

University of California, Merced

Barriers and Opportunities Faced by Undocumented Students

Authors:

Luz Sandoval Manjarrez

Maria Ayala-Rodriguez

Collaborators:

Patricia Luna, Juan Morales, Tomas Monroy

Questions and comments can be addressed to lsandoval5@ucmerced.edu or
mayalarodriguez@ucmerced.edu

Abstract

This research paper is designed to understand the challenges the undocumented students at the University of California Merced endured from their transition into a new country to entering their college journey. This paper draws from focus groups conducted with 35 undocumented students at UC Merced. Our research reveals several findings: 1) the students have some resources through the Undocumented Student Service Center yet; 2) they continue to face barriers; 3) undocumented students benefit from community on campus; and 4) undocumented students experience fear of deportation for themselves and their family members. Based on the focus groups, we recommend that a multicultural building with a safe zone for undocumented students be created.

Introduction

Undocumented students at the University of California Merced, rarely have a voice due to the fear that their immigration status holds them back. It is important to know the stories and struggles these students face to better improve their educational career and help them succeed. A study was created for others to understand the desires of the undocumented students at University of California Merced in order to educate people of the adequate resources they need on campus to succeed.

In the research conducted during the spring semester of 2015, we endeavored to understand the needs of undocumented students. Focus groups, convened by students from the University of California Merced, revealed that not all undocumented students have the same opportunities to obtain in-state tuition, financial aid, and work permits. Undocumented students should get equal opportunities to succeed on campus, as sometimes they are afraid of coming out of the shadows and speaking up for themselves.

Some people are aware of the hardships and struggles endured by undocumented students; still the understanding and conceptualization of their personal lives becomes difficult to comprehend for all because not everyone's story is the same. Individuals must understand that as students enter college, it becomes difficult for them to transition into a new environment. The world for an undocumented student can be difficult as their resources are limited and their foundation for personal statements are restricted. With this research we endeavor to understand the struggles undocumented students face in connection with the University of California Merced as a whole.

Research Questions

The study was designed to answer the following three research questions:

- 1.How would a multicultural building benefit undocumented students?
- 2.How has students' background influenced their education?
- 3.How do current immigration events affect undocumented students?

Methodology

The findings from this report are based on focus groups conducted at the UC Merced campus during the spring of 2015. A group of UC Merced students used a snowball sample to recruit 35 undocumented students from different class standing to participate in five focus groups (Figure 3). As shown on Figure 4: 24 of the participants were female and 11 were male. The University's Internal Review Board approved the protocol for this study. The focus groups lasted about one hour each, they were recorded and later each recording was transcribed. We then coded the transcripts for emergent themes.

Background: Undocumented Students at UC Merced

This is a study of undocumented students at UC Merced, which includes students who have no evidence or proof of either citizenship or residency in the United States. Through the study we found that the students prefer the term undocumented rather than illegal alien or other terms to describe them.

In the 2014-2015 academic year, there were 265 undocumented students at the University of California Merced, accounting for nearly 5 percent of the student body. UC Merced has the highest percentage of undocumented students of all the UCs. The following chart outlines the increase of undocumented students at UC Merced for the past four years.

The majority of the participants were born in Mexico with outliers being Guatemala, Brazil and the Philippines.

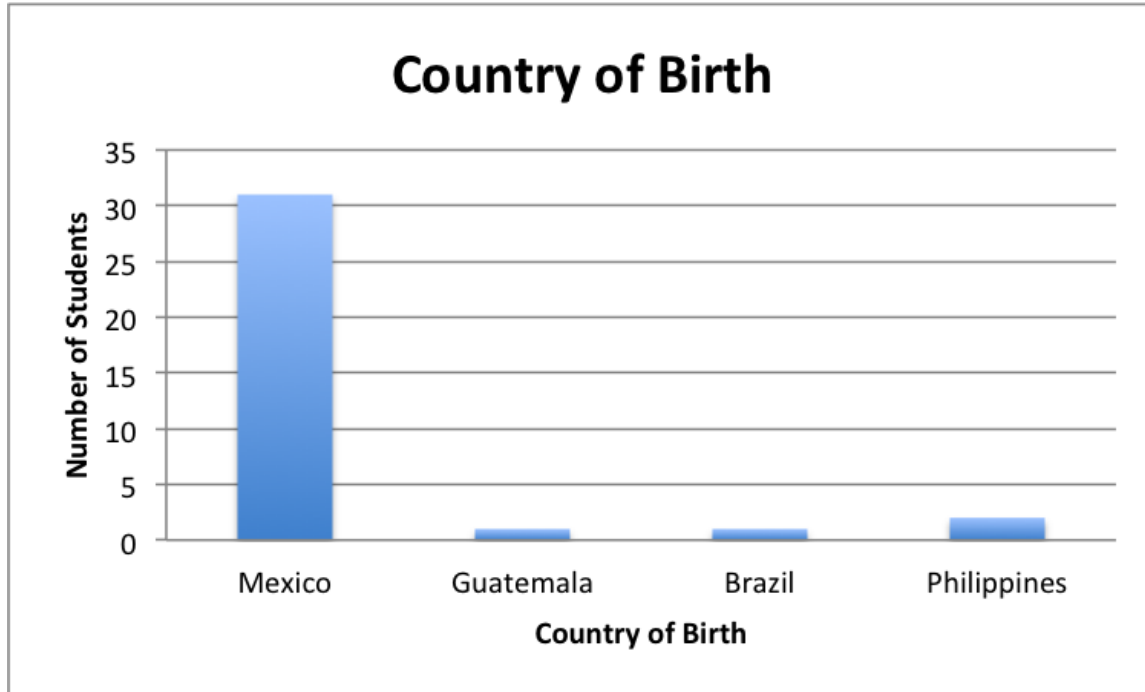


Figure 1. 31 participants were born in Mexico, 1 in Guatemala, 1 in Brazil and 2 in Philippines.

Demographic questionnaires were included in the focus groups, which allowed us to describe some of the characteristics the research participants had. Most of our participants were from low-income families. About 63 percent come from families where the total family income is less than \$25,000. In all, only 6 percent of participants come from families whose family income is over \$50,000. In contrast, the median family income for a four-person family in California in 2013 is \$75,656 (Figure 2). Most of the families of the undocumented students make an average of \$25,000 and with that they must sustain their own home and try to help with college expenses. Taking into consideration that many of these are low-income students, this data shows that they cannot easily fund their education. Undocumented students have less access to the grants, loans, and scholarships provided for other documented low-income students.

Therefore, having easier access to services and help that is centered on the undocumented status can help in reducing the success gap.

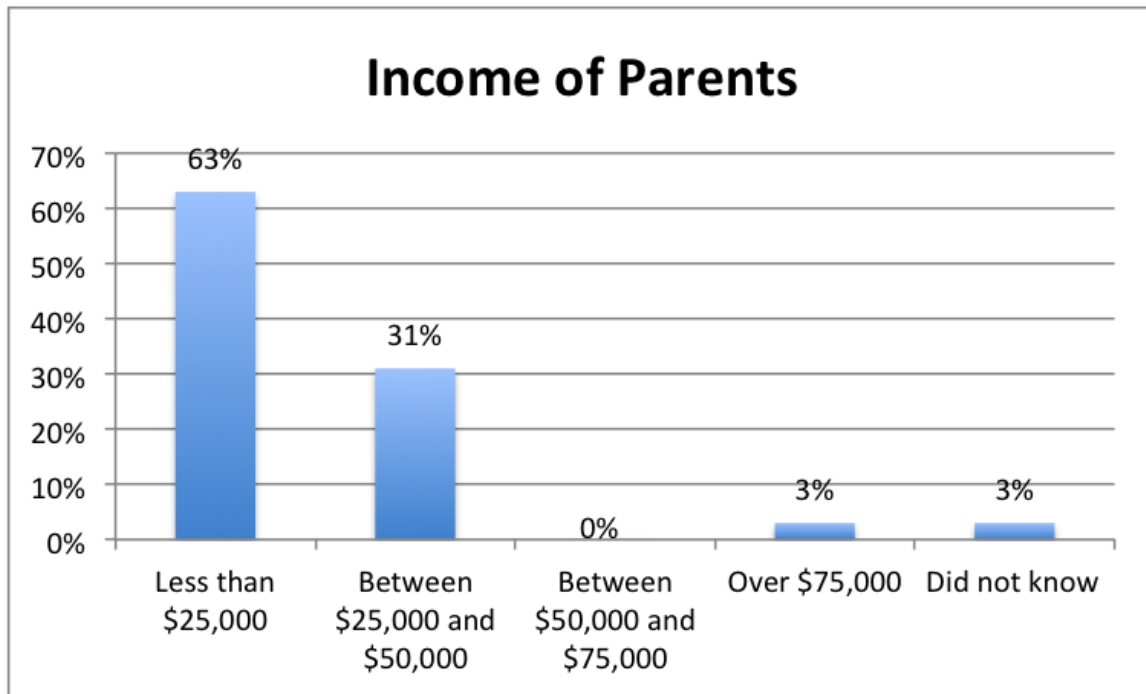


Figure 2. 63% of participants' parents' income is less than \$25,000 a year. 31% of participants' parents' income is between \$25,000 and \$50,000. 3% of participants' parents' income is over \$75,000.

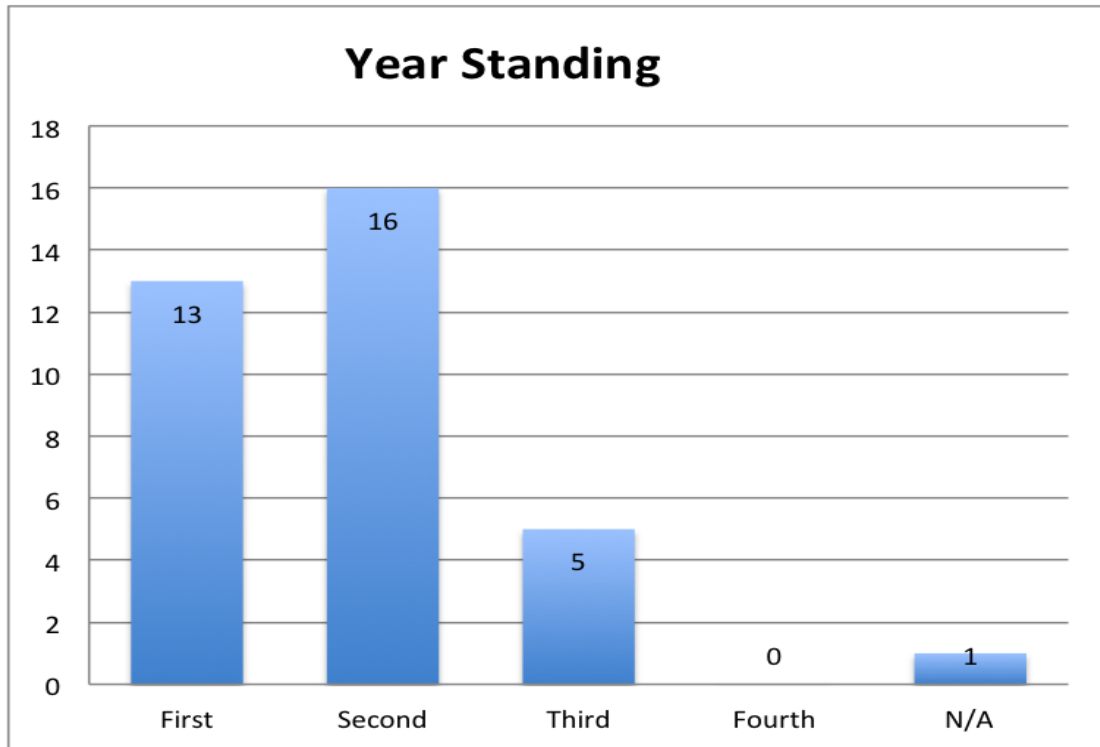


Figure 3. We had a total of 35 participants. 13 were first year, 16 were second years, 5 were third year and 1 was not available.

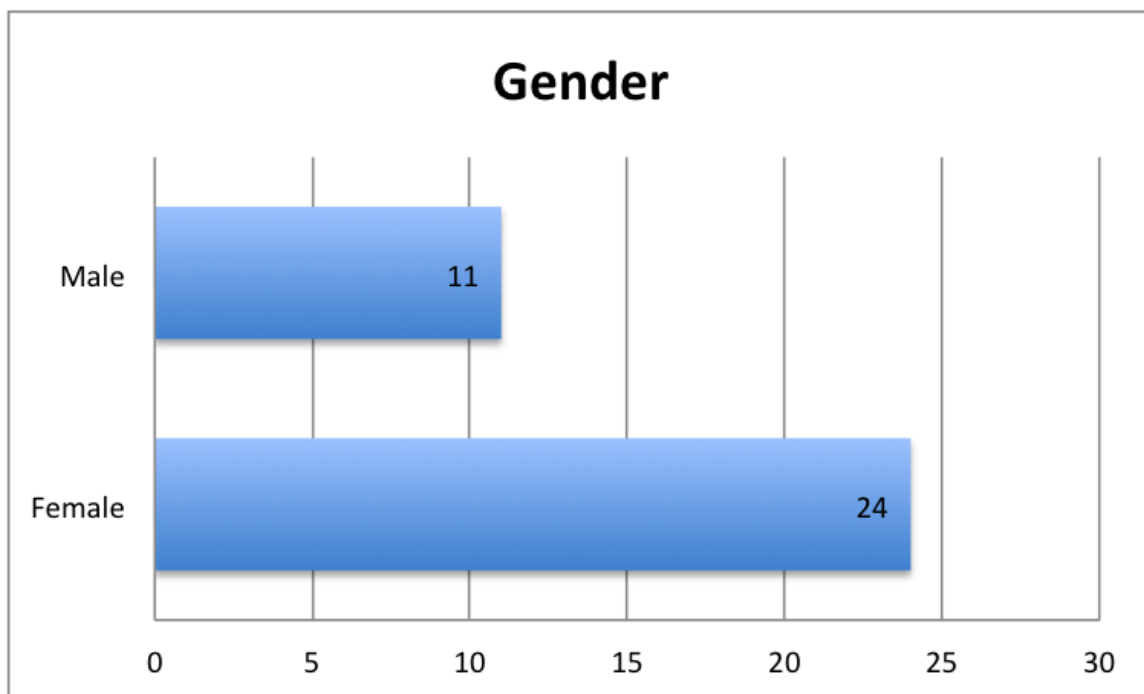


Figure 4. Out of our 35 participants 24 were females and 11 males.

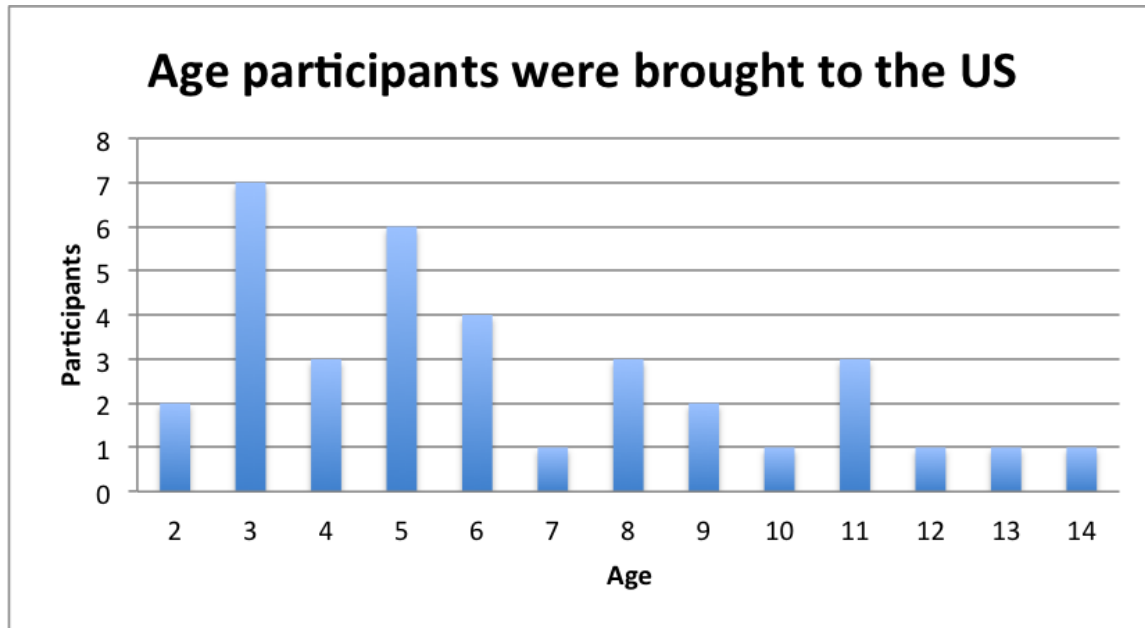


Figure 5. The majority of our participants were brought to the US between the ages of 2-8.

Summary of Legal Terms and Policies

There are several local, state and federal policies, which apply to undocumented students.

The California Dream Act is composed of two bills - AB 130 and AB 131. This Act allows qualified undocumented students to apply for state and private financial aid.

President Barack Obama announced deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) as an executive order on June 2012. It is a policy that allows undocumented immigrants that qualify to obtain a two-year work permit while also being exempt from deportation through the expiration date. The price to apply is \$465.

AB 540 allows students that qualify to apply for in-state tuition. In 2014, AB 2000 was passed and is an expansion of AB 540 allowing more students to pay in state tuition.

AB 60 Allows applicants who are unable to submit satisfactory proof of legal presence in the US get driver's licenses in California.\

SB 1210, also known as the Dream loan, allows undocumented students to get loans. Currently the UC System has this on hold due to the lack of funding.

On Feb. 2 2015, a UC policy was implemented in which the UC would give in-state tuition to whoever is a recipient of DACA and doesn't qualify for AB 540.

Findings

- A. *Alejandro Delgadillo the associate director of the Calvin E. Bright Success Center and Diana Valdivia the Fiat Lux and Undocumented Counselor are current resources students have.*

Our findings reveal that the main resource the undocumented students at the University of California Merced have is Alejandro Delgadillo the associate director of the Calvin E. Bright Success Center and Diana Valdivia the Fiat Lux and Undocumented Counselor. With them, the students find a sense of strength because there is someone who encourages them to keep on moving forward, who has created a sense of community before they even began college and demonstrated that the barriers and opportunities they face as life proceeds is what made them the strong individual they are today. It is true that these students live in fear, for not knowing what can become of them tomorrow, but today they talk about what they want to see in the present, to be the change and break the barriers for those who come after them, because no longer do they want the lack of language to keep them from pursuing the American Dream.

The focus groups allowed us to develop an understanding of the challenges undocumented students face. The first question we addressed was: "How would a resource center benefit undocumented student?" We are able to perceive that students at times need guidance when filling out paperwork and obtaining resources to match their case. They also need help

applying for the Dream Act, so they can receive financial aid, or to apply/re-apply for DACA. Most students seek DACA assistance in order to obtain a social security number and be able to apply for employment to get their driver license. Alejandro and Diana have assisted a lot of students when it comes to documentation; they have also been helpful in directing students to the different resources that the campus provides. Aid such that the organization Students Advocating Law and Education provide to help students find undocumented students with similar background, and feel more accustomed to college their first year. Alejandro and Diana's office also helps students get scholarships, assistant position and leaderships programs to help them throughout their academic year. Students enjoy coming to their office because they feel they can express themselves and seek help in a safe environment. The only concern most students held is that when they want to talk about a private matter, they feel restricted. The office is small, the walls are thin their conversations are no longer private as they are easily overheard by others who step foot into the door.

The office is not just documentation based, as students may be able to receive emergency funds to help pay bills, groceries and rent for money becomes crucial and the lack of funds they receive already is minimal. Undocumented students are in the need of a place where they can receive assistance. The justification of how important Alejandro and Diana are to the undocumented population at the University of Merced takes place not only resource based, but also the students found a friend in their time of need. Support is expressed when the students share their stories in the focus groups. Take for example Ivette from focus group two who clarifies that Alejandro and Diana helped her assimilate to college by creating a sense of guidance and making her feel less scared.

“When I came to visit the school we would walk and we were lost and [Alex] was there and [he] just started telling us all these possibilities and that was really enlightening. Then he referred us to Diana and I talked to Diana, that’s when she told me how much financial aid I could get.”

- Ivette (Focus Group 2)

The resource center will help Alejandro and Diana by providing them an office where students will have a private safe zone to express their needs and issues, where they will not be afraid or ashamed by sharing their legal status and fearing that their personal stories may be overheard. As it becomes two very different things when people hear your story, connect a face to the issue, and know what personal aspects you are going through. Students would be able to express themselves in a safe environment and create a family tie with other undocumented students and allies. For in the end the center is to bring a sense of protection, where students can feel safe and know that they will not be judged for the title they are deemed to carry as Michelle from focus group two explained:

“I’m like traumatized by my family basically [because] they’re like don’t ever tell anyone, you’re [going to] get in so much trouble! And I’m just like okay, I just always kept it to myself and I guess like growing up it kind of depressed me,[because] it was just like no one to talk to. Recently someone I know just told me they were [undocumented] and we’re all crying we’re like oh my gosh me too, I know how you feel”

– Michelle (Focus Group 2)

Students are in search of a home away from their home because sometimes they are not understood by society. By having a support system undocumented students can find the strength necessary to not give up and keep on studying. These students had to keep to themselves their status while growing up. They often felt as if their status was something to be ashamed of.

However, this small office run by Alejandro and Diana made the students feel stronger because they are learning that being different is nothing to fear. They too have the opportunities others hold, the only difference they have to try harder to obtain them. Undocumented students at times show signs of depression, when they feel they are alone but when they knew there were other students like them they started to worry less about their status. At times four walls and a door might not seem like a big difference, but continue to add the aspects of a guide, a friend and resources then it becomes the safe environment students are looking for in the multicultural building; that one day the students of the University of California Merced hope is ran by Alejandro and Diana: two of their biggest supporters in resources during their college experience.

B. Barriers & Opportunities

Even though there are many resources that have been created specifically for undocumented students, the problem is not completely solved. Most of these students come from low-income families; they are first generation college students and must learn the process for applying to college on their own. They are to take charge, find scholarships and resources that are to benefit their unique case as no two students are in the same situation. This led the researchers to understand the second sub-topic of the question, “How would a multicultural building benefit undocumented students” as an understanding of the barriers and the resources the undocumented population has faced upon entering the University of California Merced is foreseen. The students on campus have seen an increase in their financial aid, but they are still worried because their resources may be taken away by immigration policies. Students feel vulnerable of the fact that the system has their private information and the ability to find them if ever necessary, as they are DACA recipients. Sonia states,

“So it’s just a fear of, we can pay all this money and we can say we are secure for two years but once the two years are done and we can’t have the money again

. Because that was a huge problem with me this year that I had to re-apply.” – Sonia (Focus Group 1)

Daniel states that he had financial aid problems. Although most undocumented students are now able to get some type of financial aid this aid is often not enough and they struggle as mentioned in focus group 1,

“I personally think it is getting better because there’s so many resources here on campus they offer us, whether it’s financial aid or information about DACA. I think another struggle that I see is with the recent tuition [hike] so our tuition increases on us. We do not get federal loans, we have to figure how we are going to pay that money, so I think that’s one of the struggles.”

– Daniel (Focus Group 3)

Even though students see a change in their financial aid they still fear these opportunities may be taken away. Most students decide to attend the University of California Merced due to the financial aid offered. Just by living in California students feel a little safer due to the many opportunities the state offers. With new laws it gives the students hope to consider attending college and affording it. As opportunities like this arise more and more undocumented students are attending colleges and universities.

C. Community on campus

Sometimes undocumented students are lost on campus and do not know where to reach out for help by having a resource center they will have somewhere to receive guidance. The population at University of California, Merced will be able to be part of this center and will have access to information on undocumented students. There are times where students might want to have more

information on immigration but do not know where to go to access this information. Undocumented students in our research noticed that students do not know where to go,

“I think that when students have a question in regards to undocumented as a community, questions [about] immigration, we tend to be little ants roaming everywhere. So I think by having a center, let’s say we have a building that represents, we can go there and you’ll ask something and they’ll find it for you... I’ve never felt mistreated here. I never felt different here and that’s why I’m saying it makes some[one] feel really comfortable, comfortable.”

– Sonia (Focus Group 1)

Students can be going around trying to find the resources and not get the information they need. Sometimes staff is not educated on the issues or laws that affect undocumented so this makes students pursue other sources that might not give them the accurate information. The environment of the University provides the students with a sense of security within the campus, but the center would create more awareness on how to support undocumented students. This center will help create unity within the campus, because it will show that the university is a strong ally to undocumented students.

The resource center can also be a place where future students receive help. High school undocumented students might not have somewhere to find information on how to attend college. The reason is because some professionals are not aware of the resources available for undocumented student,

“I know that there are still some students and counselors out there that are not educated about DACA and the Dream Act so it would be helpful if [a] resource center could help other regions.”

– Joaquin (Focus Group 1)

The center could educate students and counselors on how undocumented students could get a higher education. There are some students that do not consider applying to the University of California, Merced because they are not aware of what the university has to offer. If we had a resource center students would be able to ask for assistance as well as acquire resources that would help their transition into college. This means that students can find support within their peers as their experiences may be shared, and emotional support beheld. The resource center could be also helpful for seniors in High Schools as they may receive help filling out paperwork to enter college and get educated on what resources are available to them. Some students mentioned that their high school counselors were not aware of the resources that are available for undocumented students so they had to do their own research. Once they did their research they consider applying for the schools that showed more information on undocumented students. If the University of California Merced were to have this type of assistance, new incoming freshman will be more open and uncomfortable to enroll at the campus.

Undocumented students do not only have the stress of learning how to be a first generation students but they also worry that something wrong could happen with the law. As children, there are not many differences that are visible but once they start growing up (i.e. applying to jobs, college, driver's licenses) they see the differences. At first, some students don't see the differences between the resources for undocumented and documented students so they expect to have the same opportunities. For example Sara from focus group 5 mentions,

“Well I was like what’s FAFSA, what is the Dream Act, well what’s the difference? And that is when the division started to happen. Oh, okay. Maybe I am not the same as my classmates.”

– Sara (Focus Group 5)

Sara realizes the different things she must apply for but is also confused because there is no clear reason why since before she was the same as any other student. Meanwhile there are some undocumented students who have better resources when applying for college. For example, Sara from focus group 4 was aided with the Advanced Via Individual Determination (AVID) program she states,

“I was in the AVID program and my school is very open to helping AB540 students and undocumented students. It was easy to apply and get the information that I needed. I feel like my school in general really helped me with the process.”

– Sara (Focus Group 4)

By having programs that prepare students for higher education, help them to boost their knowledge in applying to college because they can serve as a guide. Based on the findings not all students had the same opportunities of having resources available or someone to help them. Some students would also get confused because they were unsure if they were residents or not since they have lived in this country all their lives. Most undocumented students are also first generations so they must seek information on their own.

E. Fear

The last questions that came up in our research is “How do current immigration events affect undocumented students?” Undocumented Students do not only need to keep up with their studies but with current event on immigration issues. There are many new laws and debates happening

about immigration that they need to be aware of because this affects them and their families. Fear was one of the most common emotions students expressed when asked about how they felt about current immigration policies. There are some undocumented students that fear being deported since the government has all their information gained through college applications, financial aid, and other forms. Because of their legal status they feel treated and viewed as prisoners. Students that qualified and applied for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) have to renew it every 2 years and make sure they have not violated any policies. This makes them feel threatened because they need to gather all of their information again to get the 2-year pass.

“It’s kind of like the knowledge of being a prisoner and having to check back to your parole or something that [is] just very frightening.”

– Joaquin (Focus Group 1)

Most students have their parents as primary providers of the family so the fear of having them be deported is unbearable as expressed by Sonia from focus group 5,

“My dad he’s the one who works and he’s our provider so if anything would happen I don’t think I can picture myself without my dad, our family wouldn’t function. It’s that fear like what if one day I go back home and [my] dad is not here.”

– Sonia (Focus Group 5)

While these students try to study they do not only have in their minds assignments or exams, but their families that are at their homes. Many students share the similar experience of fear that when they get home their parents or family might not be there. This makes the students stress more about school, and motivate others to do better. The major reason these students go to

college is because they want to make their families proud and if something happens they at least have something to rely on.

These students are not only scared of deportation but of what would happen if any of their documentation is taken away, like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival. Students in our research share the fear of continuing with their education because they are not sure if by the time they graduate they are going to be able to work with their degree. In our study of the 35 students, some do not qualify for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals as demonstrated in Figure 6, so their biggest fear is what is going to happen after they graduate from college. These conflicts can discourage students from continuing education that sometimes makes students drop out or be dismissed from school due to the lack of support they receive.

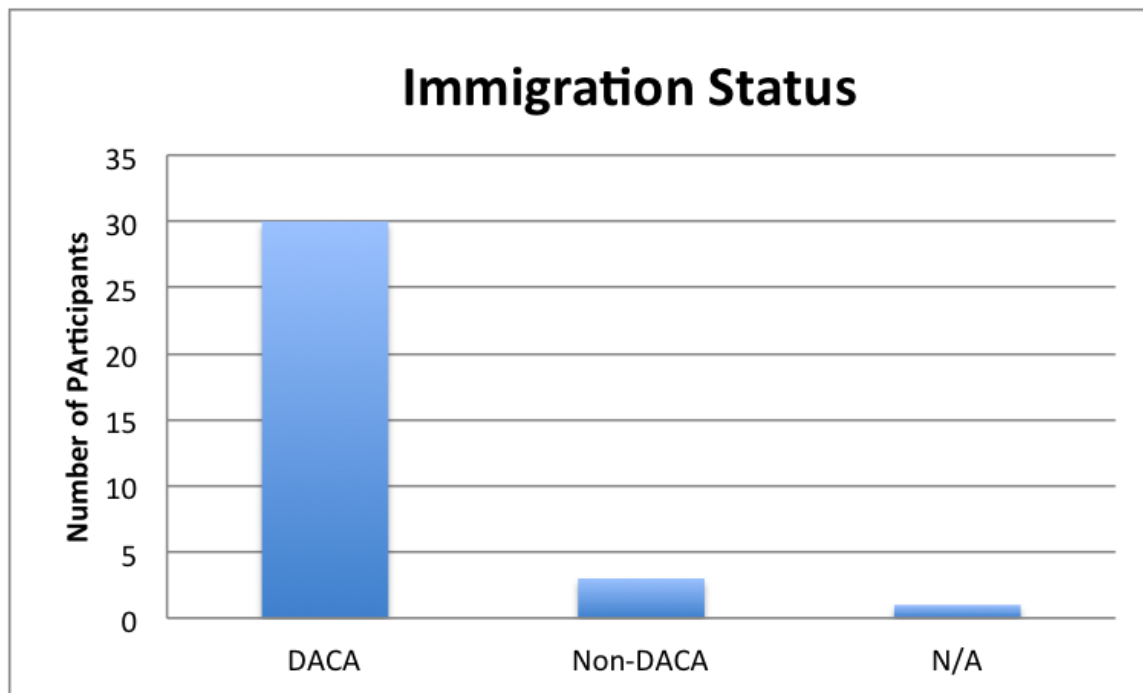


Figure 6. As seen in the table above, 30 of the 35 participants qualified for DACA.

Conclusion

As the students expressed their needs by sharing their stories and experiences, a common resource most students mentioned that would benefit them was a resource center focusing on helping the undocumented population. This center, if created, would assimilate the resources students have spoken about and shown interest in having. Legal services would provide students with the most up to date information on immigration issues while also helping with legal advising or recommendation to certain lawyers to help with immigration issues. The center would serve as an undocumented student safe zone, it would be created for all the undocumented population in order for them to interact with other students with similar issues, that would allow for them to share stories and even create possible friends and networks. This will allow students to see that they are not alone in their struggle, and they would have a space specifically for them. In the center the students would be able to get financial assistance and support. This would be readily available to them by aiding incoming and current students in filling out the CA Dream Act, scholarships, and other documentation, while also maintaining emergency funds for the students in dire need. Via the center internship and job opportunities can be created for students who do not qualify for DACA and can be paid with either honorariums or stipends. The entire staff in the center would consist of specialists on undocumented related issues and would help any student with the questions or problems they have. Through the center, certain educational resources would be created in the form of workshops, trainings such as undocu-ally for the UC staff, and others. The center would have a great impact on the campus and help educate others on undocumented related issues and in turn this would create unity throughout the entire campus.

Throughout the study we realized that all undocumented students have different experiences; none of them are the same, though they may seem similar at times. These students seek to overcome the barriers placed in front of them and their background plays a crucial part

on who they are now in comparison to the struggles they have faced in their past. This creates a sense of always aspiring to succeed. Although opportunities exist, the students dwell on the fear of deportation and the possibility of being separated from their families. Current immigration policies do not provide a permanent solution, while the students and their families are forced to face emotional burdens all due to a broken immigration system. If a multicultural center were to be created the fear implemented in the students would start to decrease, as the support found within their peers would support the triumph to never give up. Undocumented students would understand that they are not the only ones who hide in the shadows of society, who live in fear that their loved ones may be deported and their life would turn upside down. Fear is a constant aspect that lives in the mind of the unexplainable, for the students have become mentally confined to the barriers created by a Nation that states: living in the United States without proper documentation is but a crime. At times fear must be taught to be controlled, resources that could be found in the community where the multicultural center is found. Advocates and specialists would be there to help through emotional support as well as academic structures to help the student succeed in their career. This same problem is also visible in larger campuses such as the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). The scholarly project: *In the Shadows of the Ivory Tower: Undocumented Undergraduate and the Liminal State of Immigration Reform* presented similar issues in Los Angeles and that of Merced. Students live in fear of deportation, they struggle to succeed academically, as the current events are constantly changing. After reading the article the research team at UCM was able to construct the topics and questions that would be used to express the difficulties students face as they enter college.

The results concluded at UCM, became relevant that education and empowerment in the barriers they have faced throughout their lifetime is what created their strength, to be the people

who they are today. To learn that the obstacles of learning a second language was only an obstacle, for life continued and now the students can proudly say they are obtaining a higher education. The multicultural center would allow for staff like Alejandro Delgadillo and Diana Valdivia to have an office. This office would be private and allow the students to feel secure and safe. When students need help or guidance they would be able to identify a “safe” spot. The multicultural would have a section where students can receive financial assistance or help to fill out documentation. This would help the student’s feel safer when filling or sharing information confidently. Also a resource center will secure that undocumented friendly staff to continue assisting future undocumented students. More students seek universities where they feel there are people that understand them, and this office will be able to provide that feeling. We realized that these current immigration issues have empowered many undocumented students to stand up for what they believe in and fight for their rights, as the multicultural center would provide the resources the students seek.

Appendix

Focus Group Guiding Questions

This were the questions and demographic questionnaire that were used during each focus group, in order to understand the struggles of the students.

General Questions

What were your experiences in your first school in the United States like?

What made your transition to the United States easier or more difficult?

Why did you decide to attend UC Merced?

How did you go about choosing a school?

Who helped to answer your questions about enrolling in UC Merced as an undocumented student?

Questions about UC Merced

What has your experience at UC Merced been so far? (**Probe: school, cost of living, people/community, services resources, campus life**)

What would you be doing if you didn't attend UC Merced? Do you believe you would be better or worse off?

Anti-Immigrant Sentiment Questions

Some people say that it is getting better for undocumented students who live in California, while some argue the opposite. What do you think?

Have you noticed any changes in people's attitudes towards undocumented students at UC Merced?

Have you noticed any differences in how people treat undocumented students in California since you got here?

Do you think undocumented students are treated differently than other students? Why? **(Probe for reasons why: language or accent, skin color, because you look different or dress different?)**

Have you ever felt you were treated differently because you are an undocumented student? **(Probe for where treatment occurred and examples of what type of treatment they experienced: at work, at school, when looking for work, housing, by law enforcement?)**

How do professors at UC Merced treat undocumented students?

How do students at UC Merced treat their undocumented peers?

How do staff at UC Merced treat undocumented students?

Although it can be hard to deal with poor treatment or discrimination because of who you are or where you came from, some people think that there are many opportunities at UC Merced for undocumented students. Do you think there are good opportunities at UC Merced? **(Probe: For themselves, their children's future, in work, school.)**

Opportunities:

Do you think that students that are U.S. citizens/ residents with and students without papers (documentation) have different opportunities here in the U.S.? If so, in what ways?

Some students think that students without legal documentation will have different experiences compared to students with legal documentation. Do you agree? If so, describe some potential experiences that may be different. **[if needed say in getting a job, or making money, or going to school, or staying in the country, probe for experiences of friend or family members...]**

Success at UC Merced:

Can you share with us your understanding of the goals and objectives of student organizations that advocate for undocumented students' rights to access higher education?

What is your understanding of the recent University of California's initiatives to assist undocumented students?

What do you perceive as obstacles undocumented students face at UC Merced?

Are there any on-campus groups that have been helpful to you as undocumented students?

What attributes would you identify as specific to undocumented students?

Do you have any suggestions for information or opportunities that you think would be helpful for undocumented students to thrive at UC Merced?

Other campuses throughout the state have obtained a resource center for undocumented students. Would you feel that a resource center at UC Merced would be beneficial?

If you knew that other UC campuses had a resource center, would this have affected your decision of attending UC Merced? Why?

Changing Legal Status:

Has anyone in your family recently changed their legal status (for example, become a legal permanent resident or naturalized citizen)? What was the reason for doing so? Was the process itself difficult?

In June 2012, President Obama signed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals directive (DACA), which would allow students, who qualify, to obtain a 2-year work permit. Has someone in your family or yourself applied for or is thinking of applying for DACA? Why or why not? What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of applying for DACA? Many children without legal documentation, or with parents/legal guardians who are undocumented, succeed in school and achieve higher education. What do you think has helped these children succeed? (**Probe: Parents, good teachers, etc.**)

Immigration Reform

Lately, the government seems to be interested in undocumented students who come to the U.S. illegally. Some government officials are working on policies that are making it easier for undocumented students to work or to attend school. Other policies seem to be unfavorable to undocumented students, by deporting or detaining undocumented students and treating them unfairly. What do you think of these current debates around immigration policy?

The government has made some proposals to help undocumented students and non-students remain in the country. Some people think the government has gone too far, some people think it hasn't gone far enough. What would you like to see the government propose for undocumented people in the United States? (Probe: daca, work visa, amnesty, etc.)

What do you think about proposals to increase border enforcement through increasing border patrol agents and expanding the border wall?

Do you think undocumented students who have lived in the U.S. for longer periods of time have different views from newly arrived undocumented students?

Are there any questions we should have asked but haven't asked so far with regard to the experiences of undocumented students at UC Merced?

Do you all have any questions for us?

FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARTICIPANTS:

Pseudonym chosen: _____

Age: _____

City of permanent residence: _____

Please state the year and semester that you began as a student at UC Merced (e.g. Fall 2012)

Please state your current status at UC Merced (e.g. junior, senior) _____

What year did you arrive to the United States? _____

How old were you? _____

What grade were you in? _____

What is your immigration status?

a) I was undocumented but currently have DACA

b) I am undocumented and do not currently have DACA

c) Other: Explain: _____

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