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“It’s Not Just a Latino Issue”: Policy Recommendations to Better Support a Racially Diverse Population of Undocumented Students

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Latinas/os¹ comprise over three quarters of the 11.7 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States. Given that this is a significantly large proportion of the undocumented population, most of the attention given to undocumented immigrant students has focused on those of Latina/o origin. As such, scholars and educators know relatively little about the experiences and needs of non-Latina/o undocumented immigrants who make up approximately 23 percent of the undocumented population.² Further, there is little research on how current educational policies and support structures are serving non-Latina/o undocumented college students. Comparing the experiences of Latina/o and non-Latina/o undocumented college students, this report seeks to identify how educators and interested stakeholders can better support this racially diverse population.

Undocumented immigration status raises numerous challenges for undocumented students who seek to pursue a higher education. Coming to the United States as young children, undocumented students have guaranteed access to K-12 educational institutions as the result of a 1982 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plyler v. Doe* (Olivas, 2012). However, their pathways to higher education become complicated as they struggle to access information about laws and policies that will support their pursuit of higher education (Abrego, 2006; Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2010; Perez, 2012). Additionally, they struggle to persist in higher education as they have relatively limited access to scholarships and financial aid and tend to experience institutional neglect and limited social support on campus (Diaz-Strong, Gómez, Luna-Duarte, & Meiners, 2011; Flores, 2010; Gildersleeve, Rumann, & Mondragón, 2010; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2011; Perez Huber & Malagon, 2007; Terriquez, 2014).

While this previous research has elucidated the many barriers to undocumented students' pursuit of higher education, most scholars have focused on the experiences of Latina/o undocumented students. This has left a gap in our understanding of the experiences and needs of non-Latina/o undocumented students. Yet, a few scholars have begun to address the impact of race by showing how race impacts Asian and Pacific Islander (API) undocumented students' access to educational resources (Bangalon, Peralta, & Enriquez, 2012; Buenavista & Chen, 2013; Chan, 2010). To build on this, we compare the experiences of Latina/o and

¹ We use Latina/o throughout this report to refer to individuals of Mexican, Central American, and South American origin. Although we draw our data on Latinas/os primarily from Mexican-origin individuals, we use the term Latina/o to acknowledge the shared racialized experiences among individuals from Latin America. Further, most respondents tended to identify as Latina/o.

² Approximately 10.9 percent of undocumented immigrants are of South and East Asian origin, 4.2 percent are of Caribbean origin, 4.4 percent are of European and Canadian origin, and 1.6 percent are of Middle Eastern origin (Passel & Cohn, 2009).

non-Latina/o undocumented college students to demonstrate how race impacts access to undocumented-specific resources and social support systems.

Rather than assessing the impact of a specific policy on the non-Latina/o undocumented student community, this policy report compares the educational experiences of Latina/o and non-Latina/o undocumented college students to make specific policy recommendations for better supporting this racially diverse population. We drew on 57 interviews with undocumented college students from a range of racial backgrounds, approximately half of whom are Latina/o and half are not. We found that the racialization of undocumented immigration as a Latina/o issue impacts undocumented college students' access to material resources and social support. In hopes of addressing this disparity, we offer explicit policy recommendations that educators, community organizers, and other interested stakeholders can implement to better support all undocumented students.

Data

Our data consists of semi-structured interviews with 57 undocumented college students in Southern California: 26 Asian Pacific Islanders (15 Korean, 5 Filipino, 3 South Asian, 1 Chinese, 1 Mongolian, and 1 Pacific Islander), 25 Latinas/os (23 Mexican, 1 Belizean, and 1 Peruvian), 3 bi-racial Asian/Latinas (1 Peruvian Japanese, 1 Peruvian Chinese, and 1 Argentinean Korean), 2 Afro-Latinas and 1 White. All respondents have been assigned pseudonyms in order to protect confidentiality.

As the Principle Investigator, Enriquez conducted interviews in collaboration with 12 undocumented and citizen undergraduate students (including Salinas and Mazumder). Data collection occurred over a three-year period between October 2010 and February 2014. This was due in part to the relatively hard-to-reach nature of non-Latina/o undocumented college students who were less likely to be involved in undocumented student organizations and often less willing to participate in research. Enriquez used prior contacts built through her work as a college educator, researcher, and active member of community-based immigrant rights organizations to gain access to ten undocumented student organizations—three from University of California campuses, four from California State University campuses, and three from California Community Colleges—and recruited many respondents from these spaces. Additionally, snowball sampling was used to obtain referrals to individuals who had limited involvement in these organizations or were not currently enrolled in school.

All three authors have been involved in the Southern Californian undocumented student community for years and are committed to improving the experiences of undocumented college students. Further, we have occupied multiple positionalities as undocumented students, DACAmented individuals, citizen allies,

community organizers, and/or educators. These experiences have uniquely enabled us to understand the experiences of undocumented students and translate them into policy recommendations for allies and educators.

Discrepancies in Material Resources:

The Availability of Information and Financial Resources

Policies and legislative changes related to undocumented immigration status are critically important to promoting undocumented students' access to higher education. In California, one of these key policies includes Assembly Bill 540 (AB-540), which was enacted in 2002. This law allows all individuals, regardless of immigration status, to pay in-state college tuition rates if they attended at least three years of high school in California and received their high school diploma or equivalent. This and similar policies³ dramatically lower the cost of attending a public college or university and increase undocumented students' rates of college attendance (Flores, 2010). Additionally, the California Dream Act (Assembly Bills 130 and 131) was signed into law in 2011 and provides access to private institutional scholarships and some forms of state-issued financial aid. While all undocumented students need to obtain information about these policies, our findings suggest that there is a clear discrepancy between informational and financial resources made available to Latina/o and non-Latina/o undocumented students.

Undocumented students receive information about resources and legislative changes related to their undocumented status through various sources. Figure 1 summarizes the various sources from which respondents report receiving information. These numbers suggest that Latina/o undocumented students tend to access information from more public sources (e.g., organizations and counselors) while non-Latinas/os tend to turn to more private sources (e.g., friends, family, private attorneys, and the internet). Although we cannot control for other factors that may impact where individuals seek out information, this suggests that race differentiates where undocumented students access undocumented-specific information about college attendance.

³ Similar policies to AB-540 have been adopted by Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, and Washington (NILC, 2014).

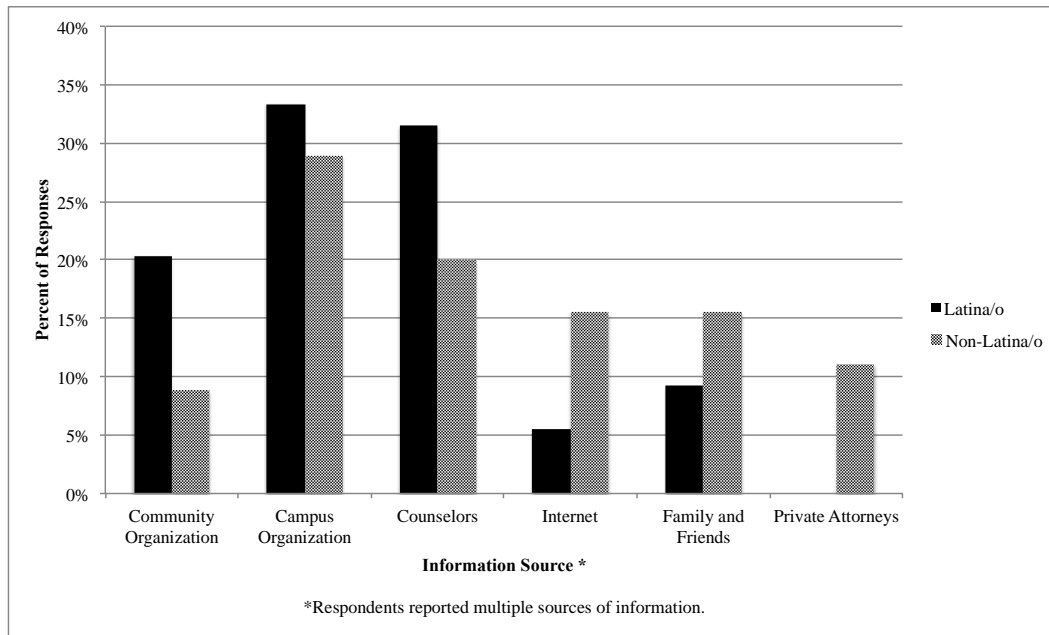


Figure 1. Undocumented college students' sources of information related to attending college by racial group. Tabulated from authors' interview data.

Respondents suggest that this divergent access to informational resources is in part due to the fact that most public events and organizations that provide immigration-related workshops and resources target Latina/o populations. AJ Bongolan, a Filipino undocumented student, explains:

It kind of is alienating because most of the programs...[are] in Spanish.... I went to a workshop in the San Fernando Valley. And I mean they speak English but the paper that I had to sign was in Spanish and I don't know what it means. And to me I kind of felt alienated because I don't understand it. But at the same time I kind of understand why they put it in Spanish.

As AJ and other interviewees note, resources tend to target Latinas/os because they are often hosted by Latina/o organizations, are more heavily advertised to the Latina/o community, and are often made accessible through materials in both English and Spanish. While this has successfully helped raise awareness amongst the Spanish speaking Latina/o undocumented population, the lack of these resources in other groups' native languages tends to alienate non-Spanish speakers and dissuade them from attending future events or asking for help. In this fashion, the racialized distribution of information can lead non-Latinas/os to disengage from these public spaces, which can make it hard for them to gain access to basic information about policies that would facilitate their pathway into higher education.

Additionally, financial resources are largely geared towards the Latino community with relatively few being available in non-Latina/o communities. Joyce Jung, a Korean undocumented student, explains how she believes being API, rather than Latina/o, has limited her access to scholarships:

The Asian community for AB-540 students is so small that there are no people that raise money for them...For Latino/Latina students they voice their opinions...and I feel like there's more of them and so there's more attention towards them.

Indeed, as Joyce suggests, many of the scholarships available to or created specifically for undocumented students tend to be offered through Latina/o organizations. While they may not have race-based or national origin application requirements, their connection to Latina/o organizations often creates the impression that they are meant for that segment of the undocumented population. Additionally, there are more Latina/o organizations than non-Latina/o organizations that offer scholarships. Latina/o respondents reported receiving scholarships from over fourteen organizations while non-Latinas/os often mentioned scholarships from the same three organizations. As a result, Latina/o undocumented students have relatively more access to critical financial resources in comparison to their non-Latina/o counterparts, which may increase their ability to persist in their educational endeavors.

Recommendations to Improve Access to Material Resources

Recommendation 1: Inclusively Disseminating Information

To address the current discrepancy in informational resources available to Latina/o and non-Latina/o undocumented students, educators and organizers should consider how resources are being disseminated to undocumented students. Information about policies should be provided to all students during standard college information workshops, rather than targeted towards specific students. Further, information should be made available in a variety of languages and translators should be provided at events, meetings, and workshops. Lastly, organizers could reach a wider audience by developing strategic partnerships among various ethnic-based non-profit community organizations.

Recommendation 2: Increasing Scholarships and Broadening Application Requirements

Many, if not most, scholarships persist in maintaining citizenship requirements that exclude undocumented students. Educators and organizers should try to increase the pool of available scholarships by working with organizations to eliminate citizenship requirements and to develop scholarships that

do not have such requirements. For those scholarships already open to undocumented students, educators should advocate that they be made available to all undocumented students regardless of race, national-origin, or other demographic characteristics. Although the number of scholarships available to undocumented students has been growing, many are attached to Latina/o organizations. These organizations should take appropriate steps to ensure that potential applicants are aware of the lack of race-based application requirements. For example, this could be highlighted in scholarship announcements or they could partner with non-Latina/o organizations or race-neutral community organizations to advertise or offer scholarships.

Obstacles to Accessing Social Support: Non-Latina/o Undocumented Students in Latina/o-dominated Undocumented Student Organizations

Although undocumented students come from countries around the world and represent diverse racial backgrounds, undocumented immigration is most often framed in social and political discourses as a Latina/o issue. As a result, race and undocumented immigration status have become linked in the eyes of most individuals, including those educators and community members interested in supporting undocumented students. Further, this has shaped undocumented student organizations that aim to provide social and emotional support to all undocumented students but often find that they host a primarily Latina/o membership. As such, non-Latina/o undocumented students face three types of obstacles when participating in undocumented student organizations: language barriers, limited visibility of their ethnic group, and relatively less visibility as public activists. Given these obstacles, few non-Latinas/os participate in these Latino-dominated spaces, which further limits the structural and social support that non-Latina/o undocumented students can access.

Language emerges as a clear barrier to non-Latinas/os participation in undocumented student organizations that host a primarily Latina/o membership. Upon entering undocumented student organizations, many non-Latina/o respondents were faced with Spanish language use and cultural references they did not understand. Mei Zheng, a Chinese student, explains:

The larger undocumented movement [is] largely dominated by Latina and Latino immigrants. It's really different because a lot of stuff is conducted in Spanish and it's really cultural. And I understand...that's what binds all these people together so of course you are going to use that for solidarity purposes. But it was just alienating for me personally and so...that's what makes you hesitant to go out to more 'mainstream' events.

Mei specifically points to how the use of Spanish language and Latina/o cultural references during meetings and events make her feel alienated. While she and other interviewees recognize that these cultural connections are critical for facilitating the growth of the undocumented student movement within the Latina/o community, it does discourage the participation of non-Latina/o undocumented students who are made to feel like they do not belong. This leads many to choose between continuing to participate despite their lack of understanding or leaving this space, which prevents them from obtaining the critical informational and social support provided by these organizations.

Non-Latina/o undocumented students also struggle with the limited visibility of their ethnic group within undocumented student organizations that host predominately Latina/o members. Ravi Lal, a Fijian student, explains, “When I entered their space, I was not acknowledged. I stood there for a while. I said hello to a couple of people, but people were just removed from me.” While it is difficult to be new to any organization, this barrier is heightened for undocumented non-Latina/o students who see few or no members with whom they can culturally and ethnically identify. This causes students like Ravi to feel like they do not belong in undocumented student organizations, as members are predominately of Latina/o origin. As such, he disengaged from this space until he felt comfortable enough to speak of his struggles as an undocumented Fijian, which even then very few understood. Further, Luca Popescu, an Eastern European undocumented student, explains the importance of having cultural ties to other undocumented students as he “would have probably grown up with a stronger sense of community...and [been] less fearful because I would have been surrounded by a more comfortable environment.” As Luca suggests, having a wider network one can ethnically identify with helps solidify one’s sense of belonging in a group and reduces one’s fear of being outspoken.

Although a growing number of non-Latina/o students are now entering undocumented support organizations, participants suggest that, when compared to Latina/o members, very few partake in publicly visible forms of activism. In part, this is due to the limited visibility of their racial group, number of organizations, and opportunities for participation. API interviewees in particular also point to cultural stigmas about being outspoken. Harry Kim, a Korean undocumented student explains:

Usually, the people who are active are the young Hispanic students...But in Korean culture, people do not express themselves publicly...In America, a lot of Asians they [are a] minority [and they] feel suppressed. The family didn’t really encourage them to go out there and to participate [in] rallies.

While Harry provides a cultural explanation for APIs limited activism, he also acknowledges the racial oppression they face as a minority group in the U.S. and

limited family support for activism. In light of these factors, many API undocumented students, and non-Latinas/os in general, may restrain themselves from becoming publically visible activists within the undocumented student movement.

Recommendation 1: Creating Linguistically and Culturally Inclusive Spaces

To create linguistic inclusion within organizations, educators and organizers should evaluate the “safe spaces” created for undocumented students by intentionally outreaching to different racial groups and making sure that the spaces are inclusive of all languages and cultures. For instance, organizations should critically consider if their names or mission statements might be generating a linguistically or culturally exclusionary public persona. Further, many undocumented student organizations are affiliated with Latina/o student campus centers or Chicano/Latino Studies Departments; although these are valuable spaces with which to build coalitions, educators and organizers should also pursue coalitions with non-Latina/o spaces in order to maximize visibility and member recruitment. Additionally, organizations could develop and agree upon community guidelines for meetings and events that value multilingualism while establishing when and how various languages can be used and how translations will be provided. Finally, organizations could harness cultural diversity to raise awareness about undocumented student issues by celebrating holidays from various countries or fundraising through food sales that would offer traditional dishes from various countries.

Recommendation 2: Increasing Feelings of Belonging

Educators and organizers should actively work to integrate all new and potential organizational members, particularly those of non-Latina/o origin who may feel out of place. Of particular importance is making sure that new attendees are greeted and included before, during, and after meetings and events. This could be achieved through a variety of techniques including establishing a membership chair that is responsible for greeting and talking with new attendees before and after meetings. Further, new members could be retained by matching each with a buddy or putting them in contact with other members who may have similar interests such as majors, extracurricular activities, etcetera.

Recommendation 3: Building Racially-specific Sub-organizations

Organizations could consider building sub-organizations or parallel organizations that cater to the needs of specific segments of the undocumented student populations. For example, the Los Angeles chapter of Asian Students Promoting Immigrant Rights through Education (ASPIRE) initially grew in

collaboration with UCLA's undocumented student organization Improving, Dreams, Equality, Access, and Success (IDEAS). Initially established to increase the visibility of and support provided to API undocumented students, ASPIRE has sought to create a space where API undocumented students can find other API undocumented students with whom they feel comfortable around and can identify. These efforts appear to have increased the number of non-Latina/o undocumented members in student organizations; this has a cumulative effect as other non-Latinas/os see these initial members, connect to them, and decide to become active members themselves. Although these and similar sub-organizations (e.g., LGBTQ undocumented student organizations) target specific sub-groups of the undocumented student population, these spaces most often lead individuals to increase their participation in the broader undocumented student community.

Conclusion

We have shown how the racialization of undocumented immigration as a Latina/o issue differentiates the experiences of Latina/o and non-Latina/o students. Specifically, we found that Latina/o and non-Latina/o undocumented students have dissimilar access to information and resources that would facilitate their pursuit of higher education. Moreover, they are less likely to be fully integrated members of undocumented student organizations because they tend to feel alienated in these Latina/o dominated spaces and so do not access critical social and emotional support structures. In hopes of addressing these disparities, we have offered a number of specific recommendations to improve the material resources and social support available to undocumented students from diverse racial backgrounds.

Given that relatively little research has addressed the experiences of non-Latina/o undocumented students, future research should build on our initial findings. This could include research on how non-Latino undocumented students become involved in non-Latino organizations and how non-Latino organizations are successfully raising awareness and providing access to information to multiple racial/ethnic communities. This will help educators see how effective programs can be replicated throughout the nation. Additionally, more research is needed to better understand the experiences of the various groups that fall under the non-Latina/o umbrella that we have discussed—Afro-Latinas/os, Europeans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders—in order to better meet their specific needs. By becoming conscious of all these different struggles, it is possible to formulate equitable and sustainable support structures that effectively meet the needs of a racially diverse undocumented student population.

It is critical to note that these recommendations focus on the improvement of pre-existing resources for undocumented students that tend to cater to Latinas/os. While our findings may be unique to the Southern California context where we

conducted out research, we suggest that other geographic areas with less developed resource structures need to pay attention to these issues as they develop their own support structures. Further, this does not mean that Latina/o undocumented students are no longer struggling, but rather that we need to take other segments of the undocumented population into consideration as we continue to develop support structures that meet the needs of all undocumented students.

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