The Struggles and Success of Undocumented Latino College Student

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Significance of Issue

College degree attainment is more important now than ever before in our nation’s history. An estimated 60% of U.S. jobs will require some form of postsecondary education by 2018. Research shows that bachelor degree holders earn significantly more money and suffer lower unemployment rates than high school graduates. College education is no longer only required to attain a better job; a college education will soon be required to attain any job that is sufficient to survive in our current economy. However, research suggests that as a nation, we are not producing enough college graduates to fill our growing need for a college-educated workforce. A 2009 study used California as an example of this future shortage and warns that by 2025, 41 percent of California’s jobs will call for workers to have a college education; however, the authors of this study predict only about 32 percent of California workers will have the required level of education. There is a bright side; there is a student population capable of earning this much-needed post-secondary education who need our help. This student population comprises the thousands of undocumented students who are bright, capable, and eager to further their education.

Undocumented persons are defined as people who entered the United States without legal immigration status or who overstayed their authorized time allotted. Of the estimated 65,000 undocumented students who graduate high school each year, about two-thirds are of Latino descent and 40% live in California. Though these students were protected in the K-12 education system as a result of the Supreme Court case Plyer vs. Doe that protection ends upon

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graduation. Studies show there is a serious leak in the educational pipeline regarding undocumented students, with hemorrhages occurring in the transition from high school graduation and college enrollments.\(^6\)

After leaving high school, many undocumented Latino students are faced with an array of obstacles—legally, financially, and emotionally—and they must cope with the suddenness of their illegality, albeit undeserved. Though very successful in high school, once out of high school, these students admit to feeling lonely, deceived, handicapped, and ashamed.\(^7\) Many undocumented students regularly report living in fear—and unfortunately they may have a good reason to. Undocumented students must navigate a world filled with hostile media images of undocumented immigrants, scapegoating of immigrants by politicians, and anti-immigration rhetoric by nativist groups.

Another obstacle many undocumented Latino students face is poverty. Nearly 40 percent of undocumented children live below the federal poverty level (compared to 17 percent of native-born children).\(^8\) Furthermore, low-economic status sometimes adds pressure to contribute to family income.\(^9\) Within this environment, families can also prove to be a barrier to higher education. Many must convince their families that their college attendance is worth the risk of being detained and the investment is worthwhile in an uncertain future.\(^10\)

Ultimately, the literature describes undocumented Latino students as living paradoxical lives. On the one hand, these students have American identities. Since many undocumented youth arrived in this country at a young age, many times as an infant, they confess the United States is the only home they have known. However, these students also live as outsiders and are routinely blocked from gaining access to basic resources most Americans would deem essential for survival and success—like a driver’s license, financial aid, and credit building opportunities.\(^11\) Many undocumented students feel caught between two worlds: the world they were brought from and the one in which they live now. As one student put it, many undocumented students feel they have been “sewn with two threads”.\(^12\)

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\(^6\) Ibid.


\(^9\) Ibid.


Many undocumented students credit their parents’ struggle and encouragement for their persistence through high school and toward college. However, the majority of these children outpace their parents in educational attainment, and many are left without proper guidance regarding college. It seems the students who persist despite these barriers must adopt a stronger sense of self in order to persist, and this is why I believe exploring the role of self-authorship is important to discover what gives undocumented Latino students the additional boost they need to overcome the multiple obstacles between them and a college degree.

Theoretical Lenses

Critical theory is a framework that focuses on inequities within systems and reflects on practices to expose and rectify those inequities. From the literature, it is clear that undocumented students suffer inequities in U.S. society and potentially its educational system. For this reason, it is important to explore the multiple lenses within critical theory to better understand the position many undocumented Latino students find themselves—a position of oppression, discrimination, and inequity. Only when educators understand the perspectives and positions in which many undocumented students find themselves can educators then begin to understand undocumented Latino students’ experiences of struggle—and perseverance—within oppressive systems.

Critical theory critiques social injustices and discriminatory practices. More narrowly, Critical Race Theory focuses on social injustices due to social identity, including race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Most specifically, Latino Critical Theory, or LatCrit, focuses on realities specifically experienced by Latinos, like experiences related to language, immigration, culture, and ethnicity.

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Traditional, one-size-fits-all theories of identity development can be counterproductive to development in diverse populations because identities of diverse populations need to be addressed within the context of oppression.\(^{18}\) Furthermore, it is especially important to investigate identity development in traditionally marginalized populations, for these communities have struggled to forge their own positive American identity amidst hostile and discriminatory influences.\(^{19}\) Therefore, it is best to investigate the multiple dimensions of this student population’s identities using intersectionality as a lens. Intersectionality maintains that critical social issues cannot be fully understood by focusing on one aspect of identity.\(^{20}\) Intersectionality examines intersecting factors that shape one’s identity, such as race, gender, social class, and sexuality, in order to examine how these factors fit into larger structures of oppression and privilege.\(^{21}\) Also, complicating identities guards against falsely viewing groups as homogenous and highlights critical differences within groups. For example, Latinas may at times draw more on their Latino culture to express their identity and other times draw more on their identity as women.\(^{22}\)

Latino identity is unique, for it is constructed from many different facets, including race, gender, language, culture, class, and immigration status. With each identifying facet comes additional forms of oppression—classism, racism, sexism, and anti-immigration sentiment. The intersectionality of undocumented Latino college students is even more complex given that many undocumented college students are also first generation college students. Since most undocumented students are first generation college students, their families do not possess this necessary cultural capital, leaving students to navigate the college system alone.

With multiple components to their identity, undocumented Latino college students must also come to terms with multiple forms of oppression. Practices like nativism perpetuate oppressive practices insofar as nativism focuses on the superiority of the native and sees foreigners as a threat. For example, undocumented students must face hostile opposition due to the fact that they are often perceived as a threat because they ‘take away jobs’ and ‘money’ from those who ‘belong’ or are ‘native’.\(^{23}\) Furthermore, language reinforces this divide between

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\(^{19}\) Ibid.


\(^{21}\) Ibid.


native-born and foreign-born students. The media has used terms such as “illegal alien, illegal immigrant, illegals, guest workers, temporary workers, braceros, and ‘wetbacks’” in what researches call “language of exclusion”.

**Misconceptions**

One common misconception is that allowing undocumented students access to higher education will put a financial drain on our colleges. However, allowing undocumented students access to higher education and giving them the support they need to graduate could be a benefit to both undocumented students and to their adopted homeland. Economically speaking, helping undocumented students access higher education is a plan for financial success. In a 2009 study, “The Texas State comptroller conducted an economic impact study that concluded that every dollar the state invested in higher education for undocumented students would yield more than five dollars for the Texas economy in the long run”. By making access to college education more affordable, more undocumented students are attending college, which in turn produces more revenue for the institutions. Furthermore, making higher education accessible for undocumented students would improve the likelihood of undocumented students not only attending college, but their chances of obtaining better paying jobs due to their college education, which provides more tax revenue due to the expected higher salaries of college graduates.

Another common misconception is that allowing undocumented students to access higher education will diminish space available for native-born students in colleges. Similarly, there is no evidence that undocumented students diminish space available for native-born students in colleges and universities. Since 2001, eleven states which house roughly half of the United States’ undocumented population have passed laws granting in-state tuition to undocumented students. However, these states have not experienced a financial drain on the education system nor a displacement of native-born students. This information shows the undocumented student population when able to enroll in college do so without being disruptive or intrusive to the existing college student population.

However, even with misconceptions cleared, it is important to recognize the role oppressive practices have on identity development in undocumented Latino students. Social

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27 Ibid.
oppression includes harassment, discrimination, exploitation, marginalization, and other forms of differential and unequal treatment that becomes embedded in social structures over time, and students within this social oppression begin to accept the roles. With this acceptance of outside influence, “Oppressed people develop this thought process where their internalized ideas are not their own but rather are thoughts prescribed by others to subjugate them.” 28 For this reason, exploring self-authorship in a traditionally oppressed population, like undocumented Latino students, is especially important because the oppressed absorb the ideas and values of their oppressors.

Self-Authorship is an identity theory that focuses on shifting meaning making from external sources to internally defined meaning. Self-authorship is important as a process within identity development to discard uncritically accepted values and beliefs from external sources to develop an internal voice free from subjugating influences. There are three dimension and four phases. The three dimension are Epistemological (how do I know?), Intrapersonal (who am I?), and Interpersonal (what relationship do I want with others?). The four phases include Externa Formulas, Crossroads, Becoming the Author of One’s Life, and Internal Foundation. In the External Formulas phase, students rely on external sources to answers the questions posed in the dimensions. The Crossroads phase is when those external formulas either break down or students become dissatisfied with the external formulas. Becoming the Author of One’s Life is when the struggle of the crossroads experience begins to tip the scale in the student’s favor. Finally, the Internal Foundation phase is when the internal voice is solidified and is not easily shaken. One can listen to and incorporation external influence without being consumed by them. 29 Self-authorship is important for undocumented students to shed themselves of the negative and discriminatory external influences and cultivate an internal sense of identity to persist through college.

Restoried Narratives through the Self-Authorship Lens

The following passages are excerpts from interviews with a few undocumented Latino college students who participated in a qualitative study regarding the role self-authorship played in their identity development and academic progress as undocumented students.

**Gael.** Gael was a 20 year old male Latino full time college student at Bakersfield College. He recalled times when he relied on external formulas. Gael said he “expected college to be like high school.” His crossroads came when he failed his calculus class partly due to not fully appreciating the differences between high school and college and partly due to the fact that he did not fully understand the college system. For example, even though he knew he was falling


behind in the class, he did not know when the drop deadline was. Furthermore, this was before financial aid was available to undocumented students, so Gael worked different jobs to pay for school in addition to attending school full time. Failing his calculus class was a turning point in Gael’s college career. He said, “Te tienes que poner las pilas,” which translates to, “You need to put [in] the batteries.” After failing calculus, Gael thought to himself, “You have to get it started, now you have to get serious. This shift was productive and propelled Gael to become an author of his educational goals and career.

A major source of both support and conflict came from his family. Gael credited his mother with offering the most support throughout his college career. She was the one who convinced him to enroll at Bakersfield College even though he “didn’t have his papers”. However, even with her enduring support, Gael said his mother did not fully comprehend the full significance of his accomplishments. Gael said that his mother knew he was accepted to university, but she did not understand the distinction between UC Berkeley, where he was accepted to and transferred and CSUB; “She just thinks it’s another school.”

However, family was also a source of conflict for Gael. One of Gael’s many jobs was playing guitar in a mariachi band with his cousin. Gael’s cousin was discouraging regarding Gael’s college goals. His cousin saw the more time Gael concentrated on school, the less time he concentrated on practice. They often criticized him: ‘Why are you going to school when you are going to end up working with us again?’ ‘Why do this when you can’t work? It will be useless.’

Gael’s cousin, who was also the leader and boss of the mariachi group, often mocked Gael. When the band traveled long distances, Gael brought his school books to read in the car. His cousin laughed at him and often called him “College Boy.” Gael consistently responded, “Yep, that’s me.” Gael was frustrated because if the band made a mistake on a song, they berated him, stating he should have studied the music, not schoolwork.

One of the most powerful stories Gael shared was his journey back to his roots. Gael is originally from Oaxaca, a state that endures much discrimination. When he moved to Mexico City, he said they made fun of his Spanish and his father being a mariachi. Then he moved to the United States, where he was made fun of for his English and “cheap shoes”. Admittedly, childhood is a difficult time; there is pressure to conform in order to be accepted by one’s peers. Here, Gael’s childhood experiences were compounded by the fact that he was also a minority who did not speak the language—Spanish when he moved to Mexico City and again English when he moved to the United States. Gael may have needed to rely on and conform to external formulas in order to survive in his new environments. However, his recollections gave a foundation to the changes he made in college. In college, Gael was still a minority, yet he learned to rely more on his internal voice and less on the opinions of others.

Gael’s internal foundations that cannot be shaken by external influence. Gael was comfortable with who he was, how he saw himself, and how he interacted with others. Neither ridicule nor discrimination could unsteady Gael’s sense of self. Gael solidified a sense of self that he carried with him onto the next steps in his journey.
Jasmine. Jasmine was a 24 year old Latina attending college full time. Jasmine was originally from El Salvador, where her family was fairly wealthy. Jasmine talked fondly of her time spent in El Salvador, which quickly came to an end due to political unrest. Her parents sent Jasmine and her older brother to live with family in the U.S. Adjusting to the U.S. without her parents was hard for Jasmine, as she stated, “In the beginning, I was alone and I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t tell my mom that I don’t like this country, I don’t like this language. I don’t like this. I was alone. So I had to drop everything and stand up for myself. In the end, I had to help me out because I didn’t have her anymore. [...] I think that helped me go through every barrier.”

Even though her parents support her decision to earn a college degree, Jasmine stated they were little practical help. “In El Salvador, my mom went through the second grade. So she’s not educated at all. Neither is my dad; I think he just did through first grade. So they barely know how to write their names.” Furthermore, her parents did not fully understand the demands of college. Jasmine states, “She [her mother] supports me in a way, but she doesn’t understand why I spend so much time on school. They think it’s like being in high school. You only study for one hour and then you go and have fun. I’ve been missing that for four years already.” With assignments, financial aid, or transferring, Jasmine was forced to find all the information on her own. She said unlike many students who can ask their parents for help with assignments, she must decipher the assignment on her own or take it to a tutor. Jasmine credited this strong sense of self along with institutional agents with helping her succeed through college. After a crossroads experience a professor, who told her that her work was not acceptable at the college level, Jasmine realized that she needed to change if she wanted to succeed. She started taking every paper to the Writing Center and actively seeking help. “In college, I had to get out of my comfort zone. I don’t like to talk to people I just met. But here, you have to. [...] Especially me, because I am always struggling in class, I always ask for help.” By reflecting on what she wanted to accomplish and being willing to develop a way of obtaining those goals, despite the struggle, Jasmine developed a stronger sense of self.

Fernando. Fernando was an 18 year old Latino male attending college full time. Fernando recalls feeling a great deal of fear and anxiety before coming to college. He recalled an experience when his high school English class was discussing the DACA, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. “I didn’t speak up because I was scared. And some students surprised me because they were against it. I was like, ‘Why?’ [The students said], ‘They are stealing our education.’ I didn’t know what to do. I felt so powerless.” Since then, Fernando had to navigate many complicated relationships, both encouraging and discouraging. Most of all, Fernando greatly credited policy changes, like the DACA, for strengthening his voice. “I became more open with my friends. I didn’t want to hide that I am undocumented. So, if I have friends, I tell them my situation because what can they do to me?” Now that Fernando felt more comfortable and confident given the security of DACA, albeit temporary, he had found his voice in college. He stated, “I have found more of a voice within me. In high school, I just heard what people thought. I never thought about what I thought. I never thought, ‘What do I think about that?’ Now, I have more time to think, ‘What am I? What do I think?’”
Fernando said he is proud to be an immigrant, and he used that as motivation to accomplish his goals. Fernando acknowledged his voice and pride were stifled in high school due to fear, but now that fear is subsiding, greatly due to policies like DACA. Now, Fernando claimed, “I see myself as proudly Mexican and proudly American.” Through his experiences of overcoming fear in high school, working hard in the fields, and participating in liberating policies like DACA, Fernando developed a stronger sense of self, independent from the identity imposed on him through discriminatory attitudes and social expectations.

Elizabeth was a 23 year old Latina who worked full time and attended college part time. After her mother’s passing from cancer, Elizabeth assumed a parental role as well as her other responsibilities. Elizabeth expressed her frustration with identities and values being imposed onto her by conservative family. She states, “I keep getting the same questions, ‘Are you married? Do you have children?’ People ask me this instead of asking, ‘Do you go to school?’” Against others’ generalizations and her father’s lack of support, Elizabeth cultivated a clear sense of self and purpose. She credited college to exposing her to different viewpoints, forcing her to think and decide for herself. She stated, “I think being in college, you are exposed to everyone having different perspectives on almost everything, so it's the whole questioning what you've been taught to believe your whole life and now you're here and everyone else has a different opinion and now you have to incorporate it or use it to decide what you believe.” Elizabeth also credited meeting helpful and supportive people propelled her toward meeting her college goals. She describes meeting with one of her professors: “When I went into her office and saw what was on her walls—pro-immigration and DREAMers posters—and when I brought up my undocumented status to her...It's not something I talk about. So it was nice having an ally, even if it was someone who wasn’t going through it themselves.” Furthermore, meeting other undocumented students was inspiring to Elizabeth. She attended a conference for undocumented students. “Now that I have met other people who are in my situation, it’s good having people who know what you’re going through, just to talk about it and stuff like that.”

Elizabeth illustrated her journey toward self-authorship by rejecting the external formulas given to her by her family and community, by breaking stereotypes and expectations imposed on many Latinas, and by discovering and pursuing a vision of her own life in spite of a seeming deluge of obstacles. She had become an author and owner of her own life and carved out a path to accomplish her college and career goals.

Shared Experiences

High School Discovery: An experience shared by all participants was the gravity of their situation being felt most heavily in high school. Even though he knew his status, when the gravity set in, Fernando reported, “I felt scared. I thought ‘I don’t have papers, Can I study?’ I got really depressed.” Elizabeth said her status became a “big deal” when it was time to fill out college applications and she realized even with scholarships, she could not afford it. And given all these barriers, Gael remembers feeling, “Hmm, now I’m stuck” I have to work harder:
Participants recognized the multiple obstacles they would have to overcome due to their status. Jasmine took every assignment to the tutoring lab because English was her second language. She stated, “I feel frustrated with my time, but I know if I go there, it’s better for me.” Almost all participants began their college career before being eligible for financial aid, which meant that they all had to undertake serious work in order to pay for school. However, overcoming obstacles also served as an inspiration to many participants. Elizabeth has used this fact of having to work harder due to her status as an opportunity to define herself. She states, “I am undocumented; that identifies who I am today because of all the hard work I have to put in, just knowing I have to work a little harder than other people.”

**Serendipitous Social Networks:** All participants also reported a strong reliance on others. However, the beginnings of these relationships with others were originally portrayed as moments of happenstance. In the beginning, participants were not looking for help, for they did not know where to start; instead, they were simply lucky that someone had noticed their situation and decided to intervene. Gael and Fernando were both “Thankful” that the migrant program had reached out to them. Participants were grateful when a teacher or counselor made resources universally available or made announcements generally to the class. Nearly all participants credited a “lucky” encounter with a “helpful” person as placing them on the path to success.

**Actively Seeking Agents:** Unlike their serendipitous social networks, which often was reported as unexpected or spontaneously received, not sought, the need for guidance from institutional agents appeared as an active endeavor for these participants. Participants recalled experiences of seeking out others, including peers and college staff, as a necessary factor to bolster their own success in college. Some participants needed to seek connections with non-family members to subsidize the support they lacked within their family, like Gael who continually combatted his cousin’s ridicule, calling him “College Boy” whenever Gael was caught reading a book, or Elizabeth’s who’s family subtly pressures her to pursue family over education. Participants took active steps to engage others, whether those were professors, counselors, or classmates, overcoming struggles due to shyness or language proficiency or social norms.

**Conclusion**

The time has come to recognize undocumented students as part of our campus communities. Understanding their lives and their struggles will help us develop better ways to help them succeed. Through advocacy and policy, we can help these much-deserved students attain the college degrees they seek and the college educated workforce our nation needs.