

WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER: A CRITICAL CASE STUDY OF UNDOCUMENTED  
IMMIGRANT COLLEGE STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES

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by  
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WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER: A CRITICAL CASE STUDY OF UNDOCUMENTED  
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ABSTRACT

Over 65,000 undocumented immigrant high school students graduate each year, and many have strong aspirations to continue into a post-secondary institution (Drachman, 2006; Perez, 2010). However, less than 13,000 are actually able to do so (Diaz-Strong, Gomez, Luna-Duarte, & Meiners, 2010). I posited that a major barrier between these students and the college degrees they desire is found in colleges' interpretation of state (DREAM) policies.

Using a Critical Theory lens (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Parker & Lynn, 2002) coupled with the concept of hidden curriculum (Bergenhengouwen, 1987; Perrenoud, 1993; Smith, 2013; Snyder, 1973), I explored the narratives of undocumented immigrant college students regarding their experiences with college access and persistence. Six (6) undocumented immigrant college student participants agreed to talk with me after being recruited to the study by an informant with existing relationships with the undocumented community organizations. These participants shared their college access and persistence experiences with me through semi-structured interviews I conducted by phone. These participants attended one of two Midwestern community colleges. Of note, three participants attended a community college located in a state that had passed DREAM Act legislation. The remaining three participants attended a community college located a few miles away in a state that had rejected DREAM Act legislation.

I analyzed interview transcripts in which I was careful to use pseudonyms to protect participating confidentiality. To enrich my understanding of these students' narratives, I also reviewed relevant institutional policy documents from each community college. To establish trustworthiness my study findings, I then corroborated my findings through the use of a theoretical-sensitivity expert panel (Cahill, Kuhn, Schmoll, Lo, McNally, & Quintana, 2011).

Several key themes emerged as a result of my analysis with regard to undocumented immigrant access and persistence at the post-secondary level. These themes included: Sense of Belonging, Barriers to Access and Persistence, Responsibility, Hidden Curriculum, Emotional and Psychological Toll, Personal Advocacy, and Employee Training. Each theme transcended institution. However, some played a more significant role than others in limiting undocumented immigrant access and persistence at the Non-DREAM Act institution.

Based on my study's findings, I offer several recommendations for both policy and practice to increase accessibility and improve persistence of undocumented immigrants at the community college level. Higher education institutions and coordinating agencies must consider the resources, business practices, and institutional policies in place, and the obstacles they present for underserved students, like undocumented immigrants. Additionally, post-secondary administrators and policy makers will see the impact their decisions have throughout the undocumented lifecycle and the need for intentional institutional practice that acknowledges underserved populations.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Education, have examined a dissertation titled “Writing the Next Chapter: A Critical Case Study of Undocumented Immigrant College Students’ Lived Experiences,” presented by Steve W. Pankey, candidate for the Doctor of Education degree and hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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And finally, there are too many friends and family members to thank individually, but I need to express the love I have for my doctoral cohort and those we “adopted” throughout this process. We are forever connected and family, and I am truly indebted for all the support you have given me. I can only hope to someday pay it forward.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my late father, William Gene Pankey, who passed away before I had the opportunity to begin my doctoral studies. His encouragement and support to pursue my dreams has allowed me to reach farther than I could have ever imagined. I would similarly like to dedicate this dissertation to my amazing wife and family, whose unwavering reassurance and inspiration throughout this process has made everything possible.

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

“What makes someone American isn’t just blood or birth but allegiance to our founding principles and faith in the idea that anyone—from anywhere—can write the next chapter of our story.” – President Barack Obama

In the United States (U.S.), over 65,000 undocumented immigrant high school students graduate each year, and many stand ready to join their peers at the post-secondary level (Drachman, 2006; Perez, 2010). However, less than 13,000 are actually able to do so (Diaz-Strong, Gomez, Luna-Duarte, & Meiners, 2010). These 13,000 students must overcome significant barriers to achieve their dream of college degree attainment. Because most undocumented immigrant high school graduates come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Dietrich, 2012), barriers to college graduation include a lack of access to financial resources (Perez, 2014; Terriquez, 2015), limited familial understanding of collegiate culture (Murillo, 2017; Perez, 2014; Terriquez, 2015) and fear of deportation (Murillo, 2017; Perez, 2014). However, once on campus, perhaps the highest barrier between these students and the college degrees they desire is represented in the institution’s interpretation of the words documenting U.S. policies for undocumented students and the subsequent resources available (or lack thereof) to support retention toward degree completion.

**Problem Statement**

Education has consistently been a draw for immigrants entering the U.S. in their pursuit of a better life (Portes & Hao, 2004). Historically viewed as a sanctuary, the U.S. has

consistently offered support to refugees, those seeking political asylum, and immigrants (Sulkowski, 2017). The annual U.S. undocumented immigration estimates continue to increase, and, as of June 2017, have moved well above the 11 million mark (Sulkowski, 2017). Many immigrate from Asia and Central America, but the largest population, seven million, originate in Mexico (Drachman, 2006; Gonzales, 2009; Kim, 2012; Sulkowski, 2017). Once in the U.S., undocumented immigrants can be found across the country. However, the largest undocumented immigrant populations are predominantly located in six states: California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas (Perez, 2014).

Many classified as undocumented in the U.S. were brought into the country while they were young, growing up within the public education system. These undocumented students primarily grow up in urban and suburban communities where they develop American ideals of upward mobility alongside their native-born peers (Passel & Cohn, 2009). While undocumented immigrants have previously received access to education, as granted by the 1982 Supreme Court decision of *Plyler v. Doe*, educational access does not extend beyond the public K-12 system (Dickson & Pender, 2013; Olivas, 2009). Further, without a federal mandate extended beyond secondary education requiring post-secondary educational access, some states have actively pursued legislation to limit or entirely prohibit undocumented immigrants from accessing higher education (Villarraga-Orjuela & Kerr, 2017).

Thus, undocumented immigrants consistently face barriers in their pursuit of higher education, including access to financial aid, institutional culture, lack of social capital, cultural and familial responsibilities, and potential legal repercussions (Dickson & Pender, 2013). Immigrant college students experience challenges similar to students with low socio-

economic status, such as being either the first of their family to attend college and/or being unfamiliar with post-secondary education in the U.S. (Dickson & Pender, 2013; Gonzales, 2009; Perez, 2010). These students frequently need to work twice as hard as their American-born and documented peers because of the role they play in both supporting and protecting their families (Perez & Rodriguez, 2012). Further, their undocumented status may generate fears or concerns, in that it could result in negative consequences such as being targeted on campus or even deportation (Gonzales, 2009; Perez & Rodriguez, 2012). It is unsurprising that undocumented immigrants who pursue college have a significantly lower degree completion rate than their legalized peers (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Specifically, only 40% of undocumented immigrants who start college will complete it (Passel & Cohn, 2009).

In addition to the above problems, once on the college campus, undocumented immigrants are often stigmatized as a result of their illegal status, and in many cases, experience overt, as well as covert prejudice and discrimination (Perez & Rodriguez, 2012). Institutions with predominantly White student populations and staff have historically had the most discriminatory practices as they relate to educational and state policies, such as strict interpretations of financial rules as well as application and tuition fees that increase out-of-pocket expenses (Perez & Rodriguez, 2012). These behaviors can be considered the product of covert bias, defined as seemingly unnoticeable or passive behaviors that discriminate against specific individuals through seemingly unnoticeable or passive methods (Pierce, 1970). Covert bias targets individuals from all cultural groups and populations, based on social constructions such as ethnicity, language, affluence, race, religion, and sexual orientation (Collins, 2015; Dyer, 1997; Greenwald & Krieger, 2006; Lansu, Cillessen & Bukowski, 2013; Misawa, 2010; Puchner & Markowitz, 2015; Rocco, Bernier & Bowman,

2014). Undocumented immigrants are one such group, targeted for their nationality, race, ethnicity, as well as many other characteristics. In sum, commonly accepted institutional practices can encourage an institutional campus culture that disadvantages and disenfranchises undocumented immigrant students, making them intentional casualties of national access and retention policies (Dickson & Pender, 2013). As such, it is this institutional culture that requires closer consideration as well as the factors that contribute to its formation.

Institutional culture is “reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level ... [It is] grounded in the shared assumptions of individuals” within the organization (Tierney, 1988, p. 3). These behaviors become institutional expectations and norms, many of which are documented through policy and procedure (Tierney, 1988). However, some of these patterns survive through the individuals of the institution who continue them in unwritten or codified ways as the *hidden curriculum* as described by Snyder (1973), when these expectations and norms become accepted behavior, yet “do not appear to be programmed by the educational institution” (Perrenoud, 1993, p. 61). This curriculum expresses norms and expectations that define entering and succeeding in college, as well as societal interactions on campus, and is reinforced and passed on by the institutional community (Bergenhengouwen, 1987; Perrenoud, 1993; Smith, 2013; Snyder, 1973). An example of the hidden curriculum in action as relevant to undocumented college students is the challenge they experience in navigating their entrance to college, including enrolling and then identifying and securing resources necessary for college success due to their lack of institutional mentors as well as culturally-appropriate campus resources (Dickson & Pender,

2013). An undocumented student might be confronted with the unwritten lessons of, ‘You do not belong at this college, and if you continue to try to access it, no one and no resources are available to help you.’ These experiences result in warnings that serve to reinforce and encourage the continuation behaviors and expectations (Bergenhengouwen, 1987).

Community colleges, because of their open access stance (Cohen, Brawer & Kisker, 2013), are not often linked to the concept of hidden curriculum, or unspoken expectations and norms. These institutions are the most common college choice for undocumented immigrant college students as a result of proximity, accessibility, and cost of attendance (Perez, 2010). They also boast of being the location where a growing number of programs and resources available for undocumented students can be utilized, such as The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund; the National Immigration Law Center; the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act; and the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Act (Suarez-Orozco, Katsiaficas, Birchall, Alcantar...& Teranishi, 2015). While undocumented students are seeing an increase in support in some areas of the country with additional DREAM state legislation, this population continues to struggle in overcoming some of the main challenges to post-secondary access and success, like financial support or college readiness (Olivas, 2012).

In an attempt to mitigate the barriers undocumented immigrants face, federal legislation has been proposed. The Federal DREAM Act is one piece of legislation. The Act has an emphasis on citizenship and education benefits, and has been submitted to Congress several times since 2001; however, it has still not successfully passed (Flores & Horn, 2010; Rodriguez, 2007). If approved, the federal DREAM Act would extend conditional legal status for more than 825,000 undocumented students based upon certain requirements.

Specifically, applicants must: have entered the U.S. prior to turning sixteen, lived within the country for five contiguous years prior to legislative approval, earned a U.S high school diploma or equivalent, and be less than 35 years of age (Batalova & McHugh, 2010; Rodriguez, 2007; Olivas, 2009). The final component toward permanent citizenship would require that the recipient obtain an accredited post-secondary degree or honorably serve in the military, as well as maintain high moral character. Failure to do so would result in a loss of status and potential deportation (Batalova & McHugh, 2010; Ojeda, 2010; Olivas, 2009). This pathway to citizenship similarly provides the individual with access to federal resources, like federal financial aid, and enables the student to establish in-state residency for tuition purposes (Batalova & McHugh, 2010; Olivas, 2009).

While the federal DREAM Act has been unsuccessful in receiving legislative approval, another piece of legislation has received approval and has offered some level of protection for undocumented students. The 2012 federal legislation implemented under President Obama, DACA, provides a protected status for two years once undocumented college students are successfully enrolled in their college degree program (Bozick & Miller, 2013; Sheehy, 2014). This protected status prevents students attending any accredited educational institution from being deported (Bozick & Miller, 2013). Where this differs from the federal DREAM Act is that DACA does not create a pathway to citizenship, or provide access to federal financial aid and in-state tuition (Sheehy, 2014).

Without a successfully-passed federal DREAM Act, individual states began pursuing their own legislation at the state-level. During 2001, in response to changes in state population demographics, Texas became the first to pass an in-state resident tuition policy that supported undocumented immigrants (Brown, 2012; Flores & Horn, 2010; Stepman,

2011). Over the last two decades years, at least eighteen states have enacted state-level legislation that grants in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin (NCSL, 2015; Serna, Cohen, & Nguyen, 2017). However, institutions in five states lacking state-level legislation (Hawaii, Michigan, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and Virginia) implemented their own institutional policies to grant undocumented students attending their campuses access to in-state tuition (NCSL, 2015). Each state has approved its own variation of the DREAM Act; however, all permit undocumented students to pay in-state college tuition, despite a lack of access to federal financial aid or a path to citizenship (Murillo, 2017). It is important to note that not all state legislation granting in-state tuition to undocumented students possesses the “DREAM Act” label. However, for the remainder of this dissertation, I will use “DREAM Act” to refer to states with in-state tuition legislation for undocumented students, and “Non-DREAM Act” in reference to those states without such legislation. Several of the DREAM Act states are located within the Midwest in close proximity to non-DREAM Act states.

The passage of DREAM Act legislation at the state-level has implications for changes to population demographics, economic growth, as well as higher education interpretations of the policy (Corruner, 2012; Olivas, 2009, 2012). States that pass such legislation quickly become destinations for undocumented immigrants, which frequently includes minors matriculating through the public education system (Stevenson, 2004). Similarly, the availability of resources and support for this population has proven to be a protective factor for retaining undocumented students through the completion of their high school degree. In states where no such support exists, undocumented immigrant dropout rates nearly double

(Olivas, 2012; Salsbury, 2003). These locations similarly have fewer programs and financial resources devoted toward undocumented immigrants as compared to DREAM Act states (Olivas, 2012). In many non-DREAM Act states, undocumented immigrants are only granted access to emergency medical care and K-12 education (Coffey, 2006; Nanes, 2009; Olivas, 2012). While K-12 education is guaranteed for undocumented students, non-DREAM Act states spend an average of \$2,000 less per student than their immigrant-friendly counterparts, suggesting they may be less prepared for post-secondary institutions (Izumi, 2017).

Further investigation into undocumented immigrant college students' experiences is needed, especially as DREAM and DACA legislation, and undocumented students themselves, have recently become the target of intense political and media scrutiny (Jones & Martin, 2017; Gonzalez, Collingwood, & El-Khatib, 2017). The focus on this legislation is significant, as this study sought to understand if institutions subject to these governmental policies develop a hidden curriculum with reduced barriers for undocumented immigrants, while the opposite may be true in their absence. This study illuminated student experiences surrounding the process of gaining access to post-secondary institutions located in major metropolitan areas. Utilizing a major metropolitan area in the Midwest is significant in that undocumented immigrants are more commonly located in urban, metropolitan regions (Olivas, 2009). In particular, I explored and compared student experiences associated with gaining access to post-secondary institutions in close proximity to one another in either a DREAM or a non-DREAM state. This exploration and comparison provided richer insight into the challenges undocumented students face as they strive to gain institutional access and persist to completion of their college degrees (Edmonds-Cady & Wingfield, 2017).

Utilizing the findings of this research, other higher educational professionals must address these students' ability to finance their education and gain access to resources that promote successful retention to graduation. Further, undocumented students achieve successful retention to graduation as a result from the improved effectiveness of state and federal initiatives, specifically, in these initiatives' ability to improve undocumented immigrant access and persistence to completion at post-secondary institutions through promoting a less oppressive hidden curriculum.

### **Study Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative, multi-site critical case study was two-fold. The first purpose was to uncover the institutional interpretations of state (DREAM) policies, and these interpretations' impact on undocumented immigrant students' access at these institutions through the development of hidden curriculum, and, more broadly, within higher education. This was done through the use of two community college sites located within a DREAM and a non-DREAM state, respectively. The second purpose was to compare how these institutions subsequently support (or not) undocumented immigrant student persistence to program completion, as understood through the reported experiences of these students. The study's purpose was to reveal and compare experiences and narratives of undocumented immigrant college students in DREAM versus non-DREAM Act states at a local level in an attempt to support the nationwide narrative. The unit of analysis for the study was the two neighboring community college institutions located in different states as illustrated by the experiences of the undocumented students at those institutions. Their insightful narratives directly spoke to their lived experiences and how they perceived the institution interpretation

of the DREAM Act influences their access to and corresponding degree completion at their respective institutions.

To compare how undocumented immigrants perceived the institutional interpretations of federal and state policies, and the perceived influence of these institutional interpretations on their access to and retention within higher education, a multi-site case study approach was used. This approach allowed exploration of a “program, event, activity, [and] process” (Creswell, 2013). More specifically, this study examined the experiences of undocumented immigrant college student populations within the context of the institutional culture and hidden curriculum developed to enact federal and state policy. Framed with a Critical Theory lens (described below), the study addressed the opportunities and challenges experienced due to individuals’ undocumented status on a college campus, and the societal limitations placed on individuals as a result of their race and citizenship status (Creswell, 2013; Fay, 1987; Parker & Lynn, 2002). The problem this study explored and addressed was the perceived lack of institutional support afforded undocumented students in Non-DREAM Act states as compared to DREAM Act states, and the institutional culture that facilitated the offering or lack of institutional support.

### **Study Research Questions**

Within this study, I addressed these study questions, sub questions, and a hypothesis:

**Research Question 1:** What are undocumented immigrant college students’ narratives of their lived experiences around the institutional hidden curriculum specifically related to gaining access to and persisting at their community college?

**Research Question 2:** How does college adherence to state immigration legislation (DREAM Act versus non-DREAM Act) appear to influence undocumented immigrant college students' ability to gain access to and persist at their community college?

The two central questions guided the collection and analysis of data throughout the study. However, as in-study analysis progressed, I was open to the possibility of the need to make adjustments to the guiding research questions (Maxwell, 2013). In addition to the research questions, it was necessary to consider the existing hidden curriculum literature at the K-12 level and the influence it might have on the research (Creswell, 2013).

**Hypothesis:** The hidden curriculum present at a DREAM Act college will be more favorable to undocumented immigrants than the hidden curriculum at a non-DREAM Act college.

To design a study that can adequately address these questions, it was important to consider the theoretical underpinnings that provided the lens through which the data was interpreted and evaluated. This theoretical framework is addressed briefly below and in full in the second chapter.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I conducted this study using the Critical Theory lens, as it provides a social justice-oriented backdrop for understanding the experiences of undocumented immigrant college students within higher education. The social justice component emphasizes breaking social mobility barriers, creating appropriate safety nets, and establishing economic justice for all populations (Kitching, 2001). Critical Theory attempts to deconstruct, highlight, and uncover social paradigms that reinforce unequal power differentials and discriminatory patterns of behavior by questioning established imagery, language, and policy to transform an institutionalized culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Parker &

Lynn, 2002). It is important to frame a basic understanding of its guiding principles through oppression and discrimination, as Critical Theory guides people toward uncovering, understanding, and addressing social structures that dominate, bully, and oppress disenfranchised populations (Collins, 2015; Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014).

Critical Theory is based in liberalism, which argues that cultural practices, such as an immigrant's close reliance on family as well as those within their primary networks (National Research Council, 1997), and traditions, such as an emphasis on spirituality, organic diets, and localized farming (Hirschman, 2009), must constantly undergo evaluation and exploration in order to achieve cultural growth, as well as the pursuit for the betterment of society (Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014). I believe that it is this foundation of social justice and intersectionality of identities (i.e., ethnicity, legal status, gender) that made Critical Theory ideal for this study. Critical Theory reveals many of the underlying ideologies encompassing the cultural hegemony that exists and pinpoints opportunities for both growth and enlightenment within the existing social structures (Denzin, 2008; hooks, 1994). Used in conjunction with a case study mode of inquiry, Critical Theory enabled me as the researcher to capture rich stories and descriptions of the experiences of undocumented immigrant college students, specifically as they related to their encounters with policy throughout their higher educational careers.

### **Application of Critical Theory to My Case Study**

The goal of this critical case study was to learn about how institutional interpretations of federal and state policies influenced institutional hidden curriculum, and subsequently, how that hidden curriculum impacted undocumented immigrant students within higher education. Critical Theory was particularly appealing to me as a researcher due to its ability

to encapsulate someone's worldview from multiple data sources. This value is highlighted in its the ability to expose the bullying, or interpersonal aggression characterized by an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1978), of undocumented immigrant students in higher education institutions, and capture their lived experience using their own words, imagery, and actions. The ultimate study objective was to discover the "how" and "why" of the overt institutional procedures, as well as the hidden curriculum as it influenced undocumented immigrant students and their access and subsequent persistence in the institution. Critical Theory relies heavily on the use of historical data and individual experiences. These tend to be significantly useful data sources as they detail an individual or community's previously experienced injustices, as well as the resulting generational impact the inequities may have on education, socio-economic status, and health (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Schram, 2006). Critical Theory also highlights and offers those marginalized populations who have traditionally been quieted a channel to voice their experiences (Caruthers, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schram, 2006).

Through the tradition of Critical Theory, participants have the opportunity to describe their experiences and reality through the strategy of "counter-storytelling" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 41). As participants name their construction of their experience with the hidden curriculum, this tradition exposes the exigency of those who have conventionally been marginalized and methodically subjugated through the hegemonic structure of their institution (Hale, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Newman & Benz, 1998). Critical Theory applies empirical processes to the exploration of many underlying and embedded behaviors found in society. The need for systematic processes to interrogate any phenomenon differentiates science from mythification or mystification (Horkheimer, Adorno, & Noeri, 2002). Any

belief that goes unquestioned serves no other purpose than to self-deceive or serve the researcher's own interests (Gouldner, 1970; Habermas, 1971; Maxwell, 2013; O'Neill, 1976). Additionally, Critical Theory is notable for its ability to identify social or cultural expectations that contradict the norms of a "win at all costs" culture (Habermas, 1975; Horkheimer, 1973; Kellner, 1989; Neumann, 1942, 1957). While this cultural mentality has shifted from the original capitalism intent, Critical Theory continues to provide meaningful analysis (Luke, 1989; Miliband, 1974; Miller, 1988; Offe, 1985) of current social justice issues and theory (Agger, 1991; O'Connor, 1973; Poulantzas, 1973).

### **Overview of Methodology**

To this point, this chapter has articulated the key concepts and theory that were used to explore the experiences of undocumented immigrant college student populations within the context of institutional culture and hidden curriculum influenced by federal and state policy, and subsequent procedural creation and enforcement. This section briefly outlines the methodological design of the study. A more thorough discussion will be found in the third chapter. This critical case study explored the lived experiences of undocumented immigrant students related to issues of access and persistence within public higher education.

Qualitative research, for the purposes of this study, can be defined using the Bogdan and

Taylor (1975) description:

[Qualitative research includes] ... research procedures which produce descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior. [It] directs itself at settings and the individuals within those settings holistically; that is, the subject of the study, be it an organization or an individual, is not reduced to an isolated variable or to a hypothesis, but is viewed instead as part of a whole (p. 2).

This definition appeals to me as a researcher in its capacity to describe a personalized approach that captures a holistic picture and all of its interrelated components, through the

use of numerous forms of data. The process of revealing the limitations caused by the hidden curriculum for undocumented college students, who are confronted with unfamiliar cultures and expectations, requires the ability of the researcher to capture the students' lived experiences through their words and actions. The major technique used in this study was that of case study for its capacity to explore the 'how and why' of a phenomenon empirically within the real-world setting, and utilizing numerous sources of data (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2009).

This study was conducted at two Midwestern, two-year community colleges in a major metropolitan area. One college was located in a DREAM Act state, while the other was situated in a neighboring state without any such legislation. The two colleges averaged an enrollment between 18,000 and 19,000 students each semester, with a primarily traditionally-aged population. Both were Predominantly White Institutions, with most students at each campus identifying as female. The choice of two-year community colleges was intentional for this study because, as noted above, community colleges are the primary post-secondary choice for undocumented immigrants (Perez, 2010). The selection of these institutions was equally deliberate, due to their proximity to each other and to a major metropolitan area, similarity in demographic make-up, and their location in separate states with significantly different policy situations (DREAM Act versus non-DREAM Act). Additionally, the DREAM Act institution was located in a "sanctuary city" that promised protection to undocumented immigrants against the federal government (Lee, Omri, & Preston, 2017), while the non-DREAM Act institution was located in a city without the same protections. Location in either a DREAM Act state or a non-DREAM Act state played a

significant role in the resources available to undocumented students, and was found to influence institutional policy.

Undocumented students face numerous challenges in pursuit of academic success; however, the perhaps one of the greatest among these is the cost of attendance as influenced by state policy (Perez, 2010). Presently, only 19 states permit undocumented students to qualify for in-state resident tuition (ISRT) under certain circumstances (NCSL, 2015). Residence in a state that offers ISRT to undocumented students, however, does not overcome the remaining tuition costs as these students are not eligible for federal financial aid (Dickson & Pender, 2013; Perez, 2010). As a result of these barriers, undocumented students find themselves seeking options that require the least financial investment; often, that is found in local community colleges despite actual academic interest (Conway, 2009; Diaz-Strong, Gomez, Luna-Duarte, Meiners, 2010; Perez, 2010). Proximity to home, cost, as well as increased remediation pathways to support the needs of undocumented students increases the likelihood that community colleges become their ultimate choice (Conway, 2009; Perez, 2010). In comparison to native-born college-aged students, undocumented students are twenty-percent more likely to enroll at a community college (Conway, 2009).

To generate robust data, a purposeful sample (Patton, 2015) was utilized to select participants. Six participants, three from each site, were chosen through the maximum variation sampling technique to select cases that met a diverse set of predetermined characteristics deemed important (Creswell, 2013). The participants were equally distributed among the two institutions. This variety in student experience was vital to capturing an honest representation of the undocumented immigrant student populations at each institution, and provided me with enough data to appropriately identify the apparent themes as they

emerged. This ideal sample included an equal representation of students utilizing self-pay, institutional aid, and third-party scholarships, as well as students with different socio-economic status. It was also important to have a fair portrayal of males and females within the sample, with no requirements on which characteristics intersect. While it would have been ideal to have participants partake in member checking, the need for participant anonymity was paramount and rendered this impossible. These experiences and the forthcoming themes were then externally-vetted by a theoretical-sensitivity group, referred to as the expert panel, to substantiate their trustworthiness (Cahill, Kuhn, Schmoll, Lo, McNally, & Quintana, 2011).

This study utilized several data sources to collect information from participants, including interviews, document analysis of both institutional procedures surrounding undocumented access, and the feedback from the expert panel. The students participated in one semi-structured interview over the course of the study that served as an in-depth probe into their experiences around access and persistence. Maxwell (2013) supports the notion of inductive designs whereby interview protocol questions are reflexive and open to modification during the data collection process, should the need arise. During these interviews, I utilized the opportunity to gain insight through the students' personal narratives and stories that could not be collected by any other means. The document analysis of institutional practices provided awareness into the institutional supports, culture, and philosophy toward undocumented students.

Analysis occurred throughout the data collection process to ensure research questions remained effective and that student data were meaningful (Maxwell, 2013). Specific to case study methodology, I analyzed student interview data using open coding and within-case and

cross-case analysis (Yin, 2009). In combining all of the data sources and identifying similarities or differences, I was able to explore themes that transcended the data. Once all the themes or categories were identified from the data, I was able to identify a final set of themes to organize and represent the whole of the data, with sub-themes to explore variance. It was then important to step back and apply the themes to the individual cases to build synthesis and understanding (Yin, 2009).

### **Limitations, Trustworthiness, and Ethical Considerations**

Regardless of the effort placed on creating a research design, each design will possess its own set of issues that limit the effectiveness and, ultimately, study findings. In this study, I as the researcher utilized a small undergraduate sample from two Midwestern institutions that represented predetermined criteria needed for maximum variation. While the study contributes to undocumented immigrant post-secondary literature, several issues, including the sampling concerns mentioned previously, may serve to restrict the study results. As a qualitative researcher, it is important to consider which limitations may be permitted within the design, and how they might impact the study's perceived trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2009). Qualitative studies are known to utilize the researcher as the sole instrument of data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2013). As such, all data collected and interpreted by researchers must be considered an interpretation through personal and professional experiences, assumptions, as well as any personal biases. Additionally, the goal of most qualitative studies is to develop ideas and uncover trends that are difficult to discern through other forms of assessment, however, this inherently limits research from implying causation (Creswell, 2013).

Identification of biases and how they will potentially impact the ability to clearly interpret the data is vital to the success of any research (Patton, 2015). In identifying my own biases, I have been forced to confront and accept my “Whiteness,” including the privileges I possess in many areas, like education, employment, safety, as well as many others. On the other end of the spectrum, I have preconceived notions related to the topic, specifically that many of our higher educational institutions actively create barriers to disenfranchise undocumented immigrant students, and firmly believe in the veracity of this research. To counteract my own personal experiences and beliefs, or an inherent lack of experiences with this student population, I utilized a reflective journal to capture my thoughts and beliefs that related to participant responses, documents I reviewed, or any other biases that were less explicit (Maxwell, 2013). I specifically employed these notes to identify events, experiences, or interpretations in which I was unable to remain neutral. Recognizing these opportunities, I tried to ensure, to the fullest extent possible, the data were trustworthy and free from my own bias.

Study participants, in this case, undocumented immigrant college students, were similarly limited in their ability or comfort in responding due to the nature of the topic and my own demographic profile as a White, American-born male. A constant concern in research that involves human subjects is the potential for a power differential between the participants and the researcher (Creswell, 2013). To address this most efficiently, researchers must ensure each participant understands their rights and ability within the confines of the study. I ensured this by using comprehensive informed consent (Appendix A) that identified the study purpose, the participant’s rights within the study, how his or her identity and the data he or she provided were protected throughout the research and in the future (Creswell,

2013). The use of a gatekeeper, someone with preexisting relationships with these participants and with whom they had developed significant trust, was a meaningful method for quickly establishing rapport and connecting with participants (Lewin, 1947). With regards to the issue of the power differential, I reminded participants that their participation was completely voluntary and they could withdraw consent at any time without penalty. Additionally, I checked in with participants throughout the interviews as to their comfort with the process and with their interactions with me as the researcher.

As limitations are external influences beyond the control of the researcher, they restrict the effectiveness of the methodology or conclusions that might be rendered from the study (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, bringing these limitations to light is necessary so readers might have proper awareness of any weaknesses that may have influenced the results. Maxwell (2013) suggests that qualitative research does not seek to prevent or eliminate any bias, but to implement strategies that mitigate the bias so as to limit its impact on the validity on the study and its findings.

Limitations are unintended influences, whereas delimitations are the restrictions that the researcher implements to the development of a study that intentionally constricts the scope of the research (Creswell, 2013). The delimitations of this study include the design around a small, purposeful sample of undergraduate students from two Midwestern two-year community colleges. The selection of participants was based upon predetermined characteristics that served to create a maximum variation sample. These delimitations were similarly limitations to the study, as the use of only two institutions located in the Midwest provides only a perspective generalizable to a small number of institutions.

## **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) addressed the importance of validity, reliability, and objectivity in any empirical study. For quantitative studies, this characteristic of empiricism is referred to as validity and reliability, but for qualitative studies, this concept is less well-defined. These challenges are the result of researchers not utilizing instruments with established metrics for validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a result, researchers must define processes that determine the study's findings are trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness encompasses establishing credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability for the study and its research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility refers to the confidence the researcher has in their findings. These findings can be further validated through the crystallization process. The researcher can establish transferability, or the application of the study's findings to other contexts, by obtaining substantial data to reveal similarity between contexts, environments, or situations. Additionally, confirmability is the degree to which the findings are the result of participant responses as opposed to researcher bias. A researcher may counteract bias through journaling and documenting the process of data analysis. The final area of concern is that of dependability, where the study can be replicated by other researchers and findings remain consistent. Allowing external review of analysis processes can assist in establishing such consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In pursuit of validity, qualitative researchers have developed several strategies for determining accuracy of data. The use of member checking and triangulation of multiple sources has been found to have a positive impact on the internal validity of a study (Cho & Trent, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through the thorough development of multiple data

sources, and a robust narrative capable of providing the reader with the characteristic “thick description,” a sense of transferability may be achieved (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, a more modern approach, like crystallization, will be most appropriate for this study to attend to the needs of a postmodernist model such as the one proposed for the present study. Richardson (1997) suggests this process in favor of triangulation for its more comprehensive description of the actual nature of analysis, an ever-changing and multidimensional view of the world. External validity may not be truly achievable, but enough data can be presented for a qualitative researcher to make a transferability judgment. As researchers turn to the question of reliability, the combined use of crystallization, an external observer or expert panel, and a reflexive journal, can address the concerns of the human instrument. Sometimes referred to as a critical friend, an external observer will serve as a check on researcher bias and to ensure that every appropriate perspective is explored (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the expert panel served in this role to provide clarity on themes and insight based on their own experiences. The reflexive journal permitted me as the researcher to denote daily schedules, personal reflections, insights, and a methodological record to support decisions made in the field (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Whenever planning and conducting research, the ethical considerations must always be addressed prior to initiating the study. Creswell (2013) addresses these concerns and believes each researcher must anticipate the potential ethical matters that may occur at any point in the process, including developing research questions, collecting and analyzing data, and interpreting and reporting key findings. Every institutional review board has developed its ethical procedures based upon the 1978 Belmont Report that offers research guidelines for

the protection of human subjects (United States National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978). This report requires that any research that utilizes human subjects must be conducted according to the three fundamental ethical principles: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (HHS, 1978). The first principle, respect for persons, focuses on two specific values: respect for autonomy and protection of impaired or diminished autonomy. The second principle, beneficence, is the ethical expectation that positive benefits to participants have been maximized and any potential harmful effects of the study have been minimized to the greatest extent possible. The final principle, justice, promotes moral and fair treatment to each person in accordance to what is due to that person (HHS, 1978).

In pursuit of respect for persons, it is important that each participant understand that their involvement is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time, and most importantly, remain as well-informed about the nature of their participation in the study (Sales & Folkman, 2000). Before any participant was included in this study, they read and verbally consented to an informed consent form (Appendix A) that delineated all of the aforementioned information regarding their participation and ensured that their participation was voluntarily and that they could withdraw their consent at any point during the study without prejudice. Ethical treatment consists of not only having respect for a participant's decisions and ensuring potential for harm has been mitigated, but also emphasizing all benefits and opportunities to improve well-being (HHS, 1978; Sales & Folkman, 2000). Beneficent actions, as defined by the Belmont Report, essentially follow two central rules: first, do not harm, and second, minimize potential harm while maximizing possible benefits (HHS, 1978). To that end, each participant was well informed of any potential risks inherent

in the study. While the nature of this study did not include an experimental condition, or withholding treatment, it was important to understand that each study participant is entitled to all potential benefits of the study. As Sales and Folkman (2000) suggest, injustice is the denial of some benefit that a person is entitled to without reason. Participants selected through the sampling technique were chosen specifically due to their experience and relation to the problem in question. Treating each participant with respect, beneficence, and justice was front of mind, as the trust and treatment of each was paramount to the success of the study. In order to provide the most support to these participants as possible, a thorough list of community resources was attached to the consent form to ensure each had information about these available resources.

### **Study Significance**

This study expands the existing scholarly research in the area of hidden curriculum literature in higher education to include research on underserved populations like undocumented immigrants (Beirne & Hunter, 2013; Coyne, 2011; Crawford, 2001; Peart, 2013; Salin & Hoel, 2013). To that end, student affairs and higher education policy professionals will likely be especially guided by the study findings, as the findings and recommendations inform both overall institutional policy and day-to-day practice in the service of undocumented immigrant students. A thorough review of the literature has revealed an absence of such research.

The nature of the study serves to inform and improve institutional practices in a multitude of ways. First, the awareness of these institutional ties between procedures and hidden curriculum may lead to both procedural improvements, as well as a shift in the institutional culture (Smith, 2013). Additionally, an improved awareness of intersectionality

and bullying for undocumented immigrant student populations may result in changes in student support services offered at the post-secondary level, including culturally-responsive advising and campus support resources, as most strategies have been focused on elementary and secondary-aged students (Bhat, 2008; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004; Salmivalli, 1999). Of similar importance to higher education practice is understanding the impact and influence institutional interpretations on policies of this nature has on a broader group of marginalized student populations in higher education (Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989; Kimmel, 2013; Misawa, 2015; Mourssi-Alfash, 2014; Peart, 2013).

Additionally, there is both local and national interest in this area, specifically around the questions of access for undocumented immigrants in post-secondary education. At the local level, there is considerable support by the community that serves these students and views this as a possible pathway toward more effective legislation in state and national policies. It is also important to acknowledge the rhetoric around the current political administration for the country and their legislations actions in relation to undocumented immigrants, particularly “Dreamers” (Dinan, 2017; Nunez, 2017).

### **Definition of Terms**

To appropriately address the concepts identified within this proposed study, several terms require additional clarification and definition within the context of this proposed research. The following terms are defined for the reader:

**Bias:** Refers to the impact of how “dominant perspectives can contort understandings of racism, constrain what types of action are even imaginable, and foster beliefs that such actions are progressively anti-racist when they are in fact supporting the prevailing racial order” (Hughes, 2013, p. 127).

**Bullying:** Bullying is a form of interpersonal aggression that possesses the characteristics of intentional and repetitive action, as well as an imbalance of power between participants (Olweus, 1978, 1999, 2001).

**Campus Climate:** Campus climate refers to the “interplay among people, processes, institutional culture, and represent important aspects of an organization including perceptions and expectations of the people in the academic community” (Campbell-Whatley, Wang, Toms, & Williams, 2015).

**Critical Theory:** Critical Theory guides people toward understanding social structures that dominate, bully, and oppress disenfranchised populations (Collins, 2015; Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014).

**Discrimination:** Occurs when decisions, actions, or resources are allocated based upon consideration of factors like race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and religion (Pieronek, 2003).

**DACA:** (acronym for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) is an American immigration policy that allowed some individuals who entered the country as minors, and had either entered or remained in the country illegally, to receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation and to be eligible for a work permit (Olivas, 2012).

**DREAM Act:** (acronym for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act) is an American legislative proposal for a multi-phase process for qualifying alien minors in the United States that would first grant conditional residency and, upon meeting further qualifications, permanent residency (Olivas, 2012).

**Dreamers:** A term used to refer to the more than 800,000 undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. under the age of 16 and seeking a pathway to citizenship (Nicholls, 2013).

**Hidden Curriculum:** Defined in this study as an institution's unspoken norms, values, and expectations that rule the interactions between students, staff, and faculty on campus that are defined by societal norms (Bergenhengouwen, 1987; Perrenoud, 1993; Smith, 2013; Snyder, 1973).

**Incivility:** Referred to as interpersonal misconduct involving disregard for others and a violation of norms of respect (Alt & Itzkovich, 2015; McKinne, 2008; Misawa, 2015; Myers, 2012).

**Intersectionality:** Considered the interconnection of social categorizations, frequently seen as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, and regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage (Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989; Kimmel, 2013; Misawa, 2015).

**Marginalized Groups:** Similarly known as social exclusion, or social marginalization, is the process where individuals are systematically denied access to certain rights, opportunities and resources typically available different groups (e.g., housing, employment, healthcare, civic engagement, democratic participation, and due process) (Silver, 1994).

**Micro-aggression:** Describes everyday insults and dismissals received by those of different races, genders, abilities, sexual orientations, religions, and other socially marginalized groups (Wing Sue, 2010).

**Predominantly White Institutions:** Institutions of higher learning in which the White student population accounts for fifty percent or more of the greater student enrollment (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015).

**Racism:** A system of advantage based on racial characteristics (Tatum, 1997).

**Undocumented Immigrant College Student:** School-aged immigrants that have entered the United States without inspection or overstayed their visas regardless of parental supervision (Gamez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017).

**White Privilege:** A hierarchical structure that rewards individuals who possess the characteristics of the White, Christian, straight, middle-class, male demographic, while punishing those with more diverse qualities and limiting their ability to be successful within the higher education environment (Coyle, 2011; Peart, 2015).

### **Summary**

This study sought to illustrate the challenges undocumented immigrant student populations face within higher education settings, particularly Predominantly White Institutions. While some research exists on the topic of bullying in higher education (e.g., Coyne, 2011; Peart, 2013, 2015), hidden curriculum (e.g., Dilendik, 1976; Kendall, 2013; Smith, 2013), and workplace bullying (e.g., Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Misawa, 2015; Myers, 2012), there is a dearth of literature that connects these concepts in relation to marginalized students in higher education. As is addressed in the next chapter, these concerns play a significant role in retention and persistence at an institution, as well as the other issues that undocumented students may face. The outcome of gathering and analyzing student narratives of their experiences with institutional culture supports the development of effective strategies specific to the issues experienced in an institution.

In the next chapter, a detailed review of the relevant literature is explored in connection with the development of the study. The chapter begins with a discussion of the undocumented immigrant population, their challenges, as well as the state and federal

policies that have been implemented. A discussion of institutional interpretations of these policies is also provided. Additionally, a review of the theoretical framework is offered; this review will include contextual information on Critical Theory and Predominantly White Institutions. The chapter concludes with a discussion regarding how the literature supports the methodological approach utilized in this study.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter provides a contextual backdrop and conceptual framework within which to situate my exploration of how colleges' interpretations of federal (DACA) and state (DREAM) policies, as seen through the Critical Theory lens, are reflected in undocumented immigrant college student experiences and intentions to persist. In this chapter, I review the existing literature on the topics of undocumented immigrants in higher education, undocumented immigrant post-secondary legislation, hidden curriculum, and Critical Theory. My goal is to develop a solid foundation upon which to build the present study (Creswell, 2013).

The process of reviewing relevant literature consisted of identifying and exploring studies related to undocumented immigrant college student populations, reviews of federal-level DACA and state-level DREAM Acts, hidden curriculum, and Predominantly White Institutions in higher education. I generated an initial bibliography using the many articles, books, and other sources that could aid in developing foundational knowledge of undocumented immigrant experiences at the higher educational-level. The materials included in this bibliography also served as a starting point for identifying other resources and developing relevant search terms.

After several searches through trusted research sources, including ProQuest, Education Full Text, JSTOR, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and abstracts from dissertations, I determined that the literature exploring the experiences of undocumented community college students is sparse. Further, I could find no literature that

directly compared these students' lived experiences as they attended either a DREAM or non-DREAM Act college or university. As a result of the limited research, I reviewed targeted studies on undocumented immigrants that sought to interpret their experience within a specific setting, state, or institution.

Of significant value to this study is understanding the institutional culture that consistently confronts undocumented immigrants, and within which they are expected to assimilate themselves. Aligned with this culture, hidden curriculum is similarly related to an institution's unspoken norms, values, and expectations that structure the interactions between students, staff, and faculty on campus (Beran, 2006; Smith, 2013). The subsequent campus space created, or institutional culture, is the location of the interpretation and enactment of educational and legal policies (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). The Critical Theory lens (Agger, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Schram, 2006) guides people toward understanding the nature of social structures that dominate, bully, and oppress disenfranchised populations (Collins, 2015; Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014).

### **Undocumented Immigrant College Students**

The issues undocumented immigrant students face in higher education are addressed throughout the literature (e.g., Conway, 2009; Dickson & Pender, 2013; Drachman, 2006; Olivas, 2009; 2012; Perez, 2010; Potochnick, 2014; Sheehy, 2014). However, the debate regarding post-secondary access for undocumented immigrants between the federal government and several states is one that raises new concerns as to how these students will be supported (e.g., Camarota, 2012; Conway, 2009; Diaz-Strong, et al., 2010; Drachman, 2006; NCSL, 2015; Perez, 2010). Regardless of location throughout the country,

undocumented students and their families continue to face the same barriers to success regarding access, finance, and school choice.

### **Access Issues**

With an ever-increasing number of undocumented students earning their high school diploma or the equivalent GED (Conway, 2009; Siqueiros, in Dolan, 2005), the burden of finding a path to post-secondary education grows even heavier. Between a fear of their immigration status being revealed (Perez, 2010) and that of rejection from their desired academic institutions, an undocumented student's legal status presents a significant barrier to education (Drachman, 2006). Many of these students fail to even complete high school, as they see little value in it with no future prospects (Fuligni, 2001; Potochnick, 2014). Some researchers have argued that the *Plyler* case, in which the U.S. Supreme Court held that states cannot constitutionally deny students a free public education on account of their immigration status (Crosnoe, Lopez-Gonzalez, & Muller, 2004), sets increased expectations for undocumented students to pursue higher education, without adequate resources to sustain it (Conway, 2009; Drachman, 2006; Perez, 2010).

Perhaps the greatest challenge to higher education access for undocumented students is in the actual cost of attendance (Perez, 2010). As an undocumented immigrant student, institutional fees are charged at either an out-of-state or international rate, doubling and sometimes tripling the cost (Perez, 2010). Nineteen states have elected to offer undocumented students in-state resident tuition (ISRT) as long as they commit to residing in the state for a predetermined length of time, enter certain fields of study with high career placement rates (e.g., health, IT, education), and remain in good standing both academically and legally (NCSL, 2015). However, receiving ISRT does not qualify these students for

federal financial aid, meaning they must secure funding for themselves (Dickson & Pender, 2013; Perez, 2010). Given the dearth of private funds and scholarships available for undocumented immigrants, many students select alternative pathways to post-secondary education, and even receive these recommendations from high school staff (Perez, 2010).

Bearing in mind the financial barriers, undocumented students are frequently funneled toward community colleges as an affordable option despite academic or career interests (Conway, 2009; Diaz-Strong, et al., 2010). Nationally, community college tuition averages around \$2,500 annually, public four-year institutions average \$7,000, while private four-year institutions average over \$26,000 (Diaz-Strong et al., 2010). These prices force undocumented students to pursue a cheaper option, that is closer to home, and that may similarly provide needed remediation (Conway, 2009). While it may appear like a step in the right direction for these students, community college can limit post-secondary options for students of color, as completion and transfer rates for this population rest around 17-18% (Ornelas & Solorzano, 2004; Perez, 2010).

To compound the challenges undocumented students face at their community colleges, federal education funding continues to decrease across the board, reducing the resources available to support students. Recent estimates based on high school graduation rates and enrollment trends suggest that close to 1.8 million students will fail to gain entrance to a post-secondary institution over the next ten years, with over 1.3 million of those identifying as Latino (Chavez, Flores, & Lopez-Garza, 2017; Conway, 2009; Siqueiros, in Dolan, 2005). In response to this significant need, undocumented students will face increased competition for the limited resources and barriers to their educational attainment. Some of these barriers are in the form of hidden curriculum, as Diaz-Strong and her colleagues (2010)

discovered in a survey of undocumented immigrant college students. Their work revealed undocumented immigrant challenges as a result of experiencing a lack of institutional transparency in procedures and policies. However, undocumented immigrants also struggled due to a lack of access to institutional financial support, as well as a constant fear of deportation for themselves, family members, or peers on campus. As a result, these concerns present persistence issues, as these students may struggle to remain focused on their path to educational completion (Conway, 2009).

### **Paying for College**

As undocumented immigrants live at poverty levels 50% higher than native born citizens, the lack of access to federal financial aid significantly deters many students from considering higher education (Conway, 2009). These poverty levels force many undocumented immigrant households to seek some form of welfare, and as many as one-in-three are in similar financial circumstances (Crosnoe, Lopez-Gonzalez, & Muller, 2004). For the many of these students, their only assistance is in the form of receiving ISRT based on their state of residence. However, some states (e.g., New Mexico, Texas, and Utah) have elected to offer additional financial support beyond ISRT, and provide financial aid to undocumented students as a way to mitigate their financial challenges (Drachman, 2006; Perez, 2010).

For many undocumented immigrant students, finding funds for college involves working long hours for modest wages while attending college part-time (Perez, 2010). Adding to their financial burden, these students often shoulder significant responsibility in their parents' household, including paying some of the bills (Potochnick, 2014). The determining factor for whether many undocumented immigrant students will attend college

relies on the family placing value on education and being willing to make additional sacrifices to invest in the student's college journey (Fulgini, 2001; Potochnick, 2014).

Without sufficient support and with only limited resources, students need to identify their college scholarship and educational opportunities early in their high school careers (Perez, 2010). While some scholarship money is available for undocumented students, it is often insufficient to meet the financial demands of college for undocumented students pursuing post-secondary education (Olivas, 2012; Perez, 2010). Organizations like the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) actively compile private scholarships for which undocumented students without a social security number are eligible (Allen, 2006). Additionally, immigrant students with a temporary status in the United States, as seen with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA, are eligible for funding through the \$32 million TheDream.US scholarship (Sheehy, 2014). Finally, some institutions offer their undocumented students the opportunity to utilize payment plans, while others have developed institutional scholarships (Sheehy, 2014).

### **Federal Legislation**

The United States federal government has historically played gatekeeper to undocumented immigrants in higher education. Beginning with Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, undocumented students have been prohibited from access to resources like federal financial aid (Dickson & Pender, 2013; Drachman, 2006; Olivas, 2009; Potochnick, 2014). The trend continued in 1996, when both the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWOA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) were enacted to prohibit access to state and local

higher education benefits (Dickson & Pender, 2013; Drachman, 2006; Olivas, 2009; Potochnick, 2014).

In response, federal legislation has been introduced to address the interests and needs of undocumented students. The Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) was a bi-partisan bill introduced to Congress in 2001 by senators Orrin Hatch (R-UT) and Richard Durbin (D-IL). Despite support on both sides of the political spectrum, the legislation did not pass, and it has been unsuccessfully reintroduced several times in recent years (Batalova, 2010; Dietrich, 2012; Drachman, 2006; Flores, 2010). The goal of the DREAM Act was to extend a conditional legal status for undocumented residents, provided they met certain requirements, namely: entered the US prior to the age of 16, resided in the country for at least five contiguous years prior to legislative enactment, earned a high school diploma or equivalent, and are less than 35 years of age (Batalova, 2010; Olivas, 2009). Additionally, once granted conditional status, individuals must: a) obtain a degree from an accredited institution of higher education or honorably serve in the US military, and b) maintain high moral character while in conditional residential status. Inability to meet either criterion would result in loss of status and potential deportation (Batalova, 2010; Ojeda, 2010; Olivas, 2009). If passed, it is estimated that over 2.1 million undocumented youth would currently be eligible and benefit from the DREAM Act (Batalova, 2010). The most debated portion of the Act, however, is its pathway to citizenship and access to federal financial aid, both issues that continue to create divisiveness (Batalova, 2010; Olivas, 2009).

While a federal DREAM Act continues to struggle, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) program successfully passed through Congress in 2012 under President Barack Obama's oversight. Under this legislation, a student receives a status for

two years once they successfully sign up, meet the criteria, and pay the required \$2,000 fee (Bozick & Miller, 2013; Sheehy, 2014). Once enrolled, the program guarantees that undocumented students attending any K-12 or higher education institution cannot be deported (Bozick & Miller, 2013). While a path to citizenship or access to financial aid is not included, DACA has provided safety and security to thousands of students pursuing the American Dream (Sheehy, 2014).

### **State DREAM Acts**

Despite the lack of a federal DREAM Act, states have moved independently to support the needs and interests of undocumented students. The state of Texas took the lead on the state initiatives in passing H.B. 1403 in 2001, granting undocumented students access to ISRT and delaying any deportation processes that the Department of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) can instigate (Dietrich, 2012; Flores & Horn, 2010; Potochnick, 2014). This legislation represented significant cost savings for undocumented students, as out-of-state tuition rates for Texas can exceed in-state costs by 140%, equating to nearly \$6,500 per year of community college tuition (Dickson & Pender, 2013; Gonzales, 2009; Potochnick, 2014). A key component of the Texas law included the shift in what documentation was required to prove residency in the state. Prior to 2001, students needed to possess a social security card, tax returns, voter ID, and a state driver's license to demonstrate their residency. However, following the enactment of H.B. 1403, a student need only provide a high school diploma or equivalent from a Texas institution, and reside in the state with their guardians for a minimum of three years to qualify for ISRT (Dickson & Pender, 2013).

In spite of some signs of progress, several states have struggled to take steps forward, while others are actively working to prevent DREAM Act legislation. States like Arizona, South Carolina, Georgia, Colorado, and Oklahoma have previously passed several measures to prohibit access for undocumented students (Potochnick, 2014). However, to further complicate the issue, both Colorado and Oklahoma recently enacted legislation granting undocumented students ISRT, shifting their policies in a different direction (Nelson, Robinson, & Bergivin, 2014). Arizona repealed its state ban preventing undocumented students from attending their institutions, but an estimated 500,000 undocumented immigrant students reside in the state and continue to face growing tuition costs because of out-of-state residency rules (Olivas, 2009; Potochnick, 2014). Similarly, Georgia passed legislation in 2007 that prevented undocumented students from establishing in-state residency and saw a two-percent decrease in enrollment statewide (Olivas, 2009). Further, Alabama and South Carolina have positioned their states firmly in opposition to undocumented students residing there. Non-citizens in these states are prohibited from gaining admission to most, if not all, public higher education institutions within state boundaries (Dickson & Pender, 2013).

The arguments in opposition of state DREAM Acts vary, but in many cases, undocumented students are labeled as lawbreakers that should not be rewarded for their presence in the U.S. (Drachman, 2006). Advocates against this legislation argue that providing financial subsidies would only serve to invite other undocumented students into each state, over-burdening an under-funded system (Perez, 2010). In Texas, some have sought similar access to ISRT rates as out-of-state students, arguing that DREAM Acts provide preferential treatment. However, the claims have been dismissed on the grounds that “the legal requirements for a non-citizen to obtain ISRT are more stringent than the legal

requirements for a citizen who either resides in Texas or moves to Texas...[therefore] non-citizens are not receiving preferential treatment but rather are facing more legal scrutiny” (Dickson & Pender, 2013, p. 127). Finally, some view the state DREAM Acts as wasting resources, as well as institutional and undocumented students’ time, as the absence of a federal DREAM Act leaves no clear path to citizenship. Ultimately, the concern expressed by those against the DREAM Acts is that without citizenship, the resulting degree will fail to produce improved employment opportunities and compensation, and therefore not meet the needs of the U.S. labor market (Flores & Horn, 2010).

Regardless of opposition, additional states continue to introduce and enact legislation favorable to undocumented immigrant student enrollment in higher education through access to the state’s ISRT. Potochnick (2014) studied the trends among states and congressional representation to identify trends in growth. She discovered that states with at least one female member in the legislature and a significant foreign-born population enhanced the probability that the state would introduce and adopt a DREAM Act bill.

While state DREAM Acts possess similar characteristics, they can vary in the pathway an undocumented student can take to pursue higher education. Two processes that ultimately seek to mitigate tuition costs are commonly used, but each process seeks to mitigate costs in different ways. The first classifies undocumented immigrants as residents of the state for tuition purposes, utilizing the same criteria as used for U.S. citizens, while the second creates an exemption from non-resident tuition costs for qualified undocumented immigrants (Nelson, Robinson, & Bergevin, 2014). Despite the differences in language, the requirements remain consistent in mandating the students: a) receive a diploma or equivalent from an in-state high school, b) be accepted and registered at a state institution of higher

education, and c) demonstrate a willingness to seek lawful residence within the United States at the earliest opportunity (Nelson, Robinson, & Bergavin, 2014). Access to ISRT significantly increases the likelihood that undocumented immigrants will enter and persist in higher education, and ultimately alters the economic trajectory of the youth within their given state (Flores, 2010; Kaushal, 2008).

While state DREAM Acts provide a necessary avenue to college for undocumented students in several states, they will continue to fall short without federal legislation (Dietrich, 2012). The absence of a permanent resident status or other path to citizenship is a continual barrier to undocumented students and their advocates. With a federal mandate and path to citizenship, DREAM students would finally be eligible to access the resources and support they need to achieve their educational goals (Olivas, 2009).

### **Summary and Gaps in Undocumented Immigrant College Student Literature**

The undocumented immigrant college student population continues to face significant barriers to achievement via issues of access and financial resources. While some states have worked to support this population through DREAM Acts, they fall short in providing access to other basic resources non-immigrants receive (Conway, 2009). Literature in this area has discussed the significance of DREAM Acts on both the state and federal levels, but has thus far not addressed the experiences of these students at the institutional level (Potochnick, 2014). This study is an important addition to the literature through the consideration of the institutional culture from the perspective of undocumented immigrant college students. The following section addresses the concept of hidden curriculum and describes how unspoken expectations embedded within this curriculum can play a role in the success undocumented students experience.

## Hidden Curriculum

The *hidden curriculum*, as coined by Philip Jackson (1968), suggests that educational institutions operate not only with the explicitly stated expectations, goals, “and teacher-prepared objectives, but also in the myriad of beliefs and values transmitted tacitly through the social relations and routines that characterized day-to-day school experience” (Giroux, 1983, p. 284; Harambolos & Holborn, 1991). The hidden curriculum also includes the subtle and implied messages about education that, according to several studies (Anyon, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Smith, 2013), serve to reinforce the dominant status quo. This “hidden curriculum” is an institution’s norms, values, and expectations that structure the campus interactions between students, staff, faculty, and administrators (Beran, 2006; Smith, 2013).

Bowles and Gintis (1975) describe the hidden curriculum through the example of the educational quality of some public elementary and secondary schools as a reflection of the broader economic conditions available to the students. Students from underserved backgrounds tend to be clustered in the areas where schools have “minimal possibilities for advancement [that] mirror the characteristics of inferior job situations” whereas students at institutions in affluent areas experience more opportunities for student participation and creative instruction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 132). While unwritten, this curriculum is still experienced by every student, and both hidden and overt curricula influence students, their experiences, their successes, and their opportunities.

Beyond the unwritten effects of the hidden curriculum, the overt curriculum similarly encourages educational institutions, especially those in under-resourced communities, to reinforce the prevailing community culture of poverty and disenfranchise those without the

needed capital, or access to resources (Carl, 2017). An institution's pedagogical approach serves as an example of this combined hidden and overt curriculum. Most educational institutions operate under the "banking concept," through which the faculty are the custodians of valuable knowledge that students may only passively receive, and which serves as a mechanism that keeps students passive to their instructors as well as subjugated (Freire, 2000; Salin & Hoel, 2013).

This banking concept is further reinforced as educational institutions proffer "myths indispensable to the preservation of the status quo" that perpetuate the dominant culture (Freire, 2000, p. 139). Included among these myths is the idea that everyone lives in a "'free society' ... the myth that anyone who is industrious can become an entrepreneur ... the myth of the universal right of education ... the myth of equality of all individuals" (Freire, 2000, p. 139). Students educated in under-resourced environments and settings are blamed for their deficiencies when these myths are not validated (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). The various forms of capital needed to overcome these deficiencies, but lacking in these environments, are often ignored (Bourdieu, 1984, 1985, 1989, 2000).

When students engage in cultural practices that are personally meaningful, and those practices are encouraged, students are more likely to persist to degree completion (Tyler, Boykin, Miller, & Hurley, 2006). Alternatively, when an institution's hidden curriculum forces students to adopt a foreign cultural practice or belief, persistence to degree completion falters (Boykin, 1986; Tyler, Boykin, Miller, & Hurley, 2006). This results in a form of "double consciousness" where underserved students find themselves in a position of needing to cope with the experience of being underserved, while needing to maintain their own legacies and traditions (Boykin, 1996). Specifically, they repeatedly experience racial and

economic oppression, as well as discrimination while their own cultural practices defy the expectations of White society (Boykin, 1986). In effect, these students find themselves without a cultural home, in that neither population can sufficiently understand their daily dilemma.

In general, educators within higher education institutions do not consciously endorse or act upon any hidden curriculum (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). However, faculty working in every educational institution, including those that recruit students from under-resourced communities, have misconceptions about these students (Moll, 2000), many of whom are first-generation (Kena, Aud, Johnson, Wang, Zhang, Rathbun, ... & Kristapovich, 2014), many of whom are underserved (Smith, 2013), and some of whom are undocumented immigrants (Olivas, 2012). As a result, faculty can fail to recognize the value of knowledge their students do possess, which can create disadvantage and discontent for those particular students (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

As the first in their family to attend college, first-generation students often have fewer resources and knowledge of the higher education process than do their peers (Bourdieu, 1984, 1985, 1989, 2000; Moll, 2000). For example, these students are often from underserved communities, with the majority entering higher education with a zero-expected family contribution (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Further, they may be unaware of the cultural expectations or norms to which students must adhere to be successful within their institutions. As a result, these students struggle to identify student resources on campus, methods for addressing concerns, and learning to adjust to the novel circumstances of higher education (Carl, 2014).

College students of color may be seen by their White counterparts as ‘different’ due to distinctiveness in dress, use of language, and even non-verbal cues (Monroe & Obidah, 2004). This distinctiveness or ‘otherness’ can create conflict with the Predominantly White Institutional culture that is detrimental to student success. As Smith (2013) discusses in her research, the greatest challenge to student success that non-dominant students face is an unknown set of expectations and rules defined by those in power, and designed to allow those in power to maintain a privileged status. What further complicates students’ ability to learn this curriculum is the extent to which their family and friends have experience with higher education. In most cases, first-generation students, students of color, and undocumented immigrant students lack the support that White, straight, Christian, middle-class students generally have and, in many cases, do not need to succeed (Beran, 2006). To that end, higher educational institutions continue to reinforce culture and structure that maintains a hierarchy of power.

It is important to note that not all versions of a hidden curriculum are considered nefarious, particularly the process for learning to adapt to new situations and interpret the expectations for being successful; however, many of these unwritten expectations continue to ensure the maintenance of a certain societal hierarchy (Jackson, 1968; Margolis & Romero, 1998). The literature does suggest that hidden curricula may not only reinforce social order, but also reinforce gender, race and sexual orientation stereotypes while emphasizing White institutions’ and its entrenchment within mainstream society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brandt, 1986; Giroux, 1983; Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Mullard, 1982; Stanworth, 1981; Willis, 1978). Similar to literature exploring bullying literature, most literature exploring the hidden curriculum is situated within secondary education. However,

some relatively recent hidden curriculum research is now found in higher education in response to the variability in post-secondary curriculum, which allows for greater potential for unwritten and hidden curriculum to exist (Ahola, 2000; Cotton & Winter, 2010; Margolis & Romero, 1998).

Institutions, administrators, faculty, staff, and students perpetuate and enact the hidden curriculum through the promotion of specific teaching philosophies, verbal and non-verbal communications, individual expectations, and the tacit reinforcement of certain knowledge and behavior through daily engagement (McLaren, 2003). However, institutional administrators and the students can partner to identify and ameliorate harmful effects of the hidden curriculum. Institutional administrators can learn about how they enact a hidden curriculum from their own students. Students are in the unique position to see interactions, policies, and campus culture and the messages institutions present in ways that administrators may not readily perceive. Further, institutional administrators can critically approach instruction in ways that educate students about tacit institutional expectations and in doing so, promote students' critical consciousness (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1998, 2000; Giroux, 2001; Kincheloe, 2008; McLaren, 2003). In this way, the hidden curriculum can be understood in a manner that enables administrators to challenge the tacitly transmitted harmful beliefs and values of those acting on behalf of the institution.

In this study, it is evident that recognition of the hidden curriculum is pivotal to understanding the segregation and discrimination of underserved student populations, specifically undocumented immigrants, within higher education.

## **Hidden Curriculum and Institutional Fit**

At this point, I believe it is important to introduce the term *institutional fit*, employed by Tinto (1975), and similar to Rootman's (1972) concept of person-role fit. Within this approach, students who feel they fit in are expected to appreciate and thus continue their association in a college. Those that do not feel as if they fit in are much more likely to withdraw from the institution (Tinto, 1975). I contend that the hidden curriculum can significantly contribute to or detract from institutional fit by influencing the social relationships, connectedness or sense of belonging, and human capital, including resources, technical skills, or information, to which a student has access at their institution (Dilendik, 1976). Tinto's (1975) model of student retention emphasizes the significant role of institutional fit in determining student success and degree completion (Henslin, 2016).

Tinto (1982) expanded on his original model to identify the importance of institutional policies in instruction and student affairs that aid retention as a student engages with organizational "actors" such as faculty, staff, and administrators. According to Tinto, retention efforts and the social integration of students, defined as the process by which all members of a group share and discuss their beliefs, values, and norms to establish a collective consciousness (Durkheim, 1973), are the responsibility all organizational actors of the institution, not just those in student affairs. Research demonstrates that a critical component of student retention is frequent, quality interactions with organizational actors who support and promote an institutional climate that is welcoming, values diversity, and provides quality academic and social engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1997; Tinto, 1997; 1998).

However, other literature has questioned the effectiveness of Tinto's work, suggesting it may be insufficient to interpret the overall institutional fit and sense of belonging of an educational environment (Baird, 2001; Kraemer, 1997; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This research suggests the institutional fit theory lacks generalizability to other populations beyond traditional students, as well as to settings beyond traditional four-year institutions. Sense of institutional fit and belonging is significant in determining one's place within an institution of higher education, frequently within the contexts of academic and social interactions. In the case of underserved students, the historical and contextual information that surrounds the culture of an institution, such as being a predominately White institution or situated in a region where immigrants are unwelcome, is key to understanding how and why a student, particularly an underserved student, may feel that he or she does not 'fit' or belong (Tierney, 1999). In the case of Predominantly White Institutions, underserved students face even greater challenges in assimilating into the institutional culture, as their personal and cultural experiences are a departure from that of the dominant culture (Tierney, 1999). As a result, these students need their institutions to support them through programming and support.

Higher education institutions tend to view underserved student populations as a homogenous group (McNairy, 2006). As related to Latinos/as, this approach has also led to stereotypes suggesting all Latinos/as originate from Mexico, undocumented immigrants cannot speak English, or that Latinos/as are not intelligent enough for higher education (McNairy, 2006; Smith, 2013). The strategies used to support these populations are often designed to "fix" these students so they can institutionally fit – and conform to – existing institutional norms, rather than adapting the institution to meet student needs. For example,

underserved student populations are placed in situations where they must rearrange priorities, including taking time away from family to study instead of working or supporting them in other ways (McNairy, 2006). These strategies serve primarily to reinforce the hidden curriculum, and force students through an acculturation process, or to accept that they will not be able to remain at the institution (Smith, 2013). The result of implementing these ‘one size fits all’ strategies that use a deficit approach (Millar & Wynne, 1988) is often poor retention rates among underrepresented student populations, as the strategies were initially designed for the needs of White students.

### **Summary and Gaps in Hidden Curriculum Literature**

This section offered an overview of the literature in hidden curriculum and its relationship to the concept of institutional fit. In brief, multiple factors contribute to underserved students experiencing poor institutional fit and struggling with the institutional hidden curriculum. It is significant to note that most research about the hidden curriculum emphasizes the role of covert expectations and norms in academic settings at the primary and secondary educational levels. The current study, however, expands research about the hidden curriculum into the undergraduate years of post-secondary education, particularly within the community college. Additionally, the limited efforts to consider underserved student populations focus primarily on African-American youth, avoiding undocumented immigrant populations. The present research sought to focus on this specific population within underserved students in higher education and broadens the existing literature.

This study also incorporated Tinto’s (1975) concept of institutional fit into the concept of hidden curriculum. I suggest that it is important to do so because the culture developed within an institution is directly related to the unspoken expectations and norms

that students experience. This combination serves to clarify the undocumented students' experience and engagement with an institution's culture, and the ultimate impact it will have on success. It is this culture, and the subsequent interactions and inequities it creates, that necessitates the introduction and exploration of next concept in this chapter.

### **Critical Theory**

Before addressing Critical Theory, I contend that it is important to begin with the fundamental concept of oppression. The term has been situationally-stretched to the point of being almost meaningless, where almost any circumstance can qualify as oppression. To that end, oppression must be defined more narrowly for its understanding to be clarified. Humans can be miserable without being oppressed, and the denial of oppression does not negate their feelings or that they have suffered (Frye, 1983; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). In truly defining the word, it is necessary to consider the root of oppression, press. Press assumes force is applied and barriers are imposed to restrain, restrict, or prevent a person or object's motion or mobility (Frye, 1983).

Oppression positions a person in the circumstance to either silently acquiescing to avoid harsher treatment or displaying anything less than silence and being perceived as mean, bitter, angry, or dangerous (Frye, 1983). The latter response can cost one his or her livelihood, or worse, rape, arrest, beating, and murder. Examples of oppression are evident throughout the world in denial of access to resources, education, and opportunity. The experience and perception of the oppressed is that most, if not all, aspects of life are confined and shaped by the forces and barriers of society (Barrett, 2014; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). These unavoidable limitations restrict and penalize motion in any direction, so stagnation is encouraged (Blauner, 1972; Frye, 1983).

Oppression might be viewed as the bars of a birdcage, a systematic network of barriers that work together to surround and hinder the occupant's movement (Frye, 1983). The context of these oppressive behaviors is also very important, as the circumstances assist in determining whether something contributes to an unfair structure, one that imposes forces and barriers that immobilize or restrict a group or category of people. Barriers have different meanings to those on different sides of them, even though they are a barrier to both (Frye, 1983). Barriers can take the form of standardized examinations, monuments or memorials to individuals on campus with discriminatory histories, and stereotypical threats to academic competency based on physical characteristics (Pittman, 2010). Oppression takes the form of many different activities, including violence, manipulation, marginalization, subjection, and cultural expansionism.

Oppressive behavior is so pervasive within the American culture that it appears normal and goes unrecognized or unchecked (Agger, 1991; Collins, 2015; Frye, 1983; Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014). As a result, discriminatory and oppressive behaviors often mimic the biases and attitudes that are prevalent within the dominant culture (Agger, 1991; Frye, 1983; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). Discriminatory behavior and attitudes are not something that can be fixed through legislation, as oppression operates as a chameleon, course correcting continuously and adapting so that the preservation of White dominance is ensured (Agger, 1991; Collins, 2015; Frye, 1983; Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014). Oppressive behaviors are purely a social construct, as no biological support exists to maintain the ancient practice of distinguishing one's group from another to diminish worth, intelligence, morality, or ability (Collins, 2015; Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014). These practices can appear as "microaggressions, or potentially bullying

behaviors, which are brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271).

“Whiteness” is an identification, with specific characteristics that demand its own differential in wages, education, health care, and property values that differ from underserved populations (Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014). Within U.S. culture, the value of the social construction of race placed on Whiteness turns White skin into a commodity that occupies an elevated place on the racial hierarchy (Collins, 2015; Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014). The lens that has promoted revealing these societal norms and investigating their underlying assumptions is that of Critical Theory (Agger, 1991; Collins, 2015; Frye, 1983; Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014).

Critical Theory originated in the German-based Frankfurt School’s Institute for Social Research in 1923 as a result of the efforts from Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, and Friedrich Pollock (Hughes, 1975; Jay, 1973; Kellner, 1989). Their focus was on explaining the failed socialist revolution previously forecasted by Karl Marx in the mid-nineteenth century. They hoped to develop a more modern version of Marxism that might successfully emerge in place of the budding twentieth-century capitalism (Habermas, 1971). Horkheimer released the school’s initial rebuttal to capitalism in his 1937 essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” which provided the basic foundation for Critical Theory (Habermas, 1971). Building upon the work of Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs, who initiated the Western Marxism movement and introduced the concept of “class consciousness,” or the struggle to achieve the true social location of one’s class (1971), the Frankfurt theorists believed Marx

underestimated the extent to which the false consciousness of the working class could be manipulated in the pursuit of an effective social and economic system (Habermas, 1971, 1975). False consciousness, used by Marxist Friedrich Engels (1935), is the general belief that capitalism produces internal expectations of wealth and materialism that are unsustainable for the workers responsible for creating the commodities (Agger, 1991).

The impetus for the Frankfurt School theorists at this time was the impending maturation of capitalism and the resulting coping mechanisms that allowed it to adapt to new threats like those from socialists. The significant by-product of this development was the strengthening of false consciousness, persuading the working class into an acceptance that the prevailing social system was both unavoidable as well as logical (Agger, 1991; Habermas, 1971). This exploitation as a result of capitalism encourages people to internalize values and norms so that they may participate in the system without dissonance and share in a common belief system (O'Neill, 1976; Parsons 1937). As a result, people within a capitalist system are encouraged to strive for personal betterment, but that they must become more efficient practitioners of capitalism in order to succeed (Agger, 1991). This belief minimizes an individual's ability to visualize his or her true potential and willingness to violate the societal norms that are in place (Marcuse, 1955).

Critical Theory out of the Frankfurt School has decisively positioned itself in opposition to positivism, arguing that much of the social world can only be understood through self-reflection and interaction (Habermas, 1971). Habermas' communication theory (1984, 1987) serves as a unifying resource as it integrates a vast array of theoretical and empirical strategies, incorporating Marxism and psychoanalysis alongside functionalism (McCarthy, 1978). This centralized approach to Critical Theory has promoted the legitimacy

of the Frankfurt School's research, but more importantly, it has created a space where issues of social change are addressed through self-reflection and communication (Agger, 1991; Habermas, 1971). In doing so, people are encouraged to pursue rational discourse to identify alternative social policies and seek others around them with whom to build consensus.

With a growing awareness of modern U.S. social constructs such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, Habermas contributed further to Critical Theory in the areas of marginalization based on sex and race (1981). This addition to the canon expands awareness into domains previously ignored by the dominant class. More importantly, Habermas' theory forces empiricists in the social sciences to investigate the underlying assumptions of their field (Agger, 1991). As Horkheimer, Adorno, and Noeri (2002) suggest, the unwillingness to subject empirical claims to rigorous reflection and criticism serves to reduce the validity of a positivist claim.

Central to the biases and discrimination that Critical Theory examines is racial imagery (Armour, 1997; Churchill, Vander Wall, & Trudell, 2002; Conley, 1999; Dyer, 1997; Freeman, 1995; hooks, 1994). This specific imagery is at play in the categorization of the whole world, and consists of judgments of capability and worth that inform practice based on how someone looks, speaks, where they are from, and what they eat (Dyer, 1997; Freeman, 1995; hooks, 1994). These categorizations and judgments are common motivations for bullying and hazing behavior (Conley, 1999; Freeman, 1995; Glick Schiller, 1999). Until recently, any discussion of race has avoided any inclusion of "whiteness" and only used the term as an identification of the "other" (Armour, 1997; Churchill, Vander Wall, & Trudell, 2002; Conley, 1999; Dyer, 1997; Freeman, 1995; hooks, 1994). Whites have historically been in the power position and assume the responsibility to speak for all of humanity as

opposed to just their race (Dyer, 1997; Freeman, 1995; hooks, 1994). Identifying whiteness as a race reduces this power. In the media and in most other aspects, we tend to only race individuals of color, continuing to elevate whiteness over all other identities. This invisibility of race allows white liberals to become complicit, while claiming an absence of racism, and respond with amazement or anger when attention is drawn to their whiteness (Armour, 1997; Conley, 1999; Dyer, 1997). As whiteness becomes more fragmented by intersectionality, whites attempt to re-center with “me-too-ism” and bring the attention back onto themselves and any perceived plights (Dyer, 1997; hooks, 1994).

What is clear is the importance of the explicit stories that are generated from this different frame of reference, specifically about persons of color and other underserved populations. These voices, so dissimilar from those of the dominant mainstream culture, should be heard and shared (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Tate, 1994). Critical Theory provides a unique lens within this study by its focus on “studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 2). Born in response to many significant and powerful events, including the German labor movement and the global response to anti-Semitism from World War II, the theory understands and validates social justice concerns, while addressing the fuller picture that includes "economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3).

Critical Theory serves in opposition to the current philosophy prominent in the United States that social inequality is a thing of the past (Balz & Clement, 2017). Ultimately, institutions and structures that violate individual agency receive scrutiny through this lens, as Critical Theory seeks to free society of those antiquated constructions that challenge upward

mobility (Carter, 2008). In practice, Critical Theory demonstrates value as the “framework emphasizes the importance of viewing policies and policy making in the proper historical and cultural context to deconstruct their racialized content” (Villalpando & Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 244-245). The ultimate hope of using this lens is to unveil the many systems of racism, discrimination, and injustice that remain hidden and reinforced within our historical institutions, and render them inept and incapable of further harm. I hope the present study serves to illuminate the underlying institutional hidden curriculum that reinforces those systems of oppression for undocumented immigrants.

Several researchers have applied Critical Theory to the context of education, and it is important to acknowledge the framework prior literature has established. The research of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) connected social inequity to the foundation of the educational structure of the United States, and further elaborated three significant components from which this inequity is borne. First and foremost, they determined that the concept of race serves as a fundamental characteristic of individual identity and the social expectations associated with that identity is widely reinforced throughout the U.S. The second factor, as Ladson-Billings and Tate describe it, speaks to the emphasis and value U.S. society places on material possessions, greatest amongst these, property rights. Their final component serves as an intersection of race and property rights, specifically, how social inequality is hierarchically derived from your place on the spectrum (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Patton, McEwen, Rendon, and Howard-Hamilton (2007) reinforced the work of Ladson-Billings and Tate in many ways, as well as contributed to the overall Critical Theory literature. Of their many contributions, these researchers’ work served to oppose the

prominent discussions and descriptions of mainstream society's success related to neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy. In particular, they suggest that the efforts across the country are more superficial in nature, but the underlying culture, beliefs, and motivations remain (Balz & Clement, 2017). In addition, Patton et al., (2007) acknowledged the need and value for contextual or historical analysis, as opposed to a proclivity toward ahistoricism. This is important because lessons learned from prior experiences tend to be lost when the context of the event is minimized or even erased from history. Further, the examination of those experiences must include the first-hand expertise of those with direct interaction with the phenomenon under study, accounting for the perspectives different than that of the researcher and developing a richer context (Patton et al., 2007). As previously noted, many of these lessons overlap, which can be summarized into fundamental Critical Theory tenets:

1. Racism and discrimination are routine in American society and strategies are needed for revealing them in their various forms (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995);
2. Social constructs like race, gender, class, as well as others frequently intersect to influence the access to resources that underserved populations possess (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995);
3. Experiential knowledge and storytelling provide invaluable information and access to "analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down" (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv);
4. An emphasis and dedication to social justice (Patton et al., 2007); and

5. An examination of racism and discrimination across academic disciplines (Carter, 2008, p. 471).

These basic tenets can be used as an "important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power" (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 19). Critical Theory introduces into social justice research the significant idea that acts of racism, discrimination, and other injustices are not singular events, but reflect large-scale biases and structures that have been embedded into society through generations of White privilege (Taylor, 1998). Even more, value is placed on the lived experience of underserved populations and their expertise, as opposed to the established hegemonic universal truths (Taylor, 1998).

Critical Theory was a valuable component to this study as I sought to use the lived experiences of undocumented immigrant students through an examination of their stories and observations. I note that, " Critical Theory values the voices and experiences of those who are least heard in education, especially as they provide counter-understandings to dominant ideologies" (Gildersleeve, Croom & Vasquez, 2011, p. 97). Many of the dominant narratives that are experienced in society perpetuate myths that correlate dark skin to lower socio-economic status or substandard academic prowess, and are disseminated with the intention of maintaining the hegemonic hierarchy (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Yosso, 2006). The stories of undocumented immigrants' interactions with institutional culture and hidden curricula will serve to illuminate whether underserved student populations suffer institutionally reinforced microaggressions, discrimination, and a set of unwritten expectations that are related to poor academic success and retention.

## Summary

The literature of undocumented immigrant students in higher education is underdeveloped, particularly as it relates to hidden curriculum and state DREAM Act legislation at community colleges. In this review, the key research on undocumented immigrant college students, state DREAM Acts, and hidden curriculum reveal many of the same challenges that face this population and how these interact to reinforce the dominant culture. The literature discussed in this chapter, in concert with the Critical Theory framework, does not encapsulate all the experiences underserved, particularly undocumented immigrant students are confronted with in higher education, but serves to shed light on the gaps and needs. It is particularly important to note at this point that the absence of contrasting views serves as a reflection of the overall deficit in the literature related to the intersection of undocumented immigrants, hidden curriculum, and higher education. As future research is conducted, alternative viewpoints may become evident and provide additional insight into undocumented immigrant student experiences.

The following chapter presents the methodology used to explore this topic of inquiry in detail. In particular, the chapter includes a discussion of the identified setting, sampling method, and the qualitative inquiry tools of assessment employed in the present study. The chapter concludes with a review of limitations, delimitation, and ethical implications.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This qualitative, multi-site critical case study was designed to uncover the institutional interpretations of federal (DACA) and state (DREAM) policies, and how these interpretations influenced undocumented immigrant students' experiences in accessing and persisting to degree completion at a Predominantly White Institution. The study focused on the experiences of these student participants at two Midwestern institutions co-located within the same metropolitan area. The unit of analysis was the two institutions as described through the narratives of the undocumented immigrant students, and how they perceived the institutional interpretation of the state DREAM Act and federal DACA influenced their experience in accessing the institution and persisting until degree completion. Case study was the primary approach, which is appropriate when studying a "program, event, activity, [and] process" (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). Through a Critical Theory lens, the study explored the inequity and oppression students experienced because of the societal restrictions placed on them due to their race, ethnicity, and gender (Creswell, 2013; Fay, 1987; Parker & Lynn, 2002).

These study questions and sub questions were addressed:

**Research Question 1:** What are undocumented immigrant college students' narratives of their lived experiences around the institutional hidden curriculum specifically related to gaining access to and persisting at their community college?

**Research Question 2:** How does college adherence to state immigration legislation (DREAM Act versus non-DREAM Act) appear to influence undocumented immigrant college students' ability to gain access to and persist at their community college?

**Hypothesis:** The hidden curriculum present at a DREAM Act college will be more favorable to undocumented immigrants than the hidden curriculum at a non-DREAM Act college.

This chapter describes the method and design I used in this study; specifically, the chapter includes information regarding: (a) rationale for qualitative research; (b) study design; and (c) limitations and ethical considerations.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

My selection of qualitative inquiry as the method of analysis is due to the importance I place on the actual words and experiences of participants as comprising descriptive data (Clark, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Gobo, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan 1998). The nature of qualitative research makes possible the investigation of issues and questions critical to inequity and social justice (Clark, 2008; Patton, 1987). Specifically, the nature of qualitative research permits the researcher to identify concerns unique to participants and allows the researcher to experience diverging perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Schram, 2006). A key component of qualitative research is the idea that meaning and experience are socially constructed (Collins, 2015; Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014). As a result of the role the experience of the individual plays in the development of these constructions, qualitative research is often defined by four fundamental characteristics: (1) using and valuing the expertise and lived experience of the participant, (2) the role of the researcher is that of the primary data collection instrument, (3) strategy is driven by theory

but informed by practice, and (4) the value of qualitative inquiry is in the rich description (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2002).

Regarding the first fundamental characteristic of qualitative research, ‘using and valuing the expertise and lived experience of the participant,’ lived experiences are the subjective transactions that people create and encounter in the world; these experiences are influenced by social and cultural phenomena, such as the media or familial interactions, that affect peoples’ behaviors by either restricting or expanding possibilities (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believed the participant’s point of view is crucial to eliciting their counter stories that serve to overcome the hegemonic discourse regarding truths and beliefs. These counter stories provide “concrete lived experiences in novel and literary forms, depicting local stories” and include the “author’s critical reflections on their lives and writing processes” (Ellis & Bochner, 2014, p. 9).

The second concept, ‘the role of the researcher is that of the primary data collection instrument,’ permitted me as the researcher to note the significance of each participant’s own experience and his or her narratives of that experience. Elicitation of participants’ experiences and their accounts of these experiences can provide unique access to phenomena that cannot be captured in a laboratory setting. As related to this study, I engaged with undocumented students and encouraged them to speak their own truths as these truths related to the hidden curriculum. In doing so, I was able to capture their experiences of the institutional culture and narratives about how policy shaped their experiences using their own words. My interactions with these participants, as well as the depth of knowledge and experience participants brought to this study, afforded me, as a White male, a glimpse of the cultural dichotomies and tensions that exist in higher education.

In addressing that strategy is developed from theory, but informed by practice, a researcher designs a study based the theoretical underpinnings, but refined by the needs of the situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The more flexible the design, the more adaptable the research can be for the evolving needs of the study (Clark, 2008; Patton, 2015). As a result, the focus of questions, follow-up on emergent and/or unexpected findings, and analytical shifts can be made in the field as data provide immediate feedback about the researcher's course of study (Frankel & Devers, 2000). Should new challenges (i.e., concerns with which only undocumented immigrants might be familiar) become evident or appear significant, my role as the researcher-as-instrument permitted me to follow up on emergent and possibly unexpected important findings, as participants frequently brought up topics worth further inquiry.

In this study, the use of large groups or public interactions would have had a “chilling” effect on my ability to capture undocumented immigrants’ perspectives of institutional culture and hidden curricula experiences (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). A more focused, one-on-one approach permitted rapport building and allowed me to effectively engage my study participants on a personal level. Within these interactions, I was able modify the questions or interview procedures to meet the needs of both the study and my study participants, as well as capture significant patterns and themes that can be helpful in developing theory (Hamilton, 2004).

The fourth and final characteristic that brings value to qualitative research is the thick description that is a product of the data collection process. Thick description, as coined by Gilbert Ryle (1971), and refined by Clifford Geertz (1973), is a form of qualitative writing in which the researcher provides his or her own constructions of both the phenomenon in

question, as well as the context, such that the phenomenon becomes meaningful to the reader. As a result, the focus of the researcher's role in this process is to engage participants in more personal interactions that elicit each participant's own perspective and lived experience with the phenomenon. Qualitative research seeks to interpret the topic of concern using the expertise of those who are directly involved or connected with the occurrence. My engagement in this process promoted in-depth awareness and knowledge of undocumented immigrants' lived experience with the institutional climate and hidden curriculum at higher education institutions.

The next section focuses on the concepts of case study and Critical Theory as a means of collecting and organizing relevant data.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of My Study**

In this study, I employed a critical case study approach to uncover and explore the hidden curriculum phenomenon as experienced by undocumented immigrant college students at two different colleges, each operating under different legislative mandates. The critical case study approach within qualitative inquiry has been defined as, "... an approach to qualitative research that has a distinguished history in one of the disciplines ... that has spawned books, journals, and distinct methodology that characterizes its approach" (Creswell, 2013, p. 2). My study approach sought to understand the self-described experiences and interpretations of undocumented immigrant undergraduate students who interact with predominantly white higher education institutions in the Midwest. To do so, I applied qualitative methods of inquiry to collect implicit and explicit data from which to create meaning with these students. The primary design was a case study in which semi-structured interviews and document analysis were incorporated as forms of data to interpret

the experiences of the participants. In addition to case study, I used Critical Theory with a social justice lens to interpret participant experiences. The next section will further elaborate on the case study method and the critical case study method.

**Case study method.** The case study method permits researchers to capture the participants' personal interpretations and lived experiences through investigation of their thought processes and interactions (Yin, 1994) with, in the case of the current study, the separate development of institutional culture and hidden curriculum in two community colleges. I used the case study method because it offered me insight into the worldview of undocumented immigrant college students and hold each institution as its own separate case. I was able to understand the complexities of each student's narrative concrete and contextual knowledge, such as, in this case the gaps in knowledge and procedure that undocumented students are expected to possess without support, as well as my own interpretation of the student's narrative.

The case study approach can be used to address intangible progressions, like a student's thought process, his or her interpretation of a situation, and identify useful patterns within his or her experiences (Merriam, 1998). As the participants engaged with the phenomenon under study, which in this case was the institutional culture of the two sites, I was able to synthesize the data collected from interviews and relevant documents related to their experiences without ever removing the individual from his or her natural environment.

As Gotham (1997) stated:

The advantage of case study research is that it can capture people as they experience their everyday circumstances, thereby allowing the analyst to uncover and understand the motives and decisions of key actors and networks of actors. (, p. 22)

As data collection and analysis commences, a case study can provide an additional lens for exploration. This occurred with the present research, as the methodological approach offered substantial contextual data from each participant, which was considered both individually, as well as throughout the group, as a sort of wide lens observation. Viewing multiple experiences within similar contexts permitted me to identify overarching patterns and increase my own understanding of how undocumented students differently experience and respond to, in the case of the current study, the institutional culture and hidden curriculum in higher education. The distinct experiences of different students promote an understanding of the participants' direct familiarity and expertise surrounding the phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Patton, 2015).

A substantial strength of the case study method, that was powerful in this study, is in its ability to magnify the distinctiveness of each individual participant, while, extrapolating the experiences throughout the breadth of each case, offering a sense of generalizability to larger populations and potentially broader theories (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2002). Within this study, I employed the theoretical tradition of Critical Theory to capture the fundamental nature of each participant through his or her written words, descriptive imagery, and the articulated experiences and interpretations of his or her higher education interactions.

**Critical case study.** Participants studied within the two colleges I selected for this study in critical cases permitted me to focus on the characteristics they possess that are associated with oppression and discrimination (Janesick, 2004). These specific characteristics of the individuals within the case are what made them 'critical,' as these are protected classes that are often the recipient of oppressive or discriminatory behaviors (e.g., race, ethnicity,

gender, socio-economic status, ability, etc.) (Janesick, 2004; Kendall, 2007). The goal of these cases was to develop an understanding or theory that may be generalized to other sites.

The method of a critical case study allowed me to convey a narrative about something distinctive and special, like the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants in higher education (Janesick, 2004). In the present study, I focused on those participants in possession of the particular characteristics of foreign ethnicity and legal status (Neale, Thapa, & Boyce, 2006), as they permitted me to reveal the lived experiences around the significant theme of institutional culture (Janesick, 2004). The impact of state and federal legislation on undocumented immigrants has been an important issue every institution currently faces and continues to be a challenge in higher education. As such, a more comprehensive awareness of the challenges these students will aid institutions, and hopefully legislators, in developing improved strategies for supporting and engaging undocumented college student immigrants in the future.

Within critical case studies, it is important to utilize a clearly stated set of questions from which to frame your research (Janesick, 2004; Mukhongo, 2010). Specifically, the research questions developed for this study promote the collection of data that are grounded in Critical Theory, in that they focus this research on the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants as they confront the hidden curriculum of higher education (Sanchez, 2007). As discussed in chapter two, Critical Theory focuses on the “forms of authority and injustice that accompanied the evolution of industrial and corporate capitalism as a political-economic system” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 52), much the same way that first-generation and undocumented immigrants will be disadvantaged by the hidden curriculum established as a result of institutional mandate. As Critical Theory has moved into the postmodern era, it

situates social concerns, like undocumented immigrant access and persistence, in a political context by positioning them “in historical and cultural contexts, to implicate themselves in the process of collecting and analyzing data, and to relativize their findings” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 53). Thus, meaning is mutable as a result of quickly shifting social structures, requiring research to focus more on local manifestations.

The “critical” nature of this study extended into the analysis of data in critical discourse analysis, in the utilization of vernacular and experiences for themes. Teun Van Dijk (1993) states that critical discourse analysis “strives to provide an account of the role of language, language use, discourse or communicative events in the (re)production of dominance and inequality” (p. 279). As such, “positions and perspectives need to be chosen, for instance, against the power elites and in solidarity with dominated groups” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 281). As participant data was transcribed verbatim, I relied heavily on their own language for each experience to analyze each data set.

I will next describe the study design as it relates to the relevant theoretical framework of critical case studies and research questions used to develop it. Specifically, I will describe the study setting, participants and their selection, data collection methods, and the data analysis process.

### **Study Design**

The study design serves as the blueprint for the who, what, where, and how of research (Creswell, 2013). Each of the two colleges was considered a case for this study.

### **Study Setting**

The research was conducted at two two-year community colleges located in an urban Midwestern metropolitan community. Both were considered predominantly White

institutions, as students who self-identify as White accounted for 50% or greater of the undergraduate enrollment at each college (Brown & Dancy, 2010). Of significance is the physical location of each college; specifically, one is located within a DREAM Act state, while the other is located in a nearby state without corresponding legislation.

The first is a public institution, referred to in this study as Generic Community College – DREAM (GCC – DREAM), and is an open-access institution, meaning it is non-selective (Oxley, 2017). GCC – DREAM enrolls over 19,000 credit students at a single campus site and online. Nearly 70% of GCC – DREAM’s student population is enrolled part-time, and the average student age is 24 years. Approximately 2,600 of GCC – DREAM’s students are first-time college students, defined as students with no previous post-secondary enrollment (Gordon, 2017). The institution is a predominantly white campus, with over 68% of enrolled students identifying as White.

The second institution, referred to in this study as Generic Community College – NON-DREAM (GCC – NON-DREAM), is similarly an open-access district (Oxley, 2017), with an enrollment of over 18,000 students attending one of the five campuses or online. The student population is primarily female (58%), identifies as White (61%), and is enrolled part-time (63%). Most (56%) students are first-time college students.

As discussed earlier, community colleges are the main path into higher education for undocumented immigrant students in the United States (Conway, 2009; Diaz-Strong et al., 2010; Perez, 2010). By selecting community colleges as study sites, I was positioned to expose the challenges undocumented students face when entering higher education vis-a-vie enrollment at a community college. Additionally, it is important to include in this study colleges representing differing levels of legislative support, specifically states with and

without bills that provide ISRT to undocumented immigrant students (i.e., DREAM Act versus Non-DREAM Act) (NCSL, 2015).

### **Study Participants**

The participant selection process was an intentional method targeted at generating robust data. A purposeful sample was generated in that participants were identified and selected based on pre-determined characteristics. Patton (2015) describes purposeful sampling as a process that “focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 230). This specifically provides the researcher with information-rich cases that yield thick description for analysis. A total of six participants, three from each college site, were identified as part of a maximum variation sampling technique, with the deliberate intention of attempting to interview a wide variety of people so that their aggregate answers were as representative of the whole population's as possible (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The value each participant’s expertise brought to the study provided detailed insight into the lived experiences of students that could also represent other undocumented immigrant students in higher education.

Study participants were equally distributed among the two case-study institutions so that the differences of policy interpretation between a DREAM Act and non-DREAM Act school could be adequately explored; equal distribution also allowed me to fairly capture diverse viewpoints throughout the data. The experiences of these students were potentially representative to various undocumented immigrant student populations which allowed stronger themes to emerge and cut across many demographics. The sample included an equal representation of students utilizing self-pay, institutional aid, and third-party scholarships, as well as students with different socio-economic status. It was also important to have a fair

portrayal of males and females within the sample, with no requirements on which characteristics intersect. To better protect participant confidentiality, which was critical to my participants, I have elected not to include a table listing each participant’s pseudonym with that participant’s associated demographic characteristics.

**Demographic factors.** This chapter presents the qualitative results obtained from the six participant interviews, document analysis, and a theoretical sensitivity group.

All participants were enrolled in one of the two target community colleges in the Midwestern metropolitan area under study during the spring of 2018. The participants were evenly split between institutions, as well as by gender. While demographic data were not officially collected, as the need for participant anonymity was sacrosanct and I collected no personal data for their protection, the following data was accumulated through the participant responses to interview questions and are reflected in the tables that follow.

Table 3.1. Respondents by Institution (n = 6)

	Generic Community College – DREAM (GCC – DREAM)	Generic Community College – NON- DREAM (GCC – NON-DREAM)
Number of Respondents	50% 3	50% 3

Table 3.1 demonstrates the distribution of participants between institutions based on their enrollment status. Fifty percent (n = 3) were enrolled at Generic Community College – DREAM (GCC – DREAM), while the other fifty percent (n = 3) were enrolled at Generic Community College – NON-DREAM (GCC – NON-DREAM).

Table 3.2. Respondents by Enrollment Status (n = 6)

Enrollment Status	Generic Community College – DREAM (GCC – DREAM)	Generic Community College – NON-DREAM (GCC – NON-DREAM)
First Year	--	1
Second Year	--	--
Beyond Two Years	3	2

Table 3.2 indicates the distribution of participants in the study based on their enrollment status. Most (n = 5; 83%) were still enrolled at the community college level beyond the first two years in pursuit of completion. Of these participants, two were in their third year, one in their fourth, and the other two had taken leaves of absence extending to a seventh year. The final participant was a new student at the institution. In consultation with the gatekeeper, the prominence of students with a lengthier tenure in school was a reflection of the multiple responsibilities they must fulfill (Fuligni, 2001; Perez, 2010; Potochnick, 2014), while at the same time, these same students are more confident in their ability to share their experiences without penalty (Perez, 2015).

Table 3.3. Parents' Educational Attainment (n = 6)

Parent's Education	Father	Mother
High School or Less	5	5
College or More	--	--
Non-US College	1	1

Table 3.3 indicates the parental education of the participants interviewed. Most (n = 5; 83%) indicated that neither parent had received any instruction at the college level, and none had

parents who had received any college instruction within the U.S. system of higher education. This suggests these students will rely more heavily on the resources of the institution and others in the surrounding community outside of their direct family unit. While two participants did indicate siblings with some college experience in reference to any resources they may have, participants more expressed a dependence on peers, community organizations, and the informal “word of mouth” information sharing.

### **Study Data Sources**

To effectively capture the experiences of undocumented immigrant participants within this study, I used three data sources to form a holistic and complete understanding of the students’ lived experiences within this multi-case study. These included semi-structured interviews, document analysis of institutional policy, and the use of a theoretical-sensitivity expert panel to provide data corroboration. The selection process of study participants was coordinated through an independent community advocate closely tied to the undocumented immigrant support and advocacy groups in the metropolitan area; this person served as the gatekeeper, controlling access to the protected group or population (Lewin, 1947). This person identified the students at each institution who possessed the desired predetermined demographic characteristics. Once the study participants were selected, each was invited to participate in one semi-structured interview conducted via phone. My use of multiple tools for data collection (described below) supported my ability to remain inductive throughout the study; this was necessary as I needed to constantly evaluate new information as it informed my ability to modify my interview protocol when participants presented information that needed further exploration. Each of these collection methods promoted my reflexivity and

insight into the design so that I was comfortable in modifying the questions and processes to meet the needs of the study (Maxwell, 2013).

The community gatekeeper-initiated communication between me and the potential student participants only once the participant viewed the informed consent (See Appendix A) and expressed interest in proceeding. The participant received my contact information and it was then fully at the students' discretion as whether they contacted me to participate in the study. Once admitted to the study, I shared with participants a second, brief study description, reviewed the informed consent form regarding the participant's rights, and confirmed my contact information. The informed consent form listed participant expectations for confidentiality, how data will be stored and shared throughout the study, where participants can find more information about the study, and a list of community resources.

As I noted earlier, a defining characteristic of qualitative research is the role that the researcher plays in the data collection process. Specifically, as the principle instrument or tool in interpreting participant experiences and explanations, the researcher serves as a unifying catalyst in revealing the themes and underlying meaning in the study (Merriam, 2009). In this position, the researcher controls not only the direction of the study, but the analysis of data while these data are collected in the field through the primary data sources of interviews and document analysis (Grbich, 2013; Robinson, 2012).

**Participant interviews.** Interviews conducted by telephone served as the primary study data source. My original preference was to conduct individual face-to-face interviews with each participant. However, after extensive dialogue with the UMKC Institutional Review Board regarding the *extreme* necessity to protect participants' anonymity to the fullest extent allowed by law, I elected to collect interview data only by telephone.

Additionally, I note that participant identities remained anonymous to me. When a potential participant received my contact information from the gatekeeper, and elected to reach out to me via telephone, I immediately assigned them a pseudonym that was then used during all future communications. If I was unavailable to conduct the interview at time of the initial contact, we set a follow-up time when the participant would again call me, so that I did not record their phone number. I received notifications from the gatekeeper that a potential participant had been referred, however, no identifying information was shared to ensure confidentiality.

I developed the interview protocol guide (See Appendix B) after a review of institutional culture and hidden curriculum literature (e.g., Beran, 2006; Coyne, 2011; Misawa, 2010, 2015; Peart, 2013, 2015; Salin & Hoel, 2013; Smith, 2013; Twale & DeLuca, 2008). This literature provided me with topics and targeted questions to reveal and draw out the participants' reactions and build upon their experiences. In this study, I asked each participant twenty-three interview questions in an open-ended format. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes in length, averaging just under 60 minutes. The length depended on the quality of the interaction and the amount of information the participant was willing to share. With participant permission, I recorded the interview and, upon completion of the interview, I immediately transcribed the interview and destroyed the audio recording.

Conducting interviews, even though I was limited to doing so by telephone, offered a me a chance to gain powerful insight into the participant's experiences and narratives through the "direct description of a particular situation or event as it is lived through without offering causal explanations or interpretive generalizations" (Adams & Van Manen, 2008, p. 618). Further, conducting interviews with these participants allowed them to emphasize the

emotional aspect of the experiences they relayed to me, as opposed to just stating the facts and knowledge surrounding the event or phenomenon (Seidman, 2006).

Once I had transcribed the interviews, I analyzed them to identify patterns and, ultimately, themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Typically, to ensure that I had accurately captured not just the participant's words, but also his or her meanings and interpretations, I would have asked each participant to review the typed interview with me to as I explained my emerging understandings and interpretations. However, the critical need for participant anonymity necessitated the use of a different approach to achieve trustworthiness. Specifically, I elected to use a theoretical-sensitivity expert panel (Cahill et al., 2011) to establish the trustworthiness of my data and interpretations.

**Theoretical-sensitivity expert panel.** Theoretical sensitivity is a concept drawn out of traditional Grounded Theory, which seeks to hone the nuances and complexity of the language used by the participant, reconstruct meaning from the data set, and to “separate the pertinent from that which isn't” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 44). In an attempt to “remain sensitive to the data by being able to record events ... without first having them filtered through and squared with pre-existing hypotheses and biases” (Glaser, 1978, p. 3), I entered into the research with as few pre-established thoughts concerning the nature of undocumented immigrant access and persistence within higher education. In acknowledgement that true objectivity is relatively impossible, Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) developed several techniques (e.g., expert panels, questioning) to enhance sensitivity during analysis, and generate other ways of understanding the data.

The additional lens that the theoretical sensitivity panel provides the present study is through additional reconstruction of the participants' experiences and language, and

corroboration of perception (Costain Schou & Hewison, 1998; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997; Sandelowski, 2000). Therefore, as construction cannot be done without internal influence or bias, theoretical sensitivity ensures that the data integrates participant experiences, my own interpretations of the data, with the perceptions of those external to the process but with expert awareness (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Institutional documents.** As a secondary data source, I utilized documents, primarily institutional policies describing undocumented immigrant student access and support resources, specifically referenced or described during participant interviews. The inclusion of these documents provided the study with substantiating data full of rich, thick description, a key characteristic of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Specifically, this enabled me to determine if the participant's perception of an interaction or event was the result of an institutional policy or business practice, or rather the behavior of a bad actor misrepresenting the institution. In many instances, the behavior or process described had no officially-outlined process, demarcating significant grey area that institutional employees fill in using their own perception of the institutional culture and bias.

The study principally made use of official documents in the form of institutional policies and procedures that had either been created in response to legislative action or were established separate from any known external action. Additionally, participants referenced resources and opportunities within the neighboring community. Information from the organization webpages was used to clarify the nature of the support and what relationship those organizations may have with the community colleges. The information I learned through my analysis of these documents assisted in my ability to identifying inconsistencies, as well as patterns in the data. It is also important to note that I did not review these

documents prior to conducting interviews with participants so as to avoid biasing my perception of each institution and their support of undocumented immigrants.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative analysis is a continuous process throughout the entire data collection process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Within this design, the participant interviews, document review, and the theoretical sensitivity panel were the three data sources used for the study. My analytic process, which I describe in detail below, included a review of coded data from the transcribed interviews and document review of institutional policy records to capture the emerging themes. I defined coding, for the purposes of this study as creating tags or labels for the intentions of conveying units of meaning to descriptive data gathered throughout the collection process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). When I reduced data into codes, I was able to search the data for patterns and themes that permitted me to form interpretations.

It is essential that researchers avoid permitting their individual biases or assumptions from interfering with their ability to interpret or analyze the data that participants share throughout the process (Robinson, 1998). The ability to employ neutrality in analysis allows the true themes to emerge, as opposed to meeting pre-determined expectations and theory. Once I had transcribed the interview data, my next step was to begin reviewing the text line-by-line for developing themes, by segmenting the data and giving them meaning (Lichtman, 2006). As themes became more apparent, I used specific notations or terms, such as ‘isolation’ or ‘welcoming’, to denote their significance for enumerative analysis, which I describe below. My purpose in doing this was to identify any topics that appeared with frequency and that were relevant to the research questions that guided the study.

**Social-cultural framework.** I used the social-cultural framework, an analytic approach, to contextualize the data. This approach relies heavily on the inclusion of the specific details found in a full conversation, rather than the one-sided transcription of an interview (Grbich, 2013). In traditional enumerative coding, categories or themes are produced through analysis as an outcome and not from previous conventions interjected into the data. Conversely, the social-cultural framework views dialog as a collective construction of knowledge and experience to be analyzed as data (Grbich, 2013; Mercer, 2004). This process permits the development of joint comprehension and the reconciliation of divergent points of view as all language, context, and social conventions are included in continuous data collection (Grbich, 2013; Mercer, 2004).

In the current research, it was necessary to provide a detailed analysis of participant dialog throughout more than twenty hours of transcribed conversation. The social-cultural analysis allowed me to focus on particular words of interest as they revealed themselves in the data, and for me to indicate their incidence and in which specific context (Grbich, 2013). Additionally, I took particular note of the collocation of words, as these frequencies were sometimes tied to social and cultural cues and assisted in revealing the true meaning of the participants' language within the proper context. The true value of this analysis is in the way the data continues to draw upon the relationship between language and context, while still utilizing an enumerative process to assess relative incidence of words or phrases (Grbich, 2013; Mercer, 2000). In practice, this takes the shape of identifying significant language during the interview process and drilling down into the context of the language, both when the data initially emerges as well as in other interviews with participants that raise similar issues.

**Content analysis.** Content analysis is a methodological approach that is commonly used to analyze data with a focus on the characteristics of language with an emphasis on the content or contextual meaning for that text (Budd, Thorp, & Donohew, 1967; Lindkvist, 1981; McTavish & Pirro, 1990; Tesch, 1990). In this study, content analysis was used specifically with electronic and print media like articles, books, manuals, and institutional documents to substantiate participant data (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002). Content analysis extends beyond counting words in order to reclassify the text into categories that represent specific meaning (Weber, 1990). As was the case for this research, the analysis of documents identified through participant interviews provided clarity for other aspects of the data and assisted in the development of additional themes. The ultimate purpose of this form of analysis is “to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314).

The specific approach used in the present study, conventional content analysis, served as a method for describing a phenomenon, which in this case was the institutional culture of two institutions through the narratives of their undocumented students. Utilizing this design was effective, as there is minimal research or literature of the given phenomenon in existence. As a result, I was able to avoid categorizing data into preformed themes (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002), and instead allowed the data to naturally form into categories through inductive category development (Mayring, 2000).

**Crystallization of data.** Crystallization is vital to qualitative research and is frequently identified throughout the literature related to research design (Ellingson, 2009; Gall et al., 2007; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Richardson, 1997). The goal of crystallization is to tier the data across participants and documents and is a well-established

validation technique for development of inferences and recommendations (LeCompte et al., 1992). In this study, I collected data from interviews, documents, and a theoretical sensitivity panel. crystallization served as the avenue to compare the interviews from participants at each community college and check the consistency, as well as contrast them from the experiences of the participants at the other institution constructed by each data collection method. Each interview was audio recorded, reviewed, immediately transcribed, and scrutinized through analytic induction. As defined by Gall et al. (2007), analytic induction is a process in which “the researcher searches through the data and then infers that certain events or statements are instances of the same underlying theme or pattern” (p. 21).

Following each interview, I immediately sought to ensure that the audio recorder clearly captured the full conversation. I similarly reviewed my notes from the interview, while re-listening to the recording to confirm my comprehension of their meaning as well as to check for errors in the interview (Patton, 2015). These notes were similarly used during transcription as a final verification of accuracy. Once interviews were coded line-by-line, analysis occurred for the documents referred to in the interviews, as well as the notes from the theoretical sensitivity panel discussion. Common events or statements were sorted into recognizable groupings and reviewed for interactions within each case and between the cases. By comparing each data set and allowing their individual themes to emerge, the differences in themes revealed new ways to look at the other data sets.

### **Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

#### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research presents validity and reliability concerns that can be addressed through the design of the study and effective data analysis procedures (Patton, 2015). In the

present study, meeting undocumented immigrants on their own terms, establishing a trusting relationship through the gatekeeper, and providing a safe space for discussion elicited more genuine answers and allowed me, as the researcher, to better understand the impact of the environment these students find themselves in, as well as adjust questions as needed.

The term ‘reliability’ in the context of interview data, reliability can be defined as the degree to which an interpretation is an accurate depiction of the study participants’ true thoughts or experiences (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Put another way, if another person used the same interview guide with the same population, he or she would come to the same conclusions. As such, my own efforts in designing the present study focused on creating clear protocols for interviews and recognizable methods for eliciting meaningful responses while ensuring data integrity.

In achieving validity, researchers have several strategies at their disposal, and should use a minimum of two to accomplish this goal (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). In this study, I utilized several strategies to strengthen study validity: peer review through the use of an expert panel, thick description, and crystallization. These sources were combined through crystallization processes described below to build consensus and ensure the phenomenon was considered from every facet. These specific processes have a rich history of theoretical support and will be discussed next.

**Peer review.** For this study, the peer review process took the form of the theoretical sensitivity panel, as they offered both new data and served as an external reviewer for the participant data and themes. Being experts and well-versed in undocumented immigrant access and persistence issues, this panel offered support, challenged my existing assumptions concerning the data, and pushed me to consider alternative interpretations of the experiences

by asking necessary questions concerning the methods employed and my own bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This external lens for producing credibility resulted in a close alliance between the data sets, suggesting that the themes that emerged were accurate and pervasive. It was necessary that this interaction occur throughout the entire period of analysis, as their feedback forced shifts in my lens and review of the data. By utilizing these local experts who actively participate in the undocumented immigrant community and other researchers, this study gained valuable additional credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

**Thick description.** In the pursuit of credibility, I utilized the concept of thick description, defined as “deep, dense, detailed accounts . . . Thin descriptions, by contrast, lack detail, and simply report facts” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). I employed the detailed examples drawn from the participant statements to demonstrate the authenticity of their experiences, as well as that induce similar feelings in the reader as those that the participant experienced or might encounter. As a result, I embedded direct quotes from interviews that detail these experiences and lend credibility to the specific theme under discussion.

I similarly applied thick description in my own notetaking and writing as I constructed the themes discussed in chapter four. In doing so, I took great effort to offer as much detail as possible, including descriptions related to time of day, a feeling, or my personal reaction to a statement or new piece of data. This level of vivid detail assists the reader in understanding and interpreting the both the statements and the themes as credible. Through the use of these descriptions, readers can reach similar conclusions as I did pertaining to the accuracy and applicability of the findings.

**Crystallization.** A recently developed approach to triangulation that allows more effective integration of themes and patterns is called crystallization (Ellingson, 2009). The

core concept underlying crystallization is the idea that phenomena can best be understood by exploring the multiple facets of the object of study. Crystallization is advantageous in research as it includes: (a) an emphasis on rich, thick description; (b) offers several interpretations or assessments; (c) uses multiple sources to verify the same experience; (d) goes beyond the insights of triangulation; and (e) provides a greater level of comprehension for the researcher (Ellingson, 2009). I utilized all data sources in the crystallization process to gain an in-depth insight of the phenomenon. Specifically, I used each data set to compare and reinforce themes and trends. The presence of themes in multiple data sets served to reinforce their reliability. As a result, additional themes and patterns emerged that were undetectable previously.

All research suffers from limitations in study design and other considerations that may raise ethical concerns. In the next section, I identify the limitations of the research study, and I describe remediation to compensate for their impact on my study's reliability and validity. Researcher-imposed restrictions are also discussed to correctly frame the study and the researcher's intentions.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Regardless of the topic of research, issues arise that serve as study limitations and therefore must be addressed. A researcher bears the responsibility of noting limitations and disclosing them to the reader so that the reader may be cognizant of all factors when evaluating the merits of a study (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2009). I identify six central limitations relevant to this study.

It is necessary to first address that the nature of qualitative research inherently limits a researcher's ability to draw causal conclusions (Creswell, 2013). However, this research

design provides an opportunity to identify trends and issues that can be further considered through quantitative means (Patton, 2015). The design of the study includes a limited focus and small sample size with specific characteristics, looking exclusively at undocumented immigrant students enrolled at community college institutions in a Midwest metropolitan community. However, it is important to note that undocumented immigrants are a challenging sample to measure due to legal concerns, social norms, and a myriad of other factors (Borjas, 2017; Olivas, 2012; Rodriguez & Dawkins, 2017). Similarly, the use of community colleges as the setting for this study was intentional due to the undocumented immigrant student preference to attend these institutions over four-year colleges and universities (Conway, 2009; Diaz-Strong et al., 2010; Perez, 2010). In addition, the undocumented population in the Midwest has increased by over 60% over the last fifteen years, lending credibility to a Midwestern location for the setting (Migration Policy Institute, 2018). To attend to this narrow emphasis on a student population, the use of qualitative measures, like open-ended interviews, yielded greater detail and data (Grbich, 2013). Using thick description, enough data were generated to compensate for the size, allowing for meaningful themes and conclusions to be formed.

Another study limitation is the perceived transferability of the inferences to other institutions, locations, or populations. While these are relevant concerns, the intentional selection of the community colleges, Midwestern location, and specific undocumented immigrant population were selected based on relevant literature and feedback from appropriate content experts. To address this concern, document analysis explored institutional policies influenced by state DREAM Act and federal DACA legislation. This

legislation is universally-enforced at every institution within a given state, so policy implications continue to have transferability (Creswell, 2013; NCSL, 2015).

A significant limitation that must be addressed is the reactivity the participants potentially had with me as a White, male employee at one of the community colleges research sites asking them questions related to their citizenship status. Undocumented immigrants are frequently hesitant to discuss their status, particularly with members of the dominant social class (Olivas, 2012). To mitigate these concerns, I employed a gatekeeper and peer they already trusted, an individual strongly tied to the advocacy and support community, to serve as a liaison with these students and maintain a high level of trust between myself and the participants (Lewin, 1947). Additionally, I received extensive training through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) that ensured I used current methodology and safeguards to protect my participants (CITI, 2018).

Similar to the reactivity to me, as the researcher, a political climate now exists that has created increased fear of and distrust in undocumented immigrant students (Borjas, 2017; Rodriguez & Dawkins, 2017). As such, students may be reticent to share their experiences for fear of political and legal implications. To overcome these challenges, the combination of the gatekeeper and the careful protection of participant data were used jointly. Every participant received an informed consent to ensure he or she understands his or her protections and right to withdrawal at any time without consequence (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, participant identities remained anonymous to me, as the research, while conducting all interviews via telephone and assigning pseudonyms immediately upon joining the study.

The final limitation to consider was the subjective manner in which qualitative research is conducted. The role of the researcher as the primary research instrument in data collection subjects all interpretations to the bias of personal and professional experiences, attitudes, and beliefs (Merriam, 2002). To overcome this issue, I utilized the expert panel to review my analyses and provide feedback to ensure bias has not influenced decisions within the study (Creswell, 2013). I specifically used a community advocacy group with detailed knowledge of the undocumented immigrant literature and lived experiences so as to provide focused feedback. Limitations within research are those circumstances, concerns, or influences that cannot be controlled by the researcher, as well as restrict the methodology and conclusions of the study. It is not the intent of qualitative research to eliminate all potential bias, but to identify them and the strategies necessary for maintaining the validity of the study (Bickman & Rog, 2009; Maxwell, 2013).

In addition to the limitations addressed above, several delimitations apply to this study. With regard to study delimitations, I have identified four, which are described as the specific restrictions that the researcher imposes on the design of the inquiry in which to narrow the study's scope (Creswell, 2013). The first delimitation was the size of the participant sample. As a small pool of participants was the desired sample size, the study was not intended to be generalized to all undergraduate students. It does, however, serve to contribute to the overall comprehension of the phenomenon of interest.

Another delimitation for the study includes the selection of participants from institutions located in the Midwest region of the United States. This was important as the specific metropolitan community selected is uniquely positioned in multiple states with several community colleges from which to select participants. This region allowed selection

to come from participant groups that have similar demographics but fall under different state legislation.

The selection technique, maximum variation sampling, was another delimitation for this study. The goal of this research was to capture a wide range of experiences from undocumented immigrants at multiple institutions; in doing so, the participants selected may not truly represent to general population. While the sample did not meet representation demographics of the general school population, it represented the experiences and challenges of undocumented students at those institutions, which was the goal of the study.

The fourth delimitation was that all participants had an undergraduate status at their institution, which captured a specific audience of students who are traditionally more engaged with their institutions and may, therefore, have richer descriptions of interactions. This is important in that community colleges are solely undergraduate institutions, and the primary entry point for most undocumented immigrants (Perez, 2010).

Within this study, four potential threats to validity and reliability were evident: (a) the ability of the case study to effectively capture a significant level of depth; (b) the reactivity of the participants as a result of the researcher's personal characteristics and experiences; (c) the researcher's own bias in the interpretation of events; and (d) the setting of the participant interactions, limited to only two-year institutions in a Midwest metropolitan community.

In response to these threats, I employed several strategies to maintain a high level of study validity and reliability. The sample size and limited case setting, while less transferrable to other settings, met the guidelines of qualitative case analysis in which researchers should keep their participant numbers under fourteen (Maxwell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). My use of multiple data sources permitted data to be

crystallized, forming a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon. It also was important for me to remain cognizant of my demographic profile and background, and how my perspective influenced data collection and analysis. To avoid potential bias, it was essential that my questions and interactions remain consistent with interview and observation guides. As a final check, the expert panel, similarly known as an external observer, will be used to identify any biases in interpretation or additional threats to the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical concerns that potentially influence the effectiveness of a study must be addressed prior to conducting any aspect of the research. It is the role of the researcher to identify and anticipate any ethical issues that may occur throughout the research process (Creswell, 2013). These can occur throughout the development and implementation of research and affect both the results as well as the participants of the study. Institutions at which research is conducted utilize an institutional review board (IRB) to evaluate potential research based upon national guidance provided in the 1978 Belmont Report which protects human subjects in the context of research (U.S. National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978). Within the report, three fundamental principles are identified: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (HHS, 1978). These concepts were described in chapter one. This section will further elaborate on the steps that I took to protect participants within the context of this study.

Sales and Folkman (2000) emphasized the role that respect for persons plays in properly informing the participants of their role in the study, the risks, the goals and intentions of the study, and that their involvement remains voluntary. In this study, participants were provided with a brief description of the study, goals, and outcomes.

Additionally, they were notified of any potential risks and that their participation is entirely voluntary, meaning they could withdraw their consent at any point during the research process free from prejudice. Potential benefits were be similarly shared with participants, specifically, how their participation may provide them with an increased sense of well-being (HHS, 1978; Sales & Folkman, 2000). The role of beneficence, as defined in the Belmont Report, requires that researchers strive to do no harm to their participants, as well as minimize any potential harm while maximizing potential benefits (HHS, 1978). In this study, no experimental condition was created in which any special treatment was provided to one group over another. Participants had equal access to all benefits, while I sought to mitigate harms to the greatest extent possible (Sales & Folkman, 2000).

It is important to note that participants could have experienced reactivity to me as the researcher and primary instrument of data collection. While this was addressed through the development of trust and rapport, it is not impossible that the participants might have become uncomfortable with my presence while discussing difficult topics or experiences and altered their responses (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, participants might have identified a power differential between themselves and me as the researcher. The use of a gatekeeper, who in this study was an independent community advocate, assisted me in mitigating these concerns through pre-existing relationships and trust.

### **Summary**

Exploration of the hidden curriculum research in community college settings is limited in the literature, particularly exploration specific to undocumented immigrants. Further, much of the research that engages underrepresented students, a student population inclusive of undocumented immigrant students, is situated in other educational settings and

does not engage undocumented immigrants. This is a significant gap in the literature that must be addressed, specifically within higher education research. My intent in conducting this study was to address and meaningfully respond to this literature gap.

This chapter has described the qualitative design of this study, the rationale for using such a strategy, and a thorough discussion of the ethics, reliability and validity related to its design. A significant section of this chapter was dedicated to addressing the data collection and analysis processes.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and reveal the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants attending one of two community colleges in a Midwestern metropolitan area. I selected these two colleges because although they were geographically close, one was located in a DREAM state, while the other was not. I believed that this differentiation would become apparent in the access and persistence narratives of undocumented immigrant students attending one college or the other.

This study addressed these study questions and sub questions:

**Research Question 1:** What are undocumented immigrant college students' narratives of their lived experiences around the institutional hidden curriculum specifically related to gaining access to and persisting at their community college?

**Research Question 2:** How does college adherence to state immigration legislation (DREAM Act versus non-DREAM Act) appear to influence undocumented immigrant college students' ability to gain access to and persist at their community college?

The two central questions guided my collection and analysis of data throughout the study. As in-study analysis progressed, I remained open to the possibility of the need to make adjustments to the guiding research questions (Maxwell, 2013). However, the questions continued to effectively capture the experiences of the undocumented immigrants interviewed for the study. In addition to the research questions, it was necessary to consider the existing hidden curriculum literature at the K-12 level and the influence it might have on the research (Creswell, 2013).

**Hypothesis:** The hidden curriculum present at a DREAM Act college will be more favorable to undocumented immigrants than the hidden curriculum at a non-DREAM Act college.

In compiling data from participant interviews, institutional and community documents, and the feedback from the theoretical sensitivity panel, I found seven clearly defined themes that responded to the first research question and addressed undocumented immigrant perceptions of access and persistence at the post-secondary level. Notably, however, only five of these themes demonstrated institutional differences as addressed in the second research question.

### **Themes**

The interview protocol was designed to address the two foundational research questions stated above. To respond to these questions using student narrative data, I categorized interview protocol questions by key area: access to higher education, and persistence/support within higher education. The participants reported many challenges and support factors in both realms that ultimately coalesced into seven overarching themes. These themes included Sense of Belonging, Barriers, Responsibility, Hidden Curriculum, Emotional and Psychological Toll, Personal Advocacy, and Employee Training. These themes were present to some extent for all six participants, regardless of which college they attended. I present these themes below in order of most to least frequently occurring in the interview responses. I follow my presentation of themes with a discussion of how they intersected with each other.

#### **Sense of Belonging**

Sense of Belonging was a clear concern and issue that repeatedly appeared in each of the six participants' interviews. The concept of Sense of Belonging, as addressed in previous

chapters, considers the role that a student's fit with the college culture plays in that student's decision to attend and persist at that college (Tinto, 1975; 1982). This theme can be best operationalized through Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of Imagined Communities, in which individuals who find themselves in strange circumstances nevertheless perceive themselves to be part of a larger, socially-constructed social group, such as an institution of higher education (Chavez, 1994). Sense of Belonging is frequently found among populations with a deep commitment to community (e.g., undocumented immigrants who now reside in a new country), and the need to connect with others in order to establish meaning and purpose within their circumstances (Baird, 2001; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kraemer, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1997; Tinto, 1997; 1998).

In the first research question, I considered the narratives of undocumented immigrant college students using their lived experiences related to the institutional hidden curriculum, specific to issues of access and persistence. As I explored each theme, I found that each directly spoke to this question. In regard to Sense of Belonging, as the students shared and as was confirmed by the expert panel, the extent to which a student felt supported and welcomed at an institution directly related to his or her success at that institution. In many instances, students began at one college and, due to their perceived lack of fit or sense of belonging within that college, they changed colleges to meet their needs. While each of the participants in this study continued to persist, their experiences at other institutions indicates they valued sense of belonging, and if the opportunity existed, worked to achieve the appropriate fit with their institution. However, as several students indicated, they have continued to attend their present institution due to their own limitations related to location,

cost, culture, and flexibility in less than ideal circumstances because the alternative is more undesirable than the current situation.

In my analysis of the data that I identified as aligning with this theme, and in my subsequent discussions with the expert panel, it became evident to me that Sense of Belonging plays a critical role in both access and persistence for undocumented immigrants at the post-secondary level. All six participants consistently demonstrated greater ease in transitioning to college when they established a Sense of Belonging at the institution. However, this was more pronounced for GCC – DREAM participants, and narrative data suggested that Sense of Belonging contributed to increased persistence for undocumented immigrants at GCC-DREAM.

The second research question explores the influence state immigration legislation (DREAM Act versus non-DREAM Act) might have on those lived experiences provided by the undocumented immigrant college students, and their perceptions of access and persistence at community college. As students discussed issues relating to their overall sense of belonging at their institution, a clear distinction emerged between the two schools. Students at GCC – DREAM offered stories, experiences, and an emotional connection that significantly contributed to their satisfaction and success at the institution. Conversely, participants attending GCC – NON-DREAM demonstrated a noticeably lowered sense of belonging to the institution. While students were still attending and persisting at the institution, they expressed an increased level of dissatisfaction with the institution, the culture, and the supports in place to assist them in initiating and continuing their education at the college. Further examples provided evidence that sense of belonging played a significant enough role in the educational process, that many students felt the need to transfer to other

institutions based on a lack of fitness. Most frequently, this pattern consisted of students transferring to GCC – DREAM and away from GCC – NON-DREAM.

Within this broad theme, I identified four subthemes, each of which represented a specific way in which Sense of Belonging either was or was not evident in these students' narratives.

**Openness of sharing information about legal status.** A common Sense of Belonging subtheme that emerged in several interviews was the nature in which students were able to access information related to legal status at their college. Notably, students attending both GCC – DREAM and GCC – NON-DREAM experienced a thorough onboarding process initiated once the student completed an application at the institution. Prospective students at both colleges begin receiving instruction and support from student support staff members to assist them in navigating admissions, institutional resources, enrollment, and advising to aid in their transition. The admissions pages and recruitment materials available from both institutions indicated an institutional desire to be accessible and affordable for each student, while meeting the individualized needs of each student. However, participants and panelists lamented that the experience for an undocumented immigrant may not be as well aligned with institutional goals as suggested by their narratives. A GCC-DREAM student recounted:

They [admissions] were very open with their information that had anything to do with legal status. They will treat you the way you are supposed to be treated. [GCC – DREAM] makes you feel so welcome and it's a big part of why I love this school.

This was a common experience among GCC – DREAM students interviewed, and generally confirmed by panelists. Members of the expert panel shared several experiences where they themselves were well supported by staff and faculty throughout their own time at GCC –

DREAM. The lone dissenter panelist described a few interactions, processes, and individuals concerning the admissions and advising offices that others believed to be issues of a previous institutional regime, no longer present on campus.

In comparison, GCC – NON-DREAM students' institutional admission process was complicated by mis-information and unclear policies. As one GCC – NON-DREAM stated:

GCC – NON-DREAM is definitely a 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' kind of place. They [admissions] don't ask if we are undocumented, and we don't tell them. The few people I know at school that have shared their status said they wish they hadn't. There isn't much trust that it won't be used against them.

Another GCC – NON-DREAM student had a common experience of many undocumented immigrants in either learning s/he was undocumented or in not fully understanding the limitations of their status (Olivas, 2012). This student recounted:

I lost my full ride scholarship to college when I went to [GCC – NON-DREAM] because I found out that I was undocumented, which I was unaware of until that moment. I didn't have any help from them [guidance from student services on how to navigate college processes] when I talked about my status.

These GCC – NON-DREAM student experiences received further confirmation through document analysis and my discussion with the expert panel. During a thorough search of the GCC – NON-DREAM institutional website, the only public site or document available that referenced undocumented immigrants at the college was a Policy, Records, and Procedures (PRP) document that confirmed undocumented immigrants must be charged international student tuition rates. Panelists with experience at GCC – NON-DREAM echoed their frustrations with the college culture and the perceived need to protect their status from GCC – NON-DREAM employees. Many panelists confessed they would likely have kept their undocumented status private at any higher education institution but shared that they never felt that they would be supported in revealing their status during the time they attended

GCC – NON-DREAM. Two panelists shared that they were presently students attending NON-DREAM four-year institutions and were experiencing a similar culture of silence regarding status.

**Finance/Money.** As was previously articulated, students at both colleges were unable to access federal financial due to their legal status, which significantly negatively affected their ability to afford the costs associated with college attendance (Olivas, 2009; Perez, 2015). Thus, students at both colleges attempted to secure community resources, such as private scholarships from local businesses and funding provided by area churches, as well as institutional resources, such as foundation scholarships and institutional grant-in-aid. Their efforts to secure these resources either positively or negatively influenced their sense of belonging at their college depending on their ability to procure funds. Specifically, students as well as the panelists, identified various avenues from which they learned of the potential resources available. In most cases, student peers and community groups were the primary source for information sharing and were frequently consulted after students and panelists failed to receive financial aid-related guidance from their college. While federal aid remains inaccessible, funding at the institutional level is dependent on the legislation and policy in place at the state level (Sheehy, 2014).

Several participants attending both colleges pointed to the state-enacted DREAM policy that, as a student attending GCC - DREAM observed: "... grants in-state tuition if you graduate from a high school in the state. No questions asked about your legal status." Conversely, both GCC – NON-DREAM participants and panelists both remarked that they wished similar legislation existed in both states but indicated they would have found some way to take advantage of the opportunity if available. Another participant attending GCC -

DREAM shared: “They [financial aid] just told me I fell under this category of scholarships they had available and awarded me with [a local first-generation college student scholarship].”

Participants attending GCC – NON-DREAM were unable to express similar experiences at their institution. Each of the three participants used similar language to describe their financial limitations at GCC – NON-DREAM: “They [financial aid] told me there was nothing they could do [there was no funding available to undocumented students].”

As was evidenced through the different availability of financial resources at GCC – DREAM versus GCC – NON-DREAM, both participants and panelists expressed how unsupported and unwelcomed these policies made them feel. A review of the scholarship search on the GCC – NON-DREAM institutional website indicated that an applicant must have legal citizenship in order to be eligible. In contrast, the GCC – DREAM scholarship process provided a list of financial resources available to undocumented immigrant students applying to their institution, including national opportunities, local businesses, churches, and organizations offering scholarships, micro-loans, and other forms of support.

**Accessibility of course offerings and support services.** While participants shared their challenges in gaining access to the institution, several similarly expressed their need for coursework and services to be available during the hours that they were primarily on campus. With most (n = 5) working at least one part-time job, the need for evening and weekend availability was important. Participants at GCC – DREAM valued the course offerings and support services available during evening hours and weekend days that were amenable to their busy and, often, chaotic lives. As one GCC – DREAM student observed: “The learning center, library, and writing center were my go-to places after work, even on my evenings

when I didn't have class. I still felt like I was in college, despite not going to class with everyone else."

Others at GCC – DREAM mentioned the importance of non-traditional class schedules offering enough courses to stay on track for completion without having to wait several semesters for an evening or weekend section to be offered, such as one who offered:

I am still able to take every class I need at night or on the weekend. Because [GCC – DREAM] has a good number of students taking classes at night, I can find everything I need when I need to take it.

Students needing non-traditional course schedules at GCC – NON-DREAM had a different experience in enrolling and attempting to find what they need for their degree. As one at GCC – NON-DREAM participant noted:

I really struggle to find the class I need without having to wait several semesters. My [GCC – NON-DREAM] campus rarely has classes after 6 [pm], and that is pretty much the same at the other campuses, so if I can't take it [course] online, I can't take it.

This sentiment by a GCC – NON-DREAM student reflects the general institutional culture toward non-traditional students needing schedules and support services after work. At the same time as having limited evening and weekend schedules, support services are relatively unavailable after the regular work day. As a GCC – NON-DREAM participant stated, "After 5 or 6 [pm] I have to go another [GCC – NON-DREAM] campus on the other side of town to get any support services or talk to anyone about my classes. It's really not easy to get help."

These disparate examples regarding non-traditional course offerings and the availability of support services during the evening and weekends are yet another example of the how undocumented immigrants experience these institutions. At GCC – DREAM, the flexibility, openness, and availability of resources promoted a welcoming environment where

undocumented immigrants were noticeably more comfortable, whereas GCC – NON-DREAM appeared unable to provide a similar environment. A comparison of the campus schedules between both institutions revealed that the GCC – DREAM campus was open and offering coursework to their students an average of 20 more hours a week than GCC – NON-DREAM. In addition to that, student and academic services at GCC – DREAM were available an average of 35 more hours than GCC – NON-DREAM. These differences clearly reflect the challenges undocumented immigrants face in getting their needs met at GCC – NON-DREAM.

**Availability of peers.** The availability of undocumented immigrant peers with whom to share experiences and express concerns was another significant way that participants felt that they belonged (or not) at each institution. This availability seemed to mirror the same availability as coursework and support services within the institution. At GCC – DREAM, where evening and weekend offerings were well-established, participants shared experiences in which the campus environment fostered connections with other undocumented immigrants. One GCC – DREAM student shared: “Seeing other people like me [undocumented immigrants] is important. I love walking around campus and running into other students who understand where I come from.” Another GCC – DREAM student discussed how valuable this connection is in his/her comfort on campus by sharing, “Knowing that other people were going through similar stories as me has had an impact on me. I feel like I’m not completely alone.”

Conversely, GCC – NON-DREAM participants struggled to connect with undocumented immigrant peers on campus for several reasons. For example, one GCC – NON-DREAM participant stated, “Since there isn’t really anything happening on campus

when I'm there, I never see anyone outside of class. I just go straight to class and then straight home. It's hard to get connected." It was also evident from all three students at GCC

– NON-DREAM that revealing their status on campus rarely occurs. As one stated:

You really don't know who else is undocumented because the campus doesn't feel like a place where it's safe to talk about it. I know I didn't want to tell anyone unless I felt like I had to when I first got on campus.

As a result, students at GCC – NON-DREAM expressed a lower sense of belonging, connection, and support from their institution than students at GCC – DREAM.

In my analysis of relevant institutional documents and webpages, I found that GCC – DREAM displayed significantly more diversity in its student body through committee membership, photographs on the website, recruitment materials, and the nature of events held on campus [e.g., cultural appreciation lectures and dinners, social activist speakers, legislator open houses]. Notably, students at GCC – NON-DREAM remarked that they actually attend events at GCC – DREAM in order to have access to the speakers and experience the sense of belonging there. With regard to the accessibility of peers, several panelists with experience at GCC – NON-DREAM indicated that they perceived the culture at the college to be better than when they attended, but still significantly behind that of GCC – DREAM.

The value of creating these experiences allowed participants to feel welcomed to the institution, find a place to engage, and be supported. These are all components that made participants' transition into college less difficult as well as motivate them to persist within the institution. It was not surprising that the campus culture more supportive of creating a sense of belonging existed prevalently at GCC – DREAM, where DREAM legislation exists to support the post-secondary attainment of undocumented immigrants throughout the state.

Conversely, the absence of institutional and community resources at GCC – NON-DREAM, as well as a non-welcoming atmosphere upon entrance, seemingly had the opposite effect.

### **Barriers to Access and Persistence**

For each participant, the presence and/or perception of barriers were intricately sewn into each component of their stories. For undocumented immigrants pursuing post-secondary education, obstacles are expected at every step along the path. Gonzales (2010) articulates the educational barriers an undocumented immigrant faces as obstacles to achievement based on his or her immigration status and access to resources that supplement his or her admission, such as financial support, legal protection, or health care. As described below, the obstacles Gonzales identified were apparent in student narratives. As might be expected, the major barriers participants and panelists identified pertained mainly to issues of access. However, many of these concerns had lasting implications on the students' perception of their college and continued to complicate their ability to be successful throughout their enrollment. Participants and panelists pondered on their experiences based on their interactions with employees, other students, and the practices of the colleges they added. Their perceptions of the community college and an undocumented student's place within it were a direct reflection of the barriers the college imposed.

In regard to the first research question, student experiences around institutional hidden curriculum related to access and persistence, the discussion of barriers is very pertinent and closely tied to students' decision to attend and continue at their given institution. Within this theme, participants identified several specific and some general policies that spoke to their perception of the barriers to access and persistence in higher education. From their narratives, I found that students perceived that these policies were in

place to restrict undocumented access to the colleges and establish business practices that were cumbersome to navigate or offered sufficient resistance to the point of withdrawal. It is necessary to mention that barriers were present at both colleges, a fact that leads me to my discussion of this theme in the context of my second research question.

With respect to the second research question, while barriers were undoubtedly present at both colleges, participants experienced a greater number of them while attending GCC – NON-DREAM. Further, as compared to barriers experienced by participants attending GCC – DREAM, these barriers were more substantial in scope and severity. The expert panel provided additional insight into this matter, as several had attended both colleges and could articulate the differences between them, their barriers, and the policies that challenged access and persistence for undocumented immigrants. In particular, the differences were related to the GCC – DREAM’s active role in overcoming policies and procedures that represented barriers to undocumented immigrant student success. The best example of this college’s active role pertained to the creation of an institutional grant to offset costs and the state policy of permitting any student with a high school diploma to pay in-state tuition.

Within this theme, I identified three subthemes, each of which represented a specific way in which Barriers to Access and Persistence either were or were not evident in these students’ narratives.

**Policies and procedures.** A consistent subtheme that emerged in each interview, regardless of legislative mandate or institution, was the barrier that institutional policies pose to undocumented immigrant access and persistence. Students at GCC – DREAM, while confronted by fewer barriers than those at GCC – NON-DREAM, continued to be challenged by policies related to enrollment, testing, and other student services areas. Panelists similarly

expressed frustrations about the business processes and policies that negatively impacted their experience at each institution, as well as influenced their access to resources throughout their time at the institution.

One GCC – DREAM student was confronted by the policies related to her enrollment at the institution as a result of her undocumented status. While accepting her openly to the institution, she needed to complete several steps to successfully complete her admission to the college. She stated:

I had no idea that once have I filled out my application to [GCC – DREAM] I needed to do all kinds of other stuff. When I didn't hear anything [about being accepted], I had to go back in to talk to them [admissions]. I was told I needed to fill out several other forms, get a TB test, and test [placement exam]. I thought I was being targeted, but after several other students told me they had to [do these tasks] as well, I felt better.

As might be expected, some of this discussion on barriers builds on the previous conversation under the Finance subtheme, as many of the policies-related barriers students at GCC – NON-DREAM discussed had financial implications. One GCC – NON-DREAM student expressed:

I lost a scholarship that would've covered my entire associate's degree because I was undocumented. I wasn't asked about my status until they [financial aid] were about to award me the money and asked for a social security number. It felt like when they [GCC – NON-DREAM staff] finally met me they looked at me and went, 'she looks like she might be illegal, somebody check.'

The policy and process barriers at GCC – NON-DREAM extended beyond financial implications, however, creating new obstacles for students the need placement testing and adding unnecessary developmental coursework to the student's educational plan making persistence to academic completion more challenging. As a GCC – NON-DREAM student stated:

I tell every undocumented student I work with not to say they speak any other language than English. Otherwise, they [admissions] get make you take the TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] and put in ESL [English as a Second Language] classes that don't count toward your degree.

The GCC – NON-DREAM policy regarding students with other primary languages indicates a preference for the TOEFL to determine Reading and Writing proficiency. However, there is some professional discretion which allows staff to permit students, such as undocumented immigrants living between cultures and worlds, to take the standard placement exam. I will explore the concept and relevance of staff training and knowledge greater detail later in this chapter. Nevertheless, should a student be shifted to the ESL track, this could add several classes to his or her enrollment, lengthen the amount of time it will take to complete his or her goal, and increase his or her costs. As a panelist confirmed, this was too much for him/her to overcome and caused his/her withdrawal from the institution. Another panel member shared that GCC – DREAM had previously operated with this model when s/he attended. However, a review of the GCC – DREAM's testing policy indicated all students start with the same placement exam but earning a score below the cutoff and signifying English as their second language will necessitate taking the TOEFL for better placement.

**Lack of institutional resources or support.** Once admitted to their college, undocumented students continued to experience challenges and obstacles that inhibited their ability to complete their academic coursework, as well as identify funds. As has already been referenced, the differences between the availability of resources at each college is significant and contributed to the ability of students to make timely progress toward their academic goals. In some instances, students at GCC – NON-DREAM were informed that the college had no resources to support these students, specifically the use of institutional funds, as could

be done across state lines at GCC – DREAM. Similarly, participants were on their own to identify resources external to the institution. One participant at GCC – NON-DREAM discovered that the college did in fact have funds, but the employees may elect to use these funds at his or her own discretion. He stated:

I have always been told there were no financial aid opportunities for me, but once I became a student ambassador, I was informed I was eligible for one. It didn't seem like they [financial aid] were helping me because of my circumstances, but because of what I was doing as a student ambassador.

However, for most GCC – NON-DREAM students, institutional scholarship opportunities were the exception, not the rule. As one observed, "I began looking for a scholarship, but almost all of them needed a social security number. I took that very personally."

Students were also confronted with resource limitations when it came to accessing the GCC – NON-DREAM bookstore and getting their textbooks. As one GCC – NON-DREAM participant noted:

One semester I couldn't afford to buy my books, so I asked if I could rent them, but I needed to have either financial aid or a credit card. Neither of those are options for me, so neither were textbooks.

In comparison to students attending GCC – NON-DREAM, students at GCC – DREAM benefitted from institutional resources like scholarships and multicultural programs that assisted with the college transition and costs. One GCC – DREAM participant discussed an interaction he had with an employee, saying:

I wasn't sure how I was going to make it [paying for college] work, but my advisor had this list of places she had collected that might be able to help with different things. One place was able to help with books for a semester, another helped pay for my utilities so I could pay tuition.

The members of the panel discussed how important these resources were to their own success and many said they had been forced to do most of this research on their own. As a result of their struggles, the panel members worked together to develop a community organization dedicated to educating undocumented immigrants about their resources and supporting throughout their journey. In the years since the development of the panel's organization, several additional resource agencies and groups have moved to the region to support the growing undocumented population. Many of these groups have generated support documents for public use to make the resources better known.

**Community and cultural challenges.** Participants faced several barriers that relate to undocumented immigrants and their families, as well as their surrounding community. Panelists also confirmed that a significant barrier they had faced, and several continued to experience, was the perception in the community around undocumented immigrants. The issue is multifaceted as participants and panelists faced discouragement from individuals outside of their own circle, as well as from those in their immediate family. One GCC – NON-DREAM student described how she perceived her own value based on what those in the community say about undocumented immigrants, and how education may change that:

I feel like I need my education. It would actually make me a valuable member of society, even though I have always felt like I don't belong here. I need something to say that I have worth to contribute because it feels like everyone says I don't.

A GCC - DREAM student had similar thoughts to contribute that addressed the lack of value s/he perceived both in the community, as well as in his/her own home at times:

At times it [persisting at school] was hard because I did struggle with my kid, my job, my home, and then work and school. So, there were times when I would just be overwhelmed. Unfortunately, at that time, neither my mom nor my husband was supportive of me [getting my education]. So, I would go to work, pick up and drop off my daughter at my mom's house, go to [school]. I had a lot of problems because there was no food made when he got home.

As might be expected, the participants from GCC – NON-DREAM experienced a greater number of barriers to their post-secondary access and persistence, but similar obstacles were not completely absent for those attending GCC – DREAM. As noted earlier, some members of the expert panel had the unique experience of attending post-secondary institutions in both states. For these individuals, the differences in access and persistence was substantial. Many remarked that while some barriers in the DREAM Act state were still present, the institution and the community had provided opportunities to overcome most of these obstacles.

### **Responsibility**

Responsibility as a theme immediately emerged from the participant interviews, as well. All six participants related experiences that detailed the additional roles, obligations, interests, and identities they balanced on a daily basis. Undocumented immigrants bear many responsibilities on behalf of their family, a duty to ensure obligations are met and accountable for the needs of others (Ruge & Iza, 2005). As a theme, responsibility had substantial implications on undocumented access to and persistence through post-secondary education. The many roles and duties that an undocumented immigrant might possess directly influence his or her ability, finances, and time to participate in academic endeavors. In much the same way these issues impact access, they have a negative influence on long term persistence at the post-secondary level (Angrist, Hudson, & Pallais, 2016).

In regard to the first research question, student experiences around institutional hidden curriculum related to access and persistence, this third theme, responsibility, and its impact on access and persistence was very evident throughout the analysis. Considerations such as cost, location, flexibility, and the ease of access were all readily apparent in

participants' narratives. In general, these are the considerations that draw undocumented immigrants to these colleges (Perez, 2010). Participants regularly referenced the choice to attend their particular college as the result of poor funding options, family and work obligations, and limited awareness of other college outside of their community. However, while the community college meets the cost, location, and convenience requirements that undocumented immigrants need, these students frequently require additional support based on their unique roles and responsibilities that the colleges are currently not providing.

Turning to the second research question, this theme had noteworthy differences between states and colleges. Participants experienced differences in the way the institutions reacted to their complex needs. Compared to their GCC – NON-DREAM counterparts, participants attending GCC – DREAM were able to attend classes that were more conducive to their work schedules, access support services at times more convenient to their lives, and found the resources better aligned with the needs of undocumented immigrant student populations. Panelists also noted the distinction between the colleges in terms of accessibility for non-traditional students. Panelists stated that this accessibility was even more meaningful to undocumented immigrant students who worked jobs that were less flexible, and who lacked access to resources and support networks that facilitated their transition into college.

Within this theme, I identified two subthemes. Each represented a specific way in which responsibilities either were or were not evident in these students' narratives.

**Obligations.** As undocumented immigrants, the participants managed many obligations on behalf of their families, community, and themselves. These obligations often included maintaining employment as well as helping care for grandparents, siblings, and

others who needed extra support. When asked about his obligations beyond those associated with being a college student, one GCC – DREAM student stated:

I needed a school near my home and my work that was affordable. At least more affordable. I didn't really care where I went to school as long as I got it done. As an undocumented student, you don't really have options. You aren't able to pick your dream university or go where you want to go.

The proximity to work, school, and family was of similar interest to GCC – NON-DREAM participants. One GCC – NON-DREAM participant stated:

My family comes first, so I needed to find a school where I could keep my three part-time jobs and quickly get to my grandparents if they need me. I know other students [who are not undocumented immigrants] think I'm crazy, but it's what I want to do.

The dependence on employment was significant to most participants, regardless of which college they attended, as the lack of funding options impacted how and when they were able to attend college. I heard the same sentiment from panelists in their discussions about work. Several discussed their frustrations with being ineligible for on-campus employment since it was tied to financial aid. However, panelists suggested that even if they had been eligible, it wouldn't have paid enough to actually be worth pursuing as an employment option. Compared to their GCC – NON-DREAM counterparts, GCC – DREAM students had more resources to overcome some of these challenges, as their college website listed several agencies that assisted with employment opportunities for undocumented immigrants in the Midwest. As I previously noted, I could find no similar employment-related resources on the GCC – NON-DREAM website.

The role family played in the lives of undocumented participants was significant, as several discussed how they altered their educational and professional aspirations to better support their family's needs. A GCC – DREAM participant shared the rationale for his choice of college, "I was going to attend [DREAM State University] for Engineering, but I'm

going to attend GCC – DREAM and get a degree in HVAC so I can help my family pay bills and taking care of my younger brother.” It is important to note that this participant did so willingly, as others have similarly expressed the personal pride they took serving in that capacity for their families. Several expert panel members expressed the importance of family in their decision-making process. However, two panelists described the path they took away from their families to pursue their academic aspirations.

**Identities.** Closely tied to, but separate from responsibilities, are the multiple identities that undocumented immigrants possess and must transition between. Regardless of their origin, each undocumented immigrant had to navigate both his or her family’s culture as well as the Midwestern culture found at his or her respective college. A GCC – NON-DREAM participant expressed the challenges she faced in balancing both worlds. The participant revealed, “I have never really felt like I have belonged anywhere, but that was particularly the case at [GCC – NON-DREAM]. Nobody at home even really understands why I go to school or what it takes to do well.” This participant was just one of many who had multiple roles and identities that demanded an ability to navigate his or her educational world differently than most of his or her peers. Another participant from GCC – DREAM identified how his different roles interacted, not only with each other, but also with the college he attended. He stated:

I was struggling with some of my identities, being a gay man in a Hispanic, Catholic community. I wasn’t able to open up or say who I was. I was finally able to find some acceptance at GCC – DREAM. I felt like the class isn’t worried about a gay guy. It definitely fit more of what I was looking for.

Other participants had multiple roles and identities that interacted with their obligations, such as starting school, working, and balancing the responsibilities of building and supporting a family. A GCC – DREAM student revealed her experiences of navigating

the challenges of her existing identities with the new ones emerging with the birth of her daughter by saying:

GCC – DREAM was the only thing I could afford. There were no scholarships I was eligible for because I was never at the top of my academic game in high school. I was working so I could survive. I had a newborn and a family to support.

Most (n = 5) maintained at least one regular job while attending school, with three juggling multiple jobs, and all utilize those funds to support multiple family responsibilities, obligations, or responsibilities. In my discussion with the expert panel, the issues of cost, location, and additional personal roles were some of the most common reasons that panelists had witnessed their peers leave school. In fact, some panelists that these common reasons applied to their own attrition from college. While additional responsibilities are not a challenge exclusive to this population, the absence of the resources, support systems, and other opportunities compounded the significance these roles played in post-secondary access, and particularly, in persistence.

### **Hidden Curriculum**

The expectations, norms, and basic knowledge that a student must understand and be able to incorporate into his or her behavior to be successful as a college student, more commonly referred to as the hidden curriculum (Bergenhengouwen, 1987; Perrenoud, 1993; Smith, 2013; Snyder, 1973), were some of the exact factors participants noted as pain points in their struggle to gain access and persist in higher education. As anticipated, the hidden curriculum theme validates the study hypothesis, in which the institutional culture of a college played a vital role in both access and persistence for every participant. Given that every participant in my study was a first-generation college student and an undocumented immigrant, these participants were especially dependent on the college to help them

acclimate o the norms and expectations of becoming and continuing to be a student on campus. As I noted earlier, students who feel that the institutional culture is disparate from their needs will frequently choose to pursue their academic career elsewhere; this has detrimental outcomes to their college persistence (Boykin, 1986; Tyler, Boykin, Miller, & Hurley, 2006).

In regard to the first research question, student experiences around institutional hidden curriculum related to access and persistence, student narratives emphasized recognition of the level of institutional support as well as the culture in place for undocumented immigrants to feel connected to and welcome within the college. As all participants were first-generation students with limited post-secondary education preparation, their knowledge of processes and expectations was inadequate to navigate the complex systems in place. As I anticipated, a hidden curriculum was present at both colleges and, at both colleges, adversely impacted undocumented immigrants.

In looking at Hidden Curriculum as it applied to the second question, participants from both colleges remarked that while a hidden curriculum existed, the one present at GCC – NON-DREAM presented challenges that were more pervasive and unchecked toward undocumented immigrants. In contrast, the experiences of GCC – DREAM participants suggested that the institutional supports and resources available at GCC – DREAM were more intentionally designed to mitigate the impact of the hidden curriculum. Participants noted that GCC – DREAM presented undocumented immigrants with a greater opportunity to pursue institutional funds and explore external funding options. Similarly, the college had established a robust international office dedicated to supporting non-native students attending the college. GCC – DREAM participants also expressed an appreciation of the increased

availability of student organizations and student support groups located at this college. However, several mentioned the need for access to these groups and resources outside of the traditionally-scheduled times. It is also important to note that while the student demographics at each college was not significantly different, participants and panelists indicated that GCC – DREAM had done a better job of embracing diversity and allowing undocumented immigrant student identities to be welcomed.

Within this theme, I identified two subthemes, institutional expectations and norms, and lack of post-secondary knowledge. Each theme represented a specific way in which the Hidden Curriculum either was or was not evident in these students' narratives.

**Institutional expectations and norms.** I again note that all participants were identified as first-generation students during their interviews, with neither parent having received academic credit at a U.S. college. The effect of being a first-generation college student on student college experiences was apparent throughout student narratives. For example, one GCC – DREAM student related her experiences in navigating college processes by saying:

My dad started the first semester of law school in Mexico, and my mom had a technical degree, but things are done completely different here in the U.S., so my parents didn't know how to help me, and of course they didn't have the financial means to help me pay for school.

As she and several other participants shared, because of their first-generation status, most undocumented immigrants are entirely dependent on the dissemination of expectations, practices, and culture directly from the college they attend as well as informal undocumented immigrant peer networks.

A substantial peer network was noted as important by the expert panel, as the panel's impetus for forming was to generate a support group for undocumented immigrants. The

panelists who had successfully navigated an institution of higher education also indicated that they had been more dependent on their peers than on any college programming or staff for understanding college-related expectations. A GCC – NON-DREAM participant shared a similar story:

I always asked my friends what they were doing before I asked my advisor because I knew she didn't know about some of the community resources [e.g., book sharing services, funding sources, daycare] I needed. She [advisor] also assumed I knew how to do everything. I felt lucky just to find her office some days.

Multiple participants at both colleges disclosed similar stories about the struggles they experienced as a result of institutional culture and expectations. As a GCC – NON-DREAM participant revealed, “I was naïve about what resources I would have available to me.” Like most of the participants, she was dismayed by how little information was shared during orientations and workshops that pertained to her circumstances. She continued by saying, “I sat in groups where they talked about how things worked and different resources, but none of it applied to me because of my status.” Panelists described their experiences with orientations at both the community colleges, as well as at other institutions, as “infuriating.” For several, it was just a reminder of all the resources that were unavailable to them as undocumented immigrants. While some indicated they did learn useful tools during these sessions, it was clear to them that the colleges’ focus was on the traditional student population in the room.

As the transition to college begins during the last years of high school, college admissions officers are the first to begin indoctrinating potential students into the culture of the college and setting college-related expectations. However, as was the case for other efforts, several participants felt these efforts failed to address the needs and interests of undocumented immigrants pursuing higher education. One GCC – DREAM participant felt

similarly unprepared for the transition into college after being recruited from a local high school. This student stated:

I had no idea what I was doing, I didn't know what the expectations were, how schedules worked, or anything like that. I spoke to the guy [college recruiter] several times when he visited school, and he made me feel like I was on the right track. When I got here [GCC – DREAM], it was a totally different story.

His experiences were mirrored by a fellow GCC – DREAM student, who said, “I didn't have a lot of guidance. I was still 17 and there is such a mix of students. I was a little scared trying to figure it all out.”

This general experience of participants at both colleges reflected the overall lack of awareness undocumented immigrants had regarding the expectations and norms in place for achieving success in college. While the relevant college documents I reviewed, including recruitment materials, mission and vision statements, and strategic plans, suggested an openness to first-generation students, the practices that participants and panelists experienced appeared inadequate to develop the necessary skills to successfully integrate and navigate their college.

**Lack of post-secondary knowledge.** An extension of the subtheme on expectation and norms, undocumented immigrants' lack of knowledge regarding institutional expectations and culture, led the participants to feel disconnected or isolated from their peers and the college itself. One GCC – NON-DREAM student shared her thoughts on why this happened:

I think in my situation, as a person that's undocumented, a Latina woman, sometimes we have a hard time trying to assimilate with other groups as we try to be private about our information ... When [GCC – NON-DREAM] staff would discover my status, I felt like they stopped helping me figure out how to get access to stuff because they assumed I would not be eligible for it. So, when they [staff] stopped telling me about resources, they also stopped helping me understand the institution.

This lack of knowledge likely occurred on both sides, as the student failed to gain the information he or she needed to achieve his or her goals, and the college employee likely continued to implement incorrect processes. As I stated earlier, students respond to these experiences by finding their own resource networks through peers. However, the alternative outcome is disengagement from the college, failure, and leaving school altogether (Boykin, 1986; Tyler, Boykin, Miller, & Hurley, 2006).

Another GCC – NON-DREAM participant expressed his challenges in understanding the institution and the expectations within the classroom by saying:

I really wasn't able to communicate effectively with a lot of the other students because we have different backgrounds and experiences. It's a big challenge in trying to do group projects and stuff like that, especially when no one has ever asked you to work with groups like that.

While panelists felt that working with other students at the college was dependent on the openness of these students, and was generally fine, they did agree that some interactions were more challenging than others. This was especially the case when participants worked with students with no previous experience with someone similar to themselves.

A GCC – DREAM participant with multiple responsibilities shared that the culture of the college did not seem conducive to her needs:

I have a household to maintain, it's [the college] not made for students like me. I talk to other students around campus who talk about things that I don't know anything about and have other resources I will never have.

The disconnect of undocumented immigrant students from the college, and failure of the college to train staff to be sensitive to undocumented immigrant student needs (which I will address more fully in a later theme), were significant components of participants' perceptions of their peers limited success at persisting to a degree. In my review of this

theme with the expert panel, I found that panelists agreed that hidden curriculum was a substantial obstacle to both access and persistence.

### **Emotional and Psychological Toll**

The substantial emotional and psychological toll that the participants experienced as a result of their undocumented status was well represented in student narratives. I note that is theme is also well represented in the literature, as a significant amount of scholarship has been undertaken to understand the imposed cost and stress on undocumented immigrants that results from their unauthorized status (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013).

With respect to the first research question, student experiences around institutional hidden curriculum related to access and persistence, emotional and psychological toll played a significant factor in access and persistence to higher education. As discussed below, racial battle fatigue (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014) and other personal hardships an undocumented immigrant experiences are substantial impediments to their success. The participants and expert panel verified the weight such a role plays in access, and particularly persistence at post-secondary institutions. They suggested the ongoing need to navigate a system specifically not designed for people such as themselves can lead to an animosity towards the colleges. In listening to their descriptions, the term cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) came to mind, in that they experienced psychological distress for their challenges with the system but are conditioned to revere the college for its potential social value (Tosolt, 2015). As participants revealed in their narratives, their undocumented peers became overwhelmed by their experiences at the college, their persistence suffered and only those with sufficient resources and motivation seem to continue.

In response to the second research question, students at both colleges experienced emotional and psychological toll. From the participant narratives and panel discussion, it was apparent that undocumented immigrant participants continued to suffer from the emotional, physical, and psychological challenges regardless of which college they attended. While no difference was noted between students' level of emotional and psychological toll based on which college they attended, the focus of this study was not in measuring the severity of emotional and psychological toll students encounter on a daily basis. As such, future research might reveal if the supports at GCC – DREAM provided some degree of extra defense and insulation from these challenges that could be replicated at GCC – NON-DREAM.

Within this theme, I identified three subthemes, racial battle fatigue, mental health concerns, and fear. Each represented a specific way in which Emotional and Psychological Toll either was or was not evident in these students' narratives.

**Racial battle fatigue.** One component of understanding the Emotional and Psychological Toll on undocumented immigrants stems from what has been labeled racial battle fatigue (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014). The term, coined by Smith, Yosso, and Solorzano (2006) suggesting that students of color constantly worry, have difficulties concentrating, experience physical fatigue, and can develop mental health concerns as a result of navigating discrimination, inequity, and institutions with power structures that heavily favor White people. Regardless of which college they attended, participants shared experiences in which they were overwhelmed with the responsibility of educating others such as professors or peers with a legal status, and navigating a system built for the needs of others than themselves. One GCC – DREAM participant discussed her challenges by saying, “I am frequently asked by them [faculty] to represent the entire undocumented immigrant

population in class discussions and educate others who don't understand my status or the things happening [legislation].”

A GCC – NON-DREAM participant discussed the impact her struggles with the college and in the community have had on her health. She shared, “I know it [undocumented status] weighs on me. When I first started at [GCC – NON-DREAM] I felt overwhelmed all the time. I was constantly tired and sick. Which was really bad because we [family] didn't have insurance.” The experiences of these participants mirrored the descriptions of the panelists in their focus on educating others about the plight of undocumented immigrants. Several suggested they experienced health challenges as a result of their status and educational mission.

**Mental health concerns.** The concerns surrounding the impact on undocumented immigrants extends beyond fatigue and a compromised immune system. The substantially increased stress participants talked about in their interviews had implications on their mental health as well. One GCC – DREAM participant shared that her experiences surrounding the maintenance of her home, family, and education was often too much for her to handle and led to struggles with mental health. She described her experiences by saying, “... without insurance, I was fortunate to get an evaluation. I was finally diagnosed with depression and anxiety and got extra help at school.” As another example of this subtheme, a GCC – NON-DREAM participant described academic challenges he suddenly experienced during his second semester in school. He said:

During the spring of my first year at [GCC – NON-DREAM] I started have trouble focusing on my classes and was unable to make myself go to class. I couldn't explain it because school was really important to me. I finally got diagnosed with depression and it's been much better.

Unlike his peer, the GCC – NON-DREAM participant did not indicate that he received any additional support or resources like those at GCC – DREAM.

Panelists listed mental health resources as one of the most utilized referrals they provide. Several individuals indicated they had personally utilized those services as a result of the emotional and psychological weight they carry. While no institutional data from either college were available to support the existence of an increased toll on undocumented immigrants, my review of multiple community resource guides available throughout the metropolitan area revealed a significant number of mental health and psychiatric resources, suggesting an elevated need.

**Fear.** Fear of the potential consequences of being an undocumented immigrant is another significant component of the emotional impact undocumented immigrant students experience. Undocumented immigrants operate in private and limit what information they publicly shared because of the legal, social, and economic implications of their status. Beyond any consequences they may personally face, undocumented immigrants lived in fear of the possible repercussions that may befall their family. A GCC – NON-DREAM student referenced some of the fundamental fears that live at the heart of his or her concerns and resulted in additional stressors, saying, “I definitely live with the fears of deportation, of being separated from my family, and all of the [legal] stuff with that.”

These fears continued to increase because of the national political climate of the country at the time this study was conducted, as the discontinuation of programs like DACA and mass deportations became forefront concerns for this group (Warren & Kerwin, 2017). Several panelists shared their involvement in local, regional, and national events in response to political actions taken by the Trump administration (Ramirez, 2018).

A participant from GCC – DREAM added his take on how pervasively fear had impacted his life and academic success. He stated:

It's definitely not rational, but I'm afraid to do anything that might raise any special attention to me, including missing assignments. If someone needs to contact me about something school-related, I'm terrified it will somehow lead to me or my family getting deported or something crazy like that.

As a result of these experiences and challenges, many of the participants discussed their need to reduce their time at school, including take time away from their education in order to stabilize their emotional wellbeing. Panelists discussed the prevalence of this issue, revealing community support groups specific to these issues, as there was substantial need and disruption to daily life as a result. Institutional persistence documents available from both colleges included the rates by ethnicity, indicated that Hispanic first-generation students had the lowest completion rates. GCC – DREAM displayed only marginally better retention rates than GCC – NON-DREAM for this student population.

### **Personal Advocacy**

Personal advocacy was a predominant theme throughout every interview. Each participant and every panelist recounted numerous examples and events where his or her success was entirely dependent on his or her own ability and willingness to explore options, speak up, and advocate for themselves. Without exception, when each was asked what strategy they might encourage a new student to employ in order to be successful at their college, it was to learn to advocate for yourself on campus. To that end, Personal Advocacy has a significant relationship with undocumented immigrant access and persistence at the post-secondary level. As participants and panelists both confirmed, navigating processes and identifying resources necessary for gaining entry to the institution and continuing there would have been impossible without their own efforts.

The theme of personal advocacy possesses strong narrative connection to this first research question, as undocumented immigrants were successful as a result of their ability to recognize their own needs and advocate appropriately to attain the supports required. This theme cut across all participants and at both colleges, as participants demonstrated the gap in supports and identification of needs through their experiences in the interviews. Similarly, panelists confirmed that successfully advocating for themselves at their college was a considerable challenge and the universal nature of it. It is evident that undocumented students would have failed to gain access and drop out at even greater numbers without their own advocacy at the colleges in which they initially show interest and ultimately attend.

As I noted above, participants at both colleges discussed a strong need for personal advocacy; student narratives around this theme did not noticeably vary by college attended. As participants stressed the significance of this aspect of their role, it was consistently present in each conversation and in the feedback from the panelists. I note that as with emotional and psychological toll, this study did not focus on measuring personal advocacy or the lengths that an undocumented immigrant might have to go at one institution as compared to the other. This is an area that future researchers could consider investigating.

Within this theme, I identified two subthemes, research and planning. Each represented a specific way in which Personal Advocacy either was or was not evident in these students' narratives.

**Research.** A consistent subtheme that emerged within personal advocacy was the ability of each participant to adequately prepare and arm himself or herself with relevant data, policies, and contacts in order to successfully advocate for his or her needs. One GCC – NON-DREAM participant recalled her experience in doing so, saying:

It was just me. I really wanted to go to school, so I did the research. Google was a great friend of mine, but there was a lot of anxiety. I don't know how I got through it now that I think back.

The same GCC – NON-DREAM participant also revealed her strategy in researching who had successfully navigated the system before her and what they suggested doing.

Our community [of undocumented immigrants] is actually pretty close, so it's easy to ask around and find people who found a way to succeed at [GCC – NON-DREAM]. That's how I learned that I needed to connect with [GCC – NON-DREAM] Diversity and Inclusion for some resources.

Other participants illustrated similar pathways to investigating their institutional options, including the use of several community organizations. As a GCC – DREAM participant explained:

I found a few people on campus that were in the same boat as me [undocumented], so we just helped each other out with getting our different problems solved. It was really nice to be able to 'crowdsource' our problems.

**Planning.** Participants agreed that success was nearly impossible without having a plan to get to their academic goals. Several participants discussed finding a mentor, while others referenced the need for strong organizational skills. For example, a GCC – NON-DREAM participant shared his experience in having to advocate for himself and the lengthy steps he went through in order to be successful:

I didn't feel like there was any catering to make sure I was being successful. I always found myself making sure to stay on top of tasks and to make sure to seek help when I needed it. I guess it was just a skill I developed, like a survival mechanism because I had so little to work with. So, I felt like it was my responsibility to make sure people would be able to see me and understand when I was struggling.

During one interview, a GCC – DREAM participant related her need for self-advocacy because of her first-generation status and knowing that her parents would not be able assist her in navigating the post-secondary system. She reflected:

It just came down to me figuring it [school] out. None of my friends went to college because of their status and my parents never finished elementary school in Mexico, so it was something no one in my circle was knowledgeable about.

Only one GCC – DREAM participant stated that she had successfully found a mentor at the college who was able to support her in navigating processes and making the best choices for herself. She observed:

My English professor took an interest in me during my first semester, which is the only reason I'm here today. She has helped me explore careers, find resources, and keep myself on track. I had a really rough time and she was there whenever I needed her.

Due to the consistency of this message, it was important to consider if these participants believed that this theme and skill was something unrecognized by their peers or a well-established expectation. Their feedback mirrored that of panelists in that other undocumented immigrants understand this challenge well; however, it truly is a skill that some are more effective at utilizing than others. One panelist suggested that many immigrants learn early on that their only hope for finding their way or getting their needs met is through advocating for themselves, "... almost like the first lesson you receive in the U.S." Noticeably, participants from GCC – DREAM remarked that their college was more receptive to their overtures and perhaps in response to these overtures, they have witnessed an overhaul in many of the college's online resources, including a new application for undocumented immigrants that guides them through the process more effectively.

### **Employee Training**

The final theme that emerged from the interviews was related to the participants' experiences with institutional employees, both staff and faculty. In general, these employees were without an appropriate baseline knowledge of undocumented or DACA policies, procedures, and even awareness of what the terms themselves mean. This theme is also found

in the literature, as Perez, Cortes, Ramos, and Coronado (2010) address the need for adequate resources and employee training that includes cultural awareness, sensitivity to the emotional and mental health challenges of undocumented immigrants, and the policy decisions that impact these students.

Employee training (or the lack thereof) was a challenge to student access and persistence, and directly spoke to the first research question. In particular, this theme tied closely with personal advocacy, as students faced with unknowledgeable institutional employees were at even greater risk of leaving the institution (Tovar, 2015). Regardless of which college they attended, participants experienced staff and faculty with limited or non-existent knowledge about what their status meant at multiple levels, including legal ramifications, access to resources, and psychological implications. However, many participants were able to succeed in spite of this lack of knowledge on the part of their advisors, professors, and other institutional staff. This dependence on their own community of peers and self-advocacy remained a significant sign of their resiliency.

In reference to the second research question, the occurrence and nature of the theme of employee training demonstrated a minimal difference between colleges. As might be expected, participants experienced the employees at GCC – DREAM as generally more supportive and open to working with the undocumented college student immigrants they encountered. However, participants did not experience a significantly different level of employee engagement at GCC – NON-DREAM, only that the college, itself, enforced policies and practices that were less favorable to undocumented immigrants. This suggests that most employees are interested in supporting students but may fail to have the training or resources to successfully do so. It is important to consider whether a larger sample size may

have resulted in a difference between colleges or if this narrative would hold true for other undocumented immigrants at these colleges. The expert panel provided anecdotal evidence to support a dearth of training at both institutions, such as a lack of awareness of concepts like DACA or the potential consequences a student may encounter when undocumented immigrants are discovered in the community. However, GCC – DREAM had substantially more policy and procedure documents in place to support employee training. For example, employee training documents included some references to cultural awareness and institutional resources. However, as was revealed through participant narratives, this training was not comprehensive or well-implemented among employees.

Within this theme, I identified two subthemes, inappropriate comments and lack of training on policy and business practices. Each represented a specific way in which the larger theme of Employee Training either was or was not evident in these students' narratives.

**Inappropriate comments.** Participants shared stories about the comments they overheard from professors, as well as the many inappropriate and inaccessible recommendations they received. One GCC – DREAM student lamented the experience she had with a professor who failed to understand her how her status had inherent challenges. She offered:

I was running late to a meeting with this professor who knew my status and the challenges I was facing at home, and when I get to the door outside her office, I overhear her talking about me, 'I don't get this student. She's always late. She's not taking any classes. I've told her a dozen times how to do this.'

Participants experienced both deliberate hostility and unintentional comments; both left a lasting mark. A GCC – NON-DREAM participant had this experience:

While sitting in my career class, the teacher was explaining how to complete something that required legal documents and she said, 'Most of you will be able to do this,' meaning that I would not be able to without a legal status. I had just discussed

my challenges with my status the week before because it prevented me from applying to things.

**Lack of training on policy and business practices.** While participants were disappointed by the comments that college employees directed toward them, they were more troubled by the incorrect information and recommendations they receive regarding institutional policies and practices. A GCC - DREAM participant experienced this lack of knowledge while navigating the admissions process, saying, “There was confusion with whether I paid the international or in-state tuition rate because the person [admissions recruiter] didn’t know rules in the state.” A participant at GCC – NON-DREAM experienced confusion with employees unaware of the rules at the colleges, stating:

I knew I couldn’t receive financial aid, but this person [enrollment services] kept telling me that everyone could get something. No matter how many times I told her, she pushed me into filling out a bunch of stuff and then going to the financial aid office where they told me what I already knew, that I was ineligible. Part of me was hoping she was right, but I knew.

As I previously suggested, these frustrating encounters led undocumented immigrant students to take matters into their own hands. Several participants discussed their own informal peer referral process to avoid people who were uninformed or who made things difficult for undocumented immigrants. One GCC – DREAM participant said:

Sadly, we [undocumented immigrants] have to rely on each other a lot at times because our advisors, professors, and other people at school are not educated on the resources for undocumented students and DACA. So, if someone comes to me, I’m able to tell them, [GCC – DREAM] has this great scholarship, talk to this person.

One GCC – NON-DREAM participant discussed the dismissive conversation he had with a counselor who was unaware of options and turned the student away, saying, “My counselor’s advice was to go get a job and talk to my parents about my situation because they

didn't know what to do with me at the moment." The same participant received feedback from a professor that he was unable to follow due to his undocumented status:

One of my professors was like, 'Why are you struggling?' When I told him I had two jobs and a few other things, he asked, 'Don't you have the FAFSA [financial aid]?' When I said I wasn't eligible as an undocumented student, he said, 'Why not?'

These experiences highlight the challenges to access and persistence, as undocumented and DACA students must not only advocate for themselves, but also educate the college employees who served as college gatekeepers. Panelists similarly agreed that this theme increased the challenges present when undocumented immigrants attempt to access and persist in higher education, as they are directly battling the institution, its policies, and the staff who enforce them. This final theme directly ties to several of the previous themes in the need for personal advocacy, barriers in place at the institution, the emotional and psychological toll that they experience, and the hidden curriculum they are unable to access without adequate support.

### **Subtheme Overlap and Intersections**

In my analysis of each theme and the underlying subthemes that further define those experiences, I identified numerous linkages that bear additional discussion. As was a clear component of the theme Sense of Belonging, the subtheme of Finance/Money is closely tied to several other factors drawn from the data. The participants' access to funding significantly influenced what other responsibilities and obligations they possessed, the type of college they could attend, and intersects with a family's ability to adequately prepare for post-secondary education, suggesting a lack of knowledge (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009).

As participants found themselves more engaged in other responsibilities, like part-time employment and supporting their family, they became more dependent on the college to

assist them in achieving success. This meant that participants needed courses and support services at non-traditional times, however, these supports were not targeted toward non-traditional students, much less undocumented immigrants. Participants found that their level of knowledge about the college, as well as expectations and norms, was a product of their support network, including peers, supportive institutional employees, and their own ability to investigate policy (Wong, 2017). These added stressors, which were frequently financially-motivated, contributed to emotional, physical, and psychological challenges (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013).

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter Four presented the qualitative findings from this case study initiated as an approach to gather and analyze the lived experiences of undocumented immigrant college students, and explored their perceptions of access and persistence at community college. Students attending two community colleges were included in this study, and seven significant themes emerged from the analysis: Sense of Belonging, Barriers, Responsibility, Hidden Curriculum, Emotional and Psychological Toll, Personal Advocacy, and Employee Training. Chapter Four included and synthesized the interview responses from six participants, document verification, and the study confirmation of a theoretical-sensitivity expert panel.

Chapter Five presents the key findings of the study, research implications, recommendations, and conclusions.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this qualitative, multi-site critical case study is to reveal the institutional interpretations of federal (DACA) and state (DREAM) policies, including how these interpretations interact with undocumented immigrant college students' perceptions of access and persistence within their institution. Understanding which factors and experiences impact undocumented immigrants via their lived experiences is valuable to staff, faculty, administration, and policy makers. The results of this study expose several potential strategies that can be implemented to improve access to community college and other post-secondary institutions, as well as increase persistence rates to completion.

Undocumented immigrants experience numerous challenges and barriers to gaining a post-secondary credential. Not least among their difficulties are the lack of funding options, poor institutional resources, and a general lack of familiarity with higher education processes and expectations (Dickson & Pender, 2013; Perez, 2010). In addition to these issues, undocumented immigrants are affected by multiple factors, including sense of belonging, isolation, limited familial and community support, and inadequate post-secondary preparation (Olivas, 2012). This study explored the experiences of undocumented immigrants attending two Midwestern community colleges and their perceptions of their own access and persistence within the college. Study findings suggest new strategies for improving access and increasing persistence for this population. The following discussion highlights key study findings.

## **Key Findings and Recommendations**

### **Impact of Sense of Belonging**

This study looked closely at the experiences of undocumented immigrants and their perceptions of access and persistence in post-secondary education. It was clear from the onset of the study that sense of belonging at the institution was an important aspect of their decision-making process and ability to persist. Every student referred to an aspect of belonging (i.e. supportive staff, sense of welcome or connection), and actively pursued opportunities to create it in their current institution or transferred to school with a better institutional fit. Each participant was asked, “How did you feel during the first six months you attended your institution?” Students responded consistently along state and institutional lines, with those attending GCC – DREAM reported feeling welcome at the institution and being actively supported. Whereas students attending GCC – NON-DREAM generally felt invisible to the college and not sure how to improve their accessibility to the institution.

As participants identified this as a significant reason for both choosing and remaining at their college, there was similarly a lack of other options in transferring. What was discovered through this study, is that undocumented immigrants are forced to overcome challenges in order to attain their goals as there are frequently no alternatives. So, while fitness and sense of belonging may not be ideal, students are essentially forced to adapt or give up on their post-secondary aspirations. One participant commented, “It’s not like I have other options, so I just have to make do with what I have.”

This is a significant finding in that it reveals that while some colleges may identify improved persistence practices, there may be alternative factors contributing to persistence

for these students as a result of limited or non-existent options. While it is clear that some colleges are successfully integrating undocumented immigrants into their population and providing adequate support services, this underserved group is in need of institutional intervention. Some of the practices deemed most effective by participants including mentorship, peer support groups on campus, and the procurement of institutional funds. More research is needed regarding this finding in order to determine what might be the best ways to create a genuine sense of belonging for these students, including specific strategies and interventions during recruitment, as well as throughout their time enrolled at their college.

### **Institutional Barriers to Access and Persistence**

Another key finding related to the participants' experiences related to the challenges and obstacles they faced on campus in the form of institutional policy and procedure. Students at both colleges endured barriers that made their access to the institution more laborious and difficult than their peers with a legal status. Some indicated that they were diverted to multiple offices and asked to complete processes that required multiple trips to campus. One participant remarked on her experience, stating that she "had to go to [GCC – DREAM] several times with a newborn and navigate the system all by myself." This experience was similar at GCC – NON-DREAM, where students felt overlooked in the institutional processes, as they were given the same information and advice as their peers with a different legal status with little ability to follow it. Similarly, participants and experts, alike, were challenged by policies like those that prohibited the use of institutional funds for undocumented immigrants or require that they pay tuition and fees at the international rate.

Participants shared several examples where processes might be improved or changed based on their own experiences at the different institutions. Beyond financial barriers,

participants expressed concerns with the initial placement testing policies which can force undocumented immigrants to take ESL classes before enrolling in their academic coursework that applies to a certificate or degree. It was also pivotal that participants be able to attend class and access institutional offices during the evenings and weekends when they were more likely to be on campus due to off-campus employment as will be discussed in the next section. While GCC – DREAM had its share of challenges, the institution actively created resources and opportunities to mitigate other challenges these students faced. This included the aforementioned international office, institutional grants, and a specialized admission process with a dedicated online resource page. Both the participants and the panel of experts agreed that they would significantly benefit from a committed staff advocate or support person that could serve as a point of contact as well as assist them in navigating the post-secondary environment. Additionally, this population of students would benefit from an intentional orientation or program that focuses on teaching undocumented immigrants the institution’s hidden curriculum (Bensimon, 2007). Future research should seek to explore the best practices in undocumented immigrant orientations, as well as ongoing support services that promote persistence throughout their academic program.

### **Need for Flexibility**

In discussing the various roles and responsibilities undocumented immigrants have beyond the classroom, it became evident that participants are often confined to the evening and weekend offerings that a college provides. While it was noted that GCC – DREAM offered more evening and weekend classes than GCC – NON-DREAM, both significantly lacked student support resources during those times. When asked how the college could better support them, the participants expressed the need for increased evening and weekend

course options, later hours for support services, as well as clubs or organizations focusing on undocumented immigrants and their interests.

This finding is meaningful in analyzing the efforts of our open access institutions. Community colleges serve as the main point of entry for undocumented immigrants at the post-secondary level (Perez, 2010). As such, these institutions focus on meeting students where they are in terms of academic preparation, financial need, and several other factors (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). However, despite these lofty aspirations, decisions on when courses are offered typically rely on faculty preference and support services are a reflection of the institutional funding and staffing model (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016). As a result of their need to pursue coursework outside of the traditional academic schedule, undocumented immigrants miss out of access to many of the vital resources unavailable during the evening and weekend, leaving these students on their own to generate academic success. Building on the previous discussion of Sense of Belonging, the lack of resources and experiences available to undocumented immigrants during their evening and weekend hours on campus feeds into the lack of connection with the college. More research is needed in identifying appropriate models to support undocumented immigrants. Specifically, it will be important to address how to provide the greatest level of access while state and federal funding continues to decline.

### **Peer and Institutional Support**

Participants shared several experiences that revealed the varied support that they receive on behalf of their college. The reality of nearly every undocumented immigrant interviewed, as well as the expert panel members, was that their success was dependent on their own ability to identify the appropriate resources and people to assist them in pursuit of

their education. As a result, this population of students are significantly reliant on their peers and the experiences within their close network or community. When undocumented immigrants need help navigating the college or accessing resources, they have learned their best advocate is either themselves or a peer who can recommend a course of action. As with other populations of students, self-advising or utilizing the information provided in advisement to peers for themselves frequently results in students getting off-track with their program and creating additional unintended challenges and extending the time to completion (Jaggars & Karp, 2016).

While the participants in this study were able to navigate their collegiate institutions effectively, they had engaged in several practices that bear closer attention. Undocumented immigrants at both college referenced throughout their interviews the use of informal mentoring relationships and peer groups to relay pertinent information and assist new students in accessing resources. Peer mentoring has become a best practice in higher education, so it is no surprise that students are experiencing success with this form of organization (Collings, Swanson, & Watkins, 2014). However, while students have seemingly stumbled onto success, these should become intentional programs offered through the institution with institutional oversight and support, as opposed to ad hoc, informal groups. While the primary focus of these networks is to engage in resource identification, they similarly provide emotional support and connection with others experiencing comparable challenges. These groupings lend support to the aforementioned finding related to Sense of Belonging and the need to build personal connections within the college.

An additional institutional gap identified was in the need for a dedicated and formal advocate for undocumented immigrants. The need for this is multi-faceted, as students valued

the singular point of contact and references that this person could provide, with additional ability to instruct undocumented immigrants on the norms and expectations of institution through various mediums. Participants found this to be particularly important as having a trusted advocate can minimize the need to openly share their undocumented status should the student have additional fears about doing so. This specialized first-year experience could be tied to peer mentoring, both of which should be further explored in future research, as they have close relationships to existing best practices in higher education.

### **Improved Institutional Training for Employees**

As participants discussed their interactions with the colleges they attended, and the employees that represented those colleges, it became increasingly evident that training and education is essential. The experiences shared revealed an ignorance of state and institutional policy, business practices, as well as basic student development awareness in order to best serve and accommodate students in need. This lack of knowledge and awareness places an increased burden on undocumented immigrants as they must advocate for themselves without understanding what is needed in order to successfully navigate the college. In some instances, faculty, advisors, or other staff dismissed student concerns and even suggested courses of action that might lead to legal consequences, including incarceration and deportation. Both participants and panelists found themselves in circumstances where they were in conflict with institutional employees as a result of their own research, as it had implied a different practice was in place.

At the most basic level, the participants and members of the panel emphasized the needed for empathy and understanding of the experiences of undocumented immigrants in higher education institutions. While colleges may be forced to adhere to specific state

legislative mandates, the ability of employees to exercise some measure of cultural humility, suggesting the college has not only trained employees, but that everyone possesses the capacity to remain open to understanding the plight of undocumented immigrants (Fisher-Borne, Cane, & Martin, 2015). These findings require additional research on the training needs and best practices in achieving cultural humility for employees at higher education institutions.

### **Conclusions**

This study suggests that legislative decision-making may contribute to access and persistence issues for undocumented immigrants attending community colleges and may serve as a starting point to assist institutional employees in addressing inequity. Previous researchers have identified several factors related to access and persistence for underserved populations, including undocumented immigrants (Batalova, 2010; Camarota, 2012; Chavez, Flores, & Lopez-Garza, 2017; Conway, 2009; Diaz-Strong, et al., 2010; Dickson & Pender, 2013; Drachman, 2006; Flores, 2010; Fuligni, 2001; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Kaushal, 2008; Kena, et al., 2014; Moll, 2000; Nelson, Robinson & Bergevin, 2014; Olivas, 2009; 2012; Ornelas & Solorzano, 2004; Perez, 2010; Potochnick, 2014; Sheehy, 2014; Siqueiros, in Dolan, 2005). Their work has revealed that underserved student populations frequently have fewer adult role models in academics and are less aware of the resources available to support them. When colleges actively work to mitigate these gaps in awareness and comprehension of the hidden curriculum, students attain at significantly higher levels and reach their goals at a more traditional pace (Everett, 2015).

What are the implications from this study, and what are the next steps? Based on this study's findings, undocumented immigrants in community college need increased

institutional resources and support in the form of employee advocates, funding options, and campus engagement networks to successfully navigate post-secondary institutions. For several, modifications and additions to first-year experience will be the key to successfully understanding the hidden curriculum of the college and gaining access to the resources they most need in order to persist. For others, institutional changes will need to take place, including improved staff training, simplified admissions processes, and generating institutional funds to alleviate costs.

Of particular importance was the fact that while all seven themes applied to the first research question, only five demonstrated institutional differences as discussed by the second research question. Specifically, Emotional Toll and Personal Advocacy revealed no significant difference between GCC – DREAM and GCC – NON-DREAM, while the other five (Sense of Belonging, Barriers to Access and Persistence, Responsibility, Hidden Curriculum, and Employee Training) demonstrated substantial disparities. Those five themes infer the influence of the legislative mandates of those states played a role in policy and practice development. The themes and their interpretive codes, located in Table 5.1, reveal the diverse narratives between colleges, and the experiences of those participants. With regard to the two themes that failed to validate this difference, it is suggested that future research take a closer look at their impact on student success and the specific strategies employed.

Table 5.1. Cross-Case Analysis

<b>Interviews</b>	DRM 1	DRM 2	DRM 3	NDM 1	NDM 2	NDM 3
<b>Theme: Sense of Belonging</b>						
Interpretive Codes						
<i>Community Resources</i>	-	X	-	X	X	X
<i>Institutional Support</i>	-	-	-	X	X	X
<i>Sense of Welcome</i>	-	-	-	X	-	X
<b>Theme: Barriers to Access and Persistence</b>						
Interpretive Codes						
<i>Policy</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Business Process</i>	-	-	-	X	X	X
<i>Lack of Resources</i>	-	-	-	X	-	X
<b>Theme: Responsibility</b>						
Interpretive Codes						
<i>Finances</i>	-	-	-	X	X	X
<i>Proximity</i>	X	-	-	X	X	X
<i>Family and Social Roles</i>	-	-	X	X	X	-
<b>Theme: Hidden Curriculum</b>						
Interpretive Codes						
<i>Post-Secondary</i>	X	-	-	X	-	X
<i>Preparation/Knowledge</i>						
<i>Connection to the Institution</i>	-	-	-	X	X	X
<b>Theme: Emotional and Psychological Toll</b>						
Interpretive Codes						
<i>Fear</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Personal Toll</i>	X	-	X	X	X	X
<b>Theme: Personal Advocacy</b>						
Interpretive Codes						
<i>Independent Research</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Planning</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Theme: Employee Training</b>						
Interpretive Codes						
<i>Inappropriate Comments</i>	-	-	X	X	X	X
<i>Lack of Training</i>	X	-	X	X	X	X

This study revealed that multiple factors contribute to undocumented immigrant access and persistence in community college institutions. This was even more evident at the institution where state legislation in support of undocumented immigrant educational rights was absent. Future research might explore the extent to which each factor identified in this

study influences access and persistence. Participants and expert panelists in the study indicated the significance of these factors and provided numerous examples of their efforts to secure these elements on their own. A quantitative study comparing the utilization of each factor and levels of student success. One example might be to consider whether access to these elements decrease time to goal completion or another measure of persistence.

This study could also be repeated at the four-year level to see if there are similar findings based on legislative mandates. While this study discovered common challenges at both community colleges, there were significant differences noted between GCC – DREAM and GCC – NON-DREAM in terms of culture and resources available to undocumented immigrants. It should be considered that students attending community colleges might be more vulnerable and in need than those enrolled at the four-year institutions. A study at a four-year institution might allow researchers to explore the potential stages when undocumented immigrants are most likely to stop-out.

### **Application of Findings**

In looking at the applications of this study's findings, there will be value to admissions and recruitment initiatives to increase diverse student populations similar to this group. Specifically, participants and panelists recommended the identification of a single-point of contact for undocumented immigrants. This would be a trusted individual whom students could share their concerns and challenges, as well as receive guidance on next steps as a representative of the institutions (i.e., Ombudsperson). It was also noted that the need for bi-lingual staff, faculty, and administrators to assist in communicating with prospective students as well as their families. Additionally, institutions need to ensure marketing materials, applications, and websites are available in alternative language formats, or can be

easily translated. As these findings have been identified as meaningful to undocumented immigrants, an institution's ability to implement improved strategies based on these recommendations may support increased recruitment and persistence of other underserved populations. An important aspect of any equity and inclusion initiative is to look at current employee cultural humility and training (Fisher-Borne, Cane, & Martin, 2015), and recruit new employees that are representative of those students to wish to bring to campus (Savoca, 2016).

With consideration of retention needs, the findings of this study support the development of a robust and intentional peer mentorship program in combination with integrated first-year experience opportunities. As participants widely suggested, undocumented immigrants need direction and guidance in understanding the processes, norms, and expectations of the institution. Implementing an organized and deliberate program that provides undocumented immigrants access to other students who have successfully navigated the system and can share resources and provide guidance in the form of a mentoring relationship, workshops, and even specific first-year seminar courses. An interesting study might provide insight on the relationship between peer support and college access as well as persistence. Beyond mentoring, post-traditional student groups like undocumented immigrants need access to the same institutional and academic support services that traditional students receive during the day. As such, administrators should strongly consider the operating hours maintained during the evenings and weekends, as well as the intentionality of those programs to meet the needs of undocumented immigrants.

Colleges should strive to develop partnerships with community organizations that seek to address the specific challenges undocumented immigrants face in their pursuit of

post-secondary education. Creating clear pathways between legal, mental health, peer support, and fiscal support organizations accessible to prospective and current students enables the college to serve the whole student. As undocumented immigrants are unable to access federal financial funds, it is also incumbent on colleges to develop alternative resources the support these students, including community organizations, private donations, or other means.

It is important to understand within the context of this study that there is no universal explanation for trends in access and persistence to post-secondary institutions. While this study provides promising evidence to suggest that the legislative context an institution finds itself in, influences the nature of the services, resources, and availability of expectations to undocumented students, it is challenging to generalize such findings beyond this setting. A realistic outcome is for the findings to be used as guidance and a foundation for future research in the field of undocumented immigrant access and persistence in higher education.

It is clear that undocumented students are influenced by many variables as they pursue and complete their post-secondary opportunities. As such, administrators and policy makers focused on the U.S.'s open-access institutions must remain vigilant in understanding these challenges and committed to nurturing our most vulnerable populations throughout these experiences. In doing so, these institutions must remain mindful of the value peer, community, and institutional support holds for undocumented students as they confront the many obstacles to post-secondary attainment. Regardless of the challenges they face, undocumented immigrants will continue to push forward on their educational pathway, as a college degree opens doors to opportunity, and obtaining a formal education continues to serve as a way for students to “justify [there] value as a human being.”

## **APPENDIX A**

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY

WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER: A CRITICAL CASE STUDY OF UNDOCUMENTED  
IMMIGRANT COLLEGE STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES

Steve W. Pankey

B.A. University of Missouri-Columbia, 2006

M.S. Avila University, 2009

**Request to Participate**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This study is being conducted at two Midwest, urban, community colleges. The researcher in charge of this study is Dr. Michelle Maher.

The study team is asking you to take part in this research study because you are a student who has self-identified as an undocumented immigrant in a two-year higher education setting. Research studies only include people who choose to take part. This document is called a consent form. Please read this consent form carefully and take your time making your decision. The researcher will go over this consent form with you. Ask him to explain anything that you do not understand. Think about it and talk it over with your family and friends before you decide if you want to take part in this research study. This consent form explains what to expect: the risks, discomforts, and benefits, if any, if you consent to be in the study.

**Background**

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have identified as an undocumented immigrant college student who has enrolled in a two-year higher education setting. You have been asked to take part in this research study because of the experiences you have had at your institution.

You will be one of up to 10 subjects in the study from two Midwest, urban, two-year higher education institutions.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of community college undocumented immigrant students who have had direct experience with institutional culture at their higher education institution. The goal of the study is to develop a thick description of the experiences of undocumented students as they relate to the ways institutions have interpreted the state and federal policies concerning undocumented immigrant access and persistence in higher education.

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There is a gap in the literature that explores the institutional culture of undocumented immigrants in higher education. The proposed study hopes to help fill that gap.

#### **Procedures**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to consent to one phone interview. However, should you need an in-person interview, we will identify a place and time to complete the interview. While you will be considered a participant during this time, your actual involvement is outlined below.

Each participant will have one interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes in length. The interview will be conducted over the phone or, if you request, in-person, at a convenient time for you. You will be assigned a pseudonym prior to beginning the interview, which will be used throughout the process. All questions should be considered optional; you have the option at any time to not answer any question.

If you are willing, interviews will be audio recorded; however, interviews can still take place even if you do not want them recorded. After the interviews, the researcher will *immediately* transcribe the recordings and then *immediately* destroy the audiotape of the interview. Interview transcripts will be kept in a password-protected folder in the university network drive that only Steve Pankey and Dr. Maher can access.

We stress that your participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in the interview or answer certain questions. If, at any point, you wish to withdraw from the study, you may do so by contacting the co-researcher, Steve Pankey, at (816) 604-5216.

#### **Risks and Inconveniences**

The risks to participating in this study are considered more than minimal, or potentially greater than everyday living, specifically in the event of a breach of confidentiality. Participants might feel discomfort talking about their experiences in college. This could lead to the development of mental health issues like anxiety or depression, and significantly impact your ability to perform everyday functions if untreated.

Should information not remain confidential, participants risk sharing information related to their legal status and potentially face consequences like detention, deportation, or legal liability. These consequences would have a significant impact financially, emotionally, and physically on the participant. There are several procedures in place to prevent this confidentiality breach from occurring, but additional resources are listed at the end of this consent form in the event you need additional assistance.

#### **Benefits**

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research. Indirectly, however, talking about your experiences may lead to a better understanding of your own experiences and coping strategies. Other people may benefit in the future from the information about institutional culture that comes from this study, including potential institutional policy change.

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**Fees and Expenses**

There are no fees or expenses linked to being a participant in this study.

**Compensation**

There is no compensation offered for participation in the study.

**Alternatives to Study Participation**

The alternative is not to take part in the study.

**Confidentiality**

While we will do our best to keep the information you share with us confidential, it cannot be totally guaranteed. Persons from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study to make sure we are doing proper, safe research and protecting human subjects. The results of this research may be published or presented to others in conference presentations, peer-reviewed articles, and book chapters.

However, neither the Institutional Review Board, nor the Federal government (OHRP) will have access to identifiable data. You will not be named in any reports of the results, nor will the institutions included be identified. Although audio recordings will be used for precise interviews, no audio will be used in publications or presentations, and the recordings will be destroyed immediately after they have been transcribed. To maintain your confidentiality, you will be assigned a pseudonym and referred to by it in the interview and all research documents. After your recording has been transcribed and destroyed, the study team will have no identifying information about you. If you decide to leave the study early, which you may do at any time, all data collected from and about you will be immediately destroyed.

During the research, interview transcripts and codebooks will be kept in a password-protected folder on the university network drive. Once interviews are transcribed, all digital copies will be destroyed. After the study is over, all files will be kept in a password-protected folder on the university network drive for 7 years, and will be destroyed at that time.

We stress that confidentiality will be maintained to the fullest extent permitted by the law. If subpoenaed by ICE or a federal agency for information about study participants, we are obligated to comply with the law and release study records. However, we reiterate that we have taken and will take extensive measures to protect your confidentiality to the fullest extent permitted by the law, including, if you chose to conduct a phone interview, immediately transcribing the interview and destroying the audiotape upon transcription, using only pseudonyms to identify study participants, and keeping transcriptions in a password protected folder in the University network drive that only Steve Pankey and Dr. Maher can access.

**Contacts for Questions about the Study**

You should contact the Office of UMKC's Institutional Review Board at 816-235-5927 if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research subject. You may call

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the co-researcher Steve Pankey at (816) 604-5216 if you have any questions about this study. You may also call him if any problems with your participation in the study arise.

**Voluntary Participation**

Taking part in this research study is your choice. If you choose to be in the study, you are free to stop participating at any time and for any reason. You will be told of any important findings developed during the course of this research.

You have read this Consent Form or it has been read to you. You have been told why this research is being done and what will happen if you take part in the study, including the risks and benefits. You have had the chance to ask questions, and you may ask questions at any time in the future by calling Dr. Michelle Maher at (816) 235-2325. By contacting me and agreeing to take part in the interview, you volunteer and consent to take part in this research study. The researcher will give you a copy of this consent form.

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## **APPENDIX B**

## INTERVIEW GUIDE/QUESTIONS

### Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me. I'd like to learn about your experiences related to being admitted to and deciding to stay at **[name of college will be used here]**. If it is okay with you, I would like to record our conversation so I can capture all the details about your important college experiences. I will type our discussion immediately after we conclude our conversation, and I will then immediately delete the recording of our discussion. I will not use your name in the typewritten transcript of our discussion. I assure you that everything you say will remain confidential; nothing you say will be able to be traced back to you as an identifiable individual. I want to remind you that at any time you wish to stop or prefer not to answer a question, simply say so.

What questions can I answer for you before we begin?

The questions I have prepared to ask you are separated into two groups: access to college and persistence to completion. Let's start with access.

### Interview Questions

#### **Admission to College:**

1. When did you start thinking about attending college?
2. Who helped you to discover your path to college, and why? (for example, family, friends, high school teachers/counselors, others in the community/church)
3. Why did you decide to attend **[name of college]**?
4. Did you consider attending other colleges? If so, which ones? Why did you decide not to attend them and attend **[name of college]** instead?
5. Describe your experience as a student on this campus in the first few months after you arrived here.
6. Did **[name of college]** help you during the admission process to become a student on this campus? If so, how?
7. Are there other ways **[name of college]** could have helped you during the admission process to become a student on this campus, but did not? Why do you think they didn't offer this kind of help to you?
8. Besides people from **[name of college]**, who else helped to during the admission process to become a student on this campus? (for example, family, friends, high school teachers/counselors, others in the community/church) How did they help you? Which were the most helpful to you, and why?
9. Besides what you've described to me, what other sources of help would you have liked to have had during the admission process to become a student on this campus?
10. What advice about the process of becoming a student on this campus would you share with those who are undocumented and want to be a student at **[name of campus]**?
11. Do you think your experience of becoming a student on this campus was different than the experiences of those who also became students but have a different citizen status? If so, how?
12. As a student attending college in **[insert name of state here]**, what do you know about the different admission experiences of undocumented students attending college across the state line in **[insert name of neighboring state here]**?

13. What additional guidance or support do you believe students with different citizenship statuses may have known that you did not?

Before we transition to the persistence side of the interview, is there anything else related to your access to **[name of college]**?

**Retention in College:**

1. How much of your educational program have you completed so far?
2. How much longer do you expect to be at **[name of college]**?
3. How has **[name of college]** helped you be successful as a student on this campus? If it has not helped, why not?
4. Besides people at **[name of college]**, who or what else helps you to be successful on this campus? What other resources for college success have you found outside of your college?
5. Describe your level of satisfaction as a student at **[name of college]**? What has contributed to your satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with **[name of college]**?
6. Do feel that you are doing well/successful academically in your chosen academic program? If so, what at **[name of college]** has contributed to these feelings? If not, what at **[name of college]** has contributed to these feelings?
7. How ready were you for the classwork required by your program? If you were ready for required coursework, what at **[name of college]** has contributed to your sense of readiness? If not, what at **[name of college]** has detracted from your sense of readiness?
8. What else could **[name of college]** do to help you be successful in reaching your goals as a student?
9. How has your citizenship status influenced how you've been treated as a student on this campus?
10. Describe the additional guidance and support you believe students with a different citizenship status may have had access to that has assisted their academic success.

**Closing**

You have given me a lot of great information here. Is there anything else that we have missed in our discussions of access and persistence?

Thank you for your time.

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## VITA

Steve W. Pankey was born on May 26, 1983 in Smithville, Missouri. He received his education within the North Kansas City School District and graduated from Winnetonka High School as an inaugural member of the first Gold Medallion Diploma graduating class in 2002. He received several institutional and music scholarships to attend the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri from which he graduated in 2006. His degree was a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology.

Mr. Pankey immediately began working in the mental health field with Cornerstones of Care in Kansas City, Missouri, serving in a variety of direct care and therapeutic roles. In the fall of 2006, he began his graduate work in counseling psychology at Avila University. He was awarded the Master of Science degree in Counseling Psychology in August, 2009.

Upon completion of his graduate degree, Mr. Pankey transitioned from mental health counseling to academic and career counseling at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. He has ascended the student affairs and higher education ranks at the University of Missouri and Metropolitan Community College, both institutions located in Kansas City, Missouri. Mr. Pankey initiated his doctoral work at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in the fall of 2014. Upon completion of his degree requirements, Mr. Pankey intends to continue his post-secondary administrative career and pursue research interests in the community.

Mr. Pankey is a member of Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and the Missouri Community College Association (MCCA).