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Social Capital and the Undocumented Student Pipeline

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in

Sociology

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Social Capital and the Undocumented Student Pipeline

by

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This study builds on previous work on undocumented students’ experiences in the Kindergarten to High School institutions. I use data from five focus groups with a total of thirty-five undocumented college students attending Central Valley University, in California. I find that undocumented students who matriculated to college had involved parents who deployed resources to help their children’s academic success. I also find that undocumented students use their peers and administrators in high schools to help them attain necessary information, preparation, and funding for college. Contrary to previous research on undocumented youth, my findings suggest students could do this because of their willingness to come out to their schools’ school agents and with help of parental involvement and parents’ social networks. I argue that this starts from supportive California laws that offer tools that trickle down to high school undocumented students. This support leads to a more comfortable level of trust for undocumented parents to advocate for their children, and for students to effectively use their social capital. Finally, the links established between university staff and undocumented high school students through outreach, created a crucial informational pipeline for college matriculation.
INTRODUCTION

Undocumented youth graduation rates are scarce as schools do not keep track of who is undocumented at their schools. However, there are some estimates that state 122,600 undocumented high school seniors graduate from high school every year (ThinkProgress, 2015). This number is significantly lower compared to the 3.1 million students who graduated from high school in 2015 (NCES, 2017). ThinkProgress (2015) also estimates that only about 31,850 of those undocumented youth actually go on to college. This, compared to the 2.1 million high school graduates, that enrolled in a college or university in 2015 (NCES, 2017). The number of undocumented students that are to persist and graduate is even more miniscule as it’s estimated to be less than 2,000 per year (ThinkProgress, 2015). Compare that to the 1.89 million college students that received a bachelors in 2014-2015 from a public or private university (NCES, September 2016). With such low numbers there is still a need to look into the unique struggles of this student population and how we can get them to college and beyond.

Researchers have started looking into the barriers by looking at struggles on college campuses. Perez-Huber & Malagon (2007), for example, looked at Latinx undocumented college students and their unique struggles with various identities and the overall campus climate toward undocumented Latinx students. Gonzales (2011) has also looked at undocumented students’ transition into adulthood. He showed some of the grim realities of young undocumented youth as their status takes a stronger toll on their lives and they must learn to cope in this eventual exclusionary world (Gonzales, 2011). Clark-Ibañez (2015) has looked into the thoughts and everyday experiences of undocumented children as they share their own perspectives. She shows that children are well aware of the issues of their families are facing, through games, pictures, language, stress, and their own eyes they too experience the fear of deportation (Clark-Ibañez, 2015).

Suarez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco (2011) have also shown that children of undocumented parents have a harder time with developing skills necessary to do well in educational institutions, including at-risk for underperforming, dropping out, and lacking language and cognitive skills. They also add that even U.S.-born children of undocumented parents are likely to face similar hardships throughout their lifetime, but especially as they are younger (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2011). Yoshikawa (2011) also explains the negative effects having an undocumented parent brings. He explains, one reason children of undocumented parents struggle, are due to their undocumented parents staying away from any governmental help and benefits (Yoshikawa, 2011). These issues also extend to immigrant parents’ participation in school activities. As undocumented parents feel it can be risky to participate, and thus, they’d rather stay away (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2011). Capps, McCabe, and Fix (2012) add that immigrant families face economic hardships that impact their classroom preparedness, by making it difficult to pay for school supplies and out-of-school learning programs.

Undocumented students, however, have also shown to be resilient when it comes to higher education. Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado & Cortes (2009), for example, showed undocumented students with all the risks of their status, were still able to show
academic resilience due to a protective environment, but only if, they had that protection. If not, Perez et. al, (2009) explained the weight of all the risks associated with lacking status would drop their level of academic resilience. Abrego (2008) also showed that despite the hurdles of attending college as an undocumented student, some positives emerged, such as the increase in civic engagement and relieving the stigma commonly associated with being undocumented. There has been less research specifically looking at undocumented students and how they use and gather social capital to prepare for college enrollment. The alarmingly low percentage of undocumented students that receive their college degree is especially important for California, where 25% of the undocumented immigrants in the country live, and who make up 6.8% of the state (E4FC, 1/2012).

I draw on the literature of social capital and its importance to student educational success. Then, I review the literature of parental involvement and its impact on poor, working class, and immigrant students. I also look at the limited studies of undocumented students and how they analyze social capital. Next, I provide background on state laws that lay the foundation for the context of California and its undocumented population. Finally, I draw on focus groups conducted at Central Valley University to address three questions: 1) How do California laws impact undocumented students coming out, and their use of social capital? 2) Under what contexts are parents of undocumented students more able to utilize their social capital? 3) What role does university outreach play for getting undocumented students into college? This article analyzes how a relatively high-achieving group of undocumented students used their social capital to successfully navigate their K-12 education and, ultimately, enter higher education. I suggest that undocumented students’ willingness to come out increases to school officials benefits them more now than in the past. Finally, I show that support from California policies and state laws have created a foundation for universities and high schools. These laws makes it possible for universities to provide key outreach efforts and start a resource-rich relationship between undocumented high school students and university staff.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital has been used to connect social status to social mobility, or lack thereof, in society (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu believed in the power of relationships, especially how elites use them to reproduce inequality. He added that it isn’t just about having networks, it’s about how big and how influential these relationships are economically, culturally, and socially (Bourdieu, 1986). Education researchers have argued that social capital is even more so important within the school system. Coleman (1988) introduced social capital as the reciprocity, norms, and trust that are created from developing these relationships with others. Coleman did not see social capital exclusive to elites as Bourdieu did. Since social capital comes from economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), it is especially hard for families in the lower classes to have, accumulate, and effectively use social capital.

Perna & Titus (2005) added that Black and Latinx students, especially, have little-to-no capital at their schools that encourages them to matriculate into college. At the same time, sociologists have noted the barriers poor families encounter with the school system. Specifically, they find that building positive networks and relationships between
poor families and educational institutions is very difficult (Lareau, 2003). Moreover, Latinx students must still bear the negative stereotype for lacking academic ability, being placed in lower academic tracks, and treated less important than other racial/ethnic students in their schools (Ochoa, 2013). There are positive examples of social capital for underprivileged students, however. Stanton-Salazar (2001), for example, found that school officials that were the most helpful to Latinx students, supported them more in a parenting role within the school. School counselors, teachers, and coaches that did this, were also able to show students how to effectively use their own social capital as a form of power (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

We can see there are benefits to having and fostering positive networks and relationships between students and schools. Coleman (1988) also emphasizes the importance of parents having bonds between with their children. He emphasizes that without this connection in the family, the influence the parents’ social capital is limited and may not even be passed down (Coleman 1988). Parental involvement, is thus, also seen as a crucial part in a student maneuvering through their schools’ system using their families ever-expanding social capital.

**PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

Parental involvement is important for social capital, but there is a class difference; Lareau (2003) showed this when she noted that middle and upper-class parents were more active participants in their children’s education and school success. Poor and working-class parents are not so lucky and tend to lack the networks and resources of wealthier and more privileged families (Lareau, 2003). Kim and Schneider (2005) specifically call parent participation in institutional programs more beneficial for their children, and even more important to poor and working-class parents, who don’t have as many options as middle and upper-middle class families do. They also explain that this action from poor parents make a positive difference and improve the likelihood of their children attending a prestigious university (Kim and Schneider, 2005).

Parental involvement can benefit at-risk students too. McNeal (1999) shows that parental involvement has a significant effect on school conduct. For example, he argues that it can, and does, lower troublesome behavior in schools. He also adds that those at-risk, benefit from parent-child discussions, and this keeps them from dropping out, and lowers the levels of truancies they receive (McNeal, 1999). Parental involvement in students’ lives and activity in their schooling outcomes, actually increases their overall grades, and the amount of time they spend on assignments (Fehrmann, Keith, & Reimers, 1987). Thus, parental involvement has continually been shown to impact student success.

Parental involvement is especially important for Black and Latinx students, as the more involved their parents are, the more likely they are to matriculate into college (Perna & Titus, 2005). However, poor, working-class, and Latinx parents are usually not involved, and there are several reasons why. Lareau (2003) also pointed to another disadvantage in poor and working-class families, that they often believe teachers can, and do, make the best decisions for their children. Similarly, Ramirez (2003), found immigrant parents believed they shouldn’t be attending schools as that is the domain of the teacher and felt uneasy at being expected to help teach their children. Moreno and
Valencia (2010) also showed that Black and Latinx parents, often believe their role in helping their students education is best restricted to their home. This perspective, is common among Latinx parents as they tend to define parental involvement more as guidance in their children’s lives instead of defining it to their involvement in school-related activities and grades (Zarate, 2007).

When Latinx families do try to participate, they often feel out-of-place (Delgado-Gaitan, 2007), but Delgado-Gaitan (2007) also found that when they do participate in their children’s academic lives, they have very positive, even empowering benefits. Lareau (2003) has noted that even though these parents do lack the same wealth of social capital as elite parents, they still do have resources to share to their children, no matter how limited they would be. Thus, parental involvement can be very impactful on the success of poor and working-class students, despite the limitations their social networks may have. It is important to note this, particularly because the group of students I researched are considered one of the most vulnerable groups in the country, the undocumented students.

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

The undocumented population, in general, have a more difficult time navigating societies rules and regulations, so it is no surprise that undocumented Latinx students find it harder within educational institutions. These students have been shown to struggle when looking at college matriculation. Abrego and Gonzales (2010) noted that undocumented students are a vulnerable population that face multiple barriers in pursuit of an education. The impact of social capital is similarly complicated as the relationships between undocumented Latinxs and schools are more strained. For example, Enriquez (2011) and Gonzales (2010) have both shown that these students have a harder time working and trusting school officials because they feel they have a negative label attached to them for being undocumented. Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch (1995) note that Latinx students were able to use their friendships with their non-Latinx, middle and upper-middle class, friends. However, they add that those with limited English language had a much harder time making non-Latinx friends and being able to use their social capital for school resources (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch (1995). Reciprocity and trust are two key components social networks need in order to use each other as social capital (Coleman, 1988). Trust is especially difficult for undocumented Latinxs to have, even with their close friends, because of the potentially devastating consequences of others knowing their status.

Gonzales (2010) explains that undocumented students are often too fearful in disclosing their status to teachers and counselors, and thus, have a more difficult time using their friends’ social capital. However, even when they were able to talk to school officials about their status, Gonzales (2015), shows that undocumented students couldn’t do much to change their educational trajectories. The limited knowledge school counselors and teachers have of helping undocumented students almost makes disclosing their status to teachers and classmates not worth the risks. These experiences are vastly different for U.S.-born students, as teachers and counselors, are where students typically get resources and college information (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Stanton-Salazar (2011)
especially notes that poor and working-class students are empowered by their interactions with these school agents. Unfortunately for undocumented students, they have a much more complicated relationship with schools and their personnel. However, there are other methods of accessing information that undocumented students have. Enríquez (2011) noted that despite the limitations in social capital undocumented students have, they can, and do, still find school information elsewhere. She explains that they especially lean on their undocumented networks to find the specific and unique resources on attending and funding college as an undocumented student that school staff do not have or know (Enríquez, 2011).

**CALIFORNIA CONTEXT**

California is a unique area to research as it is one of a handful of states with one of the most populated states with undocumented families. Even with this being true, for decades, California only just started to let students pay in-state tuition, making it one of 20 states that currently do, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL, 2015). Although not all states have concrete policies or laws related to undocumented students attending institutions of higher education in their states. Some states have gone out of their way to make it more, or even impossible, for undocumented students in their state to attend colleges in their state. For example, Arizona has made it incredibly expensive for undocumented families to afford college tuition by making them pay out-of-state tuition, one of six states that have similar state laws (NCSL, 2015). Even more extreme, is states like Georgia that just outright ban undocumented students from attending all or most of their four-year institutions (NCSL, 2015).

If it wasn’t for the decision in *Plyler v. Doe* in 1982, states may be trying to ban undocumented students from any educational institution, altogether. The Supreme Court ruled that children have a right to an education from kindergarten to twelfth grade, regardless of whether they are undocumented or not (American Immigration Council, 10/24/2016). This is obviously a very crucial decision as it allows any child in the U.S. a right to an education, however, the Supreme Court did not extend this right to students seeking a college education. Opening up states to pass discriminatory, or inclusive laws on their own. Not even California has always been as open to undocumented students attending higher education. Until 1986, California required proof of citizenship or permanent residency to pay in-state tuition and receive financial aid in any of their public higher education institutions. This changed in 1986, with the decision of *Leticia v. the UC Regents and CSU Board of Trustees*, that made it possible for students to both pay for in-state tuition and receive financial aid without having to prove they were citizens or permanent residents (JUSTIA, 1995). This victory for undocumented California students was short-lived, however, as the decision of *Bradford v. the UC Regents* would reverse the Leticia A. impact in 1991 (JUSTIA, 1990).

The pro-immigrant California we, currently know, started to take shape when in 2001, California passed Assembly Bill 540, which once again let undocumented students pay in-state tuition, however, this did not include access to financial aid (UCOP). It would be a decade later, in 2011, that California would allow undocumented students the
chance to receive state financial aid through Assembly Bill’s 130 and 131 (E4FC, 4/30/2015). This bill was restricted to state financial aid due to a federal bill signed in 1996, called the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. This bill disqualified undocumented people from any federal or state benefits around the country, including federal financial aid for college (USCIS, 8/26/1997). Assembly Bill 130, also allowed undocumented students to receive private scholarships (E4FC, 2015). President Obama also directed Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which deferred undocumented youth that qualified from being deported and gave them a work-permit that would be renewable every two years (USCIS, 2/14/2018). However, this order is at risk of being repealed by any future Presidents, especially the most recently elected President.

This study seeks to contribute to this growing area of research in three ways: First, by providing links between the California laws and their impact on school social capital; previous work was conducted before the Assembly Bill’s 130 and 131 had been passed and implemented (Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2015) and my analysis is of students who were currently benefitting from it. The sample of students were graduating high school when these two laws were being implemented. Thus, we can see how these laws forthcoming impacted them and their gathering of social capital for college. Secondly, I look at whether undocumented parents were involved with their children’s educational institutions. I look at identifying parental involvement within the undocumented community and the role they play in their undocumented children’s educational careers, despite their distrust and fears of educational institutions. Third, to contrast previous work that traditional school agents are, relatively, unable to help undocumented students (Gonzales, 2010) and that they, instead, rely on help from other, relatively unknown, undocumented students (Enriquez, 2011). I look to expand on this research by assessing how traditional social agents interact with undocumented students, more recently, and with additional positive California laws. There is certainly a connection between trust and coming out for undocumented youth, and that can either hurt or help their chances of gaining resources. Williams (2016) explained undocumented peoples’ experiences are more negative than positive when coming out to their friends and coworkers, but more surprisingly, with their romantic partners. So, it is no surprise that they are reluctant to come out to their high school counselors, teachers, staff (Gonzales, 2010), or are terribly misinformed when they did (Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2015). I specifically look at how undocumented students’ reliance on trust for coming out plays out in today’s more inclusive California laws and university outreach. Trust with counselors becomes key when undocumented students weigh the risk of being embarrassed by staff, or receiving resources from them instead (Gonzales, 2015).

This study also uniquely looks at the connection between California laws, university policies, and high schools. In doing so, I can provide a broader understanding of how universities in California give resources to high school undocumented students. For this reason, I present three questions: 1) How do the combination of California policies impact undocumented students coming out, and their use of social capital? 2) In what ways are undocumented parents active in their parental involvement? 3) What role
does university outreach play for helping undocumented students gain college enrollment?

**DATA AND METHODS**

I draw on focus group data conducted at a university in the Central Valley of California. CVU has very non-traditional demographics in ethnicity: Among undergraduates, Hispanic students are the majority, followed by Asian/Pacific Islander second, and whites third, and African-Americans and Native Americans are the last two racial groups. Central Valley University also holds the Hispanic Serving Institute designation. The top three geographic areas from which undergraduate students originate from are the San Joaquin Valley, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Southern California. CVU also has the most first-generation students, whose parents don’t have a four-year degree, in their system-wide educational institutions, and more than half are Pell grant eligible.

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, starting with networks with ties to undocumented students, who then asked to recommend participants for focus groups. The student participants in this study were actively involved with the undocumented student organization on campus and drew from those networks to find students. Each focus group had between five and seven participants and lasted between one to two hours. The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and used a software called HyperResearch to analyze the transcripts for emerging themes. All the students’ names were replaced by pre-selected pseudonyms. The focus groups were conducted in Fall 2014. Thirty-five undocumented college students in total participated in the focus groups. In the sample, there were eleven males and twenty-four female students. Students came from a variety of countries, including: Brazil (1), Guatemala (1), and the Philippines (2), but the overwhelming majority of the participants were of Mexican origin (31).

The sample of students came to the U.S. at varying ages; however, most respondents arrived in the US at an early age. 12 came between the ages of two and four. Another 11 came at the ages of five to seven years old. A smaller minority came as preteen and early teenagers. Six of them came between the ages eight and 10, and the remaining six came at the ages of 11 to 14. Respondents also came from mostly poor families, based on their parents’ yearly income. Sixty-three percent of students reported their families earned less than $25,000, while a smaller percent of students’ families made between $25,000 to $50,000. Of the last six percent, three percent did not know their parents’ income and the other three percent have family that make over $75,000.

In this paper I will analyze, first, whether undocumented parents were involved in their child’s school environment. I also look at the California environment and how it enables undocumented parents to use their limited capital in unique ways. I will examine the various ways undocumented parents push their children to use their school resources for college information. Second, I will look at how coming out is rooted in trusting relationships between undocumented students and counselors, administrators, peers, and teachers. I argue that this process is possible because of supportive laws that set a foundation for undocumented parents and children to be rewarded for coming out to school agents. Lastly, I will examine the role California polices play in encouraging
universities to provide services for undocumented students on their campus, in outreach efforts, recruitment, and providing undocumented-specific resources to high school staff.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Some participants reported that their parents were involved early in their educational trajectories. One way parents helped their children is by interceding in track placement. Lisa, for example, was placed in a bilingual class and her mother was displeased with Lisa’s placement. She decided to act by challenging the principal to put her in English classes. Lisa explained:

It was not until first grade where my mom was like well why can’t my child just go to just English only? Why do you guys have to put her in bilingual? And then I remember her like fighting with the principal… well we’re just gonna give her one chance and if she screws up then we’re just gonna put her in bilingual only. So I guess from that chance I was able to stay.

This is important for three reasons, first, poor and working-class students have higher rates of being placed in low-track classes (Persell, 1977). Secondly, Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Todorova (2008) have shown that bilingual classes do not prepare students enough for doing well in college. Finally, the fact that Lisa’s mother was willing to confront the principal speaks volumes about her surprising comfort with school administrators. This is surprising because this parenting style to talk directly to a school principal is typically seen in middle and upper-middle class families (Lareau, 2003). Lareau (2003) also noticed an entitlement from upper-middle class parents about making demands to administrators and teachers, while poor parents thought teachers always knew best. Lisa’s mom, although undocumented, actually showed more of a middle and upper-middle parenting style.

Other participants described their parents tapping into educational resources outside of school. John’s parents, for example, used their religious congregation to provide additional English tutorship. As John described:

I know the church my mom is going to, I guess they’re dedicated to helping the community…we would be in the back and they’d be giving me like flashcards to take home, and to learn and come back the next week and see how many I was learning…I feel that really helped me.

John’s parents used their religious community to help him develop and practice his English outside of class. It was as if he was receiving free English lessons, something some people may pay to do. Learning English isn’t just beneficial in schools but also important for living the U.S. Churches have been shown to be quite positive when it
comes to immigrant families as they run community programs that helps mentor immigrant children (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008).

Other participants had other methods of using the resources they had. For example, Ivette’s parents put her in after-school programs that also had staff to help her with her homework. This was really important as no one in her family spoke English and could not help her themselves. Ivette explains:

Yeah, I would take a lot of time other than school to practice [English] and my parents put me like in after school programs and stuff [like] that, and I think that helped me a lot...no one in my family knew English either. So, those programs helped me out a lot.

Ivette’s parents may, or may not, have known that after-school programs are a great resource for teaching. Noam & Tillinger (2004), for example, explain that after-school programs create a space that is brought together from different organizations working together. They add that these spaces bring together different educational organizations and practices to best contribute to children’s learning (Noam & Tillinger, 2004). Ivette certainly took advantage and credits the decision her parents made as important to her English learning.

Parents also played a role in navigating their children to resources. For example, despite being reluctant to come out to her counselor, Sarah eventually did because of her mother’s advice. Sarah explained:

I don’t know if I was the first undocumented student to go to my school or if it was just because my counselor was relatively new...but I went to her in the first meeting, I didn’t tell her anything about my legal status. And then I told my mom that I met with her and my mom was like ‘you need to tell her because she needs to help you, because your dad and I cannot help you.’ And so I was like ok, and I was really scared to tell her. Because she was really nice and supportive, but I just like it’s scary to tell someone about your legal status here right. [Be]cause I don’t know like maybe she’s gonna call someone you know like all these things go through your head.

Although Sarah’s mother did not have the capital to directly help her daughter, she knew of the importance of coming out to her counselor.

These examples suggest that undocumented parents took actions that would benefit their children in the long-run, including challenging administrators to change their educational tracks. Using the little social capital that they had, they positioned their undocumented children on tracks for future academic success and college preparedness. This study cannot address if these experiences are typical for undocumented students and
their parents. However, these findings indicate that scholars should not discount all undocumented parents as ineffective sources of support or information.

THE ROLE OF TRUST AND COMING OUT

Undocumented students usually do not disclose their status to even their closest friends and romantic partners, in fears of losing them (Williams, 2016). Yet participants in this study were very willing to take this risk, based on other motivations, such as: parental influence, trust with administrators, peers, and teachers. Participants were also rewarded when coming out because school officials were supportive and resourceful.

One example of how supportive staff can benefit undocumented students is from Sarah. Sarah shows even institutional agents that aren’t knowledgeable can help when willing to learn.

I told her [about my status] and it was a pretty like emotional process, but she was super supportive. And she was like ‘you know what, I don’t know much about the process but I’m gonna help you and I’m gonna get you there…First we’re gonna go through like a normal list and you’re going to choose what colleges you want to apply to and I’m gonna figure everything else out and I’m gonna help you’…So she went to another private school who had more undocumented population. So she talked to their counselor and she kind of guided her through the process and then she was able to help me.

The counselor did not know much about undocumented students but was supportive of Sarah’s goal of going to college. When the counselor expressed willingness to help, even when knowing about her status, this built trust and rapport. Trust between students and school officials extends to parents as well. If Sarah’s mother did not push her to come out to her counselor, it is less likely she would have made it to college or secured the information necessary to apply.

Not all the participants had supportive parents, however. When Sonia’s parents were not willing to financially help her transition to college, she used institutional agents to buffer this parental lack of support. Sonia’s parents were adamantly against her attending college, but despite this, she could use her social networks to help fund her college education. She explains:

[My parents] were like ‘no you’re not going [to college]. It’s already done you’re not going. We’re not helping you, you’re not gonna get a cent from us to go to college’…[So] I started going back to my contacts, people that I had met within high school, because I was very involved in high school…the executive director of my school said ‘if you’re going to get it done I’m going to help you.’ He gave me $3000 to come
the university] and then I did a Ted talk…and the producer, the director, of our Ted she got me a job, she got me two jobs.

This level of institutional connections for undocumented students is rare, but it shows how marginalized students can also gain valuable networks. In contrast to the students in Gonzales’ (2010) study, these students were much more comfortable going to school administrators for support and showed they were not as fearful to rely on them. Sonia gained confidence in speaking to school officials and was rewarded. This effort led to her receiving $3,000 to attend college as well as assistance finding a job.

Some of the respondents described gaining college information in other ways. Ivette, for example, used her peer networks to learn about a high school-to-college pipeline program. She describes:

I didn’t think about going to college at all. I was like well I’m undocumented, I can’t…until my friend she started telling, she was in AVID, but she wasn’t undocumented. It was just that she was getting really good grades because of the program they had, and I really wanted that. At least to prove myself that I could do it.

She then was willing to come out to staff of the program and gained admittance. She adds:

So then I went to talk to the one in charge of AVID in my school and I talked to her, I told her that I was undocumented and that’s why I like I wanted to be in it…They helped me into get admitted here…I just wanted do it for the grades not for college, that was like probably an extra thing to gain.

Ivette had not planned on attending college despite wanting to join AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination). Unbeknownst to her, and a lot of poor and working-class students, AVID is one of the most recognizable nonprofit organizations, that prepare underrepresented students for college (AVID, 2015). Ivette’s friendship, opened a new set of resources previously inaccessible to her.

**CALIFORNIA POLICIES AND UNIVERSITY OUTREACH**

Positive California policies, like AB540/130/131, open up the possibility for colleges and universities to serve this group. They provide the context in which students can feel safer coming out, and to search and access, resources. I found respondents had received helpful information on the CVU campus during campus visits, because of undocumented student-specific staff. For example, Ivette felt welcomed when they visited her campus and was reaffirmed of attending college during a visit to the school. She describes:

I think for me it was just when they came to visit, and they told
me you know what, we are going to give you financial aid. That gave me a lot of hope, so I think that was a great transition cause it actually made me feel welcome…Then I met [Miklo] and he was awesome. He actually made me feel like yes there’s a possibility for you. Even though my counselor and them, they tried doing that for me, but it wasn’t real until I heard it from him and from [Julie]. You know, getting to be here and knowing that I would be able to get an education…Actually, when I came to visit the school we would just walk and we were lost and he was there and just started telling us all these possibilities. So that was really enlightening.

Ivette shows the impact of her conversations with university staff. She was first visited by outreach personnel and told she would receive financial aid. Then when she visited the campus, she was reaffirmed of that support and had personal conversations with university staff. Not only does she receive important information from these interactions, she also establishes trust with staff. The possibility of attending college became real only when university staff confirmed it.

Other respondents noted CVU sent out an outreach staff member on undocumented services to inform undocumented students about attending college. For example, Miklo, the outreach specialist, was able to build rapport with Michelle because of his visit to her high school. She explains:

[Miklo], he also went to my school…I met him last semester and he told me, he’s like, ‘I remember you.’ And I was really confused because I didn’t remember him, and then when he told me his name and I’m like trying to figure it out. And he started talking about my teachers and I was like ‘oh my god you really went to my school.’ So that’s when I remembered that he was one of the people who came and like spoke and I thought it was great how well he was really like helpful in all the undocumented services and all of that.

This type of outreach established a foundation that led to trust that is essential to building social capital. Among undocumented students this is crucial. Although California laws don’t directly make colleges and universities start outreaching to undocumented students, it does give them more tools and improve the ways they can support them. This not only made college information more accessible to students, but also helps inform high school counselors and teachers. as John explains.

[My counselor] would always talk very good about [Miklo]and even if she had questions about other universities she would call him. And he would guide her through the process and through the options and she was able to help the other students. And I mean being undocumented I really I mean my mom
doesn’t make that much money we don’t have all those opportunities I had umm scholarships that I had won through different things but it wasn’t going to get me though college and I mean [Central Valley University] having [Miklo] here and having the umm they really helped me with financial aid I mean they were they were great in that way.

John wasn’t the only one to benefit from this link with Miklo, so did his counselor. Not only does John benefit, but future undocumented students now have a more knowledgeable counselor. Similarly, this high school to university link has an impact on students’ college decisions. For example, this connection influenced Sarah’s counselor on which school fit her better because of her status.

[My counselor] kind of guided me towards [Central Valley University] too. She was like ‘you know the people there are nice, everybody’s friendly especially towards undocumented students. I think that you should really apply there and go there.’ And I think that once it was kinda like sure that I was gonna go here, she got into contact with [Miklo], or even before then, she would just call him to ask random questions about like going to other colleges and stuff to help me out. And so she was huge, she was vital into me getting me into college.

This link is akin to how elite private schools function. Private high schools are in constant contact with elite universities when sending their seniors to college. These institutional networks are strong indicators of where elite high schools send their students (Stevens, 2007). It shows how important it is for high schools to be connected to universities, especially for undocumented students.

Another example of the influence on college decisions, is when David met university staff very early on in high school. This planted a familiarity with him and university personnel that not only fostered trust but also helped with recruitment to this school.

Well, I met [Miklo] when I was in high school. He was the one who used to visit the campus and I was really involved with the EOP department there…the students who used to run the program there, I used to know them very well, and they introduced me [Miklo]. And [I] started talking to [Miklo] when I was like in tenth grade. So [Miklo] kinda pushed me like oh you know what, [Central Valley University] is a good place for you, and that’s kinda like when I started making my decisions.

Meeting Miklo, a staff member that works with undocumented students, and having him as a resource since 10th grade helped David prepare to apply to Central Valley University. Joaquin also did not think he could attend college, because of his status, but
quickly learned that was not true. Him being open to CVU about his status, turned into an education on California laws, policies, and a campus visit.

For me yes (laughter) um for me um I had the mentality that if-because I was undocumented I was not allowed to go to college. And I run cross country, I’ve been running all my life basically and I received a letter from [Central Valley University] offering me a scholarship and I kinda just assumed like no I can’t go cause of my undocumented so I told of them that, and they said oh well we have uh a program AB540 and they started giving me more information so I started applying for the school and they brought me here and they showed me around, they took me to [Miklo], he talked to me, they took me to the athletic department, they talked to me, and they pretty much set everything up for me.

In the case of an undocumented student-athlete, universities were very involved in recruiting Joaquin. He also previously thought he could not attend college because of his status, he even tried to reject a scholarship because of it. What Central Valley University did was inform him of the laws on undocumented students in California and how he can go to college and pay for it. He was invited to the campus where he met with Miklo and athletic departments. Knowing, and meeting, the undocumented-student staff at Central Valley University eventually helped with his college choice.

Joaquin, along with many of the respondents, were heavily influenced by the undocumented service staff at Central Valley University. This impression of university staff was similar across all the students that met with them. They all understood how important it was to them, as undocumented students, to attend a college with undocumented student services. This university could offer these specialized services because of the control California laws have on financial aid and definitions of residency for tuition purposes. Thus, the support from the state of California provided a foundation for this relationship between this university and undocumented high school students. Miklo was a key person in this study, as his name was continuously repeated. It showed how important he was with the undocumented student community who eventually matriculated to Central Valley University.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

In this study, I have found respondents had parental involvement in various activities, including: advocating for specific classes, using their religious communities, and pushing their children to seek advice from their counselors. These attributes are uncharacteristic of poor families and undocumented parents and have helped these students’ abilities to attend college—unlike many of their other undocumented peers (Gonzales, 2015; Enriquez, 2011; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2011). Students, and parents, also showed a level of trust with their educators by coming out to them about their status. Not only did undocumented students receive the correct college advice, they were able to use these
newfound resources to gain access to other help; such as honors and AP classes, college staff supporters, and a feeling of empowerment.

These findings contrast with some of the past literature on undocumented students as parents of these students were not as fearful to involve themselves in their children’s educational institutions (Menjívar, 2006a; Yoshikawa, 2011; Gonzales, 2010, 2015; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). Instead, undocumented parents and children could leverage their social capital through relationships with teachers, administrators, university staff, churches, after-school programs, and use all that support and knowledge, to create social and economic opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986). Undocumented students, and parents, were able to use their networks to get themselves or their children into college. This is important, as undocumented families do not typically possess a high-degree of social networks. They are not part of the elites of society as people who would usually use their social capital to their benefit (Portes, 1998). My findings point to looking at more closely the ways social capital is used by undocumented families, and how we can build stronger trust and parental involvement between schools and undocumented families. Respondents could build positive networks and relationships in schools, despite it being very difficult for poor families in educational institutions to do so (Lareau, 2003).

Lastly, I found that university outreach was key to both undocumented high school students and staff as they applied to Central Valley University. California laws not only created more access to college, through AB540/130/131, but also made public schools and universities take public notice of this population. High school and university outreach had these two laws, as tools, to provide college information and financial support. Without these supportive laws that offer in-state tuition and state financial aid, the outreach efforts of university staff would be significantly diminished. Respondents received proper financial assistance and empowerment through their school agents. Students were also able to meet university outreach staff that offered in-depth knowledge about undocumented students during high school and university visits. This level of support was difficult and rare to find for undocumented students before these California laws. My study has shown the impact of increased parental involvement for undocumented students. I’ve shown how there is a link between state policies and university and high school staff and undocumented students. This informational pipeline has increased undocumented students’ trust with high school and university staff, that allows them to use their social capital to pursue higher education.

Looking at how a state environment like California has impacted Central Valley University and garnered trust for undocumented students is important. Especially considering how the California laws for undocumented students have changed in the past and may change in the future. These policies play a foundational role in helping college staff help undocumented students and willing high school staff. Having overarching state policies make it easier for colleges to openly offer and support undocumented students. Thus, California laws allow building trust between undocumented students at the high school level more accessible, and these students benefit greatly from this relationship.

Undocumented students were given extra tutoring from their parents’ involvement in learning English. They also used their own social networks to help them gain necessary information, preparedness, and funding for college. Respondents were also able to take advantage of their parents’ involvement in their education. They were able to
use their connections with others to benefit their college prospects (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). They could take advantage of both because their parents felt comfortable with their schools and found alternative forms to benefit their children, despite fears of deportation. Undocumented children used their own trusting relationships to also gain knowledge, despite the risk of being stigmatized and greatly benefitted. California laws and policies help buffer fears and risks by improving the foundation of college staff that leads to trust needed to come out, and for undocumented parents, to be more active in their children’s education. California laws set the foundation for an informational pipeline that links universities to undocumented high school students.

This study has some limitations. First, it is not representative of undocumented youth in California. The sample includes only undocumented students that were successfully able to navigate their high schools and attend a four-year university. The data analyzed was also limited to one university; other universities may lack a similar active recruitment and support of undocumented students. There needs to be future research that looks at different universities and their own institutional policies. A comparative study in the future would be preferred. I cannot know whether the front-line staff of CVU is unique in how it does outreach or the substance of their outreach.

All the respondents experienced very positive support from their peers, teachers, and counselors in high school. Therefore, future studies should observe these interactions between undocumented youth and their high school officials. University outreach staff may target only a few, or select, high schools to do outreach and their impact could be less in certain areas that don’t have colleges nearby. Researchers should also look at how different two-year and four-year colleges use, or don’t use, California policies. Could there be colleges that do more, or less, to outreach to undocumented students? Are there any high school or college staff that don’t understand or don’t know state laws on undocumented students in higher education? Thus, interviewing high school officials and university staff that work with recruiting or admitting students would also be key. Exploring the perspective of university staff would help understand how the implementation of California laws work in some schools and not in others. In the future, it would be helpful to compare across state lines as well. Since states have different levels of support and laws for undocumented students, their experiences may differ between universities, high schools, trust, and parental involvement.
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