The "U" Word: Undocumented Students in Higher Education

About the Author:
I am a junior studying Political Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am the second child in a family of six and have always had an affinity for reading and observing. My first research experience was provided by the McNair Program who seeks to diversify the faculty ranks. I enjoyed the opportunity to do research alongside faculty members as a fellow researcher, particularly in ethnography. I have found ethnography to not only be an educational experience but an escape into a new world. I am unsure about the degree to which I will pursue my curiosity for inquiry and analysis, but I foresee graduate school in the near future.

Keywords:

Abstract:

Initial Exercises:

The University

I used to think about the university as a big institution where I would one day work with great professors and challenge myself through healthy competitions. All of my life I felt that as a dedicated student, I would find the environment and atmosphere that I longed for. The university seemed like a place where all ideas were accepted and challenged; where color, age, sex, and nothing else mattered, except each individual's mind. At one point it seemed a bit unattainable. The university seemed like a place where I would finally find my fit and know that I belonged to a world of intellect and openness.

As I arrived, I realized how this utopian idea of a university I had, was a bit off. I found myself challenged, but not for the reasons I would have preferred. The challenge I had to face was based on identity issues. I had always believed that my merit had brought me to the university where I would succeed. This belief was challenged through a concept of affirmative action, where I was made to feel that I was only here because of my color and status in society. My accomplishments were belittled, and my drive to compete was shut down. Among all of my newfound insecurities, I convinced myself I was not adequately prepared for education at a university level, and therefore gave up my need to succeed. Where I thought I would find acceptance and intellect, I found more insecurities about the way I was dressed, the way I spoke, the reason I was here, and the way I had been taught.

As I found my identity being challenged by myself to my white
counterparts, I also found it being questioned by other Latinos. Was I Mexican enough because I came from a little suburb but went to Chicago Public Schools in Little Village? Was I going to speak to Latinos only and befriend Latinos only, or was I going to be “whitewashed”? Did I think I was too good to hang out with Latinos? All of these questioned were posed directly and indirectly.

A great issue that I realized at the university was that of racism. Did it really exist like some people made it seem, or was it just paranoia created by other people? Who’s side of the battle was I on? If it did exist, was I going to stand against it or was I going to hide in fear of being reprimanded by a higher level of power at the university that ultimately could make or break me?

Ultimately, I have found that my identity will always be challenged by those who I make insecure with my identity. I have found that at the university, sometimes challenges exist more than just intellectually. The greatest challenges I have found question my background, identity, and future. At this point in time I have come to realize that many more will have more challenges than the average student does. For this reason, I must continue to obtain the knowledge that will one day facilitate the challenges of future students.

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Project # 2

Making Omelets

The subjects were our roommates. When we were finally at the site of inquiry we explained the procedure to the subjects and presented them with consent forms. They were very friendly and seemed comfortable because they knew one of us personally and the other one brought candy. They were curious about the study and about what kind of notes we would be taking. They asked if they would be able to see the notes afterward. Grace was interested in what she would “look” like on paper. After signing all the papers they went into the kitchen and told us they were ready. We tried to watch them through what we referred to as an observation window which was actually a rectangular opening in the wall; however, it was too small for both of us to get a clear view of all the action. So we sat directly in front of the kitchen entry way, where there was no door, just another large opening.

The kitchen was relatively small. The furthest left hand corner held a mid-sized refrigerator. Next to that was a sink and then open counter space above the dishwasher. Across from the refrigerator was a counter
space with a microwave on top of it. Next to the microwave was a George Foreman grill. Next to the grill was a small amount of counter space immediately followed by the stove. To the right of the stove was an open counter space with various knick knacks and a knife set stored there. The floor was made of cheap tile; the floor and refrigerator were white giving it a sense of cleanliness.

Grace planned to teach Mireya to make omelets. This surprised me (Sha’Donna) because I know that Grace is uncomfortable in the kitchen and Mireya likes to take positions of leadership. They used Mireya's olive oil for the pan and the fact that that wasn't an issue indicates that they’re comfortable sharing with each other. Mireya began by the Microwave counter and stayed there for most of the project. Grace scrambled two eggs for her omelet by the dishwasher counter. The girls were laughing a lot and cutting off each other’s sentences, indicating their rapport with each other. In this way they seemed comfortable with each other but they never dispensed with formalities such as “excuse me” and “please”; perhaps their comfort with each other was strained in the teacher/pupil situation.

Even though Grace is supposed to be teaching Mireya how to make omelets she asks Mireya about how to tell if the pan is hot enough. Mireya comfortably steps into the role of teacher and tests the heat of the pan explaining what she knows to Grace. While Mireya adjusts the heat of the pan Grace fidgets with the spatula. Mireya begins to mock Grace's fidgeting for a few moments. The fidgeting and mocking indicates that both the girls are anxious about being watched. Sha’Donna knows that Mireya is not the type to mock people in that way and that Grace is a rather un-fidgety person generally.

Whenever Grace does anything, such as adjust the flame once the first omelet is cooking, Mireya questions her. Grace fidgets constantly with the omelet while it is cooking and does not simply let it fry. Perhaps she was impatient for it to cook because she was anxious to get started on a paper she had due the next day. While Grace is attending the omelet Mireya messes unnecessarily with the cabinets and adjusts things. She pours a cup of water that later she doesn’t finish drinking. It appears that Mireya is not observing but simply fidgeting because she is uncomfortable with the role of student.

Once Grace finishes the first omelet Mireya begins to crack two eggs for her own omelet. Mireya makes it a point to say that she will pay Grace back for her two eggs. Grace of course dismisses her by saying it’s fine and she doesn’t mind letting Mireya use two eggs. Mireya begins to stir the eggs instead of beating them. Grace grabs the bowl with a scoffing
sound and tries to teach Mireya how to beat the eggs. Mireya recoils dramatically and whines that she’s afraid it will fly out of the bowl. Mireya continues to beat the eggs wrong but Grace after two tries, discontinues pressing the point of how to do it properly. Mireya puts salt in her beaten/stirred eggs even though Grace mentioned earlier that she did not season her eggs. Even though Grace is supposed to be teaching Mireya, Mireya is not uncomfortable doing what she thinks is best. Mireya pours her eggs on the pan and realizes the pan is very hot. She consults with Grace but neither girl really knows what to do about the situation. Grace goes to very carefully chop up turkey on the dishwasher counter. Mireya grabs cheese for her omelet. Mireya puts cheese on her omelet “wrong” and Grace attempts to correct her but Mireya refuses to relinquish control of the project. Grace does not attempt to impose help again.

Mireya talks to us a lot while her omelet is cooking. She faces us directly and can’t resist engaging us in conversation. Grace talks with us when Mireya does but avoids looking at us directly, or does it less than Mireya. Mireya’s omelet begins to swell alarmingly and she recoils and begs for Grace to help her. Grace takes over effectively and finishes the omelet and turns off the stove. Mireya checks to make sure the stove is completely off. Grace grabs a bag of shredded cheese and can’t open it. She whines to Mireya to help her and Mireya playfully scoffs and opens the cheese. These interactions show how the girls take turns in the “dominant” and “submissive” roles. Mireya is usually trying to keep the dominant role, even when she is being taught, but when Mireya is unsure Grace will step up to the plate and fill the shoes. They are close with each other and this happens seamlessly with no conflict.

Project #4

Latino Identity in Print

During the 70’s, a movement to integrate different minorities into the university resulted in the emergence of cultural houses, including La Casa Cultural Latina. In an attempt to voice an opinion among Latinos at the university, La Carta, a Spanish and Enlgish newsletter, was produced by La Casa. I found this newsletter in the few boxes that existed in the student archives about Latinos. I was able to see the changes it had withstood and notice the changes and similarities from the first issue to the last.

Being part of the Latino community is a determining characteristic. Through reading and experience, I have come to realize in part, what it means to be a Latina at the university. I have found that I have changed the way I think
about my identity upon entering the university. Just like my identity has evolved
during time, so has the newsletter I found buried in boxes. The newsletter began
as multifaceted. It documented the lives of different Latino groups on campus and
attempted to tackle every issue that it saw unfit at the university. In once
newsletter I read an entry about immigration reform and low wages for Latino
workers. In that same edition, there were issues about low enrollment of Latinos
at the university, high school dropouts, issues concerning the various groups of
Latinos in the U.S., and political poetry.

My identity seemed much like this when I first began college. I did not
know who I was and what group I belonged to. It seemed important to pick a side
because it was a division. On the one hand, I could continue to be who I always
was and know only that I was a student, and on the other hand I needed to claim
who I was and learn about my culture. I soon realized in was not a choice to make
but a decision I had to take. I was forced to confront who I was going to be
because so many people did not let me belong in the group where I was just me
and the color of my skin did not matter. I realized this when the teacher would
ask the class to get into groups and no one wanted to talk to me. As hard as my
efforts were to integrate myself I realized I was considered different. The irony
was that I did not consider myself different: they considered me different. I liked
to think it was mere coincidence that I was not picked for groups and not spoken
to by anyone but minorities. It was obvious though when in one experience I was
chosen to be part of their group. They asked me questions about how it was in my
“hood” and if I knew a lot of gang members. I realized that it was different in my
“hood” and that I did know a lot of gang members, but that was not the problem.
The problem was I was different. My identity started in a position in which I was
forced to confront it.

La Carta began as through a series of movement in which it was forced to
confront that as Latinos we could no longer consider ourselves in separate
groups. This is not to say that we do not distinguish and honor each group as
individual and unique, but the struggle to receive a voice would have to unite all
Latinos. The first issues sought to discuss the different groups and concerns for
each through stories and articles. The later issues showed a collective consent to
be considered one in the Latino community. The evolution of this newsletter is
important because it helps to show the progress the Latino community has made.
From its emergence into the world to its political agenda and its collective
identity, La Carta represents the Latino community and my own struggle to of
self-identification. Buried in a box in the archives between minority affairs,
fraternities and sororities, and student life, I found my identity and established
were it began.

Project # 5

The Illinois Board of Higher Education
Having read this article, I could not help but feel a direct connection to it. Not only did its statements affect me, but it also added a bit more sense to my project. The first words that I read from its mission statements were: A Citizens’ Agenda for Illinois Higher Education. It struck me hard because I had never realized that mission statements are directed towards a group of people who will benefit or are trying to benefit from some type of plan. As I read it, I began to understand that in the process of targeting some, others are neglected. The word “citizen” can mean so many things to people who can categorize themselves as such, from their nationalism to duty and responsibility, to all of the benefits that can come from being a citizen. What happens when a person is not a citizen? Whether by choice or not, because of timing or political reasons, a person might not have chosen their legal status in the country. These people become excluded and are not even eligible to receive what many may consider necessary.

As far as my personal connection to it, I felt like I have felt about others same programs and proposal from before: too much talk, nothing is being done. I do not want to sound pessimistic, but at some point the optimistic plans of others who do not really know what a struggle might be seem unattainable at times. As I read it, I could almost picture the authors of this plan for higher education: a table of older people excited about diversifying the university setting by sending a couple of minority students to college and making sure they got through. It may sound as if I am bitter about the plan but experience has taught me to be wary. In high school, no one was able to tell me the first thing about paying for college, diversity, and not even about going to college. When I got here, everyone told me college was possible. They advised me not to be afraid of the big words and huge amounts of money I had to pay, and just get through it. Everyone told me that there was money out there for that would help me and that as the first in my family to go to college, there would be extra assistance for me. I am sure that these wonderful programs do exist; I was just never told how to find them.

The same goes for these great plans to make higher education possible to so many. How do we get there? Where do we go when we lose track? Can we all really go? It seems as though it has already been done and proposed before. I cannot help but wonder if this time it will work.

http://youtube.com/watch?v=rbTxO4rPjrU

**Question:** How are the lives of undocumented students different than other Latino(citizen) U of I students?

**Plan:** Through a series of interviews and the analysis of answers I plan to contribute to the three specific areas of questions:

1. How do career aspirations differ between each group(citizens vs.
undocumented students)?

2. Do undocumented student assume a role of secrecy throughout their college experience?

3. Is citizenship the ultimate goal of an undocumented student?

Data: In the interviews that I have conducted thus far, I have come to realize that everyone’s perspective is completely unique to their individual experiences. While I only had a chance to interview undocumented students so far, each of their views represents a different aspect as far as primary identity and obstacles are concerned. For example, one of the students I interviewed seemed completely aware of his situation. Diego was active in trying to find ways to work against what he referred to as another obstacle as a student. He seemed very worried about his plans after graduation, since he had siblings in his same legal status with a degree, but no job opportunities. He seemed a bit frustrated but optimistic about policies regarding students in his same position. He was very open about his identity and made sure that I understood that he primarily identified as a student, then as a Latino. He let me know that although he stands at a disadvantage because of his legal status in the country, he did not let that obstacle override his dreams and ambition about earning a degree.

In yet another interview the person was completely oblivious about deportation. This struck me as a bit odd until she mentioned that although she was not a citizen, she was a resident. This brought up another point which I had not realized would be significant. Undocumented is a word used to refer to a various amount of people in distinct situations. I realized I would have to be wary of this for future reference. In almost an opposite view of the first student’s perspective, this student was not worried about her future plans. I understood that she was only a freshmen and had a long way to go, but I could not help but wonder when she would begin to be preoccupied with plans for after graduation. The only thing that seemed to worry her, was her financial situation and how she would pay off school. At the moment, her father was paying for everything. She brought up the point that her only problem with her status in the admissions process dealt with cost of schooling. She said that the only reason it mattered was because they did not know whether to charge her out-of-state tuition or instate-tuition.

Through the interviews I also realized that not only did each person I interviewed identify differently, but they felt different about being interviewed. Diego was a bit nervous and through the course confessed he was a bit worried. His idea of secrecy was a bit different than I had
predicted. He said that although he was afraid of deportation, he trusted me a bit. Since we had known met in high school, he said he knew he could trust me. He also mentioned that he was a bit tired of all of the interviews. I asked what he meant and he said that numerous people had already approached him about the same subject, but he refused to participate. He said that other research had involved a much colder sense of his status and that he had felt like he was studied. I understood what he meant but became a bit conscious about the way I was asking questions.

In the next interview I conducted, I found myself sitting in a coffee shop. Juan insisted on buying me coffee, which I reversed, but he refused. I noticed that he was wearing a Northface vest, a Nautica hat, and a red hooded sweater with greek letters. I began by asking him the usual questions to which he responded with much security. He was very confident in his answers and sat upright, looking directly at me. Juan was a U.S. citizen who associated the words Latino with politics in which he refused to be a part of. I had made the assumption that everyone would be political about the subject I was inquiring but thusfar, only one person had proven to be political about it. Juan told me about his difficulties paying for college and about his social life as a student with citizenship. He never once mentioned the problem about restrictions of boundaries when socializing. When I asked about the hardest part of the admissions process, he related the story about counselors who did not care and teachers who did not worry. His greatest concern his first year was the association he made with his identity. He repeatedly spoke about being considered "whitewashed." On other terms, he repeatedly turned questions around and asked me what I thought and about my experiences. I found it difficult to switch things around because he asked me why I was avoiding questions he was being made to answer. On numerous occasions he asked me what I thought about his opinions and what I thought about his identity. He seemed conscious about the opinions he voiced but mentioned how he felt comfortable enough with me to answer them.

Another interview I conducted was based on a "Mexican-American" sophomore. She seemed very eager to speak but was very shy about speaking at first. In the beginning her answers were short and very much to the point, but as the interview progressed, she became increasingly open about her situation in the university as a Latina. Her greatest obstacles as a student dealt with financial support from the government. Although she was a citizen and qualified for financial aid, she still had to take out loans and apply for scholarships. She was the first in her family to go to college and through the interview I had a growing sense that she was very connected to her family and culture. I
expect that she would not see obstacles as the first subjects when it came to social life, but she in fact did. Although her obstacles were not based on legal status, she claimed that she did not go out much and watched a lot of films. She said that the racial composition of the university was not encouraging when it came to making friends and going out. Although she enjoyed meeting people, it was difficult to associate with anyone because of the difference in culture.

Discuss: Introduction

I had never realized how many titles a single person or groups of people could be associated with. While many just consider themselves students without proper documentation, the government claims they are illegals, aliens, Mexicans, Hispanics, or Latinos. In recent years, the U.S. has seen an increase in immigration from Latin American countries, primarily Mexico. While legal immigration from Mexico accounts for 9.8 million people in the U.S., another 9.3 million undocumented immigrants from Mexico were reported in the March 2002 Current Population Survey. In total, illegal immigration was reported at 5.3 million being from Mexico, and another two million from other Latin American countries (Passel). With the increased number of undocumented immigrants, an even larger scale of people with low education levels is being created through policies which prohibit the distribution of financial aid to undocumented students pursuing degrees in postsecondary education. Alongside the debate on the cost of tuition, undocumented students who attend a postsecondary institution find themselves in rather difficult situations which affect their student lives. The inability to have a social life like their citizen student counterparts restricts the full experience of a typical college student. The inability of undocumented students to obtain a job after graduation also hinders the enrollment in postsecondary institutions.

With about 65,000 undocumented students graduating from high school every year, many students refrain from attending college due to their financial situations and fear of deportation. It is estimated that between five and ten percent of the total number of undocumented students in the U.S. attend college (Gonzales). I do not intend to pretend that I know how difficult their situation is. I also do not pretend to know what it is like to be in constant fear of being taken away from your family. With recent events such as the raid in my home town of Little Village, a predominantly Mexican community in Chicago, I wonder what it would be like to have to fight to remain in the only country that I have ever known. During this event, immigration officials rounded up people in a public area. With the excuse of eliminating the neighborhood of gang activities, the officials arrested random, and sometimes, innocent
people. Mothers were held in handcuffs while their children watched. There was no warrant for the arrests, and there was also no justice given to those arrested. Many had just been in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and their legal status was never questioned. I know that for many of these undocumented students, the stigmas that surround immigrants and foreigners in general, are negative, and contribute to the feelings of racism and stereotyping.

Taking from events such as the aforementioned, I decided to learn as much as I could of those whose struggles had gone unnoticed. The amount of undocumented Latino students in institutes of higher learning are few, but in existence. It is important to know about their struggles, and my obligation as a student of color, to advocate for programming inclusive of resources that would benefit such students. While the U.S. fights wars against the world in the name of democracy, and U.S. humanitarians advocate for the equality of opportunity, many overlook the problems at home. I began looking to find out how the lives of undocumented students were different than those of other Latino students (citizens) at the university. I decided that the best way to get the stories of undocumented students through would be by using their own words and learning about the laws and policies that dominate their lives.

**Citizenship**

A large percentage of undocumented students are the result of illegal immigration by immigrant parents. Many are brought into the United States as young children and are therefore not allowed to apply for citizenship based on the illegal entry of the country by their parents, of which they of course, had no say. They grow up learning about a culture they consider theirs, about the American Dream, and the opportunities their country rendered to the Founding Fathers. Under the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, it is argued that any child has the right to equal opportunity to education. Furthermore, any person twenty-one years of age or younger is allowed a public education without having to present proof of status in the United States (“Students' Rights to Equal Education”). When it comes time to go to college, the story shifts a bit, and status becomes crucial in determining the price for continuing to learn.

Through policies that allow tuition to be lower through in-state tuition criteria, many undocumented students are given the opportunity to attend college, but for many more, college is still impossible because they cannot count on financial aid, family contributions, and cannot hold jobs because they do not have a social security number. The
Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act proposed in 2001 was introduced as a bill in November of 2005. Policies such as the DREAM Act offer the possibility of achieving permanent legal residency to undocumented students who satisfy the criteria. The DREAM Act would only grant legal residence to students who graduate from high school and attend a two to four year institution for higher learning, but also to those who join the military. In addition, undocumented students would not be eligible for grants from the government but would be able to take out loans to pay for their schooling ("Advocating the American Dream.").

Traditionally, there are two means by which a person can become a citizen (Protopsaltis). The first includes the sponsorship by a family member. Under these circumstances, citizenship becomes an almost impossible goal to reach because in certain situations, which are often the case, every member of the family is undocumented, so there is no one who can legally begin the process of naturalization. The second form of sponsorship is through an employer. In the instance of employer sponsorship, many of the undocumented immigrants will not be considered because they are either too young, or not expected to work with the employer long enough to begin the process. It is also impossible for the parents of undocumented students to obtain citizenship through employer sponsorship because the employment which they hold is usually a low-skilled job, which is periodical or in which workers can be easily replaced.

A less traditional means of obtaining citizenship, and more restrictive in practice due to recent policies, is through marriage. In most cases, the person is too young to get married. In validating the marriage, a person must also be able to show proof that the couple has been living together through visits by governmental officials and documentation of marriage and a joint tax return. With the newest laws in immigration, it is more likely to naturalize by marrying someone outside the country and having to wait for approval by the U.S., than marrying a U.S. citizen, which would lead to a 5-10 year waiting period.

While there are not many choices left for the naturalization of undocumented students, many remain in the country because it is the only country that they have ties with. Unable to visit their original homeland, many have grown up in the U.S. and have limited to few memories of their home countries. As one student referred to as irony, they are taught about a way of life and prepared to go to college, an experience most of them will never know.
Interviews

I sat there waiting to for the first person I was going to interview. His name is Diego and he is a junior at the U of I. I had known about his status in the country from previous conversations, and had instantly contacted him when I realized the type of research I would be doing. He should up at out meeting place and offered to buy him coffee. He refused but I ended up paying anyway. I was very nervous because he was to be my first interview and my first experience interviewing. My greatest fear at the moment was the chance that I might offend him with certain questions or use terminology he would find derogatory. As we sat down to begin the interview, I began by mentioning the implications of my research and how much I appreciated his participation. I noticed he was wearing a Homeland Security shirt, with a picture of a man holding a gun, and a caption that read, “Terrorizing the U.S. since 1492.” The irony that his shirt proclaimed was interesting to me so I pointed to it. He smiled and we began.

He started off by mentioning how he had previously been approached by many people in the attempt to conduct similar research. I was unaware about any research going on that was similar to mine. He said his greatest concern was becoming the “poster child” for undocumented students here at the university. Diego identified as a Latino student. Among his greatest preoccupations were the fear of exposure with ultimate consequences that could lead to deportation, and the inability to represent all undocumented students through one form of research or another. I assured him that his story was unique and a single representation of the life of undocumented student at an institute of higher learning, and that I would not try to intentionally use him as a representation of all students. I began by asking him about his life at the university and he explained that he was very happy that had been informed enough through high school about college. He had older siblings that had always provided loads of information, of which he never considered. He talked about a program that had persuaded him to continue his education. As he talked he smiled about the program. He also began to mention how he had initially decided to work after college, but upon acceptance to the U of I, had decided to change his plans. He began to look for information about scholarships and began to inform himself and his parents about the opportunities in funding for students in his situation. Since he knew that his status would prohibit him from applying for financial aid, he would find a way to pay for college. He found that he was able to take out loans and through the Bank of America was able to get a hold of enough money to pay for school. He told me that although many were supportive of him attending college, others like his counselor let him know that it was impossible. “You can’t
go there,” and “How are you gonna pay?” were just some of the negative responses he encountered. He knew that paying for college would be his first obstacle.

As the interview moved along he mentioned a topic that I was very curious about. He talked about his life with regards to socializing and night life. He mentioned that there are many things that citizen students take for granted about being at the university. He told me how he was forced to realize the importance of his status in high school. The greatest and most stressing time in a 16-year-olds life is getting a driver’s license. The freedom and implications of a driver’s license on adolescence is a great part of becoming an adult. As an undocumented student, Diego was unable to get one.

At this point in the interview I remembered my own experience obtaining a driver’s license. I knew that I needed one but was hesitant in getting it. For the most part, my parents drove me everywhere and my friends picked me up occasionally in order to go to the mall. I can recall how excited all the boys became about the opportunity to get their own and the things that they could do with a license. At that moment in the interview I realized that Diego’s expression had changed. He related his story about the inability to take out girls on date and the inability to invite them to have a drink. The prospect of going out to bars had never bothered him his freshmen year of college because none of his friends had been able to go anyway. As soon as everyone reached the legal age, he noticed how little by little, everyone began to go out. Unable to obtain any form of identification, Diego was forced to stay in while his friends went out.

Maria, a freshman, was very shy and I was still very nervous about conducting research. The prospect of not being able to give justice to her story worried me. We sat in her dorm room as she explained how she identified as a “unique type of Latina.” She had expected the university to be exactly what it turned out to be. Her greatest concern was being so far away from her family. She mentioned that U of I had been the best school she had been accepted to. In applying to U of I she had done the written application. I remembered having applied to the university on an actual application because I did not have access to a computer at home. The school I came from only allowed access to computers with internet through the library. In order to use these computers students had to give up their lunch hour in hope that there were computers available. There had been a requirement of application to at least three colleges in order to graduate, but applying had always seemed impossible to achieve with limited resources and not internet
Maria related her story of support by her parents, who were immigrants of Mexico. She had been too little to have any real memories of Mexico. Her parents had brought her to the U.S. when she was a baby and she had been unable to visit her home country since. Maria mentioned how although she was not a citizen of the United States she was a resident of the state of Illinois. Funding for her college had been limited by the government and the bill was currently being paid off by her father. Her mother did not work so I assumed her father was paying for everything. I could not imagine how he was doing it. Maria told me she was rooming with a friend from high school and how her friend was so lucky to get her college paid by the government. She explain that thus far, the greatest concern she had with her status was paying for college and the amount she had to pay. When she sent her application in, she explained how she had been questioned about her status. She gave me the reason that they did not know whether to charge her in-state or out-of-state tuition.

While the enrollment of undocumented students in institutions of higher education is not directly forbidden, certain policies indirectly discourage attendance. Policies regarding tuition have recently been passed which allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition as residents of their state rather than as foreigners. Although such policies result as positive advocates to higher education, only nine states have passed them (Krueger). Maria was lucky to be a resident of Illinois.

One of the greatest concerns about college that Maria had aside from paying for her attendance was the validation of her degree in the workforce and the possibility of finding a job. She felt her status put her at disadvantage when it came to finding a job, but she did not seem very worried. I thought about myself as a freshman and realized that her age could possible account for her preoccupation with the future.

When it came to socialization, Maria considered herself a shy girl. She said she always had homework and kept busy enough that going out was not really an option. Bars, she said, were not her scene, along with parties and other events that resembled parties. She called herself conservative and preferred not to go out. She mentioned how she was very close with her boyfriend, who would visit her every weekend. I wondered if that was the reason why she was not worried about getting into bars and going out. Her fear of deportation was also not very impacting. Although she was afraid of the consequences that could arise from her status, she did not worry too much about it. She was optimistic about her future and hoped to achieve citizenship by the time she
graduated from college.

Juan is currently in his fourth year at the University of Illinois. He is a citizen on the United States and a first generation student. We met at a café where I offered to buy him coffee. He refused to accept it unless he paid, and after a few minutes, I agreed. Initially Juan was very controlling of the situation. I almost felt it was a defense of his from being under observation by me. He wore a red sweatshirt with a hood that had Greek letters across his chest. He wore a Nautica cap and designer jeans. As soon as I began to ask him questions he began by asking my opinion of his answers and what I thought of his situation. He was very interested in learning about my opinion but I offered that it was research and that both of our opinions would be included in the final product. He mentioned how we would have to meet again in order to find about my opinion on certain topics.

It was very interesting to me that from the beginning he made it a point to let me know how he had always preferred not to be political about anything. It was ironic because he had already mentioned how he was majoring in political science. I wondered how it was possible to not be political about things. In every opinion that we give, we are political. Learning new things always gives way to politics that surround us. When I asked him how he identified, he told me he did not like to label himself, but that if he had to choose, he would pick Mexican-American. He said that contrary to popular labels at the university such as Latino, he liked to remove himself from the politics of words. I thought about my own label and necessity to be political about how I identified. Latino is a new word I had learned at the university. I found how there was all types of Latino from indigenous roots to those in the Caribbean. I associated with this word because although I was unsure about my ancestry, I recognized that I was surely a mix of different nationalities. Latino was a word that gave recognition to the indigenous people neglected by words such as Hispanic. Aside from the lack of recognition of such people, Hispanic was a term which meant a love for Spain. I knew I was in part indigenous, and I knew I needed to recognize that part of me, if even just through a single word.

Juan chose to attend U of I because it was cost efficient and close to home. He was currently working two jobs in order to pay for the loans he had taken out. He mentioned how he had always wanted to go to “the Chief school” with references to the former student mascot at the university. He asked me my opinion about the Chief and when I refused to answer, he gave up and told me I was probably against it. Juan spoke about his social life and how he tended to socialize more with Caucasian people. He said that upon entrance to the university he could not help
but notice how “Hispanics--well, all kinds stuck to own kinds.” He had joined the Army ROTC because everyone “mingled together” and had an equal opportunity.

Juan spoke about a particular topic that I paid close attention to. In his experience with La Casa Cultural Latina, he had always found it to be ignorant. He felt unwelcome stating, “I've been here two or three times but I have an opinion.” When speaking about undocumented students, Juan felt undocumented students and citizen Latino student all hated him. Juan felt that student social life was a big part of student culture.

Throughout the interview I was unsure of what to think. Juan was very opinionated but refused to acknowledge the politics of his opinions. I was unable to decipher what the stigmas were with politics and just listened to his opinions attentively. The most difficult part about trying to interview Juan was the fact that he had many opinions which I did not agree with. I found myself refraining from offering a rebuttal for many of his opinions about immigration and Latinos on campus, topics he introduced in his interview.

Celia was the fourth person I chose to interview. Although she is a legal citizen of the United States, her story remains tied closely to those of undocumented students. We met in a lounge in one of the dorms for the interview, where she showed up wearing a dim black sweater and worn denim jeans. Celia seemed a bit uneasy as I began to interrogate her, but within a few minutes, she found her niche on the welcoming couch in the lounge and refrained from biting her nails. Celia was born and raised in the northern part of Chicago. As she explained it to be, the neighborhood was predominantly composed of Polish residents when her parents first moved in from Mexico. She revealed to me that perhaps the only other Latinos living on the same block of whom she was aware of were her siblings. As a child, she confesses having dealt with minor racial slurs from other children and sometimes even grown-ups within the community. She said that it wasn’t until she turned about nine that the community’s population began to change. As of now, the neighborhood in which her family resides is primarily made up of Mexicans and Central Americans. With a larger population of the same ethnic background, Celia admitted to feeling more accepted and more at ease with herself as well as with her neighbors. In fact, Celia revealed to me that it had been a while since she had encountered racism, but college did not fail to reunite her with this haunting enemy. Like many students, Celia did not know what to expect upon entering the U of I. In spite of her fear of being alone, Celia decided to apply to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign because she claims she saw it as an opportunity to break away from barriers of oppression and acquire a
promising career. Her sister, who is 22 years old and attends DeVry University, tried numerous times to convince Celia to attend a local college or university to alleviate the pressures of being away from home. Celia refused and is now setting forth a great example for her two younger siblings; her 15 year old brother and her eight year old sister.

Celia is currently a sophomore at the U of I, and she claims that her freshman year was definitely more difficult. As she laughs back at it now, she explained to me how disoriented and helpless she felt. Celia told me that her first semester as a freshman gave her many hopes because she did so great. There were no distractions, no chores that needed to be done, and no excuses for not concentrating. Despite the fact that she had no friends—not because she chose not to, but because she did not know any Latinos and everyone else did not seem interested in getting to know her, she felt comfortable with her position as a student. When she checked her grades online, there were two different approaches to the situation: at first, she was overjoyed to find out that she had done exceptionally well in her classes, but then she realized how much money her parents were paying for her tuition. Her financial status is something she often overlooked, but being in college and receiving little help from financial aid were constant and unfriendly reminders of her situation. Lacking money and friends, Celia admits she felt intimidated. She had no one to talk to with whom she could relate to ethnically and share language and culture with. Being in college and lacking these elements made Celia unsure of her identity. To her fellow classmates, she was Mexican, but according to her birth certificate, she was American. She concluded that she is Mexican-American, and when asked why, she explained that her cultural beliefs make her Mexican, but her permanent residency in the United States makes her American.

Aeon is an American-born Latino and the first to attend college form his family. He is a sophomore at U of I and has enjoyed his experience in college to the fullest. He considers himself Mexican and offered his insight on culture. He explained to me that he was very proud of who he was and where his parents came from and found it necessary to identify with his culture. Although he does not necessarily tend to associate with other Latinos at the university he told me that he always felt he had to represent his country of origin.

Aeon seemed like a generally satisfied person and when I inquired about his greatest obstacle in attending college, he told me that being away from his family had been the most difficult thing about going to college. He stated that his relationship with his parents had always been close and that his parents had always been supportive of his decisions. Although they had not had say in his choice of college, they supported
him with his decision to attend U of I. He told me that his high school counselors had been very supportive of him in attending college and that he had been active in finding information about financing his studies. He was able to get grants and scholarships that amounted in his complete payment of college.

Although he had received a lot of support from his family and an abundance of information from his school about college, he told me that nothing had prepared him for the culture shock he received at the university. He had been accustomed to seeing people form his same ethnicity in his town and school that he had never realized what a great impact a change in cultural composition could make. The change was huge, but his persistence and friendly nature allowed him to make friends quickly. Aeon told me that he had not had financial difficulties in attending college and that for the same reason he had a chance to focus more on studies and less on what he would have to do in order to pay for school. His social life included hanging out with friends and going out when necessary. He loved to be loud he said, “Can’t you tell?”

Jade was another person whose story contributed to my research. She is a freshman at the U of I who has been struggling financially to sustain her title as a student with no legal documents. Jade was brought to the United States when she was three years old and has not returned to her hometown in Mexico since. She is the oldest from her siblings and thus feels as though she carries the most pressure to pave the way carefully and responsibly for her sisters. Jade admits that being an illegal immigrant is a great burden for a person who is trying to progress his or her status by enrolling in college. As of now, her tuition totals to an amount of 23 thousand dollars per year, all of which is coming out of her parents’ pockets. Given that she is undocumented, Jade has no access to financial aid, and to be safe, her parents refused to take out any loans for fear of being deported. To her, it seems as though her life is carefully run in every way that prevents deportation and therefore restricts her from many experiences. Jade admits that education would have been one of the many things in her life that was destined to be limited, had it not been for her acceptance to the U of I. She says that despite her parents’ many attempts to push her into attending a community college, she applied to DePaul University and U of I. Her parents had little hope in regards to her acceptance because she did not have a social security number, but when they found out of her acceptance, they decided it was time to stop underestimating her potential and basing it in of her legal status.

Jade realizes now that she was more unprepared for this kind of transition than she thought. She confesses that a lot of the times she
feels lost in her classes and when addressing this to her professors, many of them respond by telling her that it should all seem like a review from high school. Jade says it is unfair to her and other students who came from lower income communities and therefore were not presented with the same facilities, tools, and education that the majority of the students in the university were. She feels that she was not mentally prepared to take on such a role and conquer it. The way she explained it was very unique; Jade confessed that in the beginning, she thought everything would be simple because she would be surrounded by a bunch of students, and after all, that is what she identified as. Upon adapting to campus, she realized how drastic the difference was between the Latino population and other ethnicity. Although Jade had the opportunity to meet many Latinos on campus, she feels as though she is still part of yet another subculture: the undocumented students, who not to mention, cannot openly identify themselves for fear of deportation. She claims it is twice as difficult being undocumented as it is for Latinos who obtain citizenship, and it is even three times more difficult identifying as both Latino and undocumented. After speaking with other peers of the same or similar ethnic backgrounds, Jade realized that many of them are just as confused as she is about their identity. Some of her friends call themselves Chicanos, while others prefer the terms Latino or Latin-American. Throughout this entire identity crisis, however, she has concluded that she identifies herself as “Mexican—nothing more and nothing less,” she stated. Jade concluded that despite the many years she has spent living in this country, and despite the amount of money her parents have invested in it while trying to pursue a better future, she cannot claim herself to be American. A social security number and any form of identification keep her from calling herself an American citizen. Furthermore, Jade has decided that even if she was given the option to become a citizen of the US, she would remain as she is, a Mexican citizen because she feels as though she owes it to her country to uphold that title.

Results

In the eight interviews that I conducted, I found that regardless of gender, age, and year in school, the primary concern of all of the students was financing college. With the exception of two students who were fortunate enough to receive enough grants and scholarships, the rest of the Latino students interviewed were primarily worried about paying for college. A common struggle by the parents of each student was also compelling in the search for employment. With the exception of another two students, I found that adequate preparation for college courses from high school was among another of the greatest concerns for Latino students. Many felt that their high school had not prepared
them for the academic challenges in college, and the life that came with
it. All of the students I interviewed mentioned some sort of culture shock
their first year, and while some had grown more comfortable with the
demographics of the school, others could not overlook it.

The word citizenship implied many things to each interviewee. While all
three undocumented students associated the word with privilege, only
one of five citizen students found the word to imply it. The other five
citizen Latino students found the world meant basic freedoms. It was
interesting to see how one world changed in meaning depending on who
used it and it was terms it was spoken. While citizenship meant
opportunity to all three undocumented students, only two of those
students felt naturalization was an ultimate goal in their lives. The third
student found that citizenship would be selling out to a country where
opportunity lay, but not her loyalty.

When it came to differentiating between the words illegal alien and
undocumented immigrant, I found that those who were more likely to
establish a negativity to illegal alien tended to be more informed about
politics. Two of three undocumented students thought the words illegal
alien was a derogatory term used to refer to undocumented people by
the media and government in order to create a negative feeling about
immigrants. While only two citizen students were able to differentiate
between undocumented immigrant and illegal alien, the rest felt both
words meant the exact same thing.

Through particular stories of those who have in present times been able
to attend college on their own terms, we are able to see a struggle that
has otherwise been hidden from the common view. Stories of an extra
struggle in education, with no positive means in the end but to learn and
obtain a degree which will not be validated, show the human side of
those affected by immigration policies on education. These stories,
although not representative of a larger community, reflect the views of
many students who just want to learn and have the opportunity to better
their own situations.

Throughout the interviews it was compelling to compare myself to the
lives of each of the people I interviewed. I found that I shared similar
experiences to many, but when it came to comparing my situation to
those of undocumented students, there seemed to be an aspect of life I
had overlooked. My status had never been a cause for concern or an
obstacle in receiving an education or services that had seemed
otherwise a necessary component of life. The United States is a country
built on immigration. From reasons of colonization and persecution, to
slavery and opportunity, immigration (legal and illegal) has been part of
American culture from the establishment of this nation. To deny the most recent wave of immigrants the opportunity that all previous immigrants have had is unfair and immoral.

Literary Sources

Access to Higher Education for Undocumented Students

By: Edward Drachman

With the recent influx of Mexican immigrants into the United States, the idea about the responsibilities and problems it might entail are dragged along with it. The prospect of schooling for certain generations is just one of the many problems that the United States has with immigration. While it is always acclaimed that no single person is entitled to an education, the obstacle to become educated as an undocumented student becomes even greater due to the lack of funds. Through policies which exclude undocumented students from receiving financial aid and loans, the U.S. has managed to maintain many undocumented immigrants out of school. According to the article by Drachman, "illegals" entered the United States illegal and should therefore not receive any support that would encourage more immigration. Through different reforms people argue that it is the moral responsibility of the U.S. to educate these students regardless of their status. While some argue that public schooling should be provided because undocumented people still pay taxes they should be allowed to partake in certain aspects of society, others oppose it arguing that although it might seem like a moral obligation, it will only encourage more illegal immigration. The article also related the prospect of in-state and out-of-state tuition for higher education. While the policy was passed to charge students in-state tuition, many are still unable to attend the university because they have no financial means by which to do so.

Mexican-Born, In U.S. Illegally, A Top Student Can't Get Aid

By: Miriam Jordan

This article describes the struggles of one particular student in attempting to obtain a higher education. The article shows [Jazmin Segura]'s status as barrier in getting an sort of financial aid. As a student in high school, [Jazmin] was at the top of her class. She always had a dream to attend college but was unsure how she would be able to afford it. The article documents how many students in the same situation as [Jazmin] have lived in the country all of their lives except for birth. The article also mentions how only 1 in 20 undocumented students end up
Mixed Signals: No Green Card Means American Education Is a Win-Lose Prospect—Undocumented Students Are Guaranteed K-12 by Law, But College Isn’t So Easy—’A Girl Without a Country’

By: Daniel Golden

This article documents Monique Silva’s experience as an undocumented student: deaf and unable to communicate in any language. Upon her arrival to the U.S. she learned sign language rather quickly and became an exemplary student. She excelled as an athlete on her school’s track team and was accepted to the University in Washington, D.C. The story then switched to a not-so-happy ending. Ms. Silva is now working in a warehouse where she is paid minimum wage. Her co-workers do not know sign language so instead communicate with her through notes. Although she has lived in the U.S. for 12 years, she is unable to attend college because of her financial status. Her legal status in turn, disqualifies her from receiving governmental grants or funds and she is not left with much of a choice other than to work. The article, like the former, goes on to explain how distressful it is to be an undocumented student full of dreams about college. It gives statistics and shows how many undocumented students have lived in the U.S. most of their lives.

Although the articles directly relate to my area of interest, they only document specific cases and in brief stories. Through my research I intend to capture the various situation that students find themselves in while at the university. Upon their acceptance to college, they face different consequences than those who do not attend higher education. I did not find any previous research that documents the obstacles of undocumented students at college from student life to academics, to finance.

EUI Links: Here are some links that might help in my research:

1. Survival of the Fittest: How Does Self-identification Determine the Latino Student Experience at the University of Illinois?

http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/1818

2. In which university spaces are students more likely to interact across racial/ethnic lines?
http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/1900

3. Language Barriers and the International Community

http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/1895

Works Cited


Reflect: This project was by no means, representative of all Latino undocumented students. The variation in experiences from specific types of Latinos to gender and year in school were therefore cause for limited information from students. The project could therefore be conducted again in order to include more people with a variety of experiences.

Recommendations: Although U of I has a wide range of programs which cater to underrepresented students, the creation of resources for undocumented students should be a necessary addition in being best able to serve the student population. It is difficult to serve the needs of individual students and the creation of more inclusive programs is understandably necessary. It is through the creation of programs that are sympathetic to student concerns in which student success will depend on.