

# DREAMING BIG: A CASE STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES OF THREE FEMALE UNDOCUMENTED UNDERGRADUATES IN TEXAS

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## Abstract

*Undocumented students experience college academic life differently as compared to their citizen peers. Students' legal status is a lens that informs academic-related emotions, decisions, and interactions with faculty and peers. This paper examines emergent themes from a case study with three undocumented undergraduate Latina students – Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne – at an urban 4-year university in Texas and illuminates the realities of these undocumented students. Themes included anxiety beyond “normal” school-related stress, uncertainty, frustration, hope, and determination. Survey results revealed that, on average, narrators experienced decreases in positive emotions and increases in negative emotions related to academics.*

*Keywords:* undocumented students, narrators, first-year experience

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It is both a frightening and challenging time to be an undocumented college student in the United States. In a recent online article for *The Quad*, Tomar (January 2019) explained that “the rising cultures of fear, prejudice, and scapegoating have translated into policy initiatives that [have had] a very real, tangible, and negative impact on [undocumented] immigrant communities.” Policy discussions regarding undocumented immigrants at the federal level typically receive more attention from the media. However, “a great majority of policies determining the treatment of undocumented students in college settings are made at the state, higher education system, and institution levels” (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2015, p. 1). These policies govern everything from access to financial aid, whether undocumented immigrants pay in-state tuition, and whether they can even enroll in individual institutions in certain states.

The reality of undocumented college students' first-year experience differs from their citizen peers. These differences include, but are not limited to, adaptation and integration into college culture, understanding and use of academic language, lack of familial experience and support, and uncertainty (Contreras, 2009; Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013; Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010; Pérez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009; Teranishi et al., 2015). Undocumented students' legal status is a lens through which they view positive and negative academic experiences in their coursework and interactions with faculty and peers. Given the policy, academic, as well as social, emotional, and psychological contexts, it is necessary to have a broader understanding and discussion on, for, and with undocumented undergraduates.

## Review of Literature

Data on undocumented students reveals that while the majority are Latinx, they represent nearly every major racial group, including Black, White, and Asian American and Pacific Islander, as well as a number of different ethnic sub-groups (Office of Immigrant Statistics, December, 2018; Teranishi et al., 2015; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2018). Among Latinx immigrants, the most significant representation of undocumented immigrants originated from Mexico, followed by countries in Central America, specifically Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, and El Salvador. “Undocumented college students represent a range of immigration histories. While the average age upon arrival for respondents in our sample was 6.6 years, there was a wide distribution in the age of arrivals.

Generally speaking, research with undocumented Latinx students pales in comparison to their citizen peers

(Bjorklund, 2018; Conger & Chellman, 2013; Katsiaticas, Volpe, Raza, & Garcia, 2017). The lack of research is partly because data collection with undocumented students can be challenging given their legal status and fears about revealing it (Gonzales et al., 2013; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). This case study with undocumented undergraduates emerged as part of a broader longitudinal project (Allaire, In Press) on professional identity development, salience, and maintenance with undergraduate students at an urban four-year university in Texas. This article explores the realities of three narrators who are undocumented immigrant college students gleaned through interviews. The themes presented emerged through a narrative and cross-case analysis of the narrators' individual experiences.

### **DACA and the DREAM Act**

Exact numbers of college-aged undocumented immigrants are, understandably, difficult to obtain. The Migration Policy Institute (2019) estimates that there are 3.2 million undocumented children and young adults under the age of 24 within the United States. Currently, Texas ranks second behind California in both total and college-aged undocumented immigrant population (Migration Policy Institute, 2019; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Both the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) have attempted to address the needs of undocumented young adults brought to the United States as children.

The DREAM Act is federal legislation first introduced in 2001 to give specific undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship in the United States. Several versions of the DREAM Act have been introduced in Congress, but despite bipartisan support, none have passed. The 2017 Senate version of the DREAM Act would have created a three-step pathway – conditional permanent residence, lawful permanent residence, and naturalization – to citizenship for current, former, and future undocumented high school graduates through college, work, or military service. The Center for Migration Studies (2019), Migration Policy Institute (2019), and the Pew Research Center (2018) estimate that 3.4 million individuals would qualify under the 2017 version of the DREAM Act, and over 1.5 million would eventually obtain a green card.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) provided temporary protection and relief from deportation as well as work authorization for specific undocumented individuals who were brought to the United States as children (Immigration Policy Center, 2012; Teranishi et al., 2015). It allowed an estimated 800,000 eligible young adults to work, attend school, and plan their lives without the constant threat of deportation (Center for Migration Studies, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Similar to the DREAM Act, there are specific criteria that undocumented individuals must meet to qualify for DACA status. However, DACA does not provide permanent legal status to individuals and must be renewed every two years. In 2017, Acting Secretary of State Elaine Duke rescinded the 2012 DACA memorandum and announced a “winding down” of DACA. Legal challenges at the state and federal level have delayed the process of ending DACA and have left past and current recipients uncertain of their futures (Migration Policy Institute, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2018; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2018).

Despite the benefits of DACA, a study with over 900 undocumented undergraduates from 55 countries living in 34 states by Teranishi et al. (2015) revealed that the social, emotional, psychological, educational, and economic impacts on undocumented undergraduates caused by the uncertainty surrounding the DREAM Act and DACA are genuine. In their study comparing siblings who differ in their legal status, Liscow and Woolston (2016) found that undocumented teenagers with 2.6% more likely to be out of school and make almost \$8,500 less than their citizen siblings. In their qualitative study with eight DACA recipients from Mexico, Benuto, Casas, Cummings, and Newlands (2018) found that as participants grew up, they experienced a sense of non-belonging. When they received DACA status, these feelings temporarily subsided and then returned when they encountered the limitations of DACA. In their analysis of undocumented immigrants in California, Washington, New York, and Massachusetts, Gonzales et al. (2013) found that undocumented immigrant children experience high levels of distorted identity formation, have a higher risk of specific mental health issues, miss milestones, and often feel isolated and constricted. Further, Casas, Benuto, and Newlands (2019) found these feelings of non-belonging to be exasperated by the current anti-immigrant political climate.

### **Going to College**

College is already stressful. The academic stresses of higher education, however, are magnified for undocumented students and can include additionally psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress due to their immigration status. The number of college students who are the first in their families to attend college/university is growing, as post-secondary degrees have become a prerequisite for employment (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017; Shapiro et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education,

2018). Scholarship, such as Benuto et al. (2018), Cadenas, Bernstein, and Tracey (2018), Pérez et al. (2010), and Teranishi et al. (2015) comprehensive report entitled *In the Shadows of the Ivory Tower* have revealed and contextualized how undocumented students' college experiences are unique and differ from those of their citizen peers. For example, in his study with DACA recipients in Ohio, Macías (2018) explored particularly financial exclusions and highlighted undergraduate immigrants' and immigrant communities practice "gridin'," "hustlin'," and "schemin'," to navigate barriers and pay for college.

A U.S. Department of Education Report (2017) entitled *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups* 2017 noted that 3.0 million of the 17.3 million undergraduate students in fall 2014 were Hispanic, which represents a 119% increase from ten years prior (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017; Shapiro et al., 2017). However, only 5-10% of the 1.3 million college-aged undocumented immigrants, approximately 13% of the roughly 12.0 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, pursue higher education (Center for Migration Studies, 2019; Migration Policy Institute, 2019; Office of Immigration Statistics, December 2018; Pew Research Center, 2018).

### Undocumented College Students

The Pew Research Center (2018) estimates between 200,000 to 250,000 undocumented students, about two percent of all students, are enrolled in colleges nationwide. As noted previously, there is a growing body of literature describing the experiences and realities of undocumented college students. "The state of our knowledge, however, is rather nascent" (Gonzales et al., 2013, p. 17). Benuto et al. (2018), Bjorklund (2018), Conger and Chellman (2013), Ellis and Chen (2013), and Suárez-Orozco et al. (2011), in particular, have created strong foundations and offer comprehensive surveys of emergent themes among undocumented college students through reviews of literature, analysis of state tuition rates, and qualitative research.

Suárez-Orozco et al. (2011) for example notes that despite the diversity of undocumented undergraduates' origins, "the majority face three classic challenges: they are typically the first in their families to go to college, most live in mixed-status families, and many report stress, anxiety, and depression" (p. 429). In their study, Gonzales et al. (2013) emphasize that "given the identity threats and constant exposure to stress...undocumented youngsters are vulnerable to poor mental health outcomes" (p. 18). Additionally, Contreras (2009) and Perez et al. (2010) describe undocumented undergraduates' limited access to financial aid, their struggle to manage multiple jobs to pay for their college education, and how immigrant students work to contribute to their family's income. However, research by Casas et al. (2019) indicated that the challenging educational journeys of DACA undergraduates were often mitigated by perseverance, strength, and motivation.

Themes gleaned through a narrative analysis of Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne's interviews align with those described by the previously cited scholarship. This study adds to the conversation about the experiences of undocumented youth and undergraduates with a specific focus on the narrators' first-year experiences at an urban university in Texas.

### Method

The overarching purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of journey undergraduates take in the development, maintenance, and salience of their professional identities during their time at a four-year university. The overarching research question was: *What are the experiences of undergraduate students at a four-year university?* A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to answer this question. During first-year interviews, both related and unrelated themes began to emerge. This paper explores some of the themes related directly to the undocumented narrators in this project.

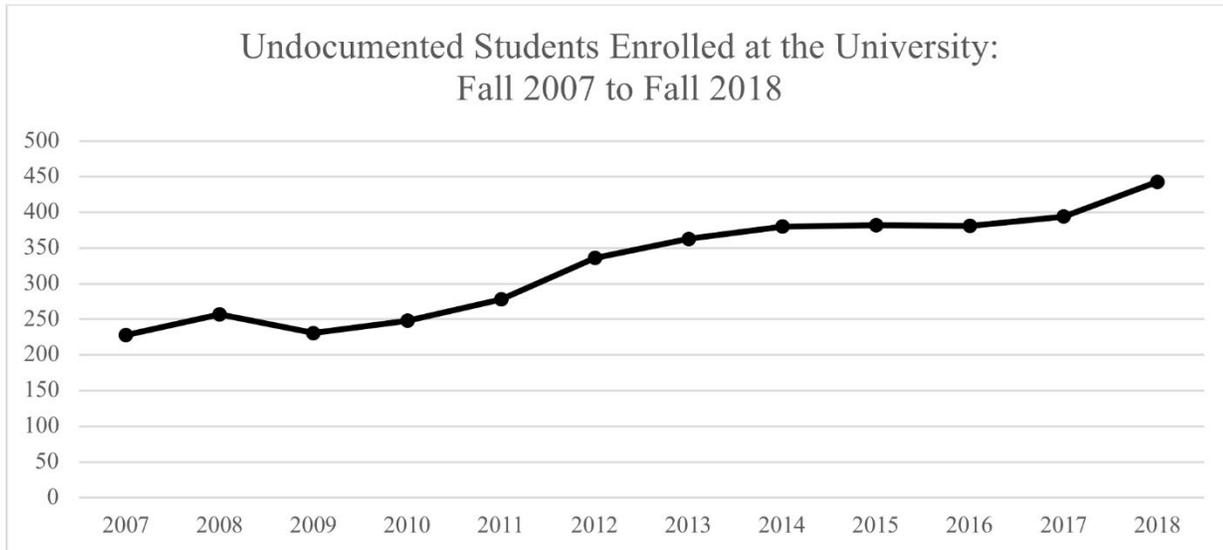
Therefore, the broad research question has been refined to reflect the first-year experiences of the undocumented immigrant students who were purposefully selected to participate. The more specific research question was: *What are the first-year experiences of undocumented students at a four-year university?* While more explicit, this question still casts a wide net and allows for multiple data types and the exploration of academic as well as social and emotional experiences during students' first-year. As a result, this study took a pragmatic approach towards data collection and recognized the value of the individual, as well as collective, voice, and narrative. Additionally, the emergent themes illuminate the emotional experiences of a distinct minority of undergraduates at the university level.

### The University of Houston-Downtown

The University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) is an urban, four-year, Hispanic-serving institution in Texas with over 14,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Approximately 40% (1,091) of all undergraduates self-identify as Hispanic or Latinx, and over 65% of Hispanic undergraduates were female. Hispanic females are also the student demographic with the

highest graduate rate (23%). Additionally, according to UHD student statistics (see Figure 1), the number of students who self-identified as undocumented has increased steadily from 228 (2.0% of the total undergraduate population) in Fall 2007 to 443 (3.5%) in Fall 2018 (Data USA, 2016; University, 2017).

Figure 1



Undocumented student enrollment at the University from 2007 to 2018.

**The Narrators**

This case study involved three (n=3) undergraduate students who, at the time of the collection of this data, were enrolled at the UHD as freshmen. The narrators were purposefully selected to participate in a more comprehensive longitudinal study on the development and maintenance of professional teacher identity because all self-identified their interest in pursuing degrees and careers in teaching (Allaire, In Press). Narrators in the broader study were purposefully selected based on several self-identifying factors. These included being the first in their family to attend college, the first time in college (FTIC), ethnicity, and the certification area (e.g., early childhood through sixth grade, fourth through eighth grade) in which they expressed interest. In addition to the factors mentioned previously, Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne (pseudonyms) self-identified as undocumented immigrants from Mexico at the time of selection (See Table 1). Per the UHD’s Institutional Review Board, narrators were made aware of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time.

Table 1

*Narrator Biographical Information*

Narrator	Age	Ethnicity	Immigrant	DACA Recipient	FTIC	1 <sup>st</sup> Generation College Student	Low-Income Student
Cynthia	18	Hispanic/Latinx	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Emma	18	Hispanic/Latinx	✓		✓		✓
Ivonne	20	Hispanic/Latinx	✓	✓		✓	

*Biographical information of the three narrators – Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne.*

## Data Collection

All of the undergraduate narrators were interviewed once per semester – Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 - during their first academic year at the University. Individual interviews lasted for approximately 60 minutes and consisted of both a semi-structured interview protocol which allowed for both consistencies across narrators and flexibility to address narrator-specific topics. Interviewing both semesters allowed the interviewer to structure Spring 2018 interviews in such a way that they were built on information provided during in Fall 2017.

Qualitative data were gathered through individual interviews with themes generated through narrative case study analysis in conjunction with a grounded theory framework (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). The narrative approach to the participants' oral histories recognized "the self-reflective nature of qualitative research...and emphasize[d] the role of the researcher as an interpreter of the data and an individual who represent[ed] information" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 86). This role was accomplished through flexible guidelines, a focus on learning from the networks, situations, relationships, views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, ideologies, and opportunities embedded within the participants' experiences (Holton, 2010; Yin, 2014).

The Fall 2017 interviews focused on the narrators' personal and academic backgrounds with the inclusion of questions and prompts such as "describe a memorable experience (positive or negative) in school" and to describe the experience of applying to college and feeling of being accepted. Spring 2018 interviews built on the previous interviews and asked narrators to reflect on their experiences and explored feelings of "becoming" as they finished their first year in college. The case study design of this project enabled the personal reflections gathered from the narrators' oral histories to be analyzed both individually and collectively.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and shared with individual narrators for editing. Transcripts were then coded for themes linking the narrators. Themes emerged from the data through several levels of coding – initial/open, focused, and axial/thematic – with extensive use of memoing throughout the process. Initial coding was based on a variety of literal, figurative, and contextual material provided by each of the narrators. Coding included word-by-word, line-by-line, incident-by-incident, and in vivo coding methods (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Charmaz, 2011; Holton, 2010).

## Results and Discussion

Open coding of the semi-structured interviews revealed five major collective themes – anxiety-squared, uncertainty, pressure and purpose, hope, and determination and resilience.

### Anxiety-Squared

Focused coding revealed that Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne's experienced similar types of academic-related stress as compared to their citizen peers. These academic-related stressors, which included, adjusting and integrating into the college community, feeling un/underprepared for the rigors of college, keeping up with classwork and homework, completing projects on time, and studying for quizzes and tests were consistent across all three narrators and mirrors findings by Benuto et al. (2018), Casas et al. (2019), and Rodriguez, Myers, Morris, and Cardoza (2000).

The narrators have also dealt with realities similar to other ethnic minority students who are citizens. Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne all lamented a lack of undocumented role models whom they can look to for support and guidance and, in some cases, a lack of academic support during the application process. All agreed that these, in addition to better supports specifically geared towards undocumented students, would have helped them acclimate better to the academic demands of the university.

Additionally, as the first in their families to attend college, Cynthia and Ivonne had little to no familial guidance when it came to the college application and financial aid processes (Benuto et al., 2018; Casas et al., 2019; Lippicott & German, 2007; Terriquez, 2015). In her interviews, Cynthia explained that her parents tried to be as supportive as they could: "My parents...they don't speak English so they couldn't help much. If I needed to go somewhere, they drove me. But I was the one that had to do the legwork to get forms, fill them out, and turn them in." Cynthia's experience is not uncommon which research conducted by Cadenas et al. (2018) and Teranishi et al. (2015) finding that language and experience are two of the most

significant barriers to undocumented student access to higher education.

Further axial coding of the narrators' university experiences revealed several distinct ways in which their legal status exacerbated the previously noted "normal" and minority-specific academic stresses. For example, Cynthia and Ivonne, despite their DACA status, less access to federal, state, and college scholarships and financial assistance than their peers. Benuto et al. (2018), Bjorklund (2018), Casas et al. (2019), and Teranishi et al. (2015) all cite finances, and its associated stress, as one of a host of barriers preventing undocumented students from attending college.

Given the limitations in the kinds of financial aid for which she is eligible, Emma discussed this challenge has on her schoolwork:

There are times when I want to just...do my school work and be a "normal" college student. But I don't get to do that. I don't want to work. I have to work. It's the only way we can pay for college since I can't get much financial aid and my family doesn't want to take out a loan.

As the only narrator who does not have DACA status, Emma's resources were even more restricted. This limited her choices in how she and her family could pay for her college tuition. She explained her frustration: "If you just look at family income, I would absolutely qualify for financial aid...if I was a citizen or DACA. But because I'm undocumented, I don't have that option." As a result, Emma is forced to work while attending full time to pay for college as well as help support her family.

Cadenas et al. (2018) and Contreras (2009) note that it can be difficult for undocumented students to find resources or to even ask for help for fear of legal complications. Ivonne confirmed this experience: "We [undocumented students] don't know where these resources are because they aren't really advertised or just nobody tells us. It's almost like it's a secret and we only find...like someone tells someone else about a website or a phone number to call." During her interview, Emma described a challenging experience with her parents:

I really had to work to convince my parents to sign the college and financial aid forms. They knew it was necessary because they wanted me to go to college, but they were afraid...because they didn't know English and were worried that ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] would track them down through the paperwork.

An overarching and genuine fear of being deported linked all of the narrators. The fear of ICE and deportation has heightened the narrators' anxiety due to the uncertain future of DACA, DREAMers, and their families.

### Uncertainty

Unlike Cynthia and Ivonne, Emma did not qualify and did not have DACA status because of when she was brought to the United States. Regardless, the lack of new immigration reform, lack of agreement by the state and federal governments and politicians on both sides of the aisle on what to do about DACA, and disagreement between political and judicial branches of government have left the narrators far from certain about their professional futures (Cadenas et al., 2018; Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015).

The narrators' frustration, due to various uncertainties, was revealed through thematic coding. Their frustration is in line with what Suárez-Orozco et al. (2011) termed *interminable liminality* – "the transitional moment between spheres of belonging when social actors no longer belong to the group they are leaving behind and do not yet fully belong in their new social sphere" (p. 444). Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne have "no straightforward path to citizenship and no means for assimilation, despite being acculturated in U.S. schools and identifying as American" (Bjorklund, 2018, p. 632). Cynthia and Ivonne, in particular, expressed frustration at changes in state and federal immigration laws, especially inconsistencies surrounding the DREAM Act, DACA, and President Trump's immigration-related policies.

Due to the immigration-related limitations examined under the previous theme, Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne all expressed uncertainty about their lives outside and beyond university-life, and theme mirrored in research by Cadenas et al. (2018), Ellis and Chen (2013), Macías (2018), and (Pérez, 2009). Naturally, all of the narrators live with a certain amount of uncertainty due to their legal status. Cynthia elaborated on this point:

"This is a fear that is always...ALWAYS in the back of our minds as undocumented immigrants and undocumented students. Our legal status determines where we can get money for college, what schools we can go to, what jobs we can do when we graduate. Some of us [undocumented immigrants]...you never know if there's going to be an ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] raid and you might get a phone call that your parents or siblings were detained and are about to be deported."

All of the narrators noted that the fear of family members being arrested, detained, and deported is very real and can harm their schoolwork. Emma, the only non-DACA narrator, explained her feelings on this: “I try not to let it [fear] affect me. Like...I try not to come to school and worry that my parents will be taken away. I don’t want that to affect my schoolwork. But I do worry.” Even as DACA recipients, Cynthia and Ivonne agreed with Emma’s sentiments. Ivonne, in particular, noted that her schoolwork is sometimes negatively impacted when immigration is in the news.

Feelings of non-belonging in both the United States and Mexico cause additional uncertainty among the narrators. This sentiment mirrors a common refrain of “*Ni de aqui, ni de alla*—Neither from here nor from there,” according to Gurrola, Ayón, and Moya Salas (2016, p. 504). Cynthia and Ivonne came to the United States at three-years-old, and Emma arrived when she was eight. As a result, the narrators have little to no connection with their home country outside of phone calls or emails with relatives. All noted that love and celebrated their Mexican heritage. Ivonne explained: “I came here [the United States] when I was three. Even though I’m not ‘American,’ this is my home country. I don’t know anything about living in Mexico.” The narrators’ felt that their roots in the United States are more profound than their roots in Mexico, and they share American values despite never being fully allowed to belong to American society. As such, the narrators are simultaneously included and excluded.

The narrators’ uncertainty also extends beyond the personal into the professional. Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne were in their first year at a university. All three fully intend to graduate and, at the time of the interviews, identified their interest in becoming teachers. However, even though they can attend college, can graduate with degrees in teaching, and become certificated teachers, their immigrant status may prevent them from being hired as teachers. Cynthia expressed the frustration shared by all the narrators succinctly: “Sometimes I think, ‘what’s the point?’ Why am I spending all this time and money on college, getting a degree, if I’m going to end up cleaning houses with my mom?” The professional uncertainty, however, has not deterred any of the narrators. In addition to motivating them to be the best students they can be, it has also motivated some to become active in on and off-campus organizations that support and fight for undocumented immigrant rights.

### Pressure and Purpose

During each of their interviews, Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne spoke at length on the demands and expectations to do their best and to succeed in college. According to research such as Crisp et al. (2015) and Perez (2009), the pressure to succeed is common among minorities in higher education, but more so among undocumented undergraduates. Narrators noted that the two most significant sources of external pressure were from their families and society-at-large. While acknowledging that this pressure can be overwhelming, thematic coding on this topic revealed all three of the narrators have, in some way, internalized these pressures to give them a sense of purpose.

Familial pressure comes from two senses of obligation. First and foremost, the narrators’ acknowledged the sacrifices their families made to bring them to the United States. For each of the narrators, the journey to the United States was expensive and complicated. In their interviews, all of the narrators were humbled by the risks and sacrifices by their parents and thanked them. After telling her story of how she came to the United States, Emma became silent and after a few minutes commented: “It still amazes me that my family did this and they did it for me (crying). I just need to do my best so that it was all worth it.” Cynthia echoed these feelings when discussing her parents’ sacrifices to bring her to the United States, adding: “They [her parents] gave up their lives so that I could have a better one...more opportunities. That’s heavy, and it’s not something that, I think, can be easily understood by citizens.” Ivonne, however, noted that her parent’s sacrifice creates an expectation on her academic performance:

It’s hard to explain, but, their sacrifice puts a lot of pressure on me. Like, if I get a bad grade, I’m letting them down. I’m letting down all the people who gave up their lives in Mexico so that I could have this opportunity. I feel like I’m rising to that challenge, but it’s hard when that’s hanging over you.

All of the narrators also hoped to repay that debt by doing well in their classes, graduating from college, and getting a good job. They acknowledged that a good job, like a being a teacher, will help their family financially and will show that the sacrifices that were made were not in vain.

Additional pressure comes from the fact that the narrators have younger siblings and cousins who look to the narrators for help and guidance. This is not lost on the narrators. Emma noted that her cousins often come to her for advice on schoolwork and college. Similarly, Cynthia has helped her family members in obtaining and filling out college-related paperwork. Cadenas et al. (2018) explain that older undocumented students become the “trailblazers” for their respective families. In this way, the narrators have become the role models that they never had with all three embracing that opportunity.

Cynthia explained: “I want to be that role model...for my cousins and for my future students. I didn’t have that, but I can be that for them.” As such, the narrators are fully aware that their performance in college influences other family members’ decisions on whether to go to college, particularly the young women in their families.

There is also external societal pressure stemming from their identity as undocumented immigrants, particularly since the 2016 election. Perez et al. (2009) and Perez et al. (2010) note that while undocumented students’ legal status is *an* identity lens through which they view the world, it is also *the* identity lens through which many individuals and organizations view them. As a result, all three narrators, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, recognize the need for and their roles as both representatives and spokespeople for undocumented immigrants. Emma and Ivonne have been reluctant to take on the role of “social justice warrior.” Cynthia, on the other hand, has embraced her role willingly and feels like she has to be a “model” to others (i.e., faculty, citizen peers) who may otherwise think negatively about undocumented immigrants.

Not only are all of the narrators determined to succeed in college, they also want to give back to their families and their communities. Cynthia, in particular, felt a strong desire to fight for the rights of the people in their communities and other undocumented people. This sense of responsibility serves as motivation to succeed in school and provides the narrators with a sense of purpose greater than themselves.

### Optimism and Hope

Two of the most striking characteristics of the narrators, which crossed over into all of the themes and interviews, was their optimism and hope. This is significant for two reasons. First, as a distinct minority in the college community, and a group that is prone to disparaging comments in politics and the media, it would be easy for the narrators to play victims. It would also be easy for the narrators to use any feelings of limitation, lack of privilege, disempowerment, and otherness as excuses to any shortcomings they may face or to show anger towards their citizen peers and college faculty. This is not to say that the narrators do not get angry or frustrated. During her interview, Emma explained why anger, for her, is not the solution: “Yeah, I get pissed off. Who wouldn’t? But if I let it get the best of me, that just feeds into the anti-immigrant narrative.” However, instead of playing the angry victim, the narrators explained that they use their negative feelings as fuel for their academic success and, to a certain extent, social activism.

Another reason the optimism and hope are significant is undocumented immigrants, and many other first-generation college students, are typically viewed through a deficit model and portrayed as lacking in the skills, knowledge, and cultural capital necessary to be successful in higher education. Similar to Cisneros and Lopez (2016), DeAngelo, Schuster, and Stebleton (2016), Katsiaficas, Volpe, Raza, and Garcia (2017), and Tovar (2015), Cynthia wanted to focus on her strengths and the strengths of the undocumented community: “We got skills! (laughs) You said there are more of us [undocumented undergraduates] than ever before in college? That’s despite all the challenges we face...ICE, deportation, language. That’s the makings of a success story!” All of the narrators agreed that despite the challenges, they are very hopeful about their futures and the future of their community.

The hope the narrators have is both internal and external. Internally, the narrators are hopeful about their futures and the success they will have personally and professionally. Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne were excited to be in college and were ready to meet new people and have new experiences and adventures. Externally, the narrators recognize that they serve as hope for other undocumented students, particularly family members, who want to go to college. The narrators hoped they could serve as a positive example of undocumented immigrants and counter the narrative that they are “takers.”

### Determination and resilience

All three narrators are determined to do well in their classes, complete college on time, obtain jobs in their chosen field of study, and become contributing members of American society. Bjorklund (2018) explains that “to overcome the manifold barriers that undocumented students face and to persist in higher education, studies have found that they must exhibit a tremendous amount of motivation and desire to succeed” (p. 653). Based on thematic coding, narrators’ determination and resilience comes from three primary sources – family, an “I’ll show you” mentality, and on-campus social networks. These sub-themes mirror those found in the previously cited study as well as Macías (2018) and Teranishi et al. (2015).

First, the narrators stressed that they gain a great deal of strength from their families. As described in previous themes, all three narrators are determined to be successful as a way of thanking their families for their past and current sacrifices. In her interviews, Ivonne specifically cited her parents’ struggle to bring her to the United States and their work ethic as her

inspirations. In this vein, the narrators considered themselves to be lucky to attend college, which serves as further motivation. O’Neal et al. (2016) found that undocumented students displayed *grit*, which they defined as a “passion and perseverance towards long-term goals” (Duckworth et al., as cited in O’Neal et al., 2016, p. 449). When asked about the idea of *grit*, the narrators agreed and found it amusing as the University uses the word “grit” as a campus slogan. Not only did the narrators feel that their grit helped them overcome barriers to their educational success and focus on the big picture. Asked to clarify this distinction, Emma explained:

I can’t speak for everyone, but I feel like typical college students...those who are citizens...they don’t really look at the big picture. Maybe it’s because it was a given that they would go to college. Maybe they don’t have to work to pay for college. They don’t look at the long-term, like, ‘if I don’t pass this class, how will that affect me graduating on time?’ Undocumented students, again I can’t speak for everyone, we look at the long-term, so we can make sure that we do well and graduate on time. A lot of us don’t have the time or money to mess around and not pass classes.

Similarly, Cynthia and Ivonne also felt that having a long-term goal distinguished them from typical college students.

Secondly, Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne all displayed an “I’ll show you” mentality which guides and inspires them. Research with undocumented students, Benuto et al. (2018), Contreras (2009), Contreras and Contreras (2015), and Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) in particular, have shown that undocumented students frequently use their feelings of limitation, otherness, and disempowerment to fuel their motivation to succeed personally and professionally. Each of the narrators acknowledged that, whether they like it or not, they are the “model” by which others – family members, pro- and anti-immigrant groups, college instructors, future employers, and citizen peers – will judge both the (un)documented immigrant community. When asked about the idea of a “model minority” Emma elaborated on her desire to prove wrong all those who look negatively upon both undocumented and legal immigrants: “I know that I’m more than just a [undocumented] student. But if that’s the first thing people see or will say when they see me, then I’m going to be the best one [undocumented student] I can be!” Ivonne also explained her desire to challenge stereotypes within the immigrant community: “Sometimes the discussion [within the immigration community] is just as toxic as outside. We don’t think we’re good enough or smart enough...I want others to see that we can do anything.” Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne, like students noted in previously cited studies, channel their desire to challenge stereotypes and obstacles associated with their status to strengthen their resilience and determination.

Finally, it should come as no surprise that reliable social networks reinforce the resilience of the narrators. In their study, Ellis and Chen (2013) noted that students find strength in dual identities derived from school and their home and host cultures. Moreover, resiliency is enhanced as students who share these dual identities work collaboratively, and at times creatively, to overcome struggles in their path. However, unlike other identity-related or special interest student organizations, there are no official undocumented immigrant student organizations on campus. Cynthia described how the dual student-immigrant identity is essential: “Not all college students are undocumented, so they don’t know what it’s like to be us. Also, not all us [undocumented immigrants] go to college, so they don’t understand the academic pressures.” Cynthia further explained that not only is it important to her to know and talk with people who have had the same experiences with their legal status as she has had, but it is crucial that they are college students too.

The narrators explained that undocumented students find each other regardless and support one another informally. Emma explained that “it’s like we [undocumented students] have a kind of radar for each other.” Similar to the experiences of other ethnic minorities in college, the narrators view this support system as crucial to their success despite the lack of formality.

### Conclusions

Despite the small sample size, the narrators’ first-year experiences as undocumented undergraduates live a reality that is different and, for understandable reasons, generally hidden from view. While this study focused on the unique lens through which the narrators view their first-year experiences, there are also similarities. The narrators’ experiences and feelings associated with those experiences are in line with those of undocumented undergraduates in the previously cited literature. There are also similarities between the undocumented undergraduates and the first-year experiences of their minority/non-minority citizen peers. Relatively high levels of anxiety, feelings of insecurity and unpreparedness, as well as pressure to perform resonated with undocumented and citizen undergraduates alike.

The typical stresses of university life marked Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne’s first-year experience. Attending classes, studying, and taking tests are stressful for all university students. In final interviews of their first year, all of the narrators in the overall project had a chance to reflect and comment on their overall first-year experience. All of the narrators, including Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne, admitted that the spring semester was not as “exciting” as the fall. They also admitted to

experiencing a spring semester malaise, in which their motivation to attend class, study, and do well on tests decreased. In this way, some of Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne's experiences mirrored those of their citizen peers.

Although they experience challenges that their citizen peers do not, Cynthia, Emma, and Ivonne all display strength, confidence, hope, and optimism about their abilities, college, and future professional careers. They understood that they are lucky even to attend college and that with great opportunity comes great responsibility. The themes generated through this analysis show a small group of students who are excited about college and the new experiences it will bring. However, they are also concerned about the future for other undocumented students. Wrapping up our interview, Ivonne noted that her struggle to get to college should not be standard practice: "I made it to college. But it was hard, and I didn't have much support. My hope is that me being here will make it easier for someone else." As such, there has been a substantial discussion with equally strong recommendations on how to best support undocumented students.

Congress' inability or unwillingness to pass a uniform federal immigration law has negatively impacted college access and attainment for undocumented undergraduates. As noted previously, there is a temptation to view undocumented undergraduates through a deficit lens. Instead of focusing on the negative, scholars such as Cisneros and Lopez (2016), DeAngelo et al. (2016), Katsiaticas et al. (2017), and Tovar (2015) argue that college counselors, faculty, and staff should focus on valuing the social and cultural capital undocumented college students are utilizing to be successful. Using Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth, Pérez Huber (2009) emphasizes seven types of capital— aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and spiritual – which are consistent with those the narrators described in their interviews.

At the institutional level, Cisneros and Lopez (2016), Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015), Teranishi et al. (2015), and Terriquez (2015) offer specific implications for policymakers and concrete suggestions to institutions looking to create a more inclusive campus atmosphere and improve access and support for undocumented students. First and foremost, they suggest that colleges and universities unequivocally "proclaim their commitment to and support for undocumented students as members of their campus communities. This endorsement should reflect their commitment to welcome, embrace, recognize, acknowledge, and provide a safe space for these students" (p. 21). This statement would accompany concrete actions that demonstrate to undocumented students, and their citizen peers, the university's commitment.

For example, universities should strive to improve and expand high school to college transition and mentor programs aimed towards undocumented student recruitment, support, and retention. As the number of undocumented undergraduates has increased, so to should staff, faculty, and counseling awareness increase and improve. Universities should look to establish undocumented allies on campus – akin to LGBTQ safe spaces – where students are free to disclose their legal status and create of resource centers to provide undocumented students safe spaces to meet and find resources and services. A combination of these institutional interventions, in conjunction with formal guidelines, could improve access and support for undocumented undergraduates.

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