

**“NO, I CAN’T LEAVE POLITICAL
CONVERSATIONS AT THE DOOR”:
From a Mixed-Status Household to Undocumented
College Student Advocacy**

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“There is no such thing as a single-struggle issue because we don’t live single-issue lives.”

—Audre Lorde

For over a decade, I observed my former stepfather—born in Brazil—spend most of his days in the basement of our rowhome in Philadelphia, except to go to bed upstairs. Although there were televisions in the living room and bedrooms, he would watch soccer games and eat in the basement. While the rest of us occupied the two main floors of our home in our working-class neighborhood, he hardly *did*. Most people would associate this space as his “mancave,” however, I recognized that he was hiding, literally and figuratively. He was hiding from the ongoing surveilling of Black and Brown undocumented individuals who migrated to the United States to live better, safer, and more productive lives with opportunities not always offered in their home countries. As a result of his undocumented status, he leaned on the side of caution. He often asked me to drive and skipped out on certain family gatherings and travels to avoid attention and the potential of being detained and deported by immigration and customs enforcement. Early on in my teenage years, I learned about the im/migration system inequalities,

more specifically for those who are racially minoritized and have high financial need backgrounds. This understanding began my advocacy efforts for human rights, im/migrant rights, and educational equity for undocumented college students.

Over the years, I have been told in academic and social spaces to leave political conversations “at the door” (i.e., friends, instructors, and colleagues indicating I should not discuss certain subjects). Unfortunately, racially minoritized and other multiple minoritized people, including Black and Brown im/migrant communities, do not have the luxury of avoiding politicized discussions, as a plethora of historical and contemporary laws and policies negatively affect and target these communities. Some examples are (a) the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), which is the federal law that prohibited Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States, (b) The Immigration Act of 1924, which developed a quota system creating forceful regulations at the U.S.–Mexico border, and (c) Arizona Senate Bill 1070, which has a racial profiling “show me your papers” clause allowing law enforcement officers to stop, detain, or arrest a person if they are suspected to be unlawfully present.

My aim is not to speak for undocumented students; I try to be an ally and coconspirator to elevate how exclusionary laws and policies negatively impact their personal, academic, and professional lives. As a Puerto Rican born on U.S. soil, I have leveraged my citizenship privilege to advocate for and bring into conversation the varying ways politics, laws, and policies—at the federal, state, and institutional levels—have impacted the lives of the undocumented students I work with. Although I share some similar lived experiences with the undocumented students I have been privileged to work with over the years (e.g., Latinx/non-white and from a high financial need family background), my citizenship privilege affords me opportunities noncitizens cannot access. For example, I was a Pell Grant recipient and a work-study student employee as an undergraduate—both are federally funded programs for which undocumented students are ineligible. As a student affairs administrator working in multicultural affairs and as a professor, I have and continue to share statistics, facts, and qualitative research findings highlighting the experiences of undocumented students and how institutional leaders and policymakers can better holistically support these collegians (e.g., equitable and inclusionary policies, nonstate or federally funded ways of employment eligibility on campus, offering free legal counsel for the

students and their families, greater financial support, support staff and centers dedicated to undocumented and other im/migrant students).

Since 2018, I have conducted a longitudinal critical qualitative study focusing on the effects of federal-, state-, and institutional-level policies and the everyday experiences of undocumented collegians, working closely with those who identify under the Latina/o/x/e umbrella. This ongoing participatory study broadly investigates (a) how race and racism shape undocumented students' collegiate experiences, (b) where students find or identify belongingness to persist toward graduation amid an anti-im/migrant sociopolitical climate, (c) how students demonstrate agency via their activism and resistance efforts, (d) how they showcase joy, and (e) their postgraduation experiences. Some examples of what I have been able to do through this work include advocating and lobbying state legislators alongside undocumented students, participating in rallies and protests (e.g., when border patrol agents were invited to a career fair on campus for recruitment), mentoring some of these talented and brilliant individuals, and initiating the process of an undocumented student support working group/task force at the university where I currently work in New York.

As part of my positionality and methodological choices, I aim to highlight the oppressive and hostile ways these collegians experience life on and off college campuses, being racially minoritized and undocumented; however, I am also intentional with sharing counterstories to negative dominant narratives surrounding undocumented im/migrant communities (e.g., in the media) and centering their assets, skills, talents, cultural capital, and joys. For example, in an article published in the *Journal of First-Generation Student Success*, titled "Hard Work and Heart Work: First-Generation Undocu/DACAmented Collegians Paying-It-Forward," I elevate how Latinx undocumented students in the Southwest used their individual and collective assets and skills to begin a peer mentoring program and a scholarship fund for their undocumented peers. Further, a coauthored article published in the *Journal of College Student Development*, titled "UndocuJoy as Resistance: Beyond Gloom and Doom Narratives of Undocumented Collegians," showcases how these collegians experience and embrace joy (e.g., with biological and chosen family and communal and artistic joy) despite navigating barriers, such as anti-im/migrant exclusionary policies and racist nativist sociopolitical and campus climates.

Advocacy and resistance may appear different to everyone. For me, these are sometimes public-facing (e.g., protests). Other times, advocacy and resistance are (a) signing petitions, (b) designing and teaching a course centering on race, racism, and undocumented collegians, (c) in faculty and staff convening spaces, challenging my colleagues to consider implementing policies and practices that are more equitable for undocumented students (e.g., enacting institutional policies that eliminate the presence of border patrol agents on campus and having scholarships and other funding opportunities with no citizenship eligibility requirement), and (d) voting in local and national elections for candidates with supportive agendas on im/migration and education. Advocacy and resistance also show up in my work as a collaborative researcher, disseminating my knowledge in academic journals and book chapter publications and participating in news articles, radio shows, podcasts, and national conferences.

Undocumented students and grassroots organizers are doing such good work to push the im/migrant agenda. My goal is to be a friend and partner in the fight for equity. My call to action to anyone interested in human and im/migrant rights is to use power and privilege to advocate for these communities within their spheres of influence. I urge those who work in, or adjacent to, higher education to educate themselves on these communities of scholars to support them best. In addition to research study findings in publications, including a *special issue* I edited with *New Directions for Higher Education*, titled “Equitable and Humanizing Research, Policy, and Practice With and for Undocumented Collegians in the United States,” some online resources include: www.myundocumentedlife.org, <https://www.presidentsalliance.org/>, <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/>, and United We Dream’s College Administrator Guidebook <https://unitedwedream.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/United-We-Dream-Administrator-Guidebook.docx.pdf>. Through coalition building and collective knowledge and power, transformational changes for a just and equitable future can be enacted.