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The “Trump Effect” and Undocumented and DACA Community College Students

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Over the last decade, public discourse and the research literature about undocumented and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) college students has mainly focused on selective, four-year institutional settings despite the fact that the largest population of undocumented and DACA college students are enrolling in community colleges.¹ For example, the University of California system enrolls between 3,800-5,000 undocumented students in comparison to the California Community College system, which enrolls between 50,000-70,000 undocumented students.² Yet, community colleges continue to be under-resourced in order to provide undocumented and DACA students services for support and engagement. Since the elections, my research team and I have been looking at how the political climate has impacted the academic trajectories of undocumented and DACA community college students. This brief will provide an overview of undocumented students in community colleges along with some preliminary findings from our research project, which includes institutional responses to the political climate and support for undocumented and DACA students.

Undocumented Students in Community Colleges

The mission of American community colleges has historically rested on the principles of access, community needs, and equity. Undocumented and DACA students often choose community colleges because of its affordability and closeness to their home community,³ but how undocumented students are received by their institutions is dependent on institutions’ admissions policies, high school preparation, communication about resources, institutional commitment, and financial aid.⁴ Given these parameters, an imperative question to ask is: Are community colleges meeting the needs of undocumented students in our current sociopolitical environment? Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco (2011) point to the increasing number of immigrants in the U.S. and how community college responsiveness

to their needs would benefit U.S. society in general.⁵ By in large, a more educated immigrant population would reap better economic and personal gains for their families and the U.S. economy. However, Terriquez (2015) found that undocumented students in community colleges “stop out” in disproportionate rates often due to lack of academic preparation, financial strains, dealing with unequal employment opportunities, and the impact of stress on mental health.⁶ Negrón-Gonzales (2017) coined *constrained inclusion* to suggest that barriers continue to exist even in states that have passed legislation that is supposed to be inclusive of undocumented students.⁷ This exposes the reality that although states like California have legislation that aims to help undocumented students, it does not necessarily equate to a welcoming campus climate for this population. As a result, scholars⁸ call for institutions to develop best practices for

undocumented students including more specialized programming and staff trainings geared towards supporting undocumented students as well as the development of webpages that are dedicated to undocumented student needs and illuminate specific state and institution policies. Most recently, Andrade (2017) examined the immediate reactions to the Trump elections by a group of undocumented students at an urban community college in Southern California and calls for a heightened knowledge about undocumented students, for professors to disseminate information about support services for undocumented students, and for increased campus protection.⁹ Similarly, our research (Vigil, Muñoz, Jach, & Rodriguez-Gutierrez, 2018) also addresses the impact of the recent elections on community college students in the state of Colorado, a region that has not been studied at length yet other regions may find applicability in themes.¹⁰ Colorado passed the Advancing Students for a Stronger Economy Tomorrow (ASSET) bill in 2013, which allows eligible undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates at higher education institutions. While this legislation, along with Colorado leaning Democratic during the presidential elections, seems in favor of undocumented students' rights at the state level, the outcome of the presidential election has produced nationwide concern about the mental health, safety, and educational progress of undocumented students.¹¹

“Trump Effect” Research Project

The presidency of Donald Trump along with the rescission of the DACA program has increasingly created negative campus climates.¹² A segment of our study examines how election results have impacted undocumented and DACA students who attend community colleges by drawing on racist nativist microaggressions, a framework developed by Dr. Lindsay Pérez Huber, that frames the intersectional oppression of racism and xenophobia, to highlight how everyday occurrences and institutional policies aimed at undocumented and DACA students create a negative campus climate. I highlight three themes: emboldened racism, heightened mental stress, and institutional responsiveness. Since the spring of 2016, my research team and I have been

engaged with campus climate studies that include individual interviews with undocumented students (twelve total) and college administrators (six per institution; twelve total) from public, private, and community college contexts. Additionally, we conducted four student focus groups (five to eight participants per focus group) that nuanced emerging themes from the individual interviews and the current political environment.

Emboldened Anti-Immigration Rhetoric

While important to note that the first exclusionary legislation against immigrants was the Chinese Exclusionary Act of 1882 and racism has been endemic for hundreds of years, participants have noticed more visible examples of racism and anti-immigrant sentiments while attending their community college. Whether its hearing their peers and faculty celebrate the current administration for its harsh stance on immigration or the noticeable displays of confederate flags on personal property, students felt that the current administration has given permission to others to display anti-immigration and racist rhetoric. Noticeable were the different perceptions among those who lived

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in urban areas as opposed to rural areas. Those who lived in rural areas reported more visible anti-immigration rhetoric compared to those who lived in urban areas. While the visible displays of racist nativism did not occur on community college campuses per se, they did occur within their community. I question, at what point do community colleges intervene in the toxic behaviors of their surrounding communities?

Heightened Mental Stress and Call to Action

Participants shared how the rescission of DACA exacerbates stress, anxiety, and fear within them to the point that they become silent, depressed, and/or feel the need to hide. While the cloud of deportation has existed before the Trump administration, the lack of discretion applied to whom is considered “deportable” has made students worry for their family members more so than previous years. This has also impacted their academic performance and future outlook due to their fear of deportation of family members. The once “A” and “B”

students are exhibiting lower academic performance due to stress and lack of concentration caused by the political environment. Some students explained how the rescinding of DACA greatly affected their course load, what to major in, timeline to graduation, transfer plans, and/or their grades. Students also expressed uncertainty about transferring to a four-year institution as well. However, hope is kept alive by countless undocumented artists, activists,¹⁴ and national entities (United We Dream), who have heightened their efforts and visibility to encourage others to act, to combat deportation and separation of families, and to lobby for a Clean Dream Act. A reminder that undocumented and DACA individuals are not voiceless and will continue to fight for their humanity in a political climate that tries to diminish it.

Institutional Responsiveness

In many cases, some community colleges provided support by gathering students together which often was a concerted effort by student organizations that catered to minoritized or politicized students. Some responses were less overt and came from individual professors or peers. The most visible displays, such as their administrators publicly and verbally supporting undocumented students or faculty placing supportive statements of inclusion on their syllabus, made students feel validated and gave them a sense of belonging. However, many undocumented and DACA students are placed in a precarious situation in which they provide the majority of the labor to create more welcoming climates for themselves and other undocumented and DACA students.

Conclusion

If community colleges are deemed the “educational equalizers” by providing access, equity, and institutional responsiveness to the needs of their communities, they should be activist organizations that exhibit courageous leadership to shape a socially just society. This would include not only providing services that specifically address the needs of undocumented and DACA students, but also constructing opportunities for engagement around white supremacy, immigration, and race on campus and within the surrounding communities.

About UndocuScholars’ Policy and Research Brief Series

This research brief is part of UndocuScholars’ Policy and Research Brief Series, which aims to disseminate knowledge about key issues related to undocumented youth in higher education including humanizing research methodologies with immigrant and undocumented communities and the conceptualization of deportation as an education policy issue.

About UndocuScholars

As an extension of the UndocuScholars Project launched in 2014 at UCLA, the ongoing efforts of UndocuScholars are to engage institutional agents, college and university students, scholars, and community advocacy partners to create and further build on sustainable and effective best practices for undocumented youth in higher education.

Endnotes

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