; they are also often the population that is impacted most negatively by anti-immigrant sentiment (Salas et al., 2013).

Additionally, I considered the theoretical framework of Social Mentality Theory through the lens of compassionate and empathetic counseling as a strategy that counselors can take in advising undocumented students (Gilbert, 1989, 2000). Social Mentality Theory focuses on the ability to be reassuring and compassionate to oneself as a result of the care-seeking and caregiving interactions with others (Hermanto et al., 2017). According to Gilbert (1989), Social Mentality Theory addresses how people relate to themselves and others through internal systems that influence mindsets and behaviors. This theory identifies that care-seekers (students) and caregivers (counselors) encompass the ability, comfort, and opportunity to stimulate social mentality, such as compassion, with one another (Hermanto & Zuroff, 2016). As Van Vliet et al. (2018) state that compassion conveys a message that one has confidence in the participants' [or students']

strengths and potential. This further provides validation that allows for self-confidence. Research around this, explored further in Chapter 2, discusses data on how compassion in counseling can support individuals faced with academic failure and allows them to regain a sense of personal mastery (Van Vliet et al., 2018). Alongside compassionate counseling, I considered how counselors take on the role of institutional agents within the K-12 organization and how they serve as a resource for undocumented students and their families. Murillo (2017a) states that “institutional agents play a critical role in connecting underserved students to networks/resources that support their academic success” (p.91). Stanton-Salazar (2001), who first defined institutional agents, calls attention to the role and importance of such agents by identifying that such individuals encompass the power, knowledge, and access that is not always easily available to underserved students (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011). College Access Professionals who take leadership in acting as such agents are able to understand the social structures that present barriers for undocumented students, advocate for this population of students by removing such barriers, serve as models in how they leverage their own identity in building relationships, and are willing to take ownership of playing this role (Murillo, 2017a). Understanding the local level context that is gathered from students and CAPs via this study helps align findings in a manner in which organizations can identify and understand the roles of both compassion and agency within the college advising process.

Assumptions and Positionality

Direct experiences I encountered from having served on a College Readiness team from 2015 to 2017 influenced the proceeding research. In this role, I took part in planning and facilitating trainings focused on supports and resources for undocumented

students that have been shared with both students and CAPs. Having been a formal employee of Urban ISG working within the College Readiness team influenced the position I took within this research. This role exposed me to district-level college counseling practices, programs, and resources that were made available to CAPs and students across the district. Despite having transitioned from that role, I continue to drive advocacy and awareness for these students regardless of their legal status. Additionally, information gathered for the research includes the perceptions and experiences of individuals that I previously worked with in the professional setting.

From a personal perspective, my progress to this point in education and career is driven by being raised by two Mexican parents who have also been directly impacted by their legal status in the past. Although I am not an insider of the undocumented community, growing up on the Texas border that is densely populated with immigrant families exposed me to the added barriers that documentation status adds to students and families. I also have relatives and extended family who continue to be affected by their citizenship status, which created challenges to accessing an education in America. With this subjectivity, the information gathered, produced, and assessed is grounded in previous research, assessed through established theoretical frameworks, and analyzed via proven methods of research analysis. To further identify and acknowledge this subjectivity, I wrote field notes after each interview to assess any assumptions through reflection. Additional approaches to the study are discussed further in chapter three, methodology.

Key Terms

Through the following chapters, I address research-specific terminology including the following:

- CAP – Within the research, CAP will refer to College Access Professional(s) who serve as the primary contacts for high school students as they explore the college access process. CAPs might include the following: college advisors, professional/trained mentors, career advisors, and other specialists trained to serve students in navigating their college and career pathways (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2016). This includes College Access Professionals serving as guides for college applications, financial aid, scholarships, and/or entrance exams.
- Sociocultural Factors – To better understand the context of the external factors that impact the undocumented population, cultural and societal factors will focus on the values, grit, and perspectives that influence undocumented students’ and their families’ lives. This may also include social norms, religion, and gender-based expectations (Durowaiye & Khan, 2017). Further explanations will be addressed through the existing research in chapter two.
- College Counseling – Counseling refers specifically to the advice and guidance that a K-12 professional provides students in relation to the college-going process (Simmons, 2011). This does not reference the counseling provided via any institution of higher education once the student has matriculated out of K-12. “Counseling” is also interchangeable with “advising” for the purpose of this research.

- DREAM Act – “The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) was introduced by Senator Orrin Hatch. It would provide a mechanism for long-term resident immigrant students to apply for legal residency and would overturn a federal law that interferes with a state's right to determine in-state tuition” (Miksch, 2005, p. 60). As this research was completed, the DREAM Act and protections for undocumented groups continues to be a topic of legislation in government with members of both parties. Its original failure to pass led to President Obama’s executive order on DACA becoming the main protection for undocumented individuals; a case that was voted on by the Supreme Court in June 2020.
- DACA - Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Undocumented status occurs when individuals have entered the United States without documentation, or when they have extended their stay in the country beyond the time allowed via a U.S. Visa (Dozier, 2001). DACA is temporary and allows individuals to reside, study, and work in the United States while deferring deportation to their country of origin (Anaya et al., 2014).
- TASFA – Texas Application for State Financial Aid is state financial aid for students who are ineligible for federal aid through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), who are Texas residents, and who went to high school for at least three years in the state. These include, but are not limited to, foreign nationals, legal permanent residents, and eligible non-citizens. You can only apply for either FAFSA or TASFA, but not both.

Roadmap for the Following Chapters

This thesis encompasses five chapters. Chapter two focuses primarily on a review of the literature that includes previous research that has been completed regarding college advising, immigration policy, undocumented population sociocultural factors, and current access and matriculation in higher education for undocumented students. This chapter focuses on the theoretical framework that was used in this research to best understand and explain the data and themes that arose as a result. Chapter 3 highlights the methodology used to conduct the research. This section considers the qualitative methods previously used in research and their alignment to the current study. Chapter 4 goes into the findings of this research and addresses common themes that arose through completion of the interviews. While interviews conducted are the voices of students and College Access Professionals, the impression they provide spotlights their experiences of the process as influenced by the environment, supports, and knowledge encountered via Urban ISD or their respective district of employment. Finally, Chapter 5 includes a research discussion that reflects on the data collected as well as the implications of the findings. This final section also discusses additional studies that must be explored to further support systems and processes that influence the journey of undocumented students towards accessing higher education.

Chapter II

Literature Review

In this chapter, I discuss previous research to best understand the background that has influenced the current state of education as it relates to undocumented students. The research speaks to the many moving factors that impact the issue of college advising for undocumented students. By better understanding the factors that direct immigration and education access for undocumented students, I had the ability to identify thematic threads once interviewees' responses were analyzed. I first addressed research explaining the theoretical framework that is used to align findings to research-based theories. CRT, which I defined in the first chapter, provides the foundation to further explore LatCrit in this chapter. Along with LatCrit, I explored compassionate counseling as an approach that school-based college access counselors should encompass in order to effectively guide undocumented students. Additionally, I addressed research on sociocultural factors of undocumented students in order to review the direct impact that stems from a place of morals, values, determination, motivation, and the societal barriers faced. These frameworks lend to the understanding of undocumented students and their families and how they are shaped by their environments, which varies drastically from that of any other legal citizen. The sociocultural factors, addressed further in this chapter, impact these students' trajectories both positively and negatively. I tie in immigration policy, education policy, and sociocultural influences by stressing the research that addressed the current state of undocumented youth in higher education. I also pinpointed graduation rates, matriculation rates, and college affordability. To identify the literature and research that best aligned with my study, I searched specific Boolean terms including:

“Undocumented”, “Immigration Policy”, “College Advising”, “College Access”, “High School Counselors”, “Education Policy”, “Financial Aid”, “Immigration in Education”, and a select others. I selected the following literature to provide an in-depth background to my study and research.

Theoretical Framework – Critical Race Theory and LatCrit

To better understand the research through a specific lens, I explore Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Race Theory. These theories consider race and racism as factors based not only on perception, but also on established policies and historical context. LatCrit, an extension of CRT, focuses on the role of Latino culture as a disruption to the Black and White binary discussion (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016; Cooper Stein et al., 2018). This lens allows educators to better understand undocumented immigration in this country (Pérez Huber, 2010). In better understanding the research through a LatCrit framework, emphasizing the reality of its existence across educational environments is critical when interpreting situations through this analytical lens. The themes that arise in interpreting research and situations through the LatCrit framework play a role in the day-to-day interactions between students, families, and counselors; they shape how those interactions are approached and how they influence social transformation (Iglesias & Valdes, 1998). It confronts dominant American understandings, taking into account the Latino perspective, which further elevate racism as it impacts Latinos.

Stereotypes of Undocumented Populations

Themes that arise when using LatCrit to interpret research have been previously identified by researchers. One of the major themes that has been addressed is the role of

Latino stereotypes, which create negative assumptions of the population within society and organizations. Stereotypes created by individuals who also enforce them, build barriers to accessing higher education. For example, Irizarry (2011) studied Latino high school students' experiences in seeking equitable access to freedoms and resources at the school level. In this research he found that there is a stereotype that students of color, specifically Latino students, are apathetic about education; a common cultural trait of marginalized populations (Irizarry, 2011). Irizarry's findings, as interpreted through the LatCrit lens, underline the role of institutional discourse in creating or enforcing education practices that can present mental and tangible barriers for students. The stereotypes addressed by Irizarry were also discussed by Del Razo (2012), who interviewed and surveyed over 300 undocumented Latino students across the United States. Del Razo found that the impact of stereotyping on undocumented youth, can lead to them facing automatic oppression that shapes their ability or inability to achieve, in addition to being constantly exploited or victimized. Stereotyping was not the only important factor that surfaced from Del Razo's (2012) research. He also identified that stereotyping could lead to limiting access to systematic resources (i.e., financial aid) that further drives oppression of this population by school systems (Del Razo, 2012). Additional research on the role of stereotypes and their power over undocumented students was identified in Irizarry and Raible's (2014) research of seven Latino high school students. The students expressed that being exposed to educational opportunities in their life allowed them to start to see what was possible for them (Irizarry & Raible, 2014). Analyzing and understanding this research through a LatCrit lens stresses the power and impact of how undocumented students are perceived, addressed, or influenced

by school administrators or, in this case, college counselors (López et al., 2019; Salinas et al., 2019). These studies further demonstrate that the exposure and negative assumptions or stereotypes of minority communities led students to often relate their self-identity with marginalized groups (Irizarry & Raible, 2014). It is important to acknowledge that students in Irizarry and Raible's (2014) research expressed a fear that administrators often use such sensitive information to stereotype and limit opportunities because of "perceived pathologies" (p.437). As I proceeded with addressing the research questions in this study, I anticipated that responses by both students and CAPs would uncover similar themes in which undocumented students have been stereotyped in a manner that influenced the guidance, resources, and supports provided based on stereotypes of the population.

Negative Portrayals Through Language and Media

An additional theme of LatCrit is the role of language, in how Latinos are labeled, portrayed, and addressed, in influencing and impacting student achievement and trajectory. This plays a role in varying fronts of society as López et al. (2019) found, via completion of a mixed-methods study on both Spanish and English evening news broadcastings, that the terms used to describe or address the undocumented population of students can affect how educators perceive them or assume of their capabilities. Language leveraged, be it "undocumented" or the dehumanizing term "illegal," influences the alignment in educators truly driving social justice efforts (Figueroa-Caballero & Mastro, 2019; López et al., 2019). The way the undocumented community is portrayed "provides strong and hegemonic constructs that do little in understanding this population, but instead only fans the xenophobic flames already in the air" (López et al.,

2019, p.11). Such portrayals ultimately impact the student and their families' senses of fear and concerns as they make decisions on a daily basis (Rendon et al., 2019; Roche et al., 2020). As interviewees' responses were analyzed, there was language that surfaced on how students described themselves but also on how CAPs labeled or addressed them.

Influence on Exclusionary Policies

LatCrit also allows for understanding and interpretation of the effects that undocumented students are faced with due to exclusionary policies (Lara & Nava, 2018; López & Matos, 2018). Specifically, there are policies in place which assist or prevent an undocumented student from accessing higher education (Macías, 2018). López and Matos (2018) also discussed how education can sometimes be used as a form of bargaining that creates limitations for Latino communities, especially those currently being impacted by the political landscape we are in. While college advisors are not necessarily required to learn about and understand the varying policy factors that impact undocumented students, staying abreast of those factors can influence the quality of advising sessions they provide. Knowledge of this, and considerate approaches by counselors, can best address the disparities that exclusionary policies create. Lara and Nava (2018) found that supportive relationships were critical in influencing undocumented students' education aspirations and trajectories. Wildman (2005) considered this necessity to name things in this case, acknowledging a students' citizenship status and the opportunities available in assisting in facilitating conversations with students and families. Gonzalez and Morrison (2016) identified that "education serves as a site of tension for students of color because of its ability to expand opportunity on one hand and create oppressive situations on the other" (p. 91). This framework is vital within education as the approach that educators

take in understanding and empathizing with undocumented students should take into account their culture and background, especially in environments where they are already the minority population facing exclusionary policies. Research finds that immigration factors, which include the policies in place within the college journey, impact issues of access, choice, navigation, and outlook for undocumented students (Abrego & Gonzalez, 2010; Gonzales, 2007; Perez, 2009).

The Undocumented Students' Perception

From a student's perspective, Cooper Stein et al. (2018) identified themes aligned with LatCrit where high school students who participated in the research reported feelings of being antagonized or disliked. This elevates a reality in which the dominant culture or environment influences how undocumented students can perceive themselves in a negative manner. To center the stigma that may have been presented by a dominant race and also reflected in the roles of teachers and education staff, Cooper Stein et al.'s (2018) research found that Latino students aimed to break stereotypes by achieving academically and socially, but still "expressed relatively low sense of self" (p. 115). The varying narratives of undocumented immigrants and the approach in understanding them via LatCrit can impact the perceptions they have of themselves as students. It also influences their understanding of how educators around them may view them as a subordinate group (Pérez Huber, 2010). Furthermore, these feelings of injustice are also what have been sparking social justice movements for undocumented students in recent years (Osorio, 2018; Guajardo et al., 2020). In my research, I identified some of the themes shared above as elevated by the students' voices and how their own interactions with college counselors were perceived.

Theoretical Framework – Social Mentality Theory and Compassion in Counseling

When considering the approaches that counselors take with students, it is important to understand the mindsets that they themselves may have when meeting with students. As research previously shared addressed, there are varying factors that impact undocumented students, and this often leaves them in a vulnerable state.

Social Mirroring

In regard to undocumented students and the lens that educators often have of them, researchers Dabach et al. (2018) found what can be defined as social mirroring. Social mirroring describes how educators mirror back to students their perceptions of who they are or what they can achieve, which can impact the trajectory of the students. This leads to evidence of how having a compassionate counseling lens can influence how undocumented students oftentimes perform at a lower academic level than their peers with documentation (Yoshikawa et al., 2016). In chapter one, I addressed the overarching framework of social mentality theory, which I branch out into the role of compassion in counseling between both counselors and undocumented students. For many of these students, even the English language is known to be a core barrier that prevents them from engaging in their academics; an area that not all educators are equipped to address (Gaytan et al., 2007; Jin Bang et al., 2011). Tying this to the political factors at play, McWhirter et al. (2013) addressed that students anticipating immigration status barriers were less likely to succeed academically and to plan to pursue postsecondary education than their peers. This is likely because of the additional layer of barriers that exist for this group when going through the college application process.

Appropriate training must be at the forefront if quality counseling is expected.

Researchers Fulton and Cashwell (2015) stated that:

Mindful awareness and compassion training may redress the negative effects of anxiety, such as lower empathy and decreased likelihood of sharing about counseling experiences...Also, developing mindfulness skills (e.g., non-judgment to present-moment experience), as well as compassion for others (via compassion meditation and exercises), may help to increase a counselor's ability to take the client's perspective and offer genuine empathy, which are both important to the development of the therapeutic relationship (p. 122).

Compassion Influenced by Awareness and Training

The importance of training, readiness, and willingness that must be in place in order to properly counsel students are provided in the statement. These skill sets are said to be “learned in supervision through modeling and skill-building or mindfulness practice within counseling supervision” (Fulton & Cashwell, 2015 p. 131). Yet, as was addressed earlier, the workload and student-to-counselor ratio that some counselors have at any given point impacts such a catered approach in the services and supports provided.

Compassion is most beneficial when it is at the center of a quality counseling framework. Jazaieri (2018) focused on this in four key components: “awareness of suffering, sympathetic concern related to being emotionally moved by suffering, a wish to see the relief of that suffering, and responsiveness or readiness to help relieve that suffering” (p. 23). Jazaieri (2018) further point out the vulnerability of students at a high school age addressing their own personal identity struggles that influence all other aspects of academics and college aspirations. There is often an added focus for students

to succeed academically in order to get into selective colleges and stressors around peer groups or “fitting in” (Jazaieri, 2018, p.27). There are also developmental shifts such as shame or negative self-beliefs that are occurring for students (Gilbert & Irons, 2009; Jazaieri, 2018). This leads to ensuring that focus on these students’ whole being is addressed as to drive engagement on the students’ behalf that would allow them to build initiative and a willingness to ask for help (Jin Bang et al., 2011; Todd et al., 2020). Matsuda (2019) also published research which call attention to the importance of incorporating mindfulness and compassion in education to engage and support students who have experienced adverse childhood experiences. As noted by Roeser and Pinela (2014), the there is opportunity to instill compassion at an early age when students are more easily influenced and shaped in developmental stages that can dictate their own future perceptions of self and others.

Relationships at the Center

Studies on the topic of how compassion plays a role in the relationships established between students and education professionals have been completed previously. For example, Bluth and Eisenlohr-Moul (2017) examined an eight-week mindful self-compassion course with 47 adolescents found that compassion often takes place alongside stress or depression and requires necessary exposure to practicing compassion by students and adults to best approach relationships. When looking at the students’ perceptions of being approached through the lens of compassion and empathy, Van Vliet et al. (2018) studied a group of young adolescent males where one of the participants expressed some the following response: “What I noticed mostly was that there was a connection, a real, actual, deep connection with these people, even if it was

momentary” (p. 307). The researchers share that for most participants it was important to know that others were aware of their distress. One participant in the study expressed her appreciation of knowing that someone in the education system acknowledged that she was facing certain issues. This is important to note and directly related to this research, as responses from students and College Access Professionals uncovered the existence of such approaches within the college access guidance that was provided.

Further supporting this research are findings that spotlight the importance of comfort within compassion; or the ability to alleviate anxiety alongside validation; or conveying the belief in the participants’ (students’) strengths and potentially elevating self-confidence (Van Vliet et al., 2018). In considering the external factors that impact undocumented students, a compassionate approach which expresses or instills resilience and growth is also key. Such an approach assisted research participants’ ability to “get through,” “bounce back,” and “move on” from the distressing event, especially those recovering from adversity that threatened their sense of power and independence (Van Vliet et al., 2018, p.310). Given the precarious state of undocumented students, many of which run into situations in which their emotional state is impacted, they often feel a sense or need to have education professionals (counselors) available who are able to empathize and direct them accordingly. High school is a final stage before transitioning into college and having been exposed to individuals who can create a comforting relationship plays a role in how successful undocumented students are in matriculating and persisting.

Counselors as Institutional Agents

With the responsibility of needing to act in different capacities as a counselor in order to drive successes for undocumented students, acting as institutional agents is an effective way to address those varying needs. Students' access to academic development is influenced by many "subsystems" at play driven by class, gender, or race, and which require institutional agents to act as the students' navigational tools. Bensimon, Dowd, Stanton-Salazar, and Davila (2019) explained that institutional agents, beyond serving as educators, encompass knowledge of the oppressiveness that exists for marginalized populations and use it to change institutional narratives. This approach allows for institutional agents to act as advocates and allies in a space where minority populations face systemic and societal barriers that prevent access to resources and support. Bensimon et al. (2019) believed that through this approach, racial equity is at the forefront of the larger environment which influences a "growing capacity to provide equal academic experiences, recognitions, and outcomes for members of different racial and ethnic groups" (p.1692). To this, Stanton-Salazar (2011) acknowledged that in order for institutional agents to be effective, they require being supported by the structure and resourcefulness of their own social networks and spheres of influence. In this research, I focus on identifying the extended role that college access professionals take in order to provide the necessary access to individualized supports that undocumented students often need. Responses provided by this study's student participants provided for the ability to identify if this was evident during K-12 based on the supports they were provided by CAPs. Stanton-Salazar's (2011) research on this described it best by saying that effective institutional agents "mobilize resources and support for students who are then enabled to

effectively navigate and exert control over the principal environments within which he or she is embedded” (p.1078).

Multiple studies address the need to have a certain approach towards students by educators and counselors. The literature and research addressed above assisted in identifying factors that influenced this study’s participants’ perspectives in being equipped accordingly for college. Based on their interview responses, I was able to better understand the relationship built, the trust instilled, and the confidence attained through the college counseling process, the matriculation, and persistence journey. I summarize this section with research by Collins and Ting (2014) who looked into the complexity of care by stating:

We live in a reductionist society. The modernist view tends to categorize, label, delineate, and standardize many aspects of our lives. In school, we differentiate among grades, marks, classrooms, abilities, disability types, behaviors, and gender. We do this because the world is so complex that we cannot understand it as is. There is a need to reduce the complexity by constructing subthemes that are smaller and easier to understand. (p. 8)

Interpreting Social Mentality and Compassion

Despite the varying factors that influence the current state of our education environment alongside the perceptions of undocumented students that educators have, there must be a simpler way to ensure that undocumented students are properly guided. This considers key components such as empathy and compassion, which show these students the potential that builds confidence in their journey to and through college. This also considers the importance in ensuring that these students have access to necessary

resources and are not limited by exclusionary policies which can be influenced by counselors serving as institutional agents. Collins and Ting (2014) emphasized this need by sharing that “a complex way of thinking can provide us with a way to conceive of care as an ever-evolving process that is constantly adapting to each unique situation” (p. 10). Counselors must understand and be open to the varying backgrounds or situations of undocumented students in order to maximize the impact that they have while acting as true institutional agents. They must build relationships in which two-sided understanding is a norm as social mentality theory describes. This diversity of the dialogue that takes place between the varying situations of each student can drive a relationship beyond comfort, force counselors to consider and interact with new perspectives, and create learning about the relationship (Collins & Ting, 2014). Through this, if educators have the ability to connect with their students and understand them beyond the classroom, they are better equipped to overcome their own assumptions of this population of students (Dabach et al., 2018). If such approaches are taken into consideration and practiced across college counseling sessions for undocumented students, there will be a stronger sense of confidence that drives actions and activities towards successful college journeys.

College Advising

According to the Texas Administrative Code, “The primary responsibility of a school counselor is to counsel students to fully develop each student's academic, career, personal, and social abilities” (Texas Administrative Code §33.006, 2001). That statement aligns with the understanding that many individuals have come to know of the role of a counselor as leading not only students’ academic supports, but also socio-emotional supports needed inside and outside of the classroom. McDonough (2005)

indicated that counselors often do not have the proper training, resources, or lack capacity to properly counsel students. Additionally, Gonzales (2016) found that many large school districts lack the capacity needed to meet those individual needs for undocumented students. Gonzales identified that school district approaches to students is often influenced by “differential access to information, their own personal prejudices and beliefs, and scarcities in time, materials, staff, and space” (p. 13).

The findings addressed have been prevalent in even the students’ perceptions of their college counselors, as a study by Solmonson et al. (2014) found in researching the impact that counselors had as perceived by college freshman. Of the 1,498 undergraduate students across three public post-secondary colleges who were surveyed, 10% reported never meeting with the school counselor (Solmonson et al., 2014).

The impact that counselors have on students’ post-secondary choices continued to be found minimal by Malgwi et al. (2005) who, through a study of undergraduate students found that there was a lower degree of influence in deciding a students’ college trajectory from high school counselors. Dabach et al. (2018) affirmed the 2005 findings of Malgwi et al. (2005) by acknowledging that educators did not always provide the right college guidance to students if they assumed automatically that the student would not attend and would instead pursue blue-collar work. This was identified through a study in which elementary, middle, and high school educators of immigrant students were interviewed to gather information regarding how they explained their students’ post-high school journey. Furthermore, Dabach et al. (2018) gathered that most educators in their sample responded that immigrant students commonly were unlikely to continue into higher education past high school.

What is often missed in these stories is the fact that immigrant and undocumented students more often times than not outpace the education attainment of their parents, which leaves gaps in education guidance from the family and requires more strategic guidance from educators (Gonzales, 2010a; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). The perception that was considered in these studies supports research by Yamamura et al. (2010) who found that stakeholders' (counselors) perceptions and sense of responsibility were that "college-readiness only applied to college bound or the top 15% of students" and not the rest of the student population (p.139). These researchers found that students that fell outside of the 15% were prepared to be workforce ready as opposed to college ready. Vela et al. (2016) further suggested that although there is a certain perception that counselors have, their approach to conversations should use caution as students "may misinterpret such comments as lack of belief in their ability and give up on their educational goals or develop low college-going self-efficacy" (p. 14).

Yamamura et al. (2010) focused on the role of a counselor having been developed from the need for such supports to compliment classroom efforts to educate students and assist them in achieving success. While there are external influences that impact how a student develops, there is an influence in how counselors truly impact the trajectory of a student's transition into college beyond what they are exposed to in the classroom. As Vela et al. (2016) explain: "Expectations from school counselors to pursue and succeed academically appear to be more important to influence college-going self-efficacy than positive regard and investment" (p. 15). Solmonson et al. (2011) found that there needs to be a connection or interaction that establishes the relationship in which a counselor/advisor influences college exploration and instills motivation in the students. In

some cases, models of college advising that incorporate specific strategies, such as peer-mentoring or specialized advising, can result in a higher likelihood of college enrollment and persistence for minority student populations, as Bettinger and Evans (2019) identified in a pre-college advising study. Educators with the right tools to address undocumented students can in fact allow for the proper engagement, action, and advancement in education for them, yet training still lacks (Clayton, 2019; Mulhern, 2020). Supporting this statement is Gonzales (2010b), who studied the stories of undocumented youth in the Los Angeles area and found that policies, practices, and relationships at play do in fact influence how successful these students are, but are also strongly driven by how a school is structured. Additionally, Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) studied high school students' ease of access to proper supports and resources, and identified that there are multiple factors, including language, socio-economic status, achievement, or immigration status, that influence how they are supported by K-12 agents. Stanton-Salazar (2001) then documented via student interviews not only the barriers that exist for such students, but also the importance of having constructive relationships and social networks that allow access to proper supports provided by educators. Both studies by Stanton-Salazar (1995, 2001) emphasized the need to ensure that educators are equipped and knowledgeable of students' situations to allow for proper guidance.

The importance of quality college advising can also be understood when looking at the numbers that the data show regarding post-high school matriculation and performance. Velez (2016) used matriculation data from the U.S. Department of Education and identified that high school seniors who interacted with their college counselor in K-12 were more likely to attend college and successfully complete their

degrees than students who did not meet with their counselor (Velez, 2016). This data shows the direct association between college advising and student educational outcomes. Further research aligns these impacts by addressing the need for college counselors to make those connections for students which provide for a more understandable approach to their college exploration (Masland Skerrit, 2012). Masland Skerrit (2012) acknowledged that there are many moving pieces to the college application process which can result in feelings of uncertainty, lack of confidence, and confusion for students. This is a reality that many students face as they near high school graduation and transition to college. To add a layer of barriers, such as legal status, can be even more daunting for students in this process, as Perez (2009) wrote from a direct interview of students who feel under-equipped and underrepresented. A student in Perez's (2009) study expressed: "the second semester [of senior year] all these great opportunities opened up for people...they come in showing the PowerPoints about federal aid and grants that say Undocumented students cannot apply and you feel horrible" (p. 20). In order to increase the likelihood of an undocumented student finding confidence in the college going process, they need the right supports provided by educators who influence a vision of opportunity and possibility (Gonzales, 2010a, 2016).

Immigration Policy Research

Policy addressed in chapter one provided initial insight into the existing legislation that impacts education and the undocumented student population. The past and present policies that government has developed have continued to impact undocumented populations. The impact is present even before they transition to the United States, as the economy, education, living conditions influence a decision to immigrate (Suarez-Orozco

et al., 2011). The policies at play at the federal, state, and local levels are addressed in the following sections.

Federal

There are multiple policies that contribute to the trajectory that undocumented students have in accessing higher education and career opportunities. It is important to note that the issue of immigration is long-standing and embedded deep in the history of this country. Certain populations were restricted from accessing the country as determined by certain criteria, like performance on literacy tests in the 1800s and 1900s (López & Matos, 2018). Previous actions regarding public education and undocumented students have even led to employing a tuition fee of \$1,000 for each student due to loss of state funding (Olivas, 2012). In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court decided on *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 granting access to free K-12 public education to all students regardless of demographics or immigration status (Olivas, 2012). This decision was a pivotal point for immigrants and undocumented families in the United States as it ensured that, despite access, the affordability factor was not going to be a concern. Supreme court Justice Brennan ultimately spoke to the reality that children were not the ones who were at fault for their legal status. Denying them a public education would hinder progress for the future of the country (Murillo, 2015). This key decision unfortunately did not extend into higher education, leaving a gap in access to education for undocumented students. Additionally, federal-level statutes were enacted which further hindered access and resources to attend higher education for this population of students. Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 clearly prohibited undocumented students from receiving federal aid for postsecondary education. Also, the Personal Responsibility & Work Opportunity

Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and IIRIRA, both enacted in 1996 in a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment sweeping the country, aimed to exclude undocumented students from receiving state or local benefits for postsecondary education (Drachman, 2006).

Along with the access to higher education, there is a financial component that must be considered. With the rising costs of higher education, affordability is often a barrier in and of itself, even for U.S. Citizens. FAFSA provides aid that totals to an aggregate \$24 billion annually (Kofoed, 2017). This financial support at the federal level only applies for those who are a citizens or eligible noncitizens of the United States, and for those who have a valid Social Security number including registration with the Selective Service system for males, as stated on the FAFSA government website. With costs of higher education continuing to grow yet inability to access financial assistance, undocumented students can easily be faced with a large financial burden for them and their families. Although not a formal policy, FAFSA encompasses key requirements for eligibility that align directly with citizenship status. Policies at the state level regarding similar issues will be addressed shortly.

Additional protections that students may qualify for and are currently making headlines are the DACA and Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Krogstad and Gonzalez-Barrera (2018) share that currently more than 320,000 immigrants from 10 nations have permission to live and work in the U.S. under TPS because war, hurricanes, or other disasters in their home countries could make it dangerous for them to return. The Trump administration has said it will not renew the program for people from El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Sudan, who together account for about 76% of enrolled immigrants as of 2018 (Krogstad & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2018). The student spotlighted at

the beginning of this thesis was fortunately able to find solace under TPS, having immigrated from El Salvador, but not all undocumented youth are able to share in the same benefits. Unfortunately, as of May 2018, the Trump administration announced an end to the TPS protection for individuals from El Salvador, beginning in September 2019; a proposal that has since been extended to 2021 due to ongoing litigation across federal courts (Renteria, 2018; Barbero, 2019).

Under DACA, which was reviewed earlier in this chapter, the Department of Homeland Security looked to protect children who had been brought into the country at a young age and met specific criteria. At the time DACA became a federal policy, Secretary Napolitano stated that such policies “are not designed to remove productive young people to countries where they may not have lived or even speak the language”, and further stating that “many [DACA recipients] have already contributed to our country in significant ways” (Thronson, 2016, p. 128). DACA has continued to be a program that has been constantly challenged by individuals who view the protection as a form of abuse of executive powers, despite having granted many students the opportunity to access higher education and contribute to the economy through employment. About 700,000 unauthorized immigrants had temporary work permits and protection from deportation through DACA as of September 5, 2017 (Krogstad & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2018). In order to qualify for DACA, individuals must meet the following requirements as shared by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services:

- Were under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012;
- Came to the United States before reaching their 16th birthday;

- Have continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007, up to the present time;
- Were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012 and at the time of making their request for consideration of deferred action with USCIS;
- Had no lawful status on June 15, 2012;
- Are currently in school, have graduated or obtained a certificate of completion from high school, have obtained a general education development (GED) certificate, or are an honorably discharged veteran of the Coast Guard or Armed Forces of the United States;
- Have not been convicted of a felony, significant misdemeanor, or three or more other misdemeanors, and do not otherwise pose a threat to national security or public safety.

Researchers Sahay et al. (2016) further described DACA and its impact on undocumented students as follows: “DACA recipients face structural barriers at the state and federal levels that stifle the potential for attaining higher education. From a political standpoint, DACA arose as a compromise from the failure of Congress to pass the DREAM Act” (p. 47). DACA, being an executive action, is not a law; thus, DACA applicants have no court to appeal rejected cases to and continue to face uncertainty with their education (Schwab & Gearhart, 2013; Barbero, 2019; Rosenberg et al., 2020). The landscape at the national level is quickly observed at the state level with repercussions that can vary widely across states, especially those with larger population numbers of undocumented youth. DACA qualifications are granted based on certain criteria that younger populations of undocumented students are now not meeting year over year given

the current restrictions on new applicants. According to an article published by Federis in 2019, undocumented students who arrived after 2007 are not able to qualify for DACA as the government is not accepting new applications as of 2017. This leaves the nearly 100,000 undocumented students, referred to as “un-DACAmented”, who graduate high school every year without a clear pathway beyond K-12 education (Federis, 2019). These policies and continued changes gravely impact undocumented students. As Perez (2009) specified, the United States is a leader in creating spaces to address social justice and human rights, yet lacks in how undocumented individuals are humanely treated, and instead, are criminalized.

State

State level policy regarding education in Texas has been much more supportive of undocumented students as compared to other states due to decades of advocacy from those who support the immigrant community in this state (Dougherty et al., 2010). With Senate Bill 1403 (SB1403), Texas was the first state to pass an in-state resident tuition policy in 2001. This provided in-state tuition rates to students who met certain requirements (Flores, 2010). Beneficiaries of SB1403 included out-of-state students who graduated from Texas high schools and who lived in the state for at least three years. Flores (2010) acknowledged that while this policy does not primarily address undocumented students, they are most likely the ones to benefit most from it. Flores (2010) examined whether undocumented students living in states that had established these policies, including Texas, were more likely to attend college after such policies were put in place than students in states without such policies. Flores ultimately found that the policies produced positive effects on college enrollment of undocumented

students, further supporting the impact that state-level policies could have. SB1403 in Texas set a precedence in 2001, which continues to this day despite challenges made by senators to repeal the bill at every legislative session.

Aligned with SB1403, the Toward Excellence Access and Success, or TEXAS Grant program, was enacted in 1999 to help pay college tuition. Eligibility for this opportunity includes all “Texas residents” as identified by meeting SB1403 residency requirements (Honawar, 2004). This program accompanied a previous grant program that was established in 1975, The Texas Public Educational Grant (TPEG), which was also aligned to serve students who identified as Texas residents, non-residents, and foreign students (Garnett, 2015). Despite barriers at the national level, these policies at the state level in Texas have provided access to undocumented students who would otherwise not have the opportunity to transition into college. One must also realize that these policies only apply in Texas and not all states across the country take the same approach in higher education access for undocumented students. As of 2019, there were only 21 states who had introduced inclusive tuition policies either at the state or institutional level (Boggs, 2019).

In Texas, there have also been a wave of immigration policies and initiatives that have negatively targeted the undocumented population. Most recently, Senate Bill 4 (SB4) was signed by Governor Abbott in May 2017 (Svitek, 2017). According to the ACLU, SB4 provides authority to local and state law enforcement agencies to do the work of federal immigration officers by allocating resources and personnel away from communities and into the focus of federal efforts. Many times, the involvement of local and state officers in these efforts influences distrust of the community and fear of

deportation for an already vulnerable population. In a challenge to SB4, some cities across Texas have now focused on creating what has been tagged as “Sanctuary Cities”, which include Houston, Austin, San Antonio, and El Cenizo; it also includes Maverick and El Paso counties. Unfortunately, these efforts to offer protections have continued to be challenged by the state and are facing ongoing litigation (Talamantes & Aguilar-Gaxiola, 2017). The added focus and effort to protect immigrants by local and state governments show what Nguyen and Serna (2014) argued on being the challenge that institutions face which further creates gaps impacting education issues.

Local

Despite the national anti-immigrant rhetoric and legislation, schools and districts have taken action to provide support and advocacy for the undocumented population. In 2017, Urban ISD and their Board of Education announced its stance on the issues impacting undocumented communities and shared their support of members of the undocumented community who have been impacted by restrictions and policies set forth by the local, state, and federal government. They further supported this statement by committing to ensure that all schools within the district would remain focused on education, inclusion, and safety for all its students and staff. Similar to Urban ISD, districts and institutions of higher education across local levels have taken similar actions to show support and advocacy for immigration issues through local policy and advocacy focused on immigrant students. It is important to note that government policies usually take precedence, even in the school setting, and that district-level stances on protecting undocumented students can be challenged (Talamantes & Aguilar-Gaxiola, 2017).

Legal Scholar Olivas (2012) explored immigration policies further and examined how they have played out and have been implemented at the state and local level. When looking at post *Plyler v. Doe* efforts to continue to marginalize and exclude undocumented populations, Olivas (2012) found that public school districts in Texas influenced education codes (Texas Education Code 21.031) that focused on charging tuition to undocumented children in the 1970s. While many districts decided not to pursue or implement the code, they had the option to do so. This created barrier to education access for the undocumented population and sparked efforts that were challenged by many communities (Del Razo, 2012; Olivas, 2012). With influence and support from the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), legal cases brought to the court focused on challenging the interpretation and implementation of *Plyler v. Doe* in fact leveraged the 1982 case to rule in favor of ensuring free access to education. This was common across districts in Texas and across the nation, requiring continued awareness and advocacy by students, community leaders, and organizations (Olivas, 2012). Despite the cases focused on limiting access, the 1980s saw an increase in school attendance of undocumented students since families considered this access a pathway to prove residency through records of attendance (Olivas, 2012). As previously stated, such protections do not provide the same context for higher education institutions across the board. Protections are instead addressed at the state and institutional level by varying policies (Gonzales, 2011).

Beyond formal education policies, other local, state, and federal legislation in recent years have continued to challenge the access that undocumented students have in attaining an education. For example, Alabama enacted House Bill 56 (HB56) in 2011,

allowing local and state law enforcement to detain individuals suspected of being undocumented. This law in Alabama caused Latino students to live in fear and not attend class in large numbers, some as high as over 5,000 during a short period (López & Matos, 2018). This came after previous efforts to drive legislation that specifically targeted immigrant communities both at the state and federal level. These state and local level policies are creating uncertain environments for the undocumented community to feel a sense of fear and mistrust, even about sending their students to school. Dee and Murphy (2020) found that local level partnerships with state and federal agencies, such as the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, reduced the number of Hispanic students enrolled in school by 10% within two years (Dee & Murphy, 2020). Previously in 2006, the United States House of Representatives proposed a bill that would have supported additional efforts to identify, deport, and separate undocumented immigrants. These efforts were confronted with anti-rhetoric campaigns across the nation, including one in which a student stood up against the injustice, for normalcy, and for the “American” dream (Vélez et al., 2008). Such anti-rhetoric campaigns have continued to cause a societal divide around the immigration issue.

The laws across local, state, and federal platforms are easily misinterpreted due to the inconsistencies and contradictions that surface when they are applied. These laws also have a deeply rooted historical context as they were originally developed to limit citizenship to white men only (Perez, 2009). The rhetoric that continues to be developed around undocumented groups is prevalent even within the undocumented immigrant community. Vélez et al (2008) identified student’s responses as taking proactive measures to fight legislation but also others who feared for their futures. Regarding the

policies that do provide opportunity for undocumented students, such as DACA, Gonzales (2016) addressed that even those policies can be unattainable due to qualifications and costs.

When addressing such policies that were previously or are currently in place, it is important to analyze the negative impact on students. Despite this, such policies also influence students' relentless activism to counter the negative stigma being portrayed in society of the undocumented community (Vélez et al., 2008; Huber et al., 2007). It is important that through all the legalities that exist, undocumented students mainly want to have equal belonging. This in a time in which providing the best care for the well-being of a child is constantly at opposing sides, depending on the stances individuals take (Gonzales, 2016). As society moves forward, consideration for policies that provide protections and access for undocumented students can reduce the disparities and improve educational outcomes (Yoshikawa et al., 2016).

College Access of Undocumented Students

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that as of 2012, the number of undocumented individuals in the US was at nearly 11.2 million (Passel, D'Vera, Cohn, 2014). Of the estimated 100,000 undocumented students who graduate from high schools in the United States every year, only 5-10% continue on into higher education (Federis, 2019; Ibarra & Sherman, 2012). This is likely due to the inability to formally address their immigration status, which impacts the access that they have to colleges and careers while facing increased chances of deportation (Gonzales, 2016). Gandara and Contreras (2009) noted that a college degree is quickly becoming a requirement for a middle-class income; a factor that Martinez (2014) questioned due to the limited access to institutions that

undocumented students have. Martinez (2014) further questions whether these students will even be able to earn their degrees or seek employment due to the multiple legal and financial barriers that they face.

To assess the impact that immigration and education policies have on undocumented students, Flores and Horn (2009) analyzed the impact of Texas' in-state tuition policy. They found that in Texas four-year public universities, enrollment grew from 633 students in 2001 to 2,275 in 2004 under House Bill 1403, a number that rose up to approximately 11,132 students in 2007 and was still less than 1% of the total enrollment at the time. To this, Flores and Horn (2009) added that there are additional skills beyond academic achievement that students must encompass to successfully navigate postsecondary institutions. Such increases in enrollment for this population are being seen across the country where states have had such policies. California is one state where undocumented high school students are improving their academic scores, attempting college credit courses, and succeeding by having increased access to opportunities (Ngo & Astudillo, 2019). As undocumented students succeed academically, they automatically challenge the nuances that exist regarding achievement. Del Razo (2012) addressed: successful undocumented youth face mediocrity which "they challenge when they are excluded from receiving any type of public financial assistance that other successful students receive" (p. 32). Nonetheless, after studying similar enrollment data across select Texas public universities, Dickson and Pender (2013) addressed that positive enrollment of HB1403 was more highly concentrated at institutions that had already historically accepted Hispanic students. They added that "the policy did not

significantly increase the enrollment at the most selective public universities... due to the small percentage of non-citizens accepted at these universities” (p.132).

At a more recent macro level, there are still gaps in access. Nienhusser et al. (2015) share that only about 25% of undocumented students between 25 and 64 years of age have attended or received a post-graduate degree, compared to 53% of documented students and 62% of those born in the U.S. To further put the issues that undocumented families face into context, Holzman (2016) emphasized that tuition and fees comprise 20-21% of the income of undocumented families without including room and board. These high costs, tied with lack of access to financial aid in some states, contributed to Holzman’s (2016) additional findings on a more specific population of undocumented families. Holzman identified that statewide bans decrease the likelihood of two- and four-year enrollment among Mexican foreign-born non-citizens, compared to that of Mexican citizens by 41% and 55%.

Martinez (2014) interviewed undocumented students that faced situations in which some were unable to navigate through the process due to not having a social security number or who were advised by adults to minimize their expectations. One subject in Martinez’s (2014) study vividly portrayed that she ultimately “lost interest in school as she no longer saw the point in excelling if she was unable to go to college,” due to barriers related to her undocumented status (p.1879). With recent executive actions related to DACA, other subjects shared the excitement felt in having some sense of hope towards college and career attainment. One specifically expressed excitement yet uncertainty in not knowing what it exactly meant, saying “you become so used to the mindset of you can’t do things and once that door is open you don’t know what to do”

(Martinez, 2014, p.1880). In a separate study, one student felt that in addition to their documentation status, an added layer of the unknown resulted from not having parents who possessed college access knowledge and needing to have self-initiative in finding that support via school resources (Trivette & English, 2017). Despite the data that identified that undocumented students in college faced larger levels of anxiety (Teranishi et al., 2011), these students are resisting the narrative that is being portrayed by greater society and the media by taking a stance and being empowered to be undocumented, unapologetic, and unafraid (Pernett, 2018) in their successes and educational attainments. According to Perez (2009), the barriers are high for these students and one in five who graduate from high school continue the journey to higher education. It is a grim number, but it is also a realization that society must reimagine how it defines undocumented students who continue to “endure second-class status” (Perez, 2009, p. 149). As this population continues to grow, the role of higher education is vital to ensuring that undocumented students are positioned to provide a sustainable life for themselves and their families (Teranishi et al., 2011).

Sociocultural Factors of the Undocumented Community

Research within this section examines the cultural and societal factors that impact undocumented students and their journey to and through higher education. These sociocultural influences stem from the societal level down to the self and include the role that family plays in the process (Green, 2019). This allows for a better understanding of how many of these students view and perform in education.

The family of undocumented students commonly plays a pivotal role in the students' lives. They influence the hard work that undocumented groups demonstrate in

achieving success, and in turn further elevate the role that the students play in serving as model examples for younger family members, friends, and neighbors (Gin, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). Alessio (2006) found that from a familial perspective, parents understand and acknowledge the opportunities that their children can access via education, which instills a dedicated work ethic built by those challenging experiences and sacrifices faced. The work ethic described is regularly due to adult figures in the home for these families not always being consistent, as they often take on multiple jobs to provide basic necessities (Gonzales, 2011; Jin Bang et al., 2011; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Unfortunately, while this population has historically played an important role in society by leading blue-collar labor roles, they are often treated like second-class citizens (Perez, 2009).

Current stigma and portrayal of undocumented people influences students' views of themselves and can also impact how educators approach their practices. Knowing this adds a layer of uncertainty that undocumented individuals work hard to overcome (Del Razo 2012; López et al., 2019). This reality is evident in one study which examined the experience of an undocumented student being unable to participate in her campus's college preparatory program because of being undocumented. This was influenced by criteria set by campus teachers who created the initiative. In this experience, the student reflected by stating "they made me feel like if I wasn't human" (Del Razo, 2012, p. 84). Many of these students immigrated to the United States at a young age and have only been exposed to this culture and society. Despite this, they still continue to battle with identity in finding confidence beyond the constant fear of being unaddressed and unrecognized (Del Razo, 2012). It is a reality that starts to become more prevalent as

undocumented individuals transition into adulthood and realize that many of the needs in adulthood, such as a job or even driver's license, require citizenship (Yoshikawa et al., 2016). It is a new reality for a population that likely never considered these factors during their K-12 education. (Gonzales, 2011, 2016). Allesio (2006) suggested that college access professionals must take these factors into consideration when guiding these students, and that not knowing the sociocultural background or driving force causes missed opportunities.

There are also other aspects of culture and society that influence the direction that a student takes after K-12. Nienhusser et al. (2016) found that those students who know and understand their situation may be still be influenced by the fear of their deportation, that of their family, or familial influence due to factors beyond their control. One student who was interviewed by Gonzales (2016) found that by the time high school started, she had already lived in nine different homes and attended eight schools. Additionally, her family included ten other undocumented members, so she too had to contribute to the family's sustainability as well (Gonzales, 2016). These pieces are easily missed or misunderstood by a college access professional who does not ask the right questions (Gaytan et al., 2007). This research studies what is addressed as *Undocumented Immigrant Blindness*, or the fact that college advisors can often assume that students are citizens; an assumption that can greatly impact college options or misinform a student and their family (Nienhusser et al., 2016).

Additionally, undocumented students face the reality of having limited access to financial resources to fund their college education. Gilbert (2014) shared that beyond college advising, applications, and matriculation, many of these students end up

struggling with persistence due to needing to fund their education and provide for their families financially. Terriquez (2015) supported this finding by also sharing that children of immigrants who are also undocumented commonly face financial, emotional, and social hardships that limit their educational attainment (Daftary, 2020). While there are immense aspirations to succeed in school and access higher education, the financial burden that it creates for undocumented students easily strain the balance needed at home. With most undocumented students entering the country with limited resources for their families, there is already an immediate gap in access to higher education where students from lower socio-economic backgrounds drop out of college at higher rates than students who are from more affluent communities (Terriquez, 2015). Such experiences and inability to equally access opportunities impact students at their core and can influence their mental health, especially when those [teachers and educators] who are meant to be of service fail to do so (Suárez-Orozco, 2012). Gonzales (2016) stated that “immigration status prevents them from fully participating in adult pursuits... they strain to cope with contradictory messages, anti-immigrant animosity, and the stigma of exclusion; seeking ways to balance identity as Mexican immigrants and de facto Americans” (p. 8). This elevates the reality that undocumented students struggle to find a sense of normalcy and stability given the precarious state of immigration in America.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, such situations faced can drive factors in these students’ educational aspirations. Perez (2009) heard from multiple undocumented students that parents’ continued encouragement and support provided necessary guidance and commitment to the process. The challenges faced in their environment caused one student in Perez’s (2009) study to realize the importance of continued dedication. The

student shared that an experience during his upbringing “made me realize that I needed to get myself and my family out of there through education” (Perez, 2009, p. 77). This aspirational capital creates a stronger sense of empowerment, confidence, and determination to succeed despite challenges that undocumented students face (Yosso, 2005; Huber et al., 2007). Many of these students do in fact prove otherwise and are able to persist for reasons discussed in the findings (Yoshikawa et al., 2016; Daftary, 2020). Nienhusser et al. (2016) related much of this data to the reality that students carry mental and emotional stress associated with their documentation status; a stress that high school counselors and staff must recognize either through verbal or non-verbal observation (Nienhusser & Oshio, 2020). Through those circumstances, these students are also able to persist and overcome. Allen et al. (2020) identified many of them encompassed “*ganas*” to succeed where their achievements honor any barriers or challenges that they and their families have faced. This has to be a consideration that higher education organizations think through as they build out the necessary supports and safe spaces that undocumented students need to succeed (Katsiaficas et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The research I discussed provided a foundational understanding of the factors that play a role for undocumented students to be prepared for higher education. As I identified, there are internal and external influences that undocumented students face. Regardless, there is an influential role that the K-12 system must play to ensure that students are adequately counseled. For this, it is important that counselors are equipped with the tools and resources necessary to engage accordingly.

The following section addresses the methods used for this study. I consider previously researched and used methods that support the process in developing research protocols, identifying research participants, and analyzing findings to best synthesize key themes that arise aligned with the research questions.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

Undocumented students continue to face political and sociocultural factors that create barriers to accessing a college education. Since *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), K-12 systems have been positioned with policies and practices that allow undocumented students the opportunity to access an education and receive resources, but these students' education journeys after high school are not guaranteed. Proper knowledge of the internal and external influencing factors that contribute to the college opportunities these students can access is necessary. These factors may include CAPs having knowledge of immigration policy, financial-aid resources for undocumented students, college admissions policies, undocumented family dynamics, and/or limitations in self-agency. K-12 organizations' roles, should they want to ensure that all students are being provided higher education opportunities, require the necessary systems, capacities, and knowledge to best support this population. In order to identify the areas of opportunity that currently exist in this process for K-12 organizations, my research explored the direct experiences of undocumented college students and CAPs. Gathering qualitative stories of these two groups allowed for a better understanding of the narrative that influenced the data. This context is necessary to assess practices in place through a lens of identifying the roles of race and racism (LatCrit), and compassion in the college counseling process.

The literature addressed in Chapter 2 identified the previous research completed on the education of undocumented students, which contributed to guiding my study. The findings uncovered through my approach should ensure that there is continued

consideration of the practices that shape the college advising process for undocumented students. My commitment to uncovering and elevating the voices of these students and counselors is the reason that this work is approached through a qualitative method.

Research Methodology and Design

I used a qualitative interview study approach as a way to uncover the underlying impact of the participants' experiences during K-12 as they transitioned and matriculated into college. This same approach was used during the process of interviewing CAPs. Both groups will be addressed further in the following sections. The qualitative approach to this research was focused on better understanding the individuals' experiences, having an in-depth inquiry with questions that explore the inequities that exist, and deconstructing those experiences in a manner that provided identification of common themes (Bhattacharya, 2017). This approach aligns with Edmund Husserl's concepts of inferential science, which focuses on identifying the overarching mental structure of the research participants' experiences (Gaete Celis, 2019). Opposed to traditional approaches to qualitative studies which focus on identifying general experiences, in this study I aimed to dive deeper into understanding "the how" of the participants' experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The data collected uncovered some of the deeper roots of the role that immigration and education access can play in shaping how interactions between college access professionals and undocumented students influence the college journey. As the researcher, I acknowledge that portions of the interview process were interpreted by my previous experience in working in the college access space. Bhattacharya (2017) identified this opportunity to drive an open discussion in which my own values, assumptions, and beliefs elevated and informed the study. The questions developed for

the semi-structured interview guide were focused on triggering not only reflections of the experiences of participants but also aimed to influence the stronger sense of emotions that the participants felt. Gaete Celis (2019) shared that this approach drives “a concrete and situated experience which allows one to deepen the embodied features that organize lived experiences into sensorimotor enactive relation of the individual with the experience” (p. 148). My goal in this process was not only to influence deeper reflections from research participants, but to also uncover a sense of vulnerability that allowed for a better understanding of the K-12 college access experience beyond the surface level knowledge we already know. I wanted to uncover not only the tangible experiences lived but also the deeper sense of emotions and feelings that resulted.

As previously described, the undocumented student group is a vulnerable population that often remains in the shadows and avoids any piece of being spotlighted (Enriquez & Saguy, 2016). On the contrary, there are also many undocumented students who have come to embrace their status and advocate for legislation and protections at the education and government system levels (Enriquez & Saguy, 2016). These efforts should be acknowledged as they have influenced important institutional and federal level policies that have allowed for easier higher education access for undocumented students (Salinas Velasco et al., 2015). Due to varying experiences that these students have, the sample population recruited for the study and their experiences reflected those differences. The qualitative interview approach to this study took into consideration how I, as the researcher, built trust, confidentiality, and confidence with the participants as I aimed to identify the surface level responses that addressed the research questions. This required single and multiple touch points with the participants throughout the study. The

CAPs who were interviewed completed their session in which I covered all of the questions from the protocol in one sitting. The students who were interviewed completed their sessions across two separate sittings, as I primarily aimed to learn more and elevate the students' voices. The design of the research process with students implemented a two-interview series with each of the participants. This approach assisted in elevating the experiences by building additional understanding of how participants were impacted and influenced in the long-term. The two-step approach was adopted from Schuman's (1982) three-step interview approach, which condensed due to the COVID-19 impact in 2020. This was condensed down to two interviews for students due to limited capacity in scheduling, availability, and to ensure the safety of all participants. The three-interview approach developed by Schuman (1982) allowed the qualitative data collected to be grounded in direct alignment of how experience was placed in greater context within the individual. The first step of the interview process was to facilitate an initial interaction in which the researcher inquired on the general experience as it was perceived, and how it has played a role into the present time (Siedman, 1998). The second step of the series focused deeper on the specific details of the experience, the environments, the conversations, and the tangible resources provided. In the context of this research, participants were asked to walk through and describe a typical experience or interaction in K-12 that focused on college advising. The final steps of the three-interview series focused on having participants reflect on the underlying meaning of the experience. Siedman (1998) described this final step as an approach to "address the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants' work and life" (p.18). This concluding interview was in essence a culmination of how specific experiences have influenced and

impacted the present. Within the approach that I took with students, the second and third interviews, as Schuman (1982) described, were coupled within the follow-up second interview. The interview approach overall allowed for first-hand consideration of the personal stories at play throughout the K-12 college advising process and its impact.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the research questions presented in Chapter 1. The questions developed took into account not only the experiences of undocumented college students who have transitioned out of high school and into college, but also the experiences of College Access Professionals tasked with providing guidance and resources to these students during the college access journey. Once again, the research questions that guided this study are the following:

1. How did undocumented/DACAmented college students make sense of their K-12 college advising experiences?
2. What political and sociocultural factors were at play for the undocumented student and their family during the journey towards higher education?
3. How did college advisors address political and sociocultural factors when advising undocumented students towards higher education?

Population and Sample

Participants in this research represented two core populations. The first population represented is that of undocumented students who attended high school within Urban ISD or another local school district, and who have since transitioned to an institution of higher education. These students received guidance and or access to supportive resources during their high school education that positioned them to pursue higher education. Students

targeted for this study were current college freshmen or seniors having graduated from K-12 during 2012-2019. Due to the varying internal and external factors that may play a role in the college access journey for undocumented students, the research focused primarily on the college advising process and experiences that they encountered during K-12. The second group that participated in this research is that of CAPs who served in a direct capacity providing direct college guidance to students. These CAPs were employed within Urban ISD or other local school districts during the years of 2012-2019. I chose to focus on staff that was previously employed in this capacity as a strategy to maximize the information that is shared and not limit or censor their experiences. I acknowledge that current staff is not always inclined to fully share as a way to not uncover existing areas of opportunity within the systems that are in place. The stories of these professionals reflected the knowledge, capacity, and consideration that they leveraged when advising students who identified as undocumented.

The college student participants identified for this research were primarily recruited from a local public Tier 1³ university. These students participate in a program that provides the college-level socio-emotional and academic supports necessary to matriculate and persist once they enrolled in the university. This office of the university provides resources and support for underserved and underrepresented populations, including first-generation, low-income, and some of the undocumented population. For the undocumented population, this office provides support for recipients of a major scholarship geared towards undocumented students who may need guidance navigating the institutional systems such as financial aid. Initial student participants who were

³ Tier 1 institutions refers to universities known for world-class research, academic excellence, an exceptional student body, and the highest levels of innovation, creativity and scholarship (Brand, 2016).

identified through this office were later used to identify other students within their networks who would also be ideal candidates for the research. Students engaged after the initial study recruitment did not necessarily attend the Tier 1 university, but instead attended other local or state institutions of higher education. Additional students who were interested in engaging in the study were provided with the necessary researcher contact information and guidance following the approved methods of research participation. This snowball sampling method, while a nonprobability method, allowed for participants to engage in the study with a sense of confidence, trust, and confidentiality (Johnson, 2014). It is important to acknowledge that the student research participants have documentation statuses that have caused both a sense of vulnerability and risk. Engaging participation through established relationships has allowed for influence on unbiased responses to the study's research questions.

Through the study recruitment process, I identified seven student participants. These student participants identified as undocumented, "DACAmented", or having had protection from deportation due to their eligibility for other documentation statuses other than being Permanent Residents or Citizens. Additionally, the participants all identified as Latino having immigrated from either Mexico or Central America.

The College Access Professionals who were identified as research participants were engaged through leveraging two different approaches. First, I identified former colleagues in my personal professional networks who I became familiar with through my previous employment with Urban ISD's college department. Second, I inquired with student participants to identify who their specific CAP was during K-12. Outreach to those individuals was made accordingly to gauge interest in participation in the research.

These participants were either employed with Urban ISD's college team or another local school district within the last three to five years (2015-2019) and were assigned as the dedicated college access professional providing direct service to students. As College Access Professionals, they all expressed having been tasked with meeting with and providing supportive guidance to the junior and senior level students within their respective campuses throughout the year. The interactions previously led with students included college counseling sessions and support with completing college admission and financial aid applications. Within the larger population of students supported, they also had to provide these supports specifically to students who self-identified or were identified as undocumented. The training and support systems provided to equip these College Access Professionals to serve in this capacity were instilled through both their own previous education, experiences, and professional development provided by their respective school district.

Through the approaches shared above to identify study participants, I recruited six CAPs to participate. Due to the limited number of participants that resulted, the sample may not be representative of the population, but inquiry methods used via the semi-structured interview guide assisted in maximizing the qualitative data collected. Their perspectives and experiences in providing college access support to undocumented students are still necessary in considering the influence and impact that this team has had on the college access journeys for these students. Incorporating the lens of this group provides a perspective into the experiences shared by the undocumented student participants.

Materials and Instrumentation

The study's main instrument that was used to interview the student group was a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C). The guide was designed to uncover the experiences that undocumented students faced during their K-12 college access journey, which influenced their current experiences while now being enrolled in an institution of higher education. With the use of the semi-structured interview guide, each participant interview took place through the course of four weeks in which participants were engaged through video conferencing (Zoom) or 45- to 60-minute phone call sessions. The one-week period between interviews allowed for participants to reflect on their responses and K-12 experiences, which in-turn influenced deeper context and insight in subsequent interactions. Subsequent interviews were structured in a format in which the previous interactions were used as a guide for reflection and inquiry. Questions developed for the interview guide focused on identifying the challenges that undocumented students have previously faced and continue to face while being undocumented. I focused on better understanding their experiences in a space where situations can vary drastically from that of their documented peers. The primary goal of the interview questions focused on understanding the sense or preparedness the students felt, and the role that the College Access Professional they worked with during K-12 played in the process.

Similar to the approach taken with student participants, CAPs who participated in the study were interviewed utilizing a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix D). Questions developed for this group focused on identifying their levels of experience of the undocumented population and how that may have influenced the approach they took

in providing college advising and resources. Additionally, the questions aimed to uncover the considerations taken and approaches leveraged in their interactions with students. These considerations included communications and language strategies, assumptions, and the environments in which the interactions took place. Questions asked of College Access Professionals addressed their knowledge of political factors that impact this population as well as the sociocultural factors that play a role in these students' lives. Identifying their level of knowledge and experience of undocumented students from their direct perspectives may have influenced the level of engagement, understanding, and compassion that they built with students, which in turn can influence college access journeys.

Utilizing semi-structured interviews allowed for the research data to be gathered in a manner in which responses were collected consistently across research participants (Longhurst, 2003). While experiences and responses from each individual varied, the questions were presented in a consistent manner by the interviewer to all participants. Additionally, I provided for some leniency in the structure of the interview questions if it was deemed necessary to inquire further about certain responses that triggered other experiences. The guide included between eight to ten questions for each of the study samples and only considered open-ended questions, which require in-depth responses.

Data Collection and Analysis

Virtual sessions were the primary platform to complete the interviews, which allowed me to both hear and see the research participants. This approach allowed me to establish interpersonal relationships with each of the participants and provide additional reasoning around the importance of producing this research. The multiple interview

approach, or prolonged duration, I used with each of the student participants allowed them to fill in gaps in information that may have been left out in previous interviews and gain understanding of their experiences at a deeper level (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Subsequent interviews I conducted were resourced with interview transcripts to allow participants to review and member-check their previous responses. I provided CAPs with follow-up transcriptions within one week of their first and only interview to gather feedback and ensure that their responses reflected their perspectives of the questions asked. These approaches also ensured that the participants' responses to each of the guiding questions were collected in full and with limited loss of information. As previously mentioned, I conducted each interview during sessions lasting from 45 to 60 minutes. To support this process, I digitally recorded and stored interview files in a secure encrypted file to ensure confidentiality. Upon completion of the interview process, I transcribed the questions and responses using the Trint online software and reviewed the transcriptions manually for additional edits. To code the data, I used Dedoose a qualitative software, to identify themes in a structured format. I evaluated the data taking a content analysis approach and used deductive codes to categorize, tag, and interpret themes (Medelyan, 2019). These codes were overarching descriptive words that allowed for themes to be uncovered from the data. Their meaning may assign a summative, salient, or essence-capturing attribute to the qualitative information (Saldaña, 2015). This process encompassed various steps taken from the work of Saldaña (2015) in which patterns are ultimately identified by first developing deductive codes, categorizing the data, identifying themes, and aligning to theory. Deductive codes and Inductive codes (see Appendix B) were used to interpret the data from the research interviews using the

Dedoose platform. Once all of the themes were identified, I interpreted them through the lens of LatCrit and Social Mentality Theory as well as the empirical research that was reviewed.

Assumptions

There are three primary assumptions of the study completed. The first is that the undocumented students who participated in the study received college counseling guidance and resources during their K-12 experience at their respective high schools. Due to the limited capacity and student-to-counselor ratio that exists in K-12, it can be difficult for college access professionals to meet with every single student that they are assigned. This not only impacts the quality of guidance but also the time invested in any one student, undocumented or otherwise. As the findings addressed, college access guidance and resources are at times provided in group spaces and not always in a one-to-one interaction. This approach also influences the level of application of recommendations that students act on. Second, K-12 does not collect nor track identification of undocumented students. There may be assumptions that there was knowledge of students' documentation status by the K-12 system and college access professionals. This is not always the case since students do not always self-identify as undocumented, publicly share that information, or even know of their documentation status until they begin the college access journey. Finally, due to my direct experience with working in this space, there is assumption that the resources K-12 provides this population of students has areas of opportunity and gaps when compared to resources provided to U.S. resident and citizen students. This assumption influenced biases in identifying those areas of opportunity or gaps that surfaced when I processed the data.

Limitations

There are five primary limitations of the study. The first limitation is that the research participants are currently attending a four-year institution, which differs from other higher education options such as two-year colleges or trade schools. The levels of preparedness for each of the varying types of institutions can be different due to the academic rigor and also the acceptance or enrollment requirements. The K-12 experiences that undocumented students may have encountered through the college access process with their college advisors could be influenced by the type of institution they considered. Second, college access professionals who participated in the research are no longer serving in a direct student-facing capacity. Their experiences may not represent the real-time efforts of the staff that are currently employed with Urban ISD or other local school districts. Current staff may have been prepared or provided with additional resources and professional development in the last one to two years. Training that may have been developed and being currently provided to CAPs who support undocumented students may not have been included in this study. Third, student participants all identified as Latino, which although being the dominant ethnic population within undocumented students, does not represent other ethnicities who may also identify as undocumented. Fourth, given the large number of undocumented students who currently reside in the United States and the increasing number of students who are graduating from high schools every year, the population in this study may not be representative of the larger undocumented student population due to the limited sample size that resulted after recruitment (Krejie & Morgan, 1970). Finally, the lens in which the study was conducted in was inclusive of my own role in education, having previously been

employed within Urban ISD's college team. At the same time, my insider perspective as a former CAP allowed me to witness the areas of opportunity that exist when providing undocumented students with college access resources.

Ethical Assurances

Research of the undocumented population is understood to be high-risk when considering the level of confidentiality necessary. Quilantan (2018) emphasized that undocumented students and their families are at risk of facing legal deportation proceedings when they are currently not eligible for protection. Additionally, even if enrolled in an institution of higher education, those organizations are not responsible for providing protection (Quilantan, 2018). Outside of the legal ramifications, there are social dynamics that can also be influenced if a student is not public about their documentation status. Any data collected through the process can lead to situations that can put any one student in a social or legal predicament. Due to the risks associated with engaging undocumented students in research, they are classified as a vulnerable population. In order to ensure that the students and professionals interviewed remain anonymous, pseudonyms were created as to not use legal first or last names. Additionally, approval of the process to protect participant information and maintain confidentiality was processed and provided by the Internal Review Board (IRB) prior to starting the study (see Appendix F). The consent form signed by participants, non-disclosure agreements, semi-structured interview guide(s), method of data filing and storage, and method of data analysis and coding were also all included. All consent documents were provided in English (see Appendix E). I also read the documents with each participant to ensure understanding of potential risks with participation, along with the protections provided

throughout the study process. Digital platforms and databases used for the study were encrypted and password protected to provide access only to myself, the principal researcher, and the committee chair.

Participants in the study understood, through formal signed agreements, that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and the option to be removed from the study was at will. To further support an environment of trust and confidentiality, I approached the interviews with a consistent understanding of the delicate state of mind and emotion that undocumented students can often have. Through this consideration, proposed questions were asked with transparent responses expected, but not required. Any and all items developed and collected throughout the research study will remain secured for five years after completion of the study.

Summary

I considered the proper methods to conduct research that resulted in gathering the data that addressed my research questions. In this, I realize that the student participants belong to a vulnerable population that continues to face insecurity in this country due to the political and sociocultural factors that play a role in their lives. The study required structures in which the process to identify research participants, build the semi-structured interview guide, and complete the interviews was approached with strong safety and confidentiality measures. Appropriate participation and consent documents included my commitments as the researcher to ensure that all research participants involved held ownership in the process. The structures remained transparent in nature to instill a sense of trust and maximize the sincerity of participants' responses. Through this, the responses that were collected focused on capturing a true representation of the undocumented

student experience as perceived directly from this population of students and CAPs. As the interview process was completed, proper analysis and coding of the data was produced with consideration of the same confidentiality measures. Themes identified through the findings of the study are provided in the following chapter.

Chapter IV

Findings

Introduction to the Findings

This qualitative interview study was focused on better understanding the role that K-12 college access counselors play in preparing undocumented students for higher education. To best understand the direct connection between college access professionals and undocumented students, both populations were represented in the interviewee groups. Six college access professionals and seven undocumented college students engaged in this study. The research questions were developed for the purpose of uncovering the gaps and areas of opportunity that exist for K-12 organizations as they provide college resources and guidance for undocumented students, as well as the political and sociocultural factors that influence the counselor/student relationship. Additionally, the interview protocol for each study group (see Appendix C and D) was developed to not only gather information related to the college access guidance and resources that the students received, but also gather insight into the students' personal journeys and perspectives of living undocumented while navigating college options. In this chapter, I address the findings that I identified from the qualitative interview data that were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify themes that emerged across both study populations. For research purposes, I address the findings of the data collectively across both study populations to triangulate the data. Data triangulation considers the use of multiple methods or data sources to identify and better understand the study's comprehensive findings (Patton, 1999). The thematic connections I make include the existing literature as discussed in Chapter 2, college access professional interviews, and

the undocumented student interviews. Before sharing the organization of the findings and the study's analysis, I provide information regarding the demographic profile of the study's participants.

Demographic Profile of Study Participants

The participants in this study included six college access professionals who have previously served in a CAP role focused on providing students with college access resources and guidance. In their previous capacity as college access professionals, they were responsible for meeting with high school students of all demographics and statuses, supporting their college access journey, and ensuring proper college admissions processes were met. All college access professionals interviewed had direct experience serving in this capacity between 2015 and 2019. Additional participants are seven current college students who identified as being undocumented or having some type of immigration protection status in the United States that does not guarantee citizenship nor permanent residency. For purposes of protecting participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned upon agreement to participants and throughout the interview process. The research participants were recruited based on the protocol identified in Chapter 3 and approved by the University of Houston's Internal Review Board. All of the student participants had formal interactions during K-12 with CAPs that provided college access guidance and resources. Additionally, the research participants' backgrounds and experiences varied based on circumstantial factors that are addressed in the subsequent sections in this chapter. I provide additional detail into each of the participants' background and demographics in Table 1 which is also included in the appendix (see Appendix A).

Table 1*Student Participants*

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Age of Arrival	HS Graduation Year	Current Age	Citizenship Protection	College Classification
Enrique	El Salvador	15	2016	21	SA	Senior
Christina	Mexico	6	2019	18	None	Freshman
Hector	Mexico	2	2016	22	DACA	Senior
Franco	Mexico	8	2017	20	DACA	Junior
Julia	Honduras	5	2017	20	DACA	Junior
Karina	Mexico	3	2016	22	DACA	Senior
Carlos	Mexico	12	2013	26	DACA	Senior

Note. HS = High School. SA = Seeking Asylum

Students

Enrique is a 21-year-old college senior majoring in education. He arrived in the United States at the age of 15 from El Salvador and journeyed to the U.S. alongside his younger brother. Although he was detained by immigration upon entering, he was allowed to reunite with his mother in Houston, Texas. In Houston, he transitioned to a middle school focused on providing resources to newly arrived children in this country. He soon after transitioned to one of the highest performing high schools in the city and graduated in 2016. Enrique currently has protection in the United States under the Asylum Seeker protections. This protection is for individuals who have left their country of origin to escape persecution or human rights violations but have not yet been guaranteed refugee status in America (Coutin, 2011). Enrique is the oldest child in his family and lives with his mother and brother, both of whom are undocumented.

Christina is 18 years old and is a current college freshman majoring in engineering. She arrived in the United States at 6 years old and was brought by her parents from Mexico in hopes of reuniting with family already living in the country.

Christina transitioned into 2nd grade classes and ultimately graduated from a large comprehensive high school in 2019. She currently does not have any protection status and is living in the country undocumented. Christina is the oldest child in her family and lives with her parents, her younger sister, and a young brother who is the only U.S. citizen in the family.

Hector is a 22-year-old college senior majoring in history and political science. He arrived in the country at the age of 2 and was brought by his mother from Mexico as a means to escape a domestic violence situation. Hector was enrolled in public school and eventually graduated from a local STEM focused charter school in 2016. He currently has protection through DACA. Hector is the oldest in his family, which consists of his mother, father-in-law, and younger brother. Both him and his mother are the only ones in their immediate family who currently do not have a permanent protection status. Through DACA, he is able to work part-time to support his family.

Franco is a 20-year-old college junior majoring in sociology. He arrived in the United States at the age of 8 and was brought by his mother from Mexico to access education and income opportunities. Enrique transitioned to 3rd grade when he entered the country and eventually attended a local charter school where he graduated from in 2017. He currently has protection through DACA. Enrique is the oldest in his family and currently lives on-campus to ensure continued focus and success in his studies.

Julia is a 20-year-old college junior currently majoring in kinesiology and psychology. She arrived in the United States at the age of 5 and was brought by her parents from Honduras as a means of fleeing gang and cartel violence. Julia transitioned into kindergarten upon arriving in the country and eventually graduated from high school

in 2017. She is the oldest in her family and lives with both parents and her younger brother, who is the only U.S. citizen. Julia currently has protection through DACA.

Karina is a 22-year-old college senior majoring in biology. She arrived in the United States at the age of 3 and was brought by her parents from Mexico to access a high-quality education and reunite with family that was already living in the country. Karina attended a public-school system and eventually graduated from high school in 2016. Karina is the second oldest in her family, but the first to attend college. She lives with her parents and older sister and is the only one in the family who has protection under DACA.

Carlos is a 26-year-old college senior majoring in biotechnology. He arrived in the United States at the age of 12 and was brought by his mother from Mexico to escape the cartel and gang violence that was taking over their hometown. Upon arriving to the United States, he was held back and placed in 6th grade, but eventually graduated from a local high school in 2013. Carlos is the middle child and lives with his mother and two other siblings. He is the only child who has matriculated for college. Carlos currently has protection under DACA which has allowed him to work part-time through college to support the tuition costs.

All of the student participants bring a unique lens to the experiences, which have led them to access higher education. The varying factors that play a role in their lives, either political or sociocultural, surfaced through the interviews I analyzed alongside the data from college access professionals in this chapter.

Table 2 which is also included in the appendix (see Appendix A) provides a demographic overview of the CAPs that participated in this research followed by brief descriptions of each of the participants within this group.

Table 2

College Access Professional Participants

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Education Level	Years as a CAP	Students Supported Annually	Notes
Raquel	Trinidad	Masters	2012-2017	3,000+	Naturalized Citizen
Cesar	Mexico	Bachelors	2017-2019	275	DACA
Jessica	Colombia	Masters	2013-2019	100-125	Naturalized Citizen
Ashley	U.S.A.	Masters	2015-2019	100-150	N/A
Stacey	U.S.A.	Bachelors	2010-2019	600	N/A
Gilbert	U.S.A.	Bachelors	2017-2018	20-30	N/A

Note. CAP = College Access Professional

College Access Professionals

Raquel is a first-generation U.S. citizen who immigrated to the country at a young age from Trinidad. Although she came to the country without documentation, she and her family secured residency soon after their arrival, which allowed her to have access to education and career opportunities. Raquel holds a bachelor's degree in finance and a master's degree in counseling. She previously served as a college access professional from 2012 to 2017. In her role as a college access professional, she was the only college counselor who supported a large comprehensive high school of about 3,000 students and was the only licensed professional counselor serving in that capacity in her district. Raquel brought a unique lens to this research as she shared some identity and experiences as an immigrant. Additionally, Raquel was the direct college counselor of Enrique; a student participant in this study. Given these experiences and her education, she has dedicated her work to serving the community and is now a middle school counselor.

Cesar is a DACA recipient who originally immigrated to the United States with his family from Mexico to access educational and financial stability. He maneuvered through the college process as an undocumented student until he was able to secure protection under DACA soon after 2012. This experience provided a unique lens into how he approaches supporting undocumented students. Cesar has a bachelor's degree in Political Science from one of the nation's Ivy League universities. He previously served in a direct college advising role but is now overseeing a group of college access professionals as a manager. During his time as a college counselor, Cesar supported three to four high schools and about 275 students at any given time.

Jessica is a first-generation U.S. citizen having immigrated to the country with her family from Colombia. Jessica also had to maneuver the college access journey as a permanent resident student until she eventually secured her citizenship in 2013. She holds a bachelor's degree in English and is currently completing her master's degree in public administration. She served as a college access professional from 2013 through 2019, providing direct services to students. During that time, Jessica supported three to four high schools and close to 100 students at any given time. Jessica has since transitioned to a new role supporting programs focused on providing educational support to under-resourced communities.

Ashley is a first-generation natural-born United States citizen, that identifies as a minority. She holds a bachelor's degree in Sociology and a master's degree in educational leadership. Ashley worked as a college access professional directly supporting students from 2015 to 2019 and has since transitioned into non-profit work. During her time as a college counselor, she supported four to five multiple campuses and

100 to 150 students at any given time. Ashley was also the direct college counselor of student participant, Hector.

Stacey is a United States citizen with multiple generations in this country. She identifies as a White female. Stacey holds an associate degree in liberal arts and a bachelor's degree in education. She served as a college access professional from 2010 to 2019 supporting a large charter school campus with a senior class of nearly 600 students.

Gilbert is a natural-born United States citizen and identifies as an Asian-American. He holds a bachelor's degree in biology. Gilbert served as a college access professional directly supporting students from 2017 to 2018. In his role during that time, he supported four to five campuses and 20 to 30 students at any given time. Gilbert's experience is unique as he worked with a program focused on providing direct support to high-performing students seeking admission into some of the nation's most selective colleges.

These college access professionals brought to the research varying experiences based on their personal lived experiences, the types of campuses they supported, and the number of students each of them worked with at any given time. Their collective experiences alongside that of students' experiences are discussed in this chapter.

Organization of the Findings

My findings are focused on elevating the voices of the research participants themselves. As I share direct excerpts from the interviews, I do so with the intent of spotlighting the power that exists in voice, relationships, and understanding. Voice must be at the center of organizational systems that are responsible for ensuring that students, regardless of documentation status, have equitable access to higher education

opportunities. Fielding's (2004) spoke to the importance of student voice in education systems by saying, "there are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together" (p. 309). Student voice efforts, "however committed they may be, will not of themselves achieve their aspirations unless a series of conditions are met that provide the organizational structures and cultures to make their desired intentions a living reality" (Fielding, 2004, p. 202). Undocumented students oftentimes navigate the education system with existing deficits such as language barriers or family socio-economic status. Organizations must be properly equipped and resourced to best serve them and meet them where they are. Best practices, systems, and procedures established to support undocumented students are best developed when organizations take into account the voices and stories of those directly impacted. In the proceeding sections I present direct voices of the research participants, an analyzed interpretation of those voices, the data's connection with the theoretical framework, and the alignment between research findings and the research questions posed in this study:

1. How did undocumented/DACAmented college students make sense of their K-12 college advising experiences?
2. What political and sociocultural factors were at play for the undocumented student and their family during the journey towards higher education?
3. How did college advisors address political and sociocultural factors when advising undocumented students towards higher education?

Although the experiences of all of the research participants represent their unique perceptions and journeys either as college access professionals or undocumented

students, six themes emerged from the data: 1) Higher Education as the American Dream, 2) The K-12 College Advising Experience Varied, 3) Political and Sociocultural Factors' Impact, 4) Relationships Impact Outcomes, 5) A Need for Community, and 6) Relentless Hope and Determination. These themes represent the deductive and inductive codes (see Appendix B) and have been grouped in the following sections. Although the codes identified are unique, they surfaced across the themes that were identified below.

Higher Education as the American Dream

For students and families across America who are born here or who have had the opportunity to secure their citizenship, access to higher education is more easily accessed from admissions and affordability standpoints. The same access is not as easy for children and families from other countries who immigrate to this America and may have to apply to college as international students. Inability to apply as residents can result in an increase to the cost of tuition, or inability to qualify for state or federal financial aid. Due to the limitations and barriers that undocumented students face, the accessibility to education is sometimes a challenge. Despite this, many families venture to the United States as a pathway to the American Dream through education. The journey to access education commonly stems from the inability to access this fundamental right in their countries of origin. Many of these families come from Mexico and Central America where socio-economic and ethnic disparities create gaps in access (Bashir & Luque, 2012). This was a common theme across both groups of research participants. The students interviewed expressed this from their personal perspectives on navigating the higher education system. Three of the college access professionals also expressed this,

having previously navigated the higher education system as immigrant students themselves.

Christina, a college freshman who was born in Mexico, shared that her family realized that an education in Mexico was not going to be an easy feat. The inability to afford an education was coupled with the reality that her family did not have access to the resources needed to support both a sustainable lifestyle and an education in Mexico.

Christina shared the following regarding her family's educational aspirations:

In Mexico, even though school was public, we still have to pay. And, you know, my dad

didn't have the best of the jobs. My parents feel that no matter where I am, whether I'm here or in Mexico, that I should stay in school. They want me to have a better future. They want me to have all of these opportunities. And it obviously doesn't hurt me to get a better education here, because that's also one of the reasons why we came here.

I found that Christina's comment mirrored what many of the students interviewed shared in their reflection of why accessing education in America is such a determining factor for immigrating here. Although primary reasons to immigrate are primarily influenced by a need to escape poverty and suffering in their country of origin, education in America is often seen as a way to access more opportunities to succeed (Ayers et al., 2008).

Hector, who is now a senior in college, also realized that education would help him find stability for himself and his family. His mother's journey alongside him as a child has remained a driving force in his commitment to persist in college. Hector said:

My mom had me when she was probably 20. And I think of her story of how a 20 year who suffered of domestic abuse and had no support system came to a country where she didn't speak the language, didn't have a job lined up, had no education to speak and made it work. I think that is why I do it. If a 20-year-old, young lady from Mexico can bring her son here and live comfortably, then a me as a 22-year-old, who got an American education and went into an American higher education institution has no excuse to not kind of pay back and succeed and be more than what she did.

The sacrifices of the student participants' parents seemed to be a driving force in accessing education beyond high school, based on the collected data. It is the support from parents that many immigrant students are surrounded with that instills a sense of determination and resiliency to attend and complete their college journeys (Cuevas, 2020).

For six of the seven students who participated, they are the oldest in their families and the first to graduate from high school. Although parents of participants were not always knowledgeable of the ins and outs of educational systems, they acknowledged that education led to greater opportunities. Julia, a college junior, stated the following regarding parent support:

My parents are really supportive. They always want us to be better, to take the chances that they couldn't take. *Mis papas siempre dicen que "la educación es la herencia que yo les voy a dejar."* It's something that not even all the money and everything is going to compare to that. So, they always tell me that if I can get a better education, get it.

The hope that the students' parents hold for them is much more than just the student succeeding in their education.

Both the students interviewed, and their parents realized that there is much more access to opportunities that results from attaining an education. The opportunities that education allows go beyond just graduating. Alongside the exposure to education is the ability to start considering the additional pathways that may become available for these students. These are pathways that open opportunities to explore other career journeys; to apply learnings in real-time by securing a job; to become a resource for younger siblings; or to support their parents who often times continue to face challenges of their own given their documentation status. As Enrique has persisted through college, he realized that he could consider options he never imagined before. He stated:

To me, college was just an eye opener to realize that there are a lot of opportunities for me. You know, there are a lot of ways for me to succeed. And when I say succeed, I don't mean getting rich or anything like that. Although money is good, that's not my definition of success. To me, success is being at peace with myself and not having to worry about anything.

This personal prospective that Enrique had about his college experience also surfaced through the reflections that CAPs who were interviewed had about their own experiences.

Jessica, who originally immigrated from Colombia, understands this reality. Her personal experience as an immigrant who successfully accessed and completed her higher education allowed her to put these students' situations into perspective. Jessica shared the following of her role in advising undocumented students:

I feel a lot of hope when advising an undocumented student. I'm like, "Oh, my gosh. Thank God. I have another student who I can let know personally that there is hope in this dream." Whether it was them that came to this country or whether it was their parents that brought them to this country, I can let them know that they can do it. I remind them that they came to this country for a reason. There's hope in achieving those goals and those visions, even those that they haven't had before. Those are not lost; they just have to be reminded that they can do it.

Jessica's reflection stems from having her own experience as an undocumented student as well. This reality that education is an avenue towards the American dream also relates to the experience of another college counselor, Cesar. He shared:

They (students) potentially come in with a defeatist attitude, they feel that there are not a lot of opportunities for them or that they have to limit their aspirations. I'm able to provide more information and context from my own perspective of what I have been able to achieve with the support I received. I know that they now have a more positive outlook and are increasing their motivation to explore post-secondary options.

Both Jessica and Cesar's reflection reveals how some CAPs are able to empathize with undocumented students. Through their own direct experiences, they are better positioned to foster student relationships and instill a stronger sense of empowerment in their students.

Raquel, another college counselor, realized that access to educational opportunities is important for these students and their families. She has seen this both in her own story and that of the students that she has had to support. In speaking about how

important education is and how determined these students are to achieve it, Raquel reflected on her own experience as an immigrant when saying:

It just gives you some sort of fight because you've always had to fight. You've always had to do things differently. As an undocumented child, you come into this country not knowing right from left and it's hard. So, with these kids, I think they just need someone to cheer them on. Someone to teach them to be able to have confidence, which is why I start my conversations with, "is not about where you start to, about where you finish."

Education as the American Dream was evident in Raquel's reflection and as college senior Hector says, "a way out." Even though there may be barriers along the way, education is the only option to succeed for undocumented students. It reflects the sacrifices of immigrant parents and instills a sense of responsibility in achieving more than those before them.

The K-12 College Advising Experience Varied

The pathways that undocumented students who participated in this research took in accessing college varied. The data found that the individual's journey is commonly influenced and impacted by different factors which can include academics, family make-up, socio-economic status, and documentation status. To support these students through that process, K-12 advising is often what they rely on to make the most informed college decisions. I asked research participants specifically about how they perceived the college advising experience and identified the areas of opportunity that exist. The following findings reflect the direct experiences both students and college access professionals had

as part of the advising process. This section incorporates two subthemes; Lack of Training and Awareness and Limited Capacity to Support Undocumented Students.

Lack of Training and Awareness

Participants shared that there was lack of awareness and training available for both students and counselors when it came to understanding how to best advise an undocumented student. Karina, a college senior, encountered challenges when she began to explore her college options. She identified that, as a high schooler, she was a high-performing student and had continued support from her parents to continue her education. Despite this, Karina stated the following regarding her college advising experience:

[The counselor] wanted me to apply to an out-of-state college. The college told her that I had to apply as an international student and that I had to provide documentation that I was going be able to afford \$88,000 of costs if attending. So, I told her I just wanted to stay in Texas. My college counselor would tell me that I had to complete the TASFA but that's all she would do. She wouldn't sit with me. I learned all of that through Google. I sometimes feel like they would get frustrated with me because they didn't know. I kept asking "Why don't you know, isn't this your whole job; for you to know?" They wouldn't even try to even investigate. To a certain point she was helpful, but then she wasn't helpful at all.

The informed guidance that undocumented students need goes beyond the standard processes that most documented students require as understood from Karina's experience. Being the first in their families to even consider college means that they are unable to find that guidance at home.

For college senior Carlos, it has taken a few years to get to where he is. He acknowledged that having had access to more informed guidance would have made the experience smoother. Carlos said:

I disclosed my status to a career counselor that I gained access to during my senior year. I was really lost, and I was not sure how people were paying for college. I remember her telling me that there are scholarships, TASFA, and a long list of things but I felt like she wasn't competent. I only met with them once, maybe twice. I don't want to say I needed my hand held, but I needed someone to hold me accountable and to walk me through the whole process of applying to scholarships and applying to TASFA. Someone who knew how whole process really works.

Carlos eventually had to find support by doing his own research and through trial and error. As many of these students do, he transitioned to a local community college where he encountered enrollment and affordability barriers because of his status. He was able to maneuver through those barriers, succeed academically, and eventually had the opportunity to transfer to a local university. He reflected on that fact that his journey would have been a lot smoother if the individuals in his high school were properly informed of the opportunities and limitations that he and others like him face. Limited awareness of how to best support these students was also something that college junior Franco encountered in high school. He shared the following:

We had a class called *College Connections*. They taught us everything there about applying to college and financial aid. That was helpful but there wasn't a focus on us applying to scholarships that would help us pay for college. He did understand

that it was also harder for us but that was about it. That's about all the help we got.

This lack of proper knowledge on behalf of college counselors was present with all of the student participants as well as the college counselors themselves.

Stacey, who supported multiple undocumented students, acknowledged that she only received one to two trainings focused on TASFA and supporting these students. The majority of the knowledge she was able to build was developed through the individual experiences she had with each student. For the counselors that I interviewed, the ability to properly advise a student came from direct interaction with students and not necessarily the training they received. Gilbert, who previously supported a small group of students, said that he was not always confident advising an undocumented student. He said the following of his experience as a college counselor:

I actually did not have an onboarding, which is shocking, really. But as a result, I just feel like even if there were potential trainings on that, I completely missed it. So, I never really formally received any training with respect to this particular population or any population for that matter. I learned how to do TASFA at a financial aid evening. I was looking at it and I thought to myself, "I've never seen this before. But we will figure this out together." I knew what I was doing after that, but I do not think there was a lot of emphasis even placed on it. I would say that there was a bit of a vacuum at the time in supporting DACAmented or undocumented students.

Gilbert eventually was able to gain some knowledge needed to better support undocumented students, but not without feeling a lack in confidence doing so. He

expressed the need for training and resources, which is something that Ashley also acknowledged was missing. Ashley shared the following based on her experiences with the resources she had access to:

There were a couple people who kind of were more experienced in working with undocumented population. I had certain people that I could ask questions to. But I would say that there are pretty minimal resources that were available to particularly help undocumented students. I would not say that the district deprioritized it, but I also would not say that they prioritized it either.

Ashley's own investigation into the proper resources she needed to be equipped with resulted from the support that she was able to provide Hector, one of the students interviewed. It was only from walking him through the college process that she felt better prepared in supporting these students. Ashley mentioned that this knowledge was primarily gained through seeking information and support from the higher education institutions themselves and not necessarily the district.

So much of the ability to best support these students stems from having access to the proper knowledge and resources that surround the processes these students must consider when exploring college options. Even though Jessica was able to maneuver through college as an immigrant herself, she too realized that as a counselor she was not receiving the proper support to develop these skill sets. Jessica said:

First and foremost, there's not a lot of confidence. There is not a lot of confidence both from the counselors and from the students themselves. From the counselor side, there's not enough confidence for them to feel empowered because confidence comes with your access to information. So, I am really saying that

there is a lack of information. Even though there is a lot of work being done and a lot of supports being created, it's just not enough. There's just not enough information circulating, and counselors are not being equipped with enough tools to have the confidence to confront these situations and serve these students in the way that they need to be served.

A lack of proper training and awareness on how to best support undocumented students in the college access journey is evidently a missing component in K-12 organizations. Both research groups acknowledged this as an area of opportunity that needs to be addressed along with increasing capacity to decrease student-to-counselor ratios to better individualize support.

Limited Capacity to Support Undocumented Students

Another theme that surfaced through participants' interviews was the fact that both students and counselors felt that limited capacity impacted the quality of the advising present. Julia, who attended a large comprehensive high school, felt that her counselors were always "rushing it" and that they were only focused on "checking to see that every student did what they had to." This was similar to Karina's experience who mentioned that the inability for her to receive proper advising was because "a lot of people and Title I schools are usually like overpopulated." Title I schools are designated as such when 50% or more of the enrolled students must be from low-income families. Franco also understood that capacity was a factor in college advising by saying:

I know that they have a lot of students to go through. I needed a little bit more guidance with finding scholarships for people with my status, but I understand

that they have a lot of people to take care of. We definitely need more counselors and possibly even counselors who follow the students year over year.

Although the counselors expressed strong sentiments around wanting and being willing to support these students accordingly, they all faced similar capacity challenges.

Ashley identified that she at one point was supporting multiple campuses and working with hundreds of students at any given point. She said:

The unfortunate part was that most of our conversations were happening with seniors because the goal in terms of applications and numbers was really targeted toward seniors in high school. We tried to go into junior classes in the spring semester if our schedules allowed and I was very intentional about this, even when it wasn't pushed out by the district. There may be even more students that we're in the fourth quartile of their class that identified as undocumented but often for those students we were just getting them to complete the application for college. We didn't necessarily get to delve into their backgrounds because we didn't get the chance.

Missing the opportunity to provide individual college access support is often the determining factor for the overall college advising experience.

This was true for Cesar who, although having access to a manager who had deeper knowledge about advising undocumented students, said: "I felt a little underprepared once I realized how many students I'd be helping with. They would then be a critical mass of students who, you know, every student is very unique in their background."

When asked about what was missing in the college advising experience, both populations acknowledged that increasing capacity would ultimately allow for a more catered

approach in counseling. Jessica summed this up by stating the following on her challenge with capacity:

Because there is a lack of College Access Professionals, lack of quantity or a lack of volumes at schools, by the time a counselor might even come back around to advise an undocumented student, it might be at the end of this school year. So, I think that that is the number one problem. Even though a counselor may want to hold the students hand as they go through that process, because there is a lack of resources and a lack of manpower, they are just not able to do that.

The experiences of both the students and college access counselors who participated, although faced with strengths and challenges, shine light on some of the most common factors that are at play in the process. Their perspectives bring direct insight into the areas of opportunity that should be addressed by K-12.

Political and Sociocultural Factors' Impact

As discussed in Chapter 2, there are multiple factors that play a role in the lives of undocumented students inside and outside of the classroom. For many of these students and their families, limitations or expanded access to education opportunities are influenced by those factors identified in the data I collected. In this section, I will provide additional insight that surfaced from the interviews with students and college access professionals. I break down this theme into two subsections: Safety Concerns as a Reason to Immigrate and Financial Barriers to Access.

Safety Concerns as a Reason to Immigrate

The students who participated immigrated to this country from Mexico or Central America with their families. These areas have faced continued violence that has resulted

in a continued increase in immigration from these countries. These reasons, that are triggered by prosecution, conflict, and violence, are also a result of unjust laws, struggling governments, or lack of accountability (Robert, 2019). For Carlos, now a college senior, and his family, the journey to move to the U.S. is a story that many continue to face to this day. They initially tried multiple times to enter the country through formal processes but continued to be met with dead ends. The violence that was erupting in his hometown was reason enough to begin exploring options outside of staying in Mexico. Carlos shared the following of his immigration experience:

I think the beginning was really when cartel violence started to erupt kind of becoming more prominent and more consistent in the way that it was appearing.

And my mom was simply not comfortable with that. When the cartel violence started to become prominent, one option was for us to just try to make it over here to where her family already was. And my dad had already been in the US because he was working over here. We went to Mexico City and Guadalajara too when we were trying to seek a visa. However, all of the times that we tried it; we were denied. The only other option that we had was really to come here undocumented.

His inability to seek legal immigration status despite the sociocultural circumstances that were creating safety concerns were creating limitations that were present in both Mexico and in America. His story calls attention to the political and sociocultural factors that have at times derailed his college dreams.

The concern with safety in the student's country of origin also surfaced when interviewing Julia, whose family left Honduras due to increasing safety issues. Julia shared of this experience by saying:

Things over there were getting worse. There were a lot of thieves and bad people. My grandma used to have this little store, we call it *pulperia*, and people over including neighbors were very jealous. If people are improving their lives, they always want to bring you down. Somebody ended up trying to bomb her store and started taking all of the products. My grandma said we had to close it and we had to look for somewhere else to live.

Julia continues to reflect on her experience as it shaped her outlook of education and future career. She expressed interest in hoping to reach a point in which she can return to Honduras and serve her community in some capacity.

As part of this research, I tried to understand if college access professionals themselves understood the context that first led students and families to immigrate to the United States. While students interviewed perceived a lack of understanding or awareness on behalf of their counselors when they were seeking college guidance, the counselors interviewed evidently spoke to their understanding that these students in fact face a different situation given their documentation status. The approach these counselors took when advising students had to be intentional and grounded in a rooted interest to connect with their students. Gilbert says he typically approached these students in a caring and understanding manner to build trust with them since they could be reserved about addressing their status. It was in that approach that students and families became more comfortable and confident sharing aspects of their lives.

Financial Barriers to Access

For Karina, her family's need to move to the United States was due to the inability to find financial stability in Mexico. Although her parents were determined and

committed to working as a way to access opportunity, her father was ultimately let go due to issues with his health. The employee protections were not sufficient, and the journey to America was the only option. With her family living undocumented and being the only child with DACA, Karina is now responsible for working in providing income to support some of the family's basic necessities. Karina expressed that her parents continue to try to remove barriers that would limit her successful completion of college, but she still feels a sense of responsibility to contribute.

In Franco's case, he acknowledged early on in high school that his citizenship status was going to present barriers for college. Through his reflection, this financial barrier was only one of the components that he believed would limit his access. This became a mental barrier for Franco, who initially did not even consider college options because he thought it was unattainable. Franco said:

My parents had always pushed me to attend college, but after finding out I was undocumented, I completely shut off from school. I never had the heart to tell my parents what I was going through because I know they had big dreams for me and I felt that telling them that would make them feel as if their sacrifices hadn't been worth anything. And it sucked, going to school every day with no real purpose, just going through the motions every day and seeing all of my peers get excited about their futures in college.

Franco's experience addresses how these students are impacted at the individual level, given the multiple factors that play a role in accessing higher education.

Within the findings related to college affordability was also the perception that college counselors had of the resources that these students had access to, specifically

TASFA. Raquel, who has advised multiple undocumented students, expressed this by saying:

You know, everything is political when it comes to these kids. With TASFA, does anyone really get TASFA money? There are many forms and I understand it goes through different verifying agencies, but I've never known a kid who got TASFA money. So, from that to their DACA renewals, politics plays a huge part, and the politics is the hand that holds them down. It's a big link that's missing.

Based on her direct experience with these students, Raquel had not come across any of them who received state financial aid (TASFA) once they matriculated to college. In Texas, this funding is allocated on an annual basis at the institutional level and can be often times limited based on the number of TASFA applicants that the institutions report. At times, this allocation limits accessibility and is contingent of funds available at the institutional level. Raquel did acknowledge these limitations in her interview. She expressed having encompassed the wherewithal to understand these situations and found it easier to connect with these students through empathizing and expressing compassion. Her personal experience and that of her family was what allowed her to identify the factors that are impacting these students and make sense of them to best serve her students.

Carlos was able to qualify for DACA, but this protection still presented limitations given the added layer of college affordability. His college journey has taken longer than the four-year model many expect. Carlos said the following regarding the barriers he has faced in completing college:

Challenges of being an undocumented college student has to do with money, of course. It's a big component. And that is constant added stress of how I'm going to pay for this semester, for the next semester or if I'm going to have to take some time off again to work full time or part time, work multiple part time jobs to then finish my degree. It definitely affects your finances directly, which in turn directly affects your mentality, your psyche, and then that affects your academics as well.

When I analyzed Carlos' experience, I was able to acknowledge that the college experience of undocumented students is not always the traditional four-year journey due to circumstances such as affordability. Research also addressed the fact that increasing higher education costs are often reasons why undocumented students do not consider college or are unable to persist through graduation, which can also risk impacting their mental health (Thangasamy & Horan, 2016).

Additional factors that surfaced tied together the political and sociocultural realities that exist, such as the limited resources that reflected a language that could be understood by families and the inability to understand the English language. Jessica mentioned that this lack of resources was due to the continued unavailability of translated documents for students and families. She said:

There is a lack of information for them coming from schools. Maybe they do not have information in a language that they are comfortable with and understand where they will be able to confidently understand all of the information they need to even take a first step. And so, what families do is not ask at all.

Language access for non-English speakers, which for Jessica presented challenges for her work and the families she supported, elevates a sense of insecurity and inability to build trusting relationships (Pot et al., 2020).

This is even more true for undocumented families who often live in fear and uncertainty of apprehension or deportation. They often avoid any interactions that may risk their legal status being known (Jefferies, 2014). Ashley saw this regularly when advising undocumented students through the college process. She realized that the application process was not always friendly towards these students' or their families' situations. Ashley stated:

Families would get really wary if additional documents were being requested which it kind of always the norm. Right. The minute that documentation starts to be requested, I think that certain families would feel really wary and feel really unsure about whether they want to continue down that path just because they might not want to reveal their documentation status in order to protect their kid.

The reality is that factors such as language barriers and basic understanding of college are elevated for families of undocumented students and it becomes even more challenging than just wanting to get an education (Gonzales, 2010b).

As understood in the findings of this section, there is no one pathway or circumstance that is streamlined across all undocumented students. There are a multitude of situations that inform how college decisions are made. Although the resources and proper guidance are not always perceived as beneficial for these students, the counselors interviewed all acknowledged that specialized consideration of the students' statuses,

family backgrounds, upbringing, or their responsibilities at home should remain at the forefront when working with these students.

Relationships Impact Outcomes

In this section, I discuss the data that surfaced when exploring questions that uncovered the role that relationships play in an undocumented student's college access journey. These findings align with Social Mentality Theory or on the ability to be reassuring and compassionate to oneself as a result of the care-seeking and caregiving interactions with others (Hermanto et al., 2017). All of the students who participated identified the importance of how strong understanding relationships ultimately allowed them to find the confidence and access necessary to pursue college. The CAPs, despite the limited training and challenges with capacity, also highlighted their intentional approach to building trusting relationships that would support the undocumented students that they were advising. The findings below address that beyond establishing a relationship, compassion and empathy should play a pivotal role in the interactions between undocumented students and college counselors. Furthermore, some of these relationships that students embraced were not always with their college counselors, but with other staff on campus as well.

In the case of Hector, much of his decision to attend the college he ended up going to was influenced by the relationship that was built with his counselor, Ashley. Although Hector also had access to other college supports while in high school, it was the interactions that he had with Ashley that allowed him to feel more confident in his decision. He shared:

Ashley eventually became my counselor senior year. She was very helpful and would often say, "Hey, listen, you have to look at all your options. You have to keep a holistic view about everything." She didn't want me to feel like I was being pushed in any direction. She ensured that I always explored all of my options and decided on something that was best for me and not everyone else. I guess she just really understood that my situation was different from everybody else.

Ashley stated the following of her approach with Hector:

I took the student under my wing and I worked really hard with him. I actually learned a lot about how to support an undocumented student while working with him because I knew that he had these really strong aspirations. And when I could see that the pieces weren't always coming together for his financial aid package, I took him under my wing and we kind of went through the process of completing TASFA together.

The importance of these interactions goes beyond solely supporting the college access journey. In the case of Ashley and Hector, Ashley shared:

He and I have kept in touch all throughout college, and I learned that he was able to get a job at the bowling alley. It really was a reminder that especially for a student with that type of aspiration, it is going to take more work and more intentionality, but it definitely is possible. I hold on to that sort of success story of getting him to even consider the college he selected as an option because he didn't really want to go at first.

The bond that is built with these students is often the determining factor.

In this research, I had the opportunity to interview another counselor who provided direct support to one of the students. Raquel, who advised Enrique, described the following interaction they shared by stating:

With Enrique, we just had a heart to heart one day about him coming here. I told him, "I get it." His story was a little traumatizing, being separated from his brother, but I told him, "I was you." We compared stories together, we cried together, and I told him that we're going to do this together. I was in a unique position to be in that role, to be able to share that with students. I was able to be transparent and they were able to be transparent with me is like, "OK, like we've got this."

Raquel had the opportunity to directly relate with undocumented students. Her personal story was always at the center of how she approached college advising. It is a powerful connection that builds confidence and determination in students.

It was similar to Julia's experience that grounded her decision to explore college. For Julia, it was a coach on campus along with her counselor that influenced her. Julia said:

It was my coach. She told me, "you're not only good at this part [soccer] of life, you can become a doctor, you can become something better." I took her advice and from there, worked with my counselor who helped me by preparing my essays, doing my TASFA, and applying to the right colleges. They were both women. They were empowering me. They told me not to let the status that society gives you stop you from where you want to be. I think it was just a straightforward conversation they both gave me that woke me up.

It was the intentional efforts of college counselors and other staff in these interactions that played such a large role in the college decisions these students ultimately made.

For an undocumented student, these interactions can be even more important due to not always having the resources or guidance at home from their parents or other family members. Franco, who is now a junior in college, reflected on the impact that his counselor ultimately had on his journey. He said:

What my counselor did for me is something that completely changed my life. He would stay after class with me and somehow managed to convince me that getting a good scholarship and being able to pay for college wasn't such a far-out idea. He dug me out of the emotional hole I had built for myself, and I can't be grateful enough. I honestly do not think I would be in college right now without his guidance. It was nice having someone who, although he didn't share the same experience as me, he was always there for me when I needed help or some form of motivation to get me feeling like I could do it.

It takes intentionality in these relationships. These students have faced barriers to access, uncertainty, and sacrifices on behalf of their families.

Being able to secure a trusting and empathetic foundation between students and counselors is necessary. Cesar acknowledged this and made it a point to leverage his personal experiences to create safe spaces for these students. Cesar stated:

One of my goals is to always build trust; a safe space where they can trust me with their aspirations and ask me for help with what goals they have. In doing that, I always shared my personal story and my own journey with getting into higher education. After identifying a student who is undocumented, I just took an

extra sensitive approach to learn more about the student's lived experience up to that point than I maybe would ask the typical senior. I do that because I know that it can be a very traumatic thing. I wanted to make sure that students felt emotionally and mentally safe with me as we had those conversations. Even before asking them to consider post graduate options, I know that there could be a lot of life circumstances that specifically affect undocumented students and their families. I would spend time addressing and making space for that instead of pushing on the college conversation.

This was the perceived approach that all of the college access professional who were interviewed expressed. They acknowledged that there were other factors that influenced an undocumented student's college decisions. Counselor, Gilbert, expressed his approach by saying, "we really just need to provide intentional space and first build more of a relationship versus some of the more transactional aspects of college access."

It takes vulnerability on behalf of the college counselor, as we have seen from the perspectives of the interviewees. Vulnerability as well as intentional empathy and compassion plays a large role in how the students perceive education, as Jessica stated:

A lot of the undocumented students that I advised were a bit hesitant, but I feel like the conversation that I created gave them enough confidence for them to be able to tell me. I could see it in their faces that they may be uncomfortable telling me they were undocumented by they would tell me. I would quickly tell them, "that's OK. There is a lot of opportunities, actually." And I would tell them that it's not easy. The question is not if they can go to college, it's just how are they going to get there? I know it takes a lot of hard work and I would tell them.

The ability to build these relationships with students is grounded in the approach that is taken when they are being advised on their college options. These findings spotlight the need to go beyond the college application or financial aid processes and dive deeper into understanding the stories. For many of these students, it was the ability for individuals to be transparent and vulnerable. What surfaced in this research was that the ability for counselors to connect opened the opportunity for students to consider and even access higher education.

A Need for Community

The previous section focused on the importance of intentional relationships which began to foster a sense of community for participants. As I interviewed both populations of participants, I began to hear a common thread of needing to find community. The students, many of whom are the first in their families to access college, oftentimes were unable to relate to others around them and seek guidance or mentorship. For counselors, they too felt that what was missing was space for students to feel supported and confident. While a need for community was not explicitly addressed by all of the participants, I identified this theme through the manner in which they discussed related constructs revolving around community. Other participants explicitly stated that community was oftentimes what was missing for undocumented students and their journey to and through college. In this section, I provide direct perspectives from participants to best understand this theme.

When discussing how his status would impact his college journey with staff, peers, or even family during high school, Franco found it challenging for them to

understand. Franco shared the following when asked about the sense of support he felt versus the support he needed from peers and family when making his college decisions:

There really was no guidance because nobody had experience with any of this stuff. Emotionally they were supporting me, they wanted me to go to college, but they didn't know how the process worked or anything.

Community plays a role in the decision-making process for these students and that ability to focus on relationships, dialogue, and collaboration within such a community is important, especially for undocumented students (Crawford, 2017). Franco's experience was similar to Hector's who said that, as an undocumented student and the first to go to college, he had nobody to turn to. He felt that there was no group to connect with and talk to about the situations he was facing.

This raises concerns with these students, as Christina also expressed the following:

Another thing that could impact my college experience could be that I'm the first in the family to go to college and I'm undocumented. I don't really have anyone to give me that support in my family who has gone through the same thing.

Even though Christina was fortunate enough to work through this and secure a stable pathway to higher education, she also realized what could have been different if intentional communities were built for them. As Enrique, who is studying to be a teacher, reflected: "I think that we are not creating enough spaces to have conversations for immigrant students. There is not enough information being shared about college opportunities and how it can be accessible if we work hard."

At times, these students do not only acknowledge this, but decide to take action and build a community of support. Karina, who is now a senior, developed relationships with others on campus, including students from her old high school, as a way to support them through their college access journey. She shared that she finds “joy” in helping others who may not always be as vocal as she is. This approach has built in her a stronger sense of self-worth, responsibility, and purpose, which has created access for more undocumented students in her circle.

It was not just the students who realized the importance of community; the counselors who were interviewed also identified this area of opportunity. Because Cesar also had to experience navigating college as an undocumented student, he understood this firsthand. Cesar has tried to be more intentional about how he brings this population of students together and said:

I think one thing that has come up that is really important is that students often feel alone and that they are the only undocumented person in their class or among their friend group. This elevates the sensitivity with an advisor or an educator to not share that status because of all the consequences that it has. I think that a consequence of that is that a lot of community building and identity development around undocumented students is lacking in ways that if there were ways to build community and to have advisers be a part of that it would be a very empowering thing for students to know they're not alone.

Although Cesar’s consideration provides an intentional approach to building a community for these students, K-12 organizations do not track citizenships status of students, which often makes it challenging for counselors to identify them unless students

and families self-identify. The challenge of capacity also limits chances to lead these community spaces. Ashley stated:

I do think that as a district, there could be more opportunities to bring people together. This would help students feel like there's less of that feeling of "alone and other" and more of a feeling of they're not alone and that there are advocates there to support. Some schools try to do it at the campus level, but it always depends on if there is a teacher or an adult at that school who wants to lead that club.

As Ashley expressed, there is power in community, but it is not always easy to build. Community is often found in schools by joining a sports team, a club, or other student organization. For Urban ISD, community is a component of their annual Immigrant Support Summit, which creates a dedicated space for students, families, and staff to explore college resources. Most of these groups are developed with structures and intentionality that welcome students, elevates their voice, and provide access to opportunities. As I identified through the data, spaces for intentional community did not always formally exist, nor were they consistent across schools. Some undocumented students may not always realize that community is what they are missing.

Relentless Hope and Determination

Undocumented students and their families are faced with immense barriers to access. The challenges and sacrifices that have been encountered on their journey to America and once living here are often the driving force for succeeding in their education. For many of them, it is reason to explore alternative options or routes towards accessing higher education. This has required relentless hope and determination in that

journey for participants. In the case of the counselors that were interviewed, they acknowledged the resiliency and determination that exists within the undocumented students they supported. They also strived to ensure that undocumented students found success while understanding that college was, in fact, an option. It required consistency and perseverance, which can also create a mental block. Jessica, who was once an undocumented college student herself, reflected on her experience and that of advising these students by saying:

Part of me feels overwhelmed and sad. I would say in some cases hopeless because there is just so many barriers that they have to face that were often within myself. I often wonder, "Will they make it?" I know that you have the ability to fight for it, but will they see that? Will they have enough hope inside remaining out of all those struggles they've been through? Do they have enough hope inside to know that they can make it and they will make it? I'm often overwhelmed with the thought of "will they make it?"

Jessica's reflection is powerful and valid as she brings in her own lens to that journey. For her, it was the ability to seek out resources, find community, persevere through the barriers, and ensure that she would succeed in college. Her firsthand experience influenced the approach she took with undocumented students and mirrored many of these students' outlooks.

I began Chapter 1 by sharing the story of Enrique and the pathway he took to access higher education. Beyond the resources and guidance that he received, so much of what has allowed him to persist stems from an internal force that he holds. This aspirational capital, as Yosso (2005) described, speaks to the ability to maintain hope

despite any barriers that are faced. This resiliency that is developed is grounded in the reality that these students and their families have continued to aspire despite not having the means to attain those goals (Yosso, 2005). Enrique shared the following about his perspective on achieving access to higher education:

I always wanted to attend a university since I was in El Salvador, but the options were limited or at least I felt like it. Here, I was the first undocumented student in the entire high school who was able to get a full scholarship and attend a four-year university. You know, I am just a really low-income person from a developing country. I come to the U.S. to better myself and to have a better future; an opportunity that I would have never had in my country. I use the power of my journey to my advantage and to move forward, to keep powering forward.

“Powering forward” is often the only option that these students have. There is almost always no option to not succeed. Regardless of any political or sociocultural impacts that are faced, continuing to push forward is what allows undocumented students to stay on course. This resiliency is what allowed Franco to continue striving towards graduating college. He said the following when discussing how he interprets the power he sees in graduating college:

It can be especially challenging when seeing on the news how so many people in this country hate people like me and how easy it is for them to talk about dismantling the DACA program. On the odd day that I fall into a slump where I may not feel like this is worth it at all, I always find purpose. This idea that once I have my education, no one can take it from. There is no executive order that can

be passed that could invalidate my university diploma and I find comfort in that. I actually got that idea from one of my conversations with my counselor.

The media and society continue to play an influencing factor in how undocumented communities are perceived. This is supported by research completed by Lopez et al. (2019) where they also identified that the media impacts how undocumented students create an understanding of self in the larger context. Beyond the stereotypes or assumptions made of these students, Karina was also determined to go to college from a very young age. Any barriers faced were not going to stop her from achieving that goal. Her determination was fueled by her parents who, despite facing uncertainty in college access and affordability, would say, “we’re not sure but we are going to figure it out.” When asked about what she wished would have been different in her journey, she mentioned not wanting to change a thing. Her experiences, upbringing, and status have made her who she is, from her perspective.

Parents instill such a strong sense of self-worth and confidence for undocumented students. The limitations, although present, are overcome in one way or another. Julia’s parents also worked hard for her to have access to a quality education. Julia expressed the following reflection, which developed the hope and determination that she now leads with. She said:

Even though my status is one of the things that wasn't in my hands, if I was or wasn't a citizen, I always worked hard to get my grades up. That was in my hands.

That I could work for.

Beyond just succeeding in college for Julia, it is this relentless hope and determination that will continue to support her and these students as they strive for more. It is this

driving force that has Carlos focused on strategizing and re-strategizing his journey to overcome obstacles. It is this force that has influenced Hector to explore law school and, one day, public office. To this, Hector said, “I remember somebody once told me that I could not go to college because of my status. I've always been told, you can't do something because of something. And that's just another thing we're going to overcome.”

With this relentless hope and determination, undocumented students continue to fight and overcome. Cesar, one of the college counselors, has seen this, both from personal experience and in the students he has kept in touch with beyond high school. He said:

I do think that undocumented students who feel comfortable sharing their status end up finding success in college. And I know that undocumented folks tend to just be naturally resourceful because all of their lives they have typically had limits to what resources they could access. I actually saw that some of these students were ending up doing very well for themselves in college and being very successful because they are learning the value of advocating for themselves and ensuring that once someone knows. Many were able to find someone who is invested in their success and they were not alone trying to navigate college and the different systems.

Cesar's intention approach to the relationships he established have also been at the forefront of how he now coaches and develops other CAPs.

Just as the students I spotlighted expressed, this theme continued to surface throughout the interviews that were conducted. It surfaced after students and counselors expressed uncertainty or doubt about college, and it surfaced when the students shared

stories of why their families immigrated to the country. This relentless hope and determination were acknowledged and appreciated by the counselors interviewed who sought to guide these students accordingly. It has supported both students and counselors to dream and achieve.

Summary of Findings

This chapter included thematic findings that surfaced from analyzing the research participants' interviews. The themes discussed were all developed based on the deductive and inductive codes that were identified during the analysis stage. These findings reflected the direct experiences of the participants and spotlighted pertinent considerations that education leaders may review as they seek to better understand the factors that impact undocumented students as they explore access to higher education. The following chapter examines the findings as they relate to the theoretical framework that was selected for this study, and connection with existing research. The final section also addresses the study's implications alongside recommendations for practice and future research.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Study Overview

To better understand the findings from this research, I considered the original theoretical framework in which I approached this study through. The theoretical frameworks of LatCrit and Social Mentality Theory were what guided the existing empirical research that was assessed and how the research questions were explored through the interview. LatCrit continues to be a lens that researchers use to understand experiences of the Latino community as it intersects with immigration status (Yosso, 2005). Social Mentality Theory focuses on the ability to be reassuring and compassionate to oneself as a result of the care-seeking and caregiving interactions with others (Hermanto et al., 2017). Additionally, initial deductive codes that were identified considered the theoretical framework and the empirical research collectively. In this section, I begin by discussing the three research questions and incorporate alignment between findings and the theoretical framework. I then address the study's implications on educational leadership, recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and conclude the chapter with my own reflection as the researcher.

Discussing the Research Questions

As I return to this initial research question that was presented in this study, I provide the following interpretation of this and subsequent questions based on the theoretical framework, established empirical literature, and the research findings.

How did undocumented/DACAmented college students make sense of their K-12 college advising experiences?

The data I collected highlights the limitations and opportunities that undocumented students face due to the local, state, and federal policies that impact undocumented students. This aligns with previous research on how policies, programs, and practices set forth by the larger institutions can exclude undocumented students and create barriers to higher education access (Nienhusser, 2018). Irizarry and Raible (2014) identified that exposure to educational opportunities beyond barriers to accessing education was what really instilled a sense of hope for undocumented students. Students in my research echoed this by sharing how exposure allowed them to be positioned to access and persist in college, despite the barriers that they were facing. Undocumented students continue to shape their understanding of how they have had access to higher education and how their journey will continue.

As understood through the findings, undocumented students perceived all of their interactions and surroundings through the lens of living undocumented because they have always had to. They have always had to live life looking forward but also looking back. At least three of the students expressed fear about them or their families facing deportation, especially those interviewees who came from mixed-status families. This reality impacts their perceptions and interactions in the campus setting. The added stress that this fear creates for undocumented students adds a sense of uncertainty and distrust with their surroundings (Green, 2019). This uncertainty can play a large role in their determination to continue succeeding. For most of the students, it was the relationships they had established which gave them hope. Many of the students highlighted that

limitations to higher education access were a result of insufficient resources, knowledge, and/or capacity. They were also grounded in the importance of exposure and relationships with college counselors and other staff who were committed to seeing them succeed. This emphasizes the presence of social mirroring, and what Dabach et al. (2018) described as the ability for educators to mirror back student perceptions of who they are or what they can achieve. The data collected speaks to this throughout the findings. Relationships are at the center of the access and opportunity that undocumented students dream of and achieve. Students in this study expressed that they were unable to comprehend or make sense of how they would be able to succeed beyond high school due to the limitations that their statuses presented. Despite this, it was often the connection that was built between them and their college counselors, or other educators at their high school, that allowed them to find comfort and confidence in the process. It is as Jin Bang et al. (2011) state through their research on academic achievement for immigrant students, that there must be understanding of the student as a whole and it has to be addressed in order to instill a willingness to find initiative or ask for help as was uncovered in the relationships established between counselors and students in this research.

What is important in this is that the role that college counselors and the K-12 system play may be a determining factor in the college trajectory that undocumented students ultimately take. Students highlighted that they were often challenged by the inability to access opportunity due to their status. The legal and societal ramifications that resulted from being undocumented were also often a source of uncertainty for students and college professionals. While there were evidently a lack of resources, training, and

capacity that both students and counselors identified, there were intentional interactions that were taking place that were sources of hope. Through any expression of doubt, uncertainty, or hopelessness, students were resilient in their outlooks on college (Yosso, 2005). I emphasize that both groups that were interviewed expressed that there is an evident lack of resources, training, and access for undocumented students, as described in Chapter 4. The findings demonstrate that there is power in specialized counseling and the intentional relationships that are built between counselors and these students.

What political and sociocultural factors were at play for the undocumented student and their family during the journey towards higher education?

The political and sociocultural factors that are present for undocumented students are numerous. These factors begin even before they journey to the United States. In their home countries, they are escaping violence, abuse, or even government oppression. Their home countries are unable to provide them with security, safety, or access to an education (Roth & Hartnett, 2018). This was evident in the stories of interviewees as they reflected on why their families moved to the United States. For some, it surfaced in the uncertainty or doubt of stability or educational success that still crossed their minds as they spoke about in their interviews. Once in this country, the factors seemed to elevate. With the inability to secure proper protections, they continued to live in fear of apprehension or deportation. Even though a few of the students have had the opportunity to secure protection through DACA, it is not a permanent solution. Many of their family members are still unable to secure protection of their own (Gonzales et al., 2014). This influences the instability that exists for undocumented families.

The legal and societal ramifications that resulted from being undocumented were also often a source of uncertainty for students and college professionals. This was evident in the difficulty of accessing proper financial support for college due to institutional, state, or federal restrictions. It was also evident in the institutional classifications that students were placed in, either in being deemed a resident or non-resident, which determined the cost of tuition. Policies that limit access, whether through admissions or financial aid eligibility, are a part of the systemic barriers that exist for undocumented students who seek higher education (Dougherty et al., 2010). While many education systems approach undocumented student situations through a deficit lens due to “perceived pathologies”(p.437), the college access counselors in this study were primarily dedicated to working through any perceived from an asset-based perspective instead (Irizarry & Raible, 2014). As heard through the students’ stories, many are responsible for working to provide for their families; they are responsible for guiding and protecting their younger siblings; they are responsible for making sense of education for their parents; and they are responsible for attaining that education through it all. It is these endless political and sociocultural factors that often lead to impacts on mental wellness, relationship dynamics, and societal perceptions that result from being undocumented. Yet, as participants highlighted, there is strength in adversity. There are positive factors that play a role in building access. Through the interviews completed, I found a strong sense of hope and resiliency. I also found a strong sense of commitment and intention. The journey towards higher education for undocumented students is not an easy one, but it is not impossible. They can, and they will succeed in attaining a college education, as expressed by student participants.

How did college advisors address political and sociocultural factors when advising undocumented students towards higher education?

There was a disconnect that surfaced through the data analyzed between an intentional relationship-based approach that counselors take versus the systemic approach that organizations take in having proper support systems available. As was identified in this research, organizational support systems are an area in which resources still lack. Jazaieri (2018) identified that in order for counseling to be effective, there must be awareness of suffering, sympathetic concern, a wish for relief, and responsiveness to support. As the counselors also shared, it takes a lot of effort to best counsel an undocumented student given the varying factors that have influenced that student and their family's journey.

Capacity is often what is most challenging when counselors are overwhelmed with a large number of students they are responsible for supporting. This capacity issue is the result of heavy student caseloads, role ambiguity, and shifting school climates (Moyer, 2011). They are not always appropriately trained or given resources to address those limitations, but the ones who I interviewed looked beyond those limitations. All of the participants who represent this group approached their interactions with a lens of compassion, understanding, and reality. This approach of compassion and empathy on behalf of college access professionals stemmed from both dedicated efforts to understand these students' journeys and their own lived experiences. This research was unique in that three of the six college access professionals were at one point also undocumented, making it a smoother process to understand, empathize, and build hope with these students. A few of CAPs' reflections of the lived experience of undocumented students

were addressed in the previous chapter and are important to consider when making a connection between empathy and relationships. Although my research did not focus on the direct lived experience of the counselors themselves, this is a recommendation that I address in the next section.

The role of Social Mentality Theory within the findings connects to the fact that sufficient training and knowledge must be present in order to have an effective and impactful approach to relationships between educators and their approach with students (Perez, 2010). Through the interactions that they led, counselors were educating themselves of the varying factors that impact undocumented students. It was through conversations and relationship building that they were becoming aware and educated on how to best support the students at the individual level. They each focused on that fact that every student's situation is different, and their opportunities can be impacted by that. Beyond limitations at the organizational level, counselor participants made intentional efforts to be resourced, to educate themselves, and to educate the students and their families. What they also advised on was the fact that such intentional approaches to advising undocumented students is not always the case. In the case of the counselors interviewed, they took it upon themselves to identify the resources, strategies, and processes that would best benefit these students. Despite this, there continues to be gaps in resources and training on how to best support undocumented students, creating a deficit for students (Nienhusser et al., 2016; Perez, 2010).

It is often the most minimally intentional interactions that can plant a seed of possibility for these students, which can fuel a drive for success. As Van Vliet et al. (2018) found and said: "What I noticed mostly was that there was a connection, a real,

actual, deep connection with these people, even if it was momentary” (p. 307). For counselors who were interviewed, this created a sense of responsibility to better support these students. At least four of the six who were interviewed discussed the added effort, focus, and attention they would take when working with undocumented students. These CAPs acknowledged that having access to resources, success in their own education journey, and ability to guide a student accordingly, developed a wherewithal to support undocumented students. These institutional agents truly work beyond their role to find the necessary solutions. Despite this, they still face limitations in the K-12 systems in which they work if the organization is not systemically addressing equity and social justice (Murillo, 2017a). Stanton-Salazar (2011) shared that even with the mindset and intention to be a resource, individuals need to be supported by the proper systemic structures and networks to execute. It is a larger process than just providing resources; it is most effective when there is capacity, knowledge, and intention at the individual level between student and counselor. These counselors are committed to best supporting all students based on the aspirations they have, but continue to be limited by a lack of resources.

Implications

I focus on the implications that that this research has on education systems and leaders. Consideration of these implications must remain at the forefront of educational decisions that continue to be made. Leaders must remain focused on ensuring that all students, including undocumented students, have the same access to dream and achieve.

Education Systems

Education systems should be built with the intention of providing resources for students and families that best support their readiness for college and career (Malin et al., 2020; Ohlson et al., 2020). School funding and programs are said to reflect the needs of the communities in which these schools sit in, but they continue to face challenges in creating sustainable change (Ray & Lao, 2019; Truscott & Truscott, 2005; Neher et al., 2017). The reality is that systems continue to provide a disservice for some of the most vulnerable and under-resourced communities whom often face school decline and limit academic achievement for some of their most vulnerable students (Duke & Jacobson, 2011; Gatewood, 2020). If we are seeing a decline or limited achievement for students of color who are citizens, imagine what may be happening for undocumented students. The research highlights that there is a lack of resources and intentional training to support undocumented students (Nienhusser et al., 2016). Consideration should be taken of the limitations that they are already facing upon entering the country, be it instability with income, language, housing, or health, of which all impact academic achievement (Chang, 2011; Sepúlveda, 2011). Education organizations have the ability to create intentional systems and processes to meet these undocumented students where they are. As one student, Julia, shared: “I just felt like another student.” This population of students encompasses a strong sense of resiliency, determination, and grit that must be fueled. Education systems have the ability to fuel those components through analyzing the impact that existing programs are having and re-strategizing when necessary. One school or one class for newcomers is not enough to meet the demand that we are seeing as the undocumented community continues to grow year after year. Investment in increased

campus capacity by hiring more counselors or creating required professional development grounded in learning how to best address the needs of undocumented students is a start. This also has to be an investment at all levels of the system to ensure that education leaders are bought into these efforts, and held accountable to meet academic goals. Inability to address this may result in school decline, continued exclusionary policies, and risk of a larger disconnect between the education systems and the communities that need them most.

Education Leaders

As education leaders, consideration of all communities must be at the forefront of decisions being made. Leaders must identify, understand, and assess the role that local-level policies have on every student, especially undocumented students and their families (Crawford, 2017). The influence and impact that leaders have on this population of students may contribute to multiple ramifications that create limitations for undocumented students (Crawford, 2017; Crawford et al., 2018). Leaders must work collaboratively across their school systems, the school board, and the communities being served, or else risk academic failure (Crawford & Valle, 2016). This research spotlights the training, awareness, and opportunity gaps while also highlighting the commitment, outlook, and determination to succeed. It should influence education leaders at every level to engage with individuals internally and externally to elevate internal knowledge. This knowledge should then be streamlined across schools to allow students in an underserved community to receive the same effective college guidance that students at a high performing school receive. It is only when all students are being equitably served that education leaders should be able to showcase proven equitable education models.

This can be addressed by creating formal space for discussion with education leaders at all levels focused on developing collaborative strategies and goals to address the specific needs of the undocumented student community. Furthermore, this is best addressed by ensuring that campus and system leaders are exposed to necessary cultural competence training that addresses the needs of the most underserved and under-resourced communities. Leadership preparation programs may incorporate coursework that exposes individuals to best practices as part of principal and district leader certification requirements. I encourage education leaders who make decisions, create systems, and influence policies to sit down with an undocumented student and their family to learn about their journey, story, and aspirations. I encourage those same leaders to sit down with college access professionals to learn about why they do the work, the challenges they face, the limitations that exist, and the hope they have for their students. The most minimal interventions, such as building counselor capacity can have substantive influence and impact on the students' college journey.

Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations for practice were developed based on the findings that were identified and existing empirical research that has studied such practices. Education systems and leaders may identify interventions that can be implemented for these students influenced by the recommendations below. While it may not always be feasible to incorporate practices immediately, continued revision and thought should be placed on how education programs and processes are executed for undocumented students.

Create an Equitable Student to Counselor Ratio by Increasing Counselor Capacity

I previously highlighted that one of the consistent challenges that organizations face is the capacity to decrease the counselor-to student-ratio in schools. As stated in Chapter 1, in Texas, the student-to-counselor ratio can sometimes be between 400 to 500 students to 1 counselor. Research participants acknowledged that this was a factor that continued to disconnect the relationships that are vital in ensuring that a student is adequately supported in their college access journey. Interviewees in both populations shared what the research also supports in the ability to minimize the ratio between counselors and students as critical in allowing a more specialized counseling approach. Julia, a student, stated about one comprehensive high school:

They have four counselors that are tasked with supporting over 3,000 students. I felt like they were rushing everything all the time and that we were just another student and they were just making sure we were completing what we had to.

Urban ISD's college program includes a dedicated team that focuses on supporting high-achieving students in accessing top tier universities across the country. The structure of this program, as counselor Gilbert described, is designed to have a "manageable" 20:1 to 30:1 student-to-counselor ratio. This approach would also better support counselors in managing caseloads that they are assigned (Goodman et al., 2018; Greenham et al., 2019). Being able to create spaces in which organizations decrease this ratio will allow a more catered approach to counseling. A student would be more easily guided through completing any college process while finding a process that is aligned with meeting the internal and external needs of each student (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019).

Develop Formal Training and Awareness Focused on Undocumented Students

It is important to note that if the ratio is addressed, this does not create an automatic solution. Organizations must ensure that proper training and guidance is in place. Training should reflect understanding of undocumented students' circumstances as they consider their college options. Four of the six college access professionals interviewed share that they did not feel properly equipped to address the needs of undocumented students. Jessica, a college counselor, shared that "there's just not enough information circulating, and stakeholders are just not being equipped with enough tools to have the confidence to confront these situations and serve these students in a way that they need to be served." Training is recommended to center on some key specialized college processes that these students face, many times varying from student to student based on their and their family's situations (Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019). Internal build out of resources must include dedicated knowledge building of varied types of documentation statuses and protections, college limitations, and opportunities that exist for undocumented students. This often varies across states and higher education institutions, such as the Texas Application for State Financial Aid, impacts of students' academic performance as it relates to admissions eligibility, and cultural sensitivity (Nienhusser et al., 2015). The current reality that I identified is that, along with a lack of internal capacity and knowledge, students are faced without a sense of direction, finding themselves figuring things out alone. One student, Karina, said that "my best friend was Google; that's how I learned about everything. My counselor would tell me that I had to complete the TASFA, but that is all she would say. I had to learn everything online." There is room for improvement in this. To support these efforts, partnerships with

external organizations and nonprofits would assist in building out the necessary systems that need to be in place. It must be a sustainable and streamlined model across high schools, especially if they sit within the same district.

Provide College Access Resources and Exposure to Students Earlier

An additional recommendation for practice centers around the age or grade in which students begin to explore college opportunities. Common practices, as shared by four of the six counselors, addressed the reality that senior year was when most students begin to be exposed to direct college counseling. Franco, a counselor, stated: “I wish we had engaged students earlier and potentially more often because I feel like a lot of the conversation was agreeing for the sake to agree versus fully understanding the process all the way.” What can be detrimental in waiting until senior year is that students are often faced with limited options due to limited exposure. The opportunity to change course in academics or even addressing college eligibility requirements narrows (Martinez & Castellanos, 2018). For undocumented students, this is especially true, as they are already going through the process with the limitations posed by that their statuses. While districts may be starting to address this by creating college preparatory campuses or dual-credit courses, the inability to implement these practices at the system-level limits access for some of the most vulnerable students. Additionally, such programs oftentimes begin during the sophomore or junior years of high school and are not always accessible system wide. As one student, Franco, reflected: “Maybe had I found the motivation earlier, I might’ve had better grades in school. If I knew this earlier, maybe freshman year or even middle school, it would have been different.” It is evident that earlier exposure is recommended not only by research but also by this study’s participants. Counselor

Ashley stated: “Making sure that our younger students, the students that are even in ninth or tenth grade, know about resources and know about what college might look like or what scholarships might look like earlier would be really, really key.” Both students and CAPs expressed this need for early exposure to higher education.

Create Collaborative Approaches to College and Career Access at the Systems Level

The reality is that capacity and limited resources to be invested in college advising efforts present barriers to all of the recommendations above. This is where exploration of external partnerships should be considered and established. Organizations across the spectrum have built programs and processes centered on addressing the specific needs of undocumented students. Consider ImmSchools; a nationwide nonprofit that centers its mission on being an immigrant-led nonprofit organization that partners with K-12 educators to transform schools into safe and welcoming spaces for undocumented students and families. My research has highlighted the importance of trusting relationships. K-12 organizations must center their approach to college advising through a lens of relationships, and if the expertise does not exist internally, external partners can meet this need. Not only should partnerships with immigrant organization be established, but so should stronger streamlined partnerships with higher education institutions. A K-20 approach to education would allow college counselors to stay abreast of the higher education requirements, processes, and policies that would best prepare them to guide students accordingly based on the students’ statuses and needs (Allen-Handy & Farinde-Wu, 2018; Bettencourt et al., 2020; Olivérez, 2007). Additionally, a K-20 approach would ensure that the proper courses, learning experiences, and education programs are in place which students can participate in. This would establish a pipeline

of leaders who are prepared and knowledgeable of the expectations that are in place across systems. This in turn would build internal knowledge and training at the high school level, further strengthening capacity. The varying policies and requirements that currently exist from institution to institution easily cause confusion and incongruence (Turner & Mangual Figueroa, 2019). Interviewees speak to this reality and about learning of these processes from the higher education institution which can impact engagement in the work and decrease capacity. Ashley felt that when she stated: “The most help I got in supporting an undocumented student was from the financial aid advisor at the university. I feel like people at the higher education institutions had the wherewithal to help me navigate situations with students.” On the other end, it is often the K-12 college advisor who has the knowledge and skillset to advise an undocumented student while realizing that colleges do not always have the proper resources to support students through college. Cesar, a counselor, shared that “some higher education administrators were not as prepared to work with undocumented students... college administrators that support students are not always the most diverse in supporting undocumented students.” The information and resources lack on both ends and such an approach would streamline programs and policies that are established. An intentional K-20 approach may not address all of the challenges that exist, but it would allow a more streamlined approach that also creates access to a larger population of students.

Establish Inclusive Education Policies that Reflect Undocumented Student Needs

What would be a more effective shift in creating higher education pathways for undocumented students would be changes in policies and legislation at the local, state, and federal levels. These recommendations fall both at the internal and external level of

organizations. All can be advocated for and supported with both existing data on college access and performance of undocumented students alongside the stories of CAPs and students. Locally, K-12 organizations should consider creating system-wide policies focused on protecting undocumented students and families on district property. The need to develop such policies would address the concerns that undocumented students and families feel when interacting with campus staff. In fact, according to Ee and Gándara (2020), the lack of such safe spaces created elevated feeling of fear at the thought of immigration interventions. Furthermore, such fear can quickly translate into the students' abilities to attend school and apply themselves academically (Ee & Gándara, 2020). We understand the fear of deportation or apprehension in detention centers is a constant reminder that impacts the level of engagement that these students have with education. Knowing that they are sitting in a safe environment relieves the anxiety and promotes well-being. Higher education organizations should do the same, but also further elevate this safe space by establishing undocumented-student-friendly practices at their schools. These practices should reflect in admission eligibility requirements, student classification consideration from international to resident decreasing tuition costs, and access to institutional funding and learning opportunities. At the state level, as seen in Texas, policies allowing undocumented students to access state funding for higher education leads to an increase in undocumented students matriculating to college and having financial support (Chavez et al., 2007). Expansion of state funding for this population of students would lead to continued persistence through completion. Interviewees express a primary concern in college being affordability. This was due to the limited financial resources available for basic living necessities and the responsibility to hold jobs, many

times illegally, to support their families. In Texas, which has in-state residency eligibility from past legislation, undocumented students are able to qualify for in-state tuition across public higher education institutions. This is a policy that, if expanded on a federal level, would allow increased access and affordability for these students. If not set at the state level, federal-level policies should be established that allow students who graduate from any high school in the United States to have accessible pathways to higher education and citizenship. Current protections under DACA are not guaranteed and are also not accessible to all students (Nienhusser & Oshio, 2020). Creating policies and legislation which focus on immigration reform for students and their families would not only benefit the students and families, but also increase contributions to society and the economy.

Build Formal Affinity Community Spaces for Undocumented Students

Lastly, community was a powerful source of empowerment, confidence, and determination. Taken directly from the comments of interviewees, a recommendation that should be heavily considered and implemented is the intentional effort to create student affinity groups and networks across campuses. Some institutions across the country have initiated establishing such spaces for undocumented students, such as California State University whose Dreamers Resources Empowerment and Advocacy center focuses on meeting these students' unique needs (Ruiz, 2020). Similarly, research by Del Carmen Salazar et al. (2016) identified that multicultural education spaces, both inside and out of the school settings, are critical in the development of undocumented students. In Texas, colleges and universities have undertaken these efforts and begun to create safe spaces where students are able to come together and feel supported. The University of North Texas, The University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley, Texas A&M – San Antonio, the

University of Texas, and the University of Houston are just a few of the universities who have programs, resources, and formal communities that provide these students with necessary support (Texas Senate Hispanic Caucus [TSHC], 2020). Similarly, K-12 organizations should consider creating such intentional spaces that are streamlined across campuses. Communities allow students to find themselves in environments where they are able to connect with others that may have shared identities, shared experiences, or shared values. This can decrease levels of stress and anxiety and increase levels of confidence, hope, and will in undocumented students. As one counselor stated:

A lot of community building and identity development around undocumented students is lacking in ways that if there were ways to build community and to have advisers be a part of that it would be a very empowering thing for students to know they're not alone.

These students maneuver through the college access journey without guidance, many times being the first in their families to achieve this level of education without family support. Christina, a student interviewee, acknowledged this challenge saying, "I'm the first in the family to go to college and I'm undocumented. I don't really have anyone to give me that support in my family that's going through the same thing... having groups at school would be nice." As humans, we all seek community. It gives us a sense of connection and purpose. Just as schools sponsor student clubs and school organizations, an intentional space for this community should be developed.

I acknowledge that these recommendations require engagement from multiple education leaders at all levels of educational organizations. The decisions to implement programs or influence policy go beyond any one individual's efforts. I recommend

organizations to start having conversations that highlight the gaps and areas of opportunity that currently exist. It is through understanding this and acknowledging that which has not been done yet that change can begin to take shape.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the limitations of the study, additional contributions to this area of research should center on a few specific focus areas that would better inform and influence longitudinal impact. The four following recommendations take into account the approach I have taken in this study, the theoretical framework in which the study was centered, and the findings that were identified.

There are a multitude of factors that are at play which influence the college access process. College counselor perceptions can vary based on their level of training, their personal experiences, or even the campus that they are assigned to. Students' perceptions vary based on their age of entry into the United States, their family makeup and dynamics, and the relationships they find or do not find trust in. To gain more concrete insight into these factors, a case study approach on a more limited number of participants would allow a deeper understanding of these situations. Similar studies that can be considered include work by Nájera (2020), who focused on safe spaces for undocumented students through a case study approach that identified the necessary role safe spaces play. Similarly, work by Kantamneni et al. (2016) used a case study approach to understand the academic and career development of two undocumented students by better understanding the varying internal and external factors that existed. This recommendation would not only allow the researcher to narrow in on more specific

details of said factors to further uncover the gaps and areas of opportunity, but also allow for building a stronger connection with the participants.

A second recommendation to further inform this research is to conduct a longitudinal mixed-methods study. The design of this research centered on one to two interviews with the participants, which relied on the retroactive memories of the interactions that took place. While the study participants' reflections and data are valid, there is a lapse in time between when the college access guidance was provided and the interview itself. I recommend a study that builds collaboration with K-12 organizations and allows undocumented students to be followed year after year. This would allow observation of the student's academic performance based on coursework being completed and the resources made available to them. Consideration of existing studies should be incorporated in future research, such as longitudinal studies completed by Gonzales (2016) with his book, *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America* which followed undocumented students over time to identify the varying internal and external factors that impact their journey. Additionally, research by Murillo (2017b), which focuses on the longitudinal effects of supports and barriers present for undocumented students accessing higher education, can be leveraged to inform future research. Since most college counseling interventions begin in the second half of high school, I recommend a study that begins upon students entering high school. This would assess a baseline on the front-end and track academic and socio-emotional growth coupled with higher education aspirations. Taking a longitudinal-based approach to this research would add to existing studies that have found that variables exist for students in high school that influence their college trajectories. Trusty and Niles (2004) found that

college completion for students can be more attainable for students with realized potential, or early talent, and early expectations. On the contrary, college completion was less attainable for students with lost talent or lack of early expectations (Trusty & Niles, 2004). Beyond this, the study should consider following students to and through college by assessing college fit, matriculation, persistence, and degree attainment. Further research should consider the Long-Term Educational Development model developed by Trusty and Niles (2004). With this approach, researchers will be able to identify and connect the factors that influence an undocumented student's journey to and through college.

In my research I identified that some organizations have started to implement college advising resources and practices that focus on supporting undocumented students. What I was unable to assess was the impact that these practices specifically have on an undocumented student's college access journey. Such efforts can include higher education summits, counselor training, or even formal curriculum for the undocumented student population that are still being developed. While research has been previously completed centered on the impact of education and immigration policies and practices, there is limited research that focuses on the impact of educational interventions that have been developed to support undocumented students' college journey. One study by Yasuike (2019) did identify that school programs can in fact serve as supplemental resources for undocumented students who already lack social capital. Additional focus should be taken on the impact of college access training and curriculum. This third recommendation suggests that research focus on assessing the curriculum or content that is currently in place, the trainings that are delivered, and the intentional programmatic

efforts that are implemented across K-12 organizations focus on undocumented students. This should incorporate analyzing the level of engagement of education leaders who influence said practices and the level of engagement from students and families. Understanding if an organization's practices are effective will allow them to redirect accordingly, identify gaps in training, and ultimately ensure that undocumented students are being properly equipped.

Lastly, I recommend that further research focus on the policies that are in place at the local, state, and federal level. At the local level, school district and university policies on undocumented students should be assessed on how they provide access and equitable support for this population of students. This should be considered alongside research that has been previously completed, such as work by Kaushal (2008) that focused on the impact of in-state tuition on college access for this population. Policies play a pivotal role in the education access that these students ultimately have and can be shaped by decision makers at every level (Crawford & Fishman-Weaver, 2016; Sáenz, 2020). A school district's policy on protecting undocumented students from external immigration agencies or a university's policy on whether an undocumented student is classified as international can play a role in a student's higher education decisions. Additional legal policies on immigration, such as state or federal aid, DACA, SB4, or family separation, also ultimately play a role in the journey (Turner & Mangual Figueroa, 2019). Understanding the alignment of these policies with college matriculation and persistence data will show how policy creates limitations or opportunities for these students. Research in this area will inform decision makers at all levels on how to best advocate for or against certain legislation that impacts undocumented students.

Researcher Reflection

As I think through the reasons of why I decided to center my research on this topic, I continue to be reminded of the lack of access that still exists for underserved, under-resourced, and underrepresented communities like the undocumented community. My journey to higher education as a first-generation Mexican American, a high school graduate, and a part-time undergraduate student who had to work full time, was not the typical four-year college experience. Yet, through determination and will, it has been possible. I see in myself the sense of resiliency that I observed in the students interviewed. I also see myself in the commitment and empathy towards this work that the college counselors expressed. Luck should not be a determining factor that influences a successful transition to and through college, nor should it have to count on determination and resiliency alone. If there are systems that do work in this process, they must be further identified, elevated, and invested in to ensure equitable access for undocumented students.

I also think through the uphill battle that these students have to face on a daily basis. Just as my own parents had to make sacrifices regularly to remove barriers to my education, these students' families are also committed to achieving academic successes. It is a way of life for undocumented students; education is the way out. As my mother always told me, "*la educación, nadie te la puede quitar.*" In the current political state of immigration, there is unending uncertainty for undocumented students and families. I find hope in knowing that many of these students center their solution on achieving an education at any cost.

If my research can further inform K-12 and higher education organizations as to how to best position resources and practices that properly support undocumented students' college access journey, my goal would be hardly met. If it informs and influences practices that support one undocumented student and their families dream of higher education, my goal would be hardly met. I have heard the voices of these students and the education leaders tasked with providing college guidance. The goal will be achieved when those voices, this research, and a continued spotlight on their challenges informs and influences systemic streamlined practices that support all undocumented students. I encourage individuals, decision makers, and organizations to always look inward and ask at the end of the day: "Did we do everything we could for these students?"

This study will be accessible to school district and higher education organizations who can leverage findings to influence institutional policies and programs as they relate to services provided to undocumented students. This information can be used to drive protections, access, and financial/socio-emotional support that will better support undocumented students as they matriculate and persist through college. Moreover, through the use of existing quantitative data regarding current students' performance in higher education, K-12 organizations are able to assess the impact of existing support while addressing areas of need that still exist.

Si Se Puede!

"I was in fourth or fifth grade when I knew I was going to college. That's the goal, right? I'm going to go to college but I'm not just going to college, I'm going

to go to one of the best ones. Like a chip on your shoulder, I want to prove everybody wrong.” – Hector, student.

As one of the themes that merged through the data, relentless hope and determination creates a powerful drive in undocumented students. Education is the way out. This is what I too have been taught, what has been engrained in me by my parents. Education attainment is a result of countless sacrifices that immigrant families make. It is a result of Enrique’s journey to the United States after escaping El Salvador; it is the result of Hector’s mother’s determination to leave an abusive husband; a result of Raquel’s family leaving Trinidad with only a few hundred dollars; a result of my own mother’s tireless summers spent selling *vasos de fruta y platillos de comida* to ensure that our family’s basic needs were met. That education, for all of us, was to be the least of our worries. This reality should shine a light on the power of hope that exists within immigrant families. There is strong will and, regardless of the limitations and barriers that continue to plague undocumented students’ access to higher education, *si se puede!*

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Appendix A

Demographic Profile of Participants

The following tables provide general demographic information for both students and college access professionals who participated in this study.

Table A1

Student Participants

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Age of Arrival	HS Graduation Year	Current Age	Citizenship Protection	College Classification
Enrique	El Salvador	15	2016	21	SA	Senior
Christina	Mexico	6	2019	18	None	Freshman
Hector	Mexico	2	2016	22	DACA	Senior
Franco	Mexico	8	2017	20	DACA	Junior
Julia	Honduras	5	2017	20	DACA	Junior
Karina	Mexico	3	2016	22	DACA	Senior
Carlos	Mexico	12	2013	26	DACA	Senior

Note. HS = High School. SA = Seeking Asylum

Table A2

College Access Professional Participants

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Education Level	Years as a CAP	Students Supported Annually	Notes
Raquel	Trinidad	Masters	2012-2017	3,000+	Naturalized Citizen
Cesar	Mexico	Bachelors	2017-2019	275	DACA
Jessica	Colombia	Masters	2013-2019	100-125	Naturalized Citizen
Ashley	U.S.A.	Masters	2015-2019	100-150	N/A
Stacey	U.S.A.	Bachelors	2010-2019	600	N/A
Gilbert	U.S.A.	Bachelors	2017-2018	20-30	N/A

Appendix B

Dedoose Codebook Analysis

Code	Definition	Count
Acknowledgement & Understanding	Deductive. This code refers to the level of awareness around the varying factors that impact undocumented students' at home and at school situations. Furthermore, it refers to the level of understanding that counselors have of such factors.	209
Barriers & Hardship	Deductive. This code refers to the limitations created by political or sociocultural factors which create challenges for undocumented students and their families due to their citizenship status.	114
Capacity	Inductive. This code refers to the student to counselor ratio that impacts the level of dedicated and specialized counseling that students receive.	33
Compassion & Empathy	Deductive. This code refers to the presence of intentional transparent and genuine approaches that undocumented students experience that strengthens rapport. It takes into account consideration of students' lived experiences, feelings, and emotions.	153
Determination & Resiliency	Deductive. This code refers to the resolve and will power that undocumented students encompass and is a driving factor in succeeding in their education despite challenges or barriers that they may face.	112
Need for Community	Inductive. This code refers to acknowledgment of limited spaces where students are able to have shared experiences or shared identities that promote a sense of empowerment and support.	31
Access & Guidance	Deductive. This code refers to the perceived presence of beneficial or unbeneficial college access resources, training, and counseling approaches.	139
Recommendations for Change	Inductive. This code refers to the perspectives that students and counselors have on changes that need to be implemented across education organizations to better serve undocumented students' college access journey.	91
Relationship & Trust	Deductive. This code refers to the connections that are established between students and counselors that assist in creating a sense of confidence, assurance, and dedication.	131
Responsibility	Deductive. This code refers to the increased level of internal and external responsibilities that undocumented students feel and face due to their documentation status.	154
Seeking Better Education	Inductive. This code refers to the students' outlook, reasons, and focus behind accessing and succeeding in their education.	60
Self-Worth	Deductive. This code refers to the internal level of value, goodness, and respect that one holds of themselves.	65
Uncertainty	Deductive. This code refers to undocumented students' precariousness encountered as they perceive, interpret, and access educational opportunities which can have limitations.	94

Appendix C

Interview Protocol for Students

Name (Pseudonym) _____ Place of
 Birth _____
 Age of Arrival in US _____ K-12 Grade Placed
 In _____
 HS Attended _____ Graduation
 Year _____
 College Attending _____ Year &
 Classification _____

I. Individual & Family Context (Interview 1)

- a. Why did your family immigrate to the United States?
 - i. Tell me more about your family.
- b. How does your family feel about education?
- c. If comfortable, how did you find out about your documentation status and what was that experience like?

II. K-12 College Counseling Experience (Interview 1)

- a. Did you disclose your documentation status to people at school? If so, who?
 - i. How did they react?
 - ii. How did it influence those relationships?
- b. At what age did you decide that you wanted to continue your education beyond high school?
 - i. What or who encouraged you to make that decision?
 - ii. How did your college counselor help in guiding you through the college access journey?
 - iii. For what reasons did you interact with your college counselor? How often did you meet with them?
- c. What information and resources (college and financial aid) did your college counselor provide you with during high school?
 - i. In what way were they helpful or not helpful as you made your decisions about college?
 - ii. What do you feel could have been done differently?

III. Higher Education Experience (Interview 2)

- a. Investigator: Review responses from Interview 1 with the participant and inquire for clarity/check for understanding where necessary.

- b. Since our last interview, have you had any reflections about the questions asked and your responses?
 - i. Why do you feel that came up?
- c. Think about the support you received in high school, what expectations did you have as your enrolled in and began to attend college?
 - i. In what ways did your high school experience with your college counselor prepare you or not prepare you for your transition to college?
- d. What challenges have you faced given your documentation status and attending college?
 - i. How do you feel your high school college counselor influenced those challenges?
- e. What successes have you faced given your documentation status and attending college?
 - i. How do you feel your high school college counselor influenced those successes?

IV. Influencing Factors (Interview 2)

- a. What things have previously or are currently impacting you and your family?
- b. What responsibilities do you have at home? Why?
 - i. How does that impact your college goals?

V. Other (Interview 3)

- a. Investigator: Review responses from Interviews 1 and 2 with the participant and inquire for clarity/check for understanding where necessary.
- b. Since our last interview, have you had any reflections about the questions asked and your responses?
 - i. Why do you feel that came up?
- c. How do you feel about the college information, resources, and guidance you received in high school?
 - i. Is there anything you would have changed? Why?
- d. What else would you like to share about your high school experience(s) and how they prepared you for college?

Appendix D

Interview Protocol for College Access Professional

Name
(Pseudonym) _____

Race/Ethnicity _____ Education _____

Background _____

Year(s) Employed with District _____ School(s) _____

Supported _____

VI. Individual Context (Interview 1)

- a. What were your role and responsibilities as a college counselor?
- b. During what year of high school did students typically start exploring their college options with you?
- c. To your knowledge, how many students (documented and undocumented) did you support at any given time?
 - i. About how many of those do you believe were undocumented?
 - ii. How did you know students were undocumented?

VII. K-12 College Counseling Experience (Interview 1)

- a. What was your experience in working with students who identified as undocumented?
 - i. How you approached those conversations?
 - ii. How did their documentation status influence the college resources and direction you provided?
- b. How often did you meet with undocumented students?
 - i. What was the setting in which you met with them?
- c. What internal and external factors do you feel played a role in the college opportunities and support(s) that undocumented students had access to?
- d. What information and resources did the district provide you with to support undocumented students?
 - i. In what way were they helpful or not helpful as you moved through the college access process?
 - ii. What do you feel could have been done differently?
- e. How did advising undocumented students on college access make you feel?

VIII. Higher Education Impact (Interview 1)

- a. What challenges do you anticipate that undocumented students faced once then enrolled in and attended college?

- i. How do you feel your role as the K-12 college counselor or the district influenced those challenges?
- b. What successes do you anticipate that undocumented students faced one they enrolled in and attended college?
 - i. How do you feel your role as the K-12 college counselor or the district influenced those successes?

IX. Influencing Factors (Interview 2)

- a. Investigator: Review responses from Interview 1 with the participant and inquire for clarity/check for understanding where necessary.
- b. Since our last interview, have you had any reflections about the questions asked and your responses?
 - i. Why do you feel that came up?
- c. What political factors (policies, legislation, etc.) that you are aware of have previously or are currently impacting undocumented students you have served?
 - i. In what way do you know they are being impacted by those factors?
 - ii. How did you become aware of these factors?
- d. What non-political factors (family, housing, finances, etc.) that you are aware of have previously or are currently impacting undocumented students you have served?
 - i. In what way do you know they are being impacted by those factors?
 - ii. How did you become aware of these factors?

X. Other (Interview 3)

- a. Investigator: Review responses from Interviews 1 and 2 with the participant and inquire for clarity/check for understanding where necessary.
- b. Since our last interview, have you had any reflections about the questions asked and your responses?
 - i. Why do you feel that came up?
- c. What do you feel missing (if anything) from the K-12 system in providing information, resources, and guidance to undocumented students as they move through the college access journey?
- d. What else would you like to share regarding your experience as a K-12 college access professional in supporting undocumented students.

Appendix E

Participant Consent Form



Consent to Take Part in a Human Research Study

Title of research study: Undocumented Students' Voice in Their Journey Towards College Access: Is K-12 Equipped and Prepared to Address Their Needs?

Investigator: Ricardo D. Rodriguez as part of a thesis submitted to the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies through the College of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education under the supervision of Dr. Ruth M. Lopez, chair.

Key Information:

The following focused information is being presented to assist you in understanding the key elements of this study, as well as the basic reasons why you may or may not wish to consider taking part. This section is only a summary; more detailed information, including how to contact the research team for additional information or questions, follows within the remainder of this document under the "Detailed Information" heading.

What should I know about a research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Taking part in the research is voluntary; whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide, and can ask questions at any time during the study.

We invite you to take part in a research study about the role that K-12 college advising has on preparing undocumented students for higher education. The research will focus specifically on the interactions between students and K-12 college access professionals and takes into account how political and socio-cultural factors influenced the college guidance that was provided. You were identified as a research participant because you meet the following criteria:

Student:

- You graduated from a K-12 high school in Houston ISD between 2015 and 2019.

- You are a current student at an institution of higher education in Houston, TX and at least 18 years old.
- You identify as undocumented, DACAmented, or a legal status other than United States citizen or permanent resident.

College Access Professional:

- You were employed by Houston ISD between 2015 and 2019.
- You worked as a College Access Professional during your years of employment. College Access Professional is inclusive of roles/titles in which you served in a capacity that provided guidance, support, or counseling on college options for students. This includes roles as classroom teacher, extracurricular sponsor, administrators, guidance counselor, or college counselor.
- You have previously provided college access counseling or guidance to undocumented student(s).

This research is NOT being funded by any internal or external sponsors.

In general, your participation in the research involves engaging in three (3) 45-minute to one-hour interviews to take place either in-person, via video conferencing, or via phone. You will be asked open-ended questions focused on the K-12 college advising process and interactions held between students and college access professionals. The interview will be between the researcher and the participant only. All interviews will be audio recorded in order to transcribe responses and analyze the data collected. There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in this research. You will not receive compensation for participation.

Detailed Information:

The following is more detailed information about this study, in addition to the information listed above.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to learn about the role that K-12 college counseling has on preparing undocumented students for higher education. The research will focus specifically on the experiences between students and college access professionals and how the political and socio-cultural landscape influenced the guidance provided/received. Through interviewing both college students and college access professionals, the investigator will learn about how K-12 college counseling was approached, perceived, and influential once the student matriculated to and persisted through college. Interviews of research participants will also identify the role that compassion, and agency played between students and college access professionals. Identifying the themes that emerge through this research will allow K-12 organizations to understand which areas of opportunity exist in the systems and processes leveraged to counsel undocumented students. The ultimate goal of the research is to ensure that this population of students has the necessary equitable guidance, resources, and support as they explore college options and transition to college.

How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in this research study for 1 month (4 weeks) or up to the length required for completion of the 3 interviews. Interviews will be scheduled on three separate days and require 45-minute to one-hour blocks of time.

How many people will be studied?

We expect to enroll about 40 people in this research study. 20 participants will represent the student population and 20 participants will represent the college access professional populations.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

Student Participants: The researcher (Ricardo D. Rodriguez) will schedule an initial interview with you. They will then request one (1) interview each week following the initial interview until all three (3) interviews are completed. Each interview is estimated to last 45 to 60 minutes and can take place at a location convenient to you on campus, via Zoom video, or phone. The researcher will provide questions about the K-12 college counseling experience and ask you to reflect on your experiences through that process which led to current understanding and impact on your higher education decision(s).

College Access Professionals: The researcher (Ricardo D. Rodriguez) will schedule an initial interview with you. They will then request one (1) interview each week following the initial interview until all three (3) interviews are completed. Each interview is estimated to last 45 to 60 minutes and can take place at a location convenient to you, via Zoom video, or phone. The researcher will provide questions about the K-12 college counseling experience and ask you to reflect on your experiences through that process which led to current understanding and impact on your students' higher education decision(s).

This research study includes the following component(s) where we plan to audio record you as the research subject:

- ☐ I agree to be audio recorded during the research study.
 - ☐ I agree that the audio recording can be used in publication/presentations.
 - ☐ I do not agree that the audio recording can be used in publication/presentations.
- ☐ I do not agree to be audio recorded during the research study.

If you decide that you do not want to be audio recorded for purposes of this research, you are still able to participate. To ensure that data from the interview is collected, transcribing of the responses will take place at time of the interview by the researcher capturing and typing responses.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can choose not to take part in the research, and it will not be held against you. Choosing not to take part will involve no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you are a student, a decision to take part or not, or to withdraw from the research will have no effect on your grades or standing with your institution of higher education.

Your alternative to taking part in this research study is not to take part.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

If you stop being in the research, already collected data that still includes your name or other personal information will not be removed from the study record with your consent.

If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator so that the investigator can document your decision and ensure that your participation is properly recorded.

You will be asked to provide additional explanation for your decision and asked if any responses collected up to the point of your withdrawal can be included in the ongoing study.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

We do not expect any risks related to the research activities. If you choose to take part and undergo a negative event you feel is related to the study, please contact the researcher.

Will being in this study help me in any way?

There are no known benefits to you from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits to others include the use of this research being used to inform K-12 organizations and institutions of higher education on best practices in supporting undocumented students.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Your taking part in this project is anonymous, and information you provide cannot be linked to your identity.

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information private, including research study *records*, to people who have a need to review this information. Each subject's name will be paired with a code number or pseudonym, which will appear on all written study materials. The list pairing the subject's name to the code/pseudonym number will be kept separate from these materials. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and other representatives of this organization, as well as collaborating institutions and federal agencies that oversee our research.

This study collects private information with identifiers such as name, age, documentation status, institution of higher education attended, etc. Following collection, researchers may choose to remove all identifying information from these data. Once identifiers are removed, this information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without your additional informed consent.

We may share and/or publish the results of this research. However, unless otherwise detailed in this document, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential.

Can I be removed from the research without my OK?

The person in charge of the research study can remove you from the research study without your approval. Possible reasons for removal include:

- Inability to align schedule dates and times needed to conduct required interviews.
- Inability to provide reflective, in-depth responses to initial interview questions.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, you should talk to the research team at The University of Houston:

Investigator, Ricardo D. Rodriguez, 210-771-1665, rdrodriguez5@uh.edu

Thesis Chair, Dr. Ruth M. Lopez, 713-743-9124, rmlopez3@uh.edu

This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Houston Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may also talk to them at (713) 743-9204 or cphs@central.uh.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

May we contact you regarding future research opportunities?

In the future, our research team may be interested in contacting you for other research studies we undertake, or to conduct a follow-up study to this one. There is never any obligation to take part in additional research. Do we have permission to contact you to provide additional information?

- ☐ ***Yes***
☐ ***No***

Your signature documents your consent to take part in this research.

<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> Signature of subject	<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> Date
<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> Printed name of subject	
<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> Signature of person obtaining consent	<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> Date
<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> Printed name of person obtaining consent	

Signature Block for Capable Adult***[Add the following block if a witness will observe the consent process. E.g., short form of consent documentation or illiterate subjects.]***

My signature below documents that the information in the consent document and any other written information was accurately explained to, and apparently understood by, the subject, and that consent was freely given by the subject.

Signature of witness to consent process

Date

Printed name of person witnessing consent process

Appendix F

Institutional Review Board Approval



July 21, 2020
 Ricardo Rodriguez
rrodriguez5@uh.edu

Dear Ricardo Rodriguez:

On July 1, 2020, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Undocumented Students' Voice in Their Journey Towards College Access: Is K-12 Equipped and Prepared to Address Their Needs?
Investigator:	Ricardo Rodriguez
IRB ID:	STUDY00002331
Submission ID:	STUDY00002331
Funding/ Proposed Funding:	Name: Unfunded
Award ID:	
Award Title:	
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None

Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent Form, Category: Consent Form; • Rodriguez Ricardo Interview Protocol - Student, Category: Study tools (ex: surveys, interview/focus group questions, data collection forms, etc.); • Letter of Agreement - Urban Experience Program (Signed), Category: Recruitment Materials; • Rodriguez Coc-Application_07032020105016.pdf, Category: Certificate of Confidentiality; • Rodriguez Ricardo Interview Protocol - CAP, Category: Study tools (ex: surveys, interview/focus group questions, data collection forms, etc.); • Rodriguez Ricardo Interest Form, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Rodriguez Ricardo Recruitment Communication, Category: Recruitment Materials; • IRB HRP-503 - Rodriguez Ricardo, Category: IRB Protocol; • Interview Script, Category: Study tools (ex: surveys, interview/focus group questions, data collection forms, etc.);
Review Category:	Committee Review
Committee Name:	IRB 3
IRB Coordinator:	<u>Maria Martinez</u>

The IRB approved the study from July 21, 2020 to July 20, 2021, inclusive.

To ensure continuous approval for studies with a review category of “Committee Review” in the above table, you must submit a continuing review with required explanations by the deadline for the June 2021 meeting. These deadlines may be found on the compliance website (<http://www.uh.edu/research/compliance/>). You can submit a continuing review by navigating to the active study and clicking “Create Modification/CR.”

For expedited and exempt studies, a continuing review should be submitted no later than 30 days prior to study closure.

If continuing review approval is not granted on or before July 20, 2021, approval of this study expires and all research (including but not limited to recruitment, consent, study procedures, and analysis of identifiable data) must stop. If the study expires and you believe the welfare of the subjects to be at risk if research procedures are discontinued, please contact the IRB office immediately.

Unless a waiver has been granted by the IRB, use the stamped consent form approved by the IRB to document consent. The approved version may be downloaded from the documents tab. Attached are stamped approved consent documents. Use copies of these documents to document consent.

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In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system.

If your study meets the NIH or FDA definitions of clinical trial, or may be published in an ICMJE journal, registration at ClinicalTrials.gov is required. See the [UH ClinicalTrials.gov webpage](#) for guidance and instructions.

Sincerely,

Research Integrity and Oversight (RIO) Office
University of Houston, Division of Research
713 743 9204 cphs@central.uh.edu
<http://www.uh.edu/research/compliance/irb-cphs/>