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THE ROLE UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT RESOURCE CENTERS PLAY IN SUPPORTING UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cynthia Boyzo

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THE ROLE UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT RESOURCE CENTERS PLAY IN
SUPPORTING UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Cynthia Boyzo Mejia

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

Undocumented Students face many challenges in their daily lives. Accessing higher education is a challenge alone. Many undocumented students get discouraged to attend higher education due to financial constraints. The students that do attend institutions for higher education encounter different challenges. According to Murillo (2017), 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school each year nationwide; however, only half (49%) attain a degree or enroll in college. Many institutions have developed Undocumented Student Resource Centers to provide a safe and welcoming environment to undocumented students. The purpose of this study explored how Undocumented Student Resource Centers support undocumented students throughout their educational journey. The research questions that will guide this study: is What role do Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRC) play in supporting undocumented students in higher education? Using a qualitative study design the researcher conducted individual zoom interviews to gain insight on the experiences undocumented students have when they utilize the Undocumented Resource Center and the role these centers play throughout their education.

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Para mi familia que siempre me a apoyado. Mama y papa gracias por todos sus sacrificios. Gracias por traerme a este país y darme la oportunidad de estudiar. Sus sacrificios no fueron en vano y espero un día pagarles por todo lo que me han dado. Los quiero mucho. Jaime, thank you for your patience, support, and unconditional love. Thank you for supporting me and motivating me. To baby J, thank you for coming into my life at the perfect time. You have already brought so much happiness and I cannot wait to meet you.

Friends

To the friends that never stopped checking up on me, thank you for your encouraging words, for believing in me, for reminding me not to give up, and for your constant support throughout the past three years. Your motivating words and support did not go unnoticed.

Research advisor

Dr. Davis, Thank you for your time, patience, and support. Thank you for believing in me, motivating me, and reminding me not to give up. I appreciate your support and guidance on this project.

Participants

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me. This project wouldn't have been possible without you all. Your stories have inspired me and motivated me to continue to advocate for undocumented students. Your voices matter.

To myself

Thank you for waking up every day and choosing to fight for your dreams. I want to thank myself for never giving up despite the many different challenges I had to face to be able to be where I am today. You are strong, capable, and your undocumented status does not determine how far you will go. "Mis sueños no tienen fronteras".

DEDICATION

To my family, Jaime and Baby J.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

The United States has become home to many undocumented students. Like many Americans, undocumented students pursue the "American dream" for a better life, including obtaining an education to fulfill their dreams (Drachman, 2006). However, findings indicate that undocumented students are less likely to pursue college than documented students (Cited in Valdez and Boza, 2018). According to Murillo (2017), 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school each year nationwide; however, only half (49%) attain a degree or enroll in college. Although undocumented students can attend postsecondary institutions, they face many challenges when enrolling and navigating the educational system. Research findings indicate that undocumented students face many obstacles related to their academic, socio-emotional, and career advancement (Morrison et al., 2016). Undocumented students are vulnerable and have more significant needs for financial resources. The lack of financial resources and low family socioeconomic status limit undocumented students from pursuing higher education (Gonzales, 2010).

As a result of the unique challenges undocumented students face, many decide not to pursue higher education due to financial constraints and lack of knowledge of available resources. Undocumented students who enroll in higher education demonstrate a high level of resilience with little support (Murrillo,

2017). Institutions play a significant role in supporting students, but many institutions leaders do not have the knowledge to help undocumented students (Murrillo, 2017). Institutions must pay attention to the needs of undocumented students due to the increasing number of undocumented populations.

There are a few policies that have affected education attainment for undocumented students. In 1982 the supreme court (Plyer v. Doe) guaranteed undocumented youth access to K-12 public schools. However, undocumented students continued to face financial barriers in postsecondary schools. Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 does not allow undocumented students to receive federal aid for postsecondary education (Drachman, 2006). Although these policies created more obstacles for undocumented students attempting to enroll in higher education in 2001, The California Dream Act was introduced (Munoz, 2013). The California Dream Act consists of three bills (AB) 540, AB 130, AND AB 131; the purpose of these bills is to allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition at public colleges and institutions. In 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was established by the Obama administration. DACA currently protects half a million individuals. The protections granted and benefits under the DACA program include deportation from two years and temporary work authorizations. To continue to have these benefits, DACA recipients must re-apply every two years. These benefits allowed many DACA recipients the opportunity to pursue higher education and obtain a professional job related to their field of study (Getrich et al., 2019). Although the DACA program was a success for many in 2017, the Trump administration threatened

to end DACA ruling the program unconstitutional. DACA and the Dream act are only temporary programs. Massive policy solutions such as immigration reform are vital to ensure undocumented immigrants have a path to citizenship and achieve their educational and career goals (Murrilo, 2017). Institution leaders must be aware of the policies that affect this fast-growing population to provide support while undocumented students navigate higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the role Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRC) play in supporting undocumented students in higher education. The constant uncertainty and unique challenges undocumented students face in higher education are a risk for mental health concerns. As a result of the challenges undocumented students face in higher education, they are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and trauma (Flesch et al., 2014). Furthermore, undocumented students are less likely to reach out and ask for support from their institutions. There is limited research on how institutions can support undocumented students navigating higher education. This study will contribute to existing but limited research on how Undocumented Student Resource Centers, support groups, and institutions can support undocumented students. Many undocumented students are vulnerable to marginalization and discrimination within the education system; therefore, educators, counselors, and education leaders can advocate for these students and be allies. Lastly, this study was intended to bring awareness to the unique needs of undocumented

students in higher education to support further undocumented students navigating higher education.

The overall research method used in this research study was qualitative design. The study employed individual interviews with undocumented students via zoom following all COVID-19 protocols. This research design was selected to bring awareness to the needs of undocumented students in higher education and how institutions can support this population of students. Conducting individual interviews will be essential to understand Undocumented Resource Centers' role in supporting undocumented students in higher education.

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

As mentioned previously, this study will contribute to the limited literature on how institutions can support undocumented students. This study will explore how Undocumented Resource Centers in institutions can help undocumented students and their roles in supporting this population of students. In addition, this study may be utilized to bring awareness of the needs of undocumented students and allow institutions to reshape the way they support undocumented students. Lastly, this study provided recommendations on how institutions, social works, educators, and counselors can create practices to support undocumented students throughout higher education. This research study allowed undocumented students to share their experiences within their intuitions and share how they have been supported throughout their educational journey. As the undocumented student population continues to grow, institution leaders,

professors, counselors, and social workers must understand undocumented students' challenges in higher education. The findings from this study will allow professionals to shape and design ways to support undocumented students. With that being said, the research question for this project is as follows: What role do Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRC) play in supporting undocumented students in higher education?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Undocumented Students face many challenges when they access and navigate higher education. Higher education is not prohibited for undocumented students however it not easy to access. The DACA program and the bill AB540 have given undocumented students the opportunity to attend post-secondary institutions. However undocumented students that do access higher education often face challenges when navigating higher education. In this chapter an overview of undocumented students will be presented as well as the challenges they face when accessing higher education. The researcher will also provide an overview of the role of Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRC).

Undocumented Individuals in the United States

The term undocumented is used to describe individuals who do not have legal documentation to live or work in the United States. Undocumented individuals enter the United states with illegal documentation or violated the terms of a legal visa and overstayed (Conger, 2013). According to the Migration Policy Institute (n.d.) more than 44.9 million immigrants lived in the United States in 2019. The Public Policy Institute reports that (n.d.) undocumented individuals living in California constitute more than 6% of the state's population. The states

that account for the most undocumented individuals are California, Texas, Florida, New York, and New Jersey (Drachman, 2006).

Most undocumented individuals and families come to the United States to get better-paying jobs and pursue the “American dream” of a better life (Drachman, 2006). Another reason individuals and families migrate to the United states is to leave a country who is under violence attacks. Research has indicated that undocumented individuals make significant contributions to the U.S. economy. It has been argued that removing undocumented individuals will hurt the U.S. economy. By the year 2040 it is projected that every three children in the United States will grow up in an immigrant household. (cited in Morrison et al., 2016). The number of undocumented students in schools is increasing so it is crucial to understand the social barriers they experience and how they affect their educational journey.

Challenges

Research has shown that undocumented students face many obstacles related to their academic, socio-emotional, and career development (Morrison et al., 2016). Many undocumented students face financial constrains when accessing higher education. A unique circumstance for undocumented students is their parent’s educational attainment. For example, most undocumented parents have less than a ninth-grade education which limits their ability to advocate for their children’s education (Morrison et al, 2016). Parents educational level is linked to family poverty. In 2007 3% of undocumented

families were living below the poverty line (Morrison et al., 2016). Furthermore, research findings indicate that poverty leads to educational difficulties. Several researchers concluded that undocumented students do not qualify for financial aid, loans, and many scholarships.

Seeking Help

Undocumented students are known to be resilient; however, that may cause them to normalize their stressors and prevent them from seeking help. Undocumented students may believe having anxiety and fear about deportation or experiencing uncertainty about their future is to be expected. The ongoing stressors that undocumented students experience blur their need for help because it is so pervasive in their daily lives (Cha et al., 2019). In a study conducted by Cha, Enriquez, and Ro, a DACA student shared he was used to feeling anxiety and thought it was “normal” to experience fear, stress, and anxiety due to his status (Cha et al. 2019). Other students shared they already felt like they did not belong in the institution, so asking for help was not an option at their institution (Cha et al., 2019). A research study reported undocumented students feel isolation as a result of anti-immigration prejudices expressed by classmates, professors, and university staff (Conger, 2013).

Another challenge that undocumented students face when utilizing services is not feeling connected with university staff. Students reported they did not feel comfortable disclosing their legal status with staff who is not aware of the barriers and challenges they face. Students also said they do not want pity from a staff or an inappropriate reaction due to their legal status. Educational institutions

are where students will either feel supported or experience inequalities; therefore, university staff should be culturally competent and have the necessary skills to work with undocumented students (Morrison et al. 2016).

The Role of Undocumented Student Resource Centers

Due to the increase of undocumented students in higher education, institutions have responded to the mobilization of undocumented students. Cisneros and Rivarola defined Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRC) as physical spaces in higher education campuses where resources and services for undocumented students are provided (2020). Examples of the resources some USRC may provide are the following: book vouchers and lending programs, meal vouchers, students employment/internships, mentorship programs, academic advising, mental health services, financial aid services, career counseling, and legal services (Cisneros and Rivarola, 2020). Growing research highlights how USRC's provide critical services such as assisting students from admissions to graduation thus improving graduation rates for undocumented students (Ngo and Hinojosa, 2021). Campus cultural centers have been identified as beneficial for minority students by providing a safe place and inclusive space that increases social identity development and connections to resources (Ngo and Hinojosa, 2021). In order to effectively help undocumented students in higher education it is important that school staff understand the daily struggles and social barriers undocumented students face (Morrison et al., 2016)

Ramifications

There are ramifications of undocumented students not receiving support from their institutions. As a result of lack of support undocumented students may experience poor academic performance, increase symptoms of mental illness, missing or dropping out of school, and impact on career development. Current immigration policies and challenges undocumented students face lead to high dropout rates (Morrison et al. 2016). Studies indicate that due to the financial constraints undocumented students face, they are more likely to drop out of school or switch from full-time student to part-time student to work and pay for their education (Ortega and Hsin, 2018). Students who do not seek help are at risk of an increase in mental health illness. This research will contribute to social work practice by acknowledging the challenges undocumented students face when navigating higher education. This research will allow undocumented students to share their own opinion and beliefs regarding the type of support they receive from the Undocumented Student Center within their institutions. The findings from this research will bring awareness to the unique needs of undocumented students.

Gaps in Literature

There is minimal research that is explicitly targeted to address the experiences of undocumented students utilizing USRCS in their institutions. Therefore, this study will review some research conducted on the challenges undocumented students face in higher education. The researcher will also review

research about the role of USRC in higher education. There is also limited research on strategies school staff can use to support undocumented students. Although some literature explains the challenges undocumented students face when in higher education the literature provides limitations to their study.

To examine the barriers undocumented students, face when utilizing mental health services, Cha, Enriquez, and Ro (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews to identify the barriers DACA students face. It is important to note that the students who participated in this study have access to mental health services; however, many do not seek the services. Students were asked questions related to mental health, coping skills, and educational experiences.

The findings from this study conducted by Cha, Enriquez, and Ro (2019) concluded that participants from the survey identified stigma around mental health that prevented them from utilizing services at their institution. Students also identified normalization of mental strain. The students referred to their feelings of anxiety as "normal" due to their status. Another barrier that students addressed was treatment services not addressing immigration issues. Students reported seeking help did not change their issues related to immigration and left their problem unsolved. After these findings, the authors concluded there is limited research on mental health utilization by undocumented students. The authors seek to bring awareness to the psychosocial issues undocumented students face.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Two theories will be used to conceptualize the ideas in this study. The first theory is the Andersen Healthcare Utilization Model which was first developed in the late 1960s by Ronald M. Andersen, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. Andersen first developed this model to understand why families use health services. However, Andersen shifted the understanding of why families use health services to why individuals use health services. For this study, Andersen's most recent model of healthcare utilization (2008) will be used. Andersen's Health care Utilization Model aims to understand the factors that lead to the use of health services (Andersen, 1995). Andersen identified three main factors for utilizing health services: predisposing factors, enabling factors, and need. Predisposing factors are characteristics such as age, race, and beliefs. Enabling factors are medical coverage, level of income, and mental health services in the community. Need factors are how mental health services are perceived and needed.

This model helps address questions for this study as it will address predisposing factors, enabling factors, and need elements. The model will guide the analysis of the challenges undocumented students face when utilizing health services in their institutions compared to students with permanent status or international visas. Some of the predisposing factors that can be determined using this model are beliefs of asking for help. The enabling factors that may be determined are how students access services. The last element, which is need, may be determined by how undocumented students perceive receiving services.

The second model that will be used to guide this study is Systems Theory. Systems Theory refers to the behaviors that are influenced by factors that work together as a system. For this study, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological model of development will be used to address how individual and social factors contribute to the utilization of services offered at the USRC for undocumented students. This model will help guide this study as it will address the micro-level factors such as family, peers, and school factors that contribute to the utilization of services. The model may also address practiced that prevent students from utilizing services at the Undocumented Student Resource Center.

Summary

This study will explore the roles that USRC and support groups play in supporting undocumented students in higher education. In this literature review, the researcher has provided an overview of the demographics of undocumented students in the United States, presented challenges undocumented students encounter and how USRC can support these students. In addition, the researcher presented the conceptual framework which will guide the study. Chapter three will discuss the research design and methodology to conduct the research.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study explored and described how effective Undocumented Student Resource Centers are for undocumented students in higher education. This chapter contains the details of how this study was carried out. The sections discussed are study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

This study aimed to explore and describe the effectiveness of undocumented resource centers in higher education. This study is an exploratory and descriptive research project. It is exploratory due to how effective undocumented support groups/resource centers are for undocumented students in higher education. It is a descriptive research project due to the reported experiences undocumented students shared regarding their experiences with undocumented support groups/resource centers in their institutions. Since undocumented students shared their experiences, this qualitative study used semi-structured individual interviews. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions to collect data from subjects.

The importance of using an exploratory, qualitative approach with interviews is that participants can share their personal experiences to their answers rather than being restricted. Interviews will allow participants to provide

their own experiences and thoughts on undocumented support groups/resource centers within their institutions. Since students will be sharing their experiences, it is also essential to use a descriptive approach to describe their unique experiences utilizing support groups while navigating higher education.

A limitation of using semi-structured interviews is that they are more intrusive and less anonymous than surveys, as the researcher will be meeting with the interviewer through zoom. This may also cause bias because the interviewer's questions or identity may affect the respondent's answers. The respondents may not be candid when answering questions due to not wanting to give a socially undesirable answer. This may cause the respondents to feel uncomfortable about sharing their experiences. Another limitation of this study is that the participants' immigration status will be based on self-disclosure. The researcher will not ask the participants about their undocumented status.

Sampling

This study utilized a snowball or chain sample to recruit undocumented students at a four-year university in California. Students must self-identify as undocumented or have a DACA status to participate. To obtain a sample, the researcher reached out to undocumented students through social media and undocumented support groups/resource centers. Approval was requested from students and undocumented support groups and resource centers to recruit participants. The researcher asked the director of the USRC at a four-year university to forward the recruitment flyer to students via email. There was a total of 10 subjects participating in this study. Interviewing undocumented students in

universities was essential to understand their experiences and explore how effective undocumented support groups/resource centers are in providing undocumented students.

Data collection and Instruments

Qualitative data was collected via zoom live, audio-recorded interviews, and audio transcripts were collected in 2022. Each interview began with an introduction and description of the study and its purpose. Demographic information was collected on the day of the interview. This information consisted of age, gender identification, ethnicity identification, and level of education.

The researcher used nine questions during the interview to gather data. Follow-up questions were also asked during the interview. The following questions were asked during the interview to understand how USRC supported undocumented students in higher education. Individual interviews helped the researcher understand the experiences of undocumented students. Individual interviews allowed the participants to express their experiences openly. To ensure confidentiality, audio recordings and notes related to the study were locked in a secure locked cabinet. All participants were given a pseudonym for their privacy. The researcher kept track of time during the zoom interview to ensure the interview did not run for more than 45 minutes. The researcher reviewed the interview protocol, the purpose of the study and allowed participants to ask questions.

The following interview questions were developed through analyzing documents and articles about undocumented students in higher education and

how USRC support undocumented students. A strong emphasis was placed on gathering personal narratives, comments, and opinions directly from students. Content analysis was used to analyze the student interviews. The researcher coded the responses using a word or short phrase that assigned a meaning of what was said to code the data collected. The researcher used the coding manual to code the responses for qualitative researchers. The researcher also discussed the following questions with the researcher supervisor to ensure valid and reliable questions.

1. Why did you choose to come to this institution?
2. How did you find out about the undocumented resource center at your school?
3. How comfortable do you feel seeking support from the resource center?
4. Can you tell me what resources you have obtained through the Undocumented Student Resource Center?
5. How has the undocumented resource center supported you throughout your educational journey?
6. What can the undocumented resource center do better to support undocumented students?
7. How can the undocumented resource center advocate for the needs of undocumented students, if at all?
8. Has the undocumented Resource center provided any opportunities for you? If so, how?

9. How would you describe the atmosphere in the Undocumented Resource Center?

The researcher employed additional stimulus or probing questions and furthering responses depending on the answer given by the participants. The researcher allowed participants to share their ideas and concerns comfortably by using active listening skills.

Procedures

The researcher reached out to the director of Undocumented Student Center at a four-year university via email to gather data. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and the need for undocumented students for the research project. The researcher asked the coordinator to forward the flyer the researcher had created asking for participants. The email asked participants to email back if they were interested in participating. Once the participants emailed the researcher, the researcher set up a time and day to meet via zoom. The researcher also posted the flyer on social media, specifically Instagram, to gather data. If participants were interested, they sent a direct message to the researcher, and the researcher set up a time to conduct the interview.

During the zoom meeting, the researcher asked participants demographic information and screened participants to make sure they qualified for the research. To qualify the students, needed to have an undocumented status and be enrolled in a community college, private institution, or four-year university. During the zoom meeting, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the importance of their participation. The researcher explained how the study

was to be anonymous and how their names will not be used. The interviews were 30-45 minutes or less. The researcher asked various questions to understand the role of a resource center for undocumented students. The researcher thanked the participants for participating in the study.

Protection of Human Subjects

To protect the anonymity of the participants during the interview, the researcher allowed participants to have their cameras off or change their name on zoom. If participants choose to have their cameras and names on the screen, their identities will not be shared. The participants were told about recording the interview to review the data. Once the research is done, all recordings will be deleted. The researcher has transcribed the zoom dialogue during the interview to gather data. No names were shared, and the participants' identification are never be shared. To mitigate COVID, data collection was done entirely virtually through zoom interviews.

Data Analysis

All data gathered in the interviews was analyzed with thematic analysis. First audio recordings of the individual interviews were transcribed using the live transcription method in zoom. The researcher saved the document with the live transcription on a password-protected computer. Non-verbal actions were noted. The researcher also used In Vivo Coding to emphasize the actual spoken words of participants. The researcher looked for patterns in responses and coded the data using short phrases or words. The researcher re-read all transcriptions to ascertain an understanding of the findings.

Summary

This study explored and described how institutions can further support undocumented students in higher education. The researcher conducted zoom interviews for undocumented students to explore how supported they feel in their institutions. The interviews were a helpful tool to understand how supportive undocumented resource centers are for undocumented students. Participants were able to share their own experiences through interviews. The interviewees captured the experiences and feedback from undocumented students regarding their utilization of the resource centers and support groups.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter provides demographic information of the sample, describes the data that was obtained, and explained how the data was analyzed. This chapter explains the qualitative procedures used and the results of the analysis along with how the results answer the research question. This chapter provides data tables to provide a clear understanding of the data collected. Lastly, this chapter is organized into three main sections: analyses, data thematic results, and summary.

Analyses

Table 1 shows the demographic information of each participant. Participants were twenty-one years old and above, most ranges from twenty-one to twenty-nine. There was a total of 10 participants for the purpose for this study majority females with the exception of three males. All participants identified as Hispanic and first-generation students. The participants in this study are all students pursuing higher education degrees such as Associates, bachelors, Masters and PH.D. degrees.

Tables 2 displays information collected regarding the students experience in receiving support at the Undocumented Student Resource Center. The data indicates that majority of students has a positive experience at the USRC which benefited them and promoted a positive experience. Students expressed feeling

welcomed at the center. Students also identified how the USRC supported them. Some of the ways the USRC supported students was by sharing resources such as free textbook information, scholarship information, internships, and workshops. Three students did report having a negative experience due to not having an USRC at their school. These students reported feeling lost as they navigated higher education as undocumented students. These students shared they often had to create their own resources and advocated for themselves in order to navigate higher education.

Table 3 displays the theme of places. Students were asked of the USRC was accessible and easy to find within their institution. The data indicates that students had a hard time finding the physical center at their school due to the center not being located in an accessible location. Students described the center as small and intimidating. A student reported have to share the center with other centers causing confusions and comfortability. One student reported that the center was easily accessible however the center was reportedly closed most of the time due to being ran by students.

Table 4 displays the theme of ideas that students expressed about the importance of USRC at their institutions. One student reported that USRC are not funded enough because institutions believe that these centers are not being used however it is because students are afraid to disclose their status and may be afraid of the repercussions they may face. Another student reported not having a center at her school and transferring to a school where a center is available which indicated that these centers are needed for undocumented students.

Another student reported feeling she is not heard and how educational leaders should be aware of the challenges that undocumented students face in order to provide better support.

Table 5 displays the advice that the participants provided for institutions and other undocumented students. Most participants encouraged undocumented students to not give up, seek help, and advocate for themselves. Students also expressed the importance of building a community in order to feel supported and navigate higher education. Students also provided advice for institutions such as being more aware of the challenges that students face, provide a welcoming environment, be allies and advocate for the issues that affect undocumented students.

Data Thematic Results

The research question being addressed in this study was: What role do Undocumented Student Resource Centers play in supporting Undocumented students in higher education? The research question was meant to be qualitative and exploratory to allow for in depth understanding of the experiences of undocumented students navigating higher education while accessing the Undocumented Student Resource Center. From the data collected, Undocumented Student Resource Centers are necessary in order to provide supportive services for undocumented students. These centers benefit these students and students who have a positive experience are most likely to have a good educational experience. Through the data collection, students were able to

share their lived experience, recommendations, and ideas about the importance of the centers in higher education institutions.

Table 1. Demographic of Research Participants

Demographic	Participant Response
Age 23	21, 22, 21, 23, 22, 29, 25, 23, 21,
Gender female female, male, female	Female, female, female, male, female, male,
Ethnicity Hispanic, Hispanic, Hispanic, Hispanic	Hispanic, Hispanic, Hispanic, Hispanic, Hispanic, Hispanic,
Degree pursuing bachelors, Associates, bachelors, bachelors, bachelors, bachelors	Ph.D., Masters, bachelors, Associates,
First Generation yes, yes,	Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes

Table 2. Research Category 1: Support

Content/Theme
Personal Communication, Participant 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “The resource center at my school has always made me feel welcome. They have supported me by helping me get my textbooks for cheaper, find tutors, and scholarship information.”
Personal Communication, Participant 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I feel very comfortable going to the resource center at my school. I can ask questions, and everyone is always friendly. They have helped me with textbook waivers, tutors, and networking with other undocumented students.”
Personal Communication, Participant 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Throughout my entire undergrad and master's program there were no resources for undocumented students so a lot of times we created our own".
Personal Communication, Participant 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "I haven't received a lot of support from my school. The times I have had questions the staff is not able to help me. They don't have the knowledge or resources to support me."
Personal Communication, Participant 5
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is no resource center at my school, so I haven't had much support. It had been hard not knowing where to find resources and what I am

eligible for because of my status. There is also a big lack of knowledge and understanding of the challenges undocumented students face.

Table 3. Research Category 2: Places

Content/Theme
Personal Communication Participant, 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "The resource center at my school is very small. It is located in a portable classroom. It can be hard to find especially for new students."
Personal Communication Participant 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "My school introduced the center on orientation day so that helped me familiarize myself with the center and its location".
Personal Communication Participant 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "The center is small and intimidating. It has been hard for me to fit in and feel safe in that space.
Personal Communication Participant 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "The location of the center is accessible and easy to find however the center is closed most of the time. The center is run by students and when they have to go to class the center closes which is an inconvenience.

Table 4. Research Category 3: Ideas

Content/Theme
Personal Communication, Participant 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'The centers are not being funded because institutions believe the centers are not being used but it's actually because undocumented students are afraid to reach out for help and disclose their status.
Personal Communication, Participant 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "I need to have a resource center and I'm in the process of transferring to a different school because there is no center at my current school. I thought I would be okay without one".
Personal Communication, Participant 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "I feel like our properties as undocumented students are never heard. They don't do anything in the long run. It is just a checkmark when they meet with us to say they met with undocumented students, but they are not listening and understanding the challenges that we face.
Personal Communication, Participant 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "I think it is important to have undocumented centers in school because there are a lot of undocumented students, especially first generation. You know for me it was hard because I didn't know how to navigate school and I felt lost and scared my first year.

Table 5. Research Category 4: Advice

Content/ Theme
Personal Communication, Participant 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Don't give up, it might be hard but if you ask for help there will always be a help. You need to ask and speak up".
Personal Communication, Participant 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Always apply to scholarships and network because you will always learn something".
Personal Communication, Participant 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Continue to pursue your dreams despite your legal status".
Personal Communication, Participant 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Always look for community, let yourself be vulnerable with folks to talk about your experience".
Personal Communication, Participant 5
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Share your status with people you feel comfortable with because there are people out there willing to help you".
Personal Communication, Participant 6
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Advocate for yourself, don't be afraid to speak up and ask for help".
Personal Communication, Participant 7
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Build a community with other students who share the same experience as you"

Summary

The data collected was organized into four categories as is presented in the above tables. Categories one through three were influenced by the questions in the interview guide as participations were directly asked questions that elicit answers that fit into those categories. The data collection was organized and analyzed through the process of content analysis through data found in interview transcripts. Further explanation and in-depth analysis of the data is presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The following section will discuss five themes that represent the role that Undocumented Student Resource Centers play in the undocumented student's educational journey. This section attempts to use the proposed meaning of each theme as a guide on how to view the role that USRC plays in supporting undocumented students. The eight themes are support, comfort, places, first generation, advocacy, and awareness. The themes being discussed pull from the tables presented. Further, recommendations on how to apply these findings to social work policy and future research will also be discussed.

Discussion

Support

The students in the study revealed the importance of support throughout their education journey. This study will examine the idea of comfort among students which is a theme from the category support. The study found that the idea of comfort was important for students. Students who felt comfort and support when accessing the USRC were more likely to have a better experience than those who did not feel comfortable. The idea of comfort is important because the comfort level a student feels makes the center more accessible and

without that comfort, a student might not return. Students who were able to access the center and feel comfortable were most likely to share their stories and ask for help. The idea of comfort suggests that USRC should be a welcoming environment where students feel safe to communicate, seek resources, and ask for support. This idea will require USRC to create and establish a safe place that allows undocumented students to share freely and engage with others. Creating a safe place for undocumented students will require USRC to embrace and value diversity, advocate for students, and withhold any judgments or biases about immigration status. The idea of comfort was a common theme among students in this study which implies that feeling a level of comfort when accessing the USRC was essential for students to feel supported and welcomed.

Places

This element of places was also a common theme among students. Interviewees discussed the importance of a physical center within their institution. The idea of places is important because the size of an agency matters in terms of confidentiality. Students shared the importance of having a physical place where their information is not misheard and where they feel confident sharing sensitive information. The idea of having a physical place in institutions might suggest how serious institutions are about helping students. Students who have a physical resource center in their institution where it was easy to access, organized, and spacious had a better experience throughout their education journey than the students who did not have a physical place in their institution or who had to share

spaces with other centers. If institutions can create accessible physical centers aimed especially at the needs of undocumented students, students are more likely to view the institution as helpful and supportive. This might indicate how effective these centers are with students. Those institutions without a center made students feel like they did not belong, were judged, and were isolated. This idea might require institutions to expand. Students might also have to advocate and ask to make the space bigger. It can be concluded that having a place where students feel heard, safe, and can easily access matters contributes to the experience of undocumented students when seeking resources from the USRC.

First Generation

The students in this study all identified as first-generation students. First generation refers to those students who are the first ones in their immediate family to go to a university/college and pursue higher education. The study found that first-generation undocumented students benefit particularly from having a resource center within their institution. This might be important because first-generation student undocumented students are the main population. This might suggest that first-generation undocumented students need more attention to address their specific and unique challenges. This indicates that centers need to rethink the type of services they are providing for first-generation undocumented students. This implies that different centers in the center require different levels of attention, understanding, and support.

Students in this study shared their experience as first-generation undocumented students as feeling lost and alone. Some students shared they didn't have anyone in their family to ask for help or guidance which led them to feel lost. Some students stated they had to figure it out on their own which led them to be their advocates while others felt shut down. The students who were able to access the USRC in their institution expressed the importance of having a physical space where they can meet other students who are also first-generation. Meeting other students who are also first-generation allowed students to connect and build a community. Students also expressed the importance of having a resource for first-generation undocumented students in their centers such as scholarship information, internship opportunities, and legal assistance.

Advocacy

The element of advocacy was another theme among undocumented students. The majority of undocumented students reported the importance of self-advocacy and advocacy within their institution. Undocumented students already face unique challenges, and they deserve to feel safe, heard, and acknowledge in their institutions and outside of their institutions. The study found that advocacy was an important element for undocumented students to feel safe. Some of the students in this study reported having to advocate for themselves to gain access to resources. Some students reported feeling alone and lost which resulted in them being their advocates to receive help. Other students emphasized the importance of advocacy within their institutions. Students in this

study empathized with their appreciation for educators and faculty staff who were allies and advocates for the undocumented community. This implies that it is essential for undocumented students to know there is staff who support them, advocate for them, and are knowledgeable about issues that are affecting them. Students who felt that their school and USRC advocated for them were more likely to seek support from the USRC.

Advocacy is an important theme among undocumented students which suggests that students cannot rely on the center alone. Students are more proactive and are prepared to self-advocate for needed resources. This indicates that students are often left to figure things out on their own without support. This study found that USRC might require the input of undocumented students first and allow them to express their needs and concerns to be able to effectively advocate for them and the issues that are affecting them.

Awareness

Lastly, the element of awareness was an idea that most participants shared as being an important part though their education journey as undocumented students. Students in this study shared how important it was for them to feel like their institutions were aware of their unique challenges. Students also reported the importance of staff bringing awareness of the issues and resources for undocumented students. This suggests that students feel more comfortable seeking resources when they feel supported in their institutions and understood by school staff. This element indicates that institutions and school staff should be

aware of challenges faced by students and be able to provide awareness to make positive changes. This would require institutions and education leaders to revisit the way they are supporting students. The theme of awareness implies that USRC and students should not give up and continue to bring awareness to issues affecting undocumented students to gain resources and increase support for students.

The findings in this category could imply that to promote awareness for undocumented students, education leaders should advocate and be allies for these students. Students who reported having a negative experience in their institution reported a lack of awareness and knowledge from staff that negatively impacted their educational journey. Students who reported having a positive experience shared they felt like the staff at the USRC advocated for them and were knowledgeable about the resources available to them as well as the issues that specifically impact them. These responses are significant because they might suggest that undocumented students benefit from staff bringing awareness to the issues, they are facing to increase resources and support.

Recommendations for Social Work Research, Policy, and Practice

Social Work Practice

The elements discussed attempted to identify how undocumented students are supported when assessing the Undocumented Student Resource Center at their institution. The elements discussed highlight the experiences and

recommendations to create safe and welcoming centers for students navigating higher education while undocumented. However, to make changes and increase awareness, further research must be done. One recommendation is to expand this study and interview allies, educational leaders, and undocumented students to allow them to share their experiences in higher education. This would allow students to express their thoughts and experience within their institutions.

Another recommendation for social work practice is to encourage social workers and educational leaders to advocate for undocumented students at the macro level. Undocumented students deserve to be respected, supported and heard despite their undocumented status. Undocumented students need educational leaders who offer support and a welcoming environment to thrive in higher education. Having a support network and a welcoming space where students can build connections, talk about issues that affect them, and feel safe was a reoccurring theme identified in the data.

Policy

One recommendation for policy in social work includes social workers and educational leaders advocating for policies that affect undocumented students. For example, this can look like bringing awareness to the issues that affect undocumented students, promoting safe centers that offer counseling services, legal and financial assistance, and promoting a welcoming space for these students. Additionally, advocating and being allies for undocumented students

will increase the chances of these students having a positive experience navigating higher education.

Research

The themes and categories discussed in this study attempted to answer the question of what role Undocumented Student Resource Centers play in supporting undocumented students. Participants in the study were able to share their experience assessing the Undocumented Student Resource Center in their institution as well as provide recommendations for educational leaders and other students however, further research needs to be done. The population of undocumented students continues to increase, and institutions should be prepared to support this specific population. There continues to be a lack of literature regarding how undocumented students can be supported, ways to be allies, and the challenges that these students face in higher education. This might promote further research to allow educational leaders and students to understand how to be allies, advocate, and create safe places in institutions for undocumented students.

Conclusions

This study achieved its purpose in highlighting social work practices that identify how Undocumented Student Resource Centers play a role in supporting Undocumented Students. Through a qualitative method, the researcher explored how Undocumented Students are supported by the Undocumented Student

Center in their institution. This study will serve to guide institutions with an interest in supporting Undocumented students. This study supports the field of social work by furthering research focused on the issues faced by Undocumented Students in higher education as well as the role Undocumented Resource Centers play in supporting these students throughout their educational journey.

APPENDIX A
STUDENT PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER

Seeking Volunteers for Research Study



**Are you an Undocumented Student
at a UC or CSU institution?**

**Would you like to assist a graduate student
with their research project?**

- Participation consists of one 30-45 minute zoom interview
- Identity and all information will be kept confidential
- This research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB)
- If interested, please call or text (951) 261-3305
Email: Cynthia.boyzo26@gmail.com

APPENDIX B
INFROMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to explore the role Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRC) and support groups play in supporting undocumented students in higher education. The study is being conducted by Cynthia Boyzo Mejia, graduate student at California State University, San Bernardino, under the supervision of Tom Davis, Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to explore the undocumented Student Resource centers (USRC) and support groups ay in supporting Undocumented students in higher education. The study also intends to provide awareness for institutions and recommendations in order to assist undocumented students.

DESCRIPTION: I would like to ask you to participate in an interview. Your participation will require approximately 30-45 minutes. The interviews will be conducted through zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. Additionally, the time of the interview will be scheduled at your convenience. With your permission, all interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. I will rely on a secure transcription service to help transcribe the interviews.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is voluntary. You do not have to participate in this study, and you are not obligated to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Furthermore, you may withdraw your participation in the study at any time without penalty.

CONFIDENTIAL: I will do everything to protect your confidentiality. Your identity will not be revealed in any dissemination of the study (e.g., articles and presentations). Both you and your college will be assigned a fictitious name. In addition to using fictitious names, all identifying information will be further disguised. Lastly, in efforts to protect confidentiality any data collected will be kept under lock and key and in password protected computer file. The audio recordings will be destroyed 3 years after the project has ended. With your permission, all interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. I will rely on a secure transcription service to help transcribe the interviews.

DURATION: Your participation in the study will consist of one interview. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes.

RISKS: I do not know of any risks to you in this research study. However, answering questions about your experiences may cause some discomfort. As noted previously, you may opt out from answering any questions or withdraw from participating at any time during the course of the study. Furthermore, your name and your institution will not be identifiable by name during the study or after its completion.

BENEFITS: I am not aware of any benefits you may receive from participating in this study. However, the information you share through your participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding of the role of the USRC and the experiences of undocumented students.

CONTACT: If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Dr. Barragan at (909) 537-3501.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2023.

I agree to have this interview be audio recorded: _____ YES _____ NO

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

Place an X mark here

Date

APPENXIC C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your ethnicity?
2. What is your age?
3. What gender do you identify as?
4. What is your level of education?
5. What Institution do you attend?

Interview Questions:

1. Can you tell me if your institution's resource center played a role in you making the decision to attend this school over others?
2. Would you mind telling me how you found out about the resource center at your school?
3. Would you mind sharing how comfortable you feel seeking resources from the center? From 1-10
4. Can you tell me what resources you have obtained through the Student Resource Center? (Examples)
5. How has the undocumented resource center supported you throughout your educational journey?
6. How might the resource center do better to support undocumented Students?
7. How might the resource center advocate for the needs of undocumented students, if at all? (ideas)
8. Has the Resource center provided any opportunities for you?

9. If you don't mind sharing do you feel welcomed when going to the resource center?

Could you tell me more?

APPENDIX D
Email Invitation

Dear (Name of Potential Participant),

My name is Cynthia Boyzo, I am a graduate student at California State University, San Bernardino. I am writing to invite you to participate in the research study I will be conducting. The title of the study is "What role does Undocumented Student Resource Center play in supporting undocumented students" The main purpose of the study is to explore the role Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs) play in supporting undocumented students in higher education.

Attached to this email are the details of this research study including the recruitment flier and informed consent form. If you agree to be part of this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview regarding your experience utilizing the Undocumented Student Resource Centers in your institution. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be conducted via zoom at a time that is convenient for you.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at Cynthia.boyzo26@gmail.com

Takes in advance for your time and participation.

Cynthia Boyzo

APPENDIX E
REQUEST FOR APPROVAL

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Dear Undocumented Student Resource Center,

My name is Cynthia Boyzo, and I am a graduate student at California State University of San Bernardino. The research I wish to conduct for my Master of Social Work project involves studying the role an undocumented resource center plays in supporting undocumented students in higher education. This project will be conducted under the supervision of Thomas Davis.

I am requesting your consent to interview students at the undocumented resource center for this project. I am asking for you to forward the attached recruitment flyer to your students.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on (951) 261-3305, 006085205@coyote.csusb.edu

Once the project is complete, I can provide you with a copy of the results in the summer of 2023.

I would greatly appreciate your consent and support!

Yours sincerely,
Cynthia Boyzo

APPENDIX F
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



January 21, 2022

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Administrative/Exempt Review Determination
Status: Determined Exempt
IRB-FY2022-98

Thomas Davis Cynthia Boyzo Mejia
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Thomas Davis Cynthia Boyzo Mejia:

Your application to use human subjects, titled “The role of Undocumented resource centers for undocumented students in higher education ” has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of

Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

- **Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.**
- **Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.**
- **Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.**
- **Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.**

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2022-98 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Nicole Dabbs

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

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