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Nested Contexts of Reception: Undocumented Students at the University of California, Central

Tanya Golash-Boza and Zulema Valdez

Abstract
This article draws from five focus groups with 35 undocumented students who enrolled in the University of California–Central (UC Central), a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in a Latino-majority, working-class community in the heart of the Central Valley, after the passage of the California Dream Act. We develop a framework of *nested contexts of reception* to argue that students encounter distinct contexts at the local, state, and federal levels that shape their educational incorporation. By considering nested contexts, we reveal how local, state, and federal policies and societal reception combine to help or hinder undocumented students' success in higher education.

Keyword
undocumented immigrants, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Latino students

In 2015, 69 percent of high school graduates enrolled in college (National Center for Education Statistics 2017). Yet, only a quarter of undocumented high school graduates pursue higher education (Lee 2015). Beyond legal status, many factors hinder undocumented youths' successful transition from high school to college (Abrego 2006), including institutional and societal exclusion (W. Perez et al. 2009), financial hardship associated with economic disadvantage (Oliverez et al. 2006), and a lack of skills and knowledge needed to successfully navigate college (Huber and Malagon 2007).

Nearly 2.5 million of the estimated 11 million undocumented migrants in the United States live in California, making it the state with the largest number of undocumented migrants. The Golden State also boasts some of the most favorable policies toward them (Nguyen and Serna 2014). Governor Davis signed AB 540 into law in 2001, which granted undocumented students in-state tuition eligibility. To qualify, a student must have accumulated three or more years at a California high school, be enrolled at an accredited public postsecondary institution, and file an affidavit saying they will immediately apply for legal status. One decade later, Governor Brown signed AB 130, making private scholarships available to undocumented students; and AB 131, which allowed eligible undocumented students to apply for Cal Grants and other state financial aid (Office of Governor 2011). AB 130 and AB 131 became known as the California Dream Act. Paradoxically, in 2013, Janet Napolitano, former secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, was named the University of California's president (Soni 2013). With her record of deporting 400,000 undocumented immigrants a year during her tenure as secretary, many undocumented students and their allies voiced their concerns with her record. She responded by committing $5 million in 2013 for the University of California (UC) campuses to provide undocumented students with greater resources and support (Guzman-Lopez 2013).

Before passage of these state laws, Leisy J. Abrego (2006) found that California's undocumented youth could not afford a four-year college degree. After the passage of AB 540, Leisy J. Abrego (2008) found that the relatively low in-state tuition fees for community college put a two-year college degree within their reach. Since the publication of Abrego's (2008) article, the California Dream Act has increased access to financial aid, and more resources have been made available for students in the UC system due to Napolitano's allocation.

We focus on undocumented students who enrolled in the UC after the passage of the California Dream Act. Whereas previous scholarship has addressed the obstacles undocumented students face that prevent them from attending a four-year university (Clark-Ibáñez, Garcia-Alverdín, and Alva 2012; Oliverez et al. 2006; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2015), we focus here on the best possible scenario—albeit in a constrained set of circumstances—a subgroup who made it to the UC at Central (UC Central), a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in a Latino-majority, working-class community in the heart of the Central Valley.

Drawing from focus groups with undocumented college students in this unique setting, we explore how students navigate the university terrain, including the obstacles, resources, and opportunities they confront on and off campus. Previous research has shown that undocumented university students face substantial challenges in higher education (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2015), including economic uncertainty (Oliverez et al. 2006), questions of exclusion and belonging (Menjívar and Abrego 2012), and perceptions of safety for themselves and their families (Clark-Ibáñez, Garcia-Alverdín, and Alva 2012)

This study expands this research by developing a framework of *nested contexts of reception*. Building on Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut's (2001, 2006) "context of reception" model, we argue that students encounter distinct contexts at the local, state, and federal levels that shape their educational incorporation. At the local level, attending a Latino-majority institution with ample university resources, targeted university policies, and supportive institutional agents provides students with solid support and a sense of belonging on campus. At the state level, students benefit from living in a majority-minority liberal-leaning state that passed the California Dream Act, making four-year college more affordable. At the federal level, many of them qualify for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the federal executive order that provides a deferral from deportation and a two-year work permit. At the same time, undocumented students and their family members continue to be at risk for deportation. By considering nested contexts, we reveal how local, state, and federal policies and societal reception combine to help or hinder undocumented students' success in higher education.

Conceptual Framework: Nested Contexts of Reception

Portes and Rumbaut (2006) contend that how well immigrants incorporate into the U.S. economy and society is based, in part, on the "context of reception" that confronts them upon arrival and shapes their settlement processes. This context of reception is comprised of government policies that pertain to the group; the societal reception context they face upon arrival and settlement, including the size of the group's community and their relationship to the dominant cultural group; and the institutions in which they participate, such as the educational system or the labor market. For undocumented students, then, the three salient dimensions that comprise their reception context include (1) government policies related to their legal status, (2) the societal reception they confront on campus and within the local community, and (3) their involvement in an institution of higher learning.

Building on Portes and Rumbaut's (2006) useful conceptual model, which explains the process by which immigrants and their descendants incorporate into the United States, we nevertheless maintain that the context of reception is not necessarily uniform with respect to favorable or unfavorable circumstances along each of the three dimensions (government, societal, institutional) or at the local, state, or federal level. In other words, the context of reception that undocumented students confront on a Latino-majority campus located in California may provide different opportunities and challenges than those faced by undocumented students outside of these contexts, even as they share a national context of legal exclusion.

At the national level, undocumented students are universally at risk for deportation. Even those who have administrative relief know it can be rescinded at any time. The national context for undocumented students is, thus, clearly unfavorable with respect to legal status and government policy, coupled with an increasingly negative societal reception context characterized by a growing anti-immigrant sentiment. However, undocumented youth also

live in communities that are more or less welcoming, and within states with different policies and practices. Undocumented youth who live in California, for example, have more legal protections and benefit from more favorable policies that promote opportunities to afford and attend college than those who live in more restrictive states such Alabama and South Carolina, which prohibit undocumented students from enrolling at any public postsecondary institution (National Conference of State Legislatures 2015). The local context also matters—when students arrive at university, finding institutional support for their specific challenges and students who share their social location can foster a sense of belonging. In this way, the local context can protect (or could potentially harm) students.

We, thus, argue that the undocumented student experience is not monolithic. The national context—which determines whether or not they can stay in the country—affects their lives, but it is not the only factor. The state-level context conditions whether or not they can attend university, and a welcoming local context can provide students with a sense of safety and inclusiveness. For these reasons, we argue that undocumented students experience nested contexts of reception.

Local, State, and National Context

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the UC Central student body. The nearly 7,000 students are evenly divided between the three schools, and from the three major regions of California—north, south, and central. The campus is majority-Latino with a significant Asian/Pacific Islander (API) population and a visible presence of white and African American students. The cost to attend UC Central is currently at $36,165 for undergraduate California residents. This includes tuition and fees at $13,598, room and board at $16,790, books and supplies at $1,109, personal expenses with $1,616, and health insurance at $2,611 (UC Central Financial Aid: Helping Students Succeed, 2017)

Table 1. Demographics of University of California–Central.

University of California–Central; 7,336 students	
Race/ethnicity	
Hispanic	51.30%
Asian/Pacific Islander	21.90%
White	11.20%
Non-resident foreigner	6.60%
African American	4.60%
Multiracial	3.50%
Unknown	1%
Total	100.00%

The students who make it to UC Central are unique, as undocumented students are much more likely to attend a community college than a university due to the lower costs of attendance (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco 2011). Undocumented students can afford UC Central in part because California is one of 18 states that currently allow in-state tuition for undocumented students, and one of six states that offer financial aid to undocumented students (National Conference of State Legislatures 2015). UC Central has an office dedicated to helping undocumented students, yet, unlike some campuses, it does not have an open space with full-time staff dedicated to undocumented students.

Our study occurred after the issuance of DACA. This executive order includes a deferral from deportation and a two-year work permit. DACA does not include a path to citizenship and can be revoked at any time by the president (Educators for Fair Consideration 2016). In our study, five of the 35 participants either did not meet the criteria for eligibility or had not applied. These criteria include having arrived in the United States prior to their 16th birthday, having been physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012, having graduated from high school, and not having been convicted of a felony, significant misdemeanor, or three misdemeanors.

When we conducted this study in the 2014–2015 academic year, President Obama was in office, and DACA was not under any imminent threat of being repealed. The national context has since changed, and President Trump recently announced his plans to rescind DACA. This makes the national context even less favorable.

Exploring Barriers to Success for Undocumented Youth in Higher Education

College attendance is an elusive dream for many undocumented youth (Gonzales 2015). One of the primary barriers to success for these youth is financial. Undocumented youth grow up in disadvantaged households. Undocumented parents, on average, possess low levels of educational attainment and lack the economic, social, and cultural resources to foster their children's educational progress (Valenzuela 1999). Given their parents' limited and low-paying job prospects and vulnerable legal status, most undocumented families reside in low-resource areas of dense poverty (Chavez 1998; Gonzales 2015). Low-performing schools, high rates of crime, racial profiling by police and school administrators, and few opportunities for success typify these disadvantaged communities (Abrego and Gonzales 2010:147).

Undocumented parents tend to move frequently in search of work, and their children may change schools numerous times as a result. School mobility, in turn, can negatively affect school performance (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011). When undocumented parents have little time to spend with their children, there are developmental consequences (Zatz and Rodriguez 2015), and parents' engagement in school-related activities or interactions with teachers is limited because of fear of deportation (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011).

The low quality of education and socioeconomic status deter the academic progression of children, shaping their future life chances (Abrego and Gonzales 2010). Furthermore, being undocumented also makes it difficult for people to access bank accounts and other financial services (Abrego and Gonzales 2010). Families with undocumented members are unlikely to seek out the social services they need due to fear of deportation (Menjívar and Abrego 2009). In the longer term, undocumented status keeps families in the shadows, and prevents them from accessing services designed to help low-income families like their own (Menjívar 2006). In general, undocumented immigrants are more vulnerable, earn less, work in more dangerous jobs, and have less access to financial and housing aid than their documented counterparts (Chavez 1998; Coutin 2000). These factors limit children's ability to access higher education.

In addition to economic obstacles, undocumented youth often live in fear of deportation for themselves and their families, which can hinder their educational success. Undocumented students experience stress and feel excluded due to their status (W. Pérez and Cortés 2011). Although having been accepted to college implies institutional inclusion (Marrow 2012), undocumented students often do not feel as though they fully belong and are often reluctant to share details regarding their status with instituitional authorities (Coutin 2000; W. Pérez and Cortés 2011). The social exclusion they experience has two contrasting effects, as it can "constrain daily life, create internalized fears, in some ways immobilize their victims, and in other ways motivate them to engage politically to resist the dire conditions of their lives" (Gonzales and Chavez 2012:255).

Once on campus, undocumented students often fear discussing their status with administrators—who consequently are unable to help them navigate the school system, even in those cases where the staff are friendly and knowledgeable (Jefferies 2014). Marisol Clark-Ibáñez (2015) highlighted the concerns of undocumented Latino students at university, such as being extra cautious when looking for help from non-Latino/a counselors or professors. She also observed a lack of institutional support that prevented undocumented students from receiving basic benefits and resources, even with something as fundamental as obtaining a school identification card (Clark-Ibáñez 2015). Others have found that peer networks provided critical support, information, and advice for undocumented students (Contreras 2009; Huber and Malagon 2007; W. Perez et al. 2009).

Despite these obstacles, some undocumented youth navigate college successfully (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012:14). Students may establish trust with teachers and counselors, resulting in better guidance in the college application process (Abrego and Gonzales 2010). Institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar 1997, 2011), including university administrators, guidance counselors, and frontline staff, may help students navigate financial aid, admissions, career planning, and opportunities, as well as specific policies for undocumented students (Contreras 2009; Hooker, McHugh, and Mathay 2015; Muñoz and Maldonado 2012; W. Perez et al. 2011).

The support and information institutional agents provide to undocumented university students is often uneven or insufficient. In a recent study, Richard Ryscavage and Michael M. Canaris (2013) found that although three quarters of administrators, faculty, and staff at Jesuit colleges agree or strongly agree that "admitting, enrolling, and supporting undocumented students fits with the mission of the institution" (Ryscavage and Canaris 2013:1), 40 percent conceded they were not aware of programs or outreach to undocumented students (Ryscavage and Canaris 2013:1). John C. Burkhardt and colleagues (2012) found similar results in a national study, observing more than a quarter of financial aid administrators, admissions officers, and registrars, "didn't know if their institution had adopted any particular position or practice regarding the admission of undocumented students" (Barnhardt, Ramos, and Reyes 2013:20). In addition, more than half revealed that their institutions did not offer staff training or outline procedures to process undocumented students' financial aid or admissions requests (Barnhardt et al. 2013).

This study considers how undocumented students fare at an HSI. UC Central is one of 159 such institutions in California and one of five UC campuses (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities 2017). HSI is a federal designation referring to two- or four-year, accredited, degree-granting, not-for-profit colleges and universities that enroll at least 25 percent full-time Hispanic students (Santiago 2006). Overall in California, 40 percent of undergraduate students are Hispanic. What makes UC Central unique within the UC HSI-designated schools is that Latino students are the majority, making up 51.3 percent of the student body (UC Central 2016).

Research on the success of Latino students at HSIs is mixed. There is ample evidence that faculty and student attitudes are similar across minority-serving universities and their PWI-counterparts, with respect to faculty responsibilities (Hubbard and Stage 2009) and student engagement (Laird, Bridges, Williams, and Holmes 2007). In their investigation of HSIs in the United States, Núñez and Elizondo (2012:9) identify key features and characteristics that condition graduation outcomes, including the institutional financial context and the organizational characteristics (also see Berger 2000). In keeping with prior research that HSIs receive less federal funding, which correlates with institutional support for instruction (De Los Santos and De Los Santos 2003; Núñez and Elizondo 2012:10), they nevertheless reveal that HSIs located in the U.S. mainland report higher graduation rates than non-HSIs, concluding that HSIs are "doing more with less," (Núñez and Elizondo 2012: 21; Malcom, Dowd and Yu 2010). On balance, it appears that many HSIs advance Latinos' educational attainment, even in the face of limited resources.

Prior research on undocumented students in higher education tends to focus on the obstacles these youth face. Research on HSIs is mixed. Taken together, these studies raise the question of how undocumented college students fare at a Latino-majority college campus in California—given its relatively favorable policies toward these youths. Do state- and local-level contexts counterbalance the enormous obstacles these youth face?

Method

During the 2014–2015 academic year, a group of undocumented students at UC Central asked the lead author of this article to conduct a study of undocumented students on campus. The students and coauthors worked together to design the study and to create the focus group guide. The decision to use focus groups was made through conversations with the undocumented undergraduate student collaborators. We elected to do focus groups so that students could hear others' experiences and reflect on their own. We expected students would be more willing to discuss their own experiences more after hearing about the challenges others faced, and we found support for this expectation. The focus groups were conducted by two faculty—one Latina and one Anglo. The faculty members did not personally know any of the students who participated in the focus groups, and none of the students had been or were in our classes.

We conducted five focus groups with a total of 35 undocumented college students at the UC Central campus. Each focus group had between five and eight participants. The focus groups lasted between one and two hours. The undocumented students used their personal networks to recruit participants to this study. Given the sensitive nature of this population, we did not post flyers around campus about our focus groups nor did we recruit openly in other ways. Participants received a $15 gift card for their participation. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed by undergraduate students. A graduate student coauthor of this paper listened to each audio recording and checked to ensure the transcriptions were accurate.

Our sample included 11 male and 24 female students. Their countries of origin included Brazil (1), Guatemala (1), and the Philippines (2), but the overwhelming majority of our participants were of Mexican origin (31). Our sample of students migrated to the United States at varying ages and years. Some came as early as the mid-to-late 1990s (8), while the majority came from early-to-mid 2000s (25), and only a couple came in the year 2010 (2). Most of our student participants arrived to the United States at an early age. In all, 12 came between the ages of two and four. Another 11 came at the ages of five to seven years old. A smaller minority came as preteen and early teenagers. Six of them came between the ages of eight and ten, and the remaining six came at the ages of 11 to 14. A total of 22 of the 35 students (63 percent) reported that their parents' annual household income was less than $25,000. Another 11 (31 percent) reported that their household income was between $25,000 and $50,000. Only one student reported that their household income was more than $75,000, and one student reported that they did not know.

Table 2. Demographics of Participants.

Name	Focus group	Gender	Age arrived in United States	DACA	Income level
Yvette	1	F	8	Yes	<$25,000
Joaquin	1	F	2.5	Yes	<$25,000
Michelle	1	F	6	Yes	$25,000–$50,000
Sonia	1	F	4	Yes	<$25,000
Lisa	1	F	4	Yes	$25,000–$50,000
John	1	F	5	No	<$25,000
Sara	1	F	6	Yes	$25,000–$50,000
Antonio	2	M	9	Yes	$25,000–$50,000
Tania	2	F	3	Yes	$25,000–$50,000
Maria	2	F	11	Yes	<$25,000
Sofia	2	F	6	No	<$25,000
Santiago	2	M	2	Yes	<$25,000
Isabella	3	F	5	Yes	<$25,000
Matias	3	M	14	No	<$25,000
Sebastian	3	M	8	Yes	$25,000–$50,000
Mateo	3	M	6.5	Yes	N/A
Nicolas	3	M	10	Yes	$25,000–$50,000
Valentina	3	F	13	No	<$25,000
Diego	3	M	5	Yes	<$25,000
Jimena	4	F	5	Yes	<$25,000

Mariana	4	F	3	Yes	<$25,000
Martina	4	F	3	Yes	<$25,000
Susana	4	F	5	Yes	<$25,000
Benjamin	4	M	5	Yes	$25,000–$50,000
Daniela	4	F	3	Yes	$25,000–$50,000
Samantha	4	F	3.5	Yes	<$25,000
Tomas	4	F	8	No	$25,000–$50,000
Gabriel	5	F	9	Yes	<$25,000
Martin	5	M	11	Yes	<$25,000
Natalia	5	F	7	Yes	<$25,000
Lucas	5	M	12	Yes	<$25,000
Emma	5	F	3	Yes	<$25,000
Renata	5	F	11	Yes	<$25,000
Agustin	5	M	3	Yes	$25,000–$50,000
Lucia	5	F	4	Yes	Over $75,000

Note. DACA = Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals; N/A = Not Applicable.

Findings

Our findings reveal that undocumented students at UC Central face nested contexts of reception. Scholars who focus on immigrant youth argue that the "context of reception" is critical to their incorporation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou 1997). The context of reception has a broad meaning, and refers to official laws and policies as well as educational and labor market opportunities and the general climate for immigrants. Here, we focus on the legal, societal, and institutional contexts, and argue that these contexts are further nested at the local, state, and national level. The national legal context included DACA for many students, and the state legal context included financial assistance for college. The societal context included a national ambivalence and even hostility toward immigrants, yet students lived in communities that were more or less welcoming. The institutional context is UC Central—a Latino-majority campus in the Central Valley of California.

One of our key findings was that the local context matters tremendously. Students' ability to attend college was dependent on the availability of financial aid, which is a result of favorable state policies. The federal context is mixed. On one hand, most of them were eligible for DACA, which provided them with temporary relief from deportation as well as a work permit. On the other hand, the students were aware of record-high deportation rates and the possibility of deportation for their family members who did not qualify for DACA. In many ways, these students could thrive due to the favorable local and state contexts. However, both the threat of deportation as well as the uncertainty of their own futures cast a long shadow over these students' lives and reminded them that they remained excluded from incorporating fully into the U.S. economy and society. Moreover, as an executive order, DACA could be rescinded at any moment, as made clear by Trump's rescission of DACA in September 2017.

Getting to the UC required undocumented students to overcome myriad obstacles. Nevertheless, their troubles did not end once they arrived on campus. One of our major findings was that, despite these students' access to financial aid, financial stress continues to be a major obstacle. Although students described the local campus climate as supportive—due to the presence of a student group that supports undocumented students, dedicated staff, and a campus where many other students share their social location—the reality of being undocumented is never far from their minds. For those who have DACA, they know that they must walk a fine line and avoid trouble with the police at all costs and realize that their parents could be deported at any moment.

Financial Stress: "It's Just Hard Money Wise"

Stress related to insufficient financial resources was paramount for the students we spoke to. Their families often lived below the poverty line—largely due to their parents' status as

undocumented migrants. Students and their families were not able to cover the cost of tuition and living expenses, and as undocumented students, they do not qualify for most student loans. Nearly two thirds of the students reported that their parents' annual household income was less than $25,000—less than the annual cost of attendance for one student at UC Central. Without significant financial support, college would be out of reach for these students. Yet, even with support, there were challenges. Sonia, for example, had an older sister who attended a California State University. After paying for her sister's tuition and books, her parents could not afford to pay Sonia's as well. Sonia was able to attend only because the executive director of her high school covered her moving costs, and she found a job to cover her other expenses. Sonia's financial situation was constrained by her family's household poverty, but also aided by her ability to gain employment through DACA.

When asked about the transition to UC Central, many students pointed to financial obstacles.

> Nicolas: I felt like money was probably one of the biggest things. It was hard because of not being able to not take out loans. My parents are low income and even though they give us financial aid, it is not enough . . . it's just hard money wise.

All the students reported some form of financial aid though it remained insufficient. Consequently, they worried constantly about making the next tuition payment, paying for books, and taking care of their basic needs. Nicolas explained,

> We're always worrying. Are my parents going to have enough money for the next payment? We're always worrying about that . . .

Having to worry about money affected students' ability to study. Having to work during the school year also affected their ability to perform. For these and other reasons, financial concerns were a critical obstacle to undocumented students' success. Lisa explained that each semester, her parents scrambled to make tuition. If they were not able to pay on time, she was not able to register for needed classes. Students were ineligible for student loans at the time these focus groups took place, which exacerbated their financial woes.

> Joaquin: [There's] a lot of budgeting that comes with being undocumented and I feel like you just have to watch very carefully where you spend on. Like other people that are able to take out loans they're like oh yeah I'm buying a computer, I'm buying this. Like I'm just like I can't.

Students agreed that the inability to take out loans was an issue. Nicolas explained, "not being able to not take out loans was very difficult because my parents are low income." Diego agreed, saying, "I would rather have to pay the money later on in the future . . . than have my parents pay for it."

Overall, the national legal context led to significant financial challenges. At the same time, students' ability to work because of DACA alleviated some of this stress. At the state level, state financial aid was tremendously helpful in terms of their ability to pay for college, yet loan ineligibility meant they had to scramble to close the gap between what the state offered and their actual expenses. At the local level, the relatively low cost of living in Central City alleviated some of these financial concerns.

Support on Campus: "I'm Proud to Say I'm Undocumented"

On a Latino-majority campus, we expected students might find a relatively welcoming climate. Many of the students in the focus group spoke about the support they had on campus. Santiago explained, "People [here] understand the situation that I am in. It makes it feel more normal that I am a person that is undocumented." Sara sums up the climate at UC Central:

> I think that overall this school and the faculty and staff tries to make us feel as comfortable as possible. I have stumbled across people who have said pretty snarky remarks regarding the undocumented population, but I would say that's just like a minority of people who go here because I think overall the students who go here are pretty educated about the undocumented population . . . I have had a professor, who may have or may not have accidentally slipped something about being undocumented. So I raised my hand and I was like "I am undocumented." Then he was cautious about every other remark that he would make. . . . Most of the time it's been a positive experience here and having S.A.L.E. [Students Advocating Law and Education, a support group for undocumented students] here has been really great for me because I found a little family that I can talk to about like my problems and they understand because most of them have gone through similar struggles.

Sonia chimed in, agreeing that S.A.L.E. is like a family, a safe zone where undocumented students feel unequivocally welcome. Maria elaborated, saying, "I joined clubs that were really supportive because they deal with our issues. It was really welcoming and that just made it really comfortable to be in this community, in this campus."

In addition to the student group, students also mentioned UC Central staff support for undocumented students. Isabella pointed to the resource center, which advises on issues such as financial aid and DACA, saying, "There are a lot of opportunities and resources for us. There is the new resource center for undocumented students and you can feel safe talking about being undocumented." John mentioned that staff provide information, advice, and emotional support. Institutional agents at UC Central also helped out in unexpected ways. Lucas found himself about to lose employment when his DACA work permit was up for renewal. In addition to helping Lucas reapply for DACA and talking to his employer, the staff member offered him informal work to help him make end meets as he waited for his DACA renewal.

The relatively welcoming climate on campus also made students more comfortable with their status as undocumented students. William Pérez and colleagues (2010) found that undocumented students often express a sense of shame with regard to their status and that this shame is often exacerbated by institutional agents who discourage them from seeking out opportunities. Likewise, Leisy J. Abrego (2011) found that many students she interviewed were fearful and ashamed of sharing their status with high school officials. In contrast, students who participated in our focus groups rarely expressed a sense of shame regarding their status. Some, however, conceded that they were nervous about coming out as undocumented. Sara explained, "I felt uncomfortable saying I was undocumented because I was scared. Not because I felt ashamed or anything." Sofia echoed this sentiment:

> I actually recently started telling people that I was undocumented which is like something I kept away for so long because . . . well, I'm like traumatized by my family basically because they're like, "don't ever tell anyone, you're gonna get in so much trouble!"

Although some students expressed concern about revealing their status in their hometowns, many found that they were able to discuss their status more freely at UC Central. Susana explains,

> In high school, I wouldn't really like straightforward tell somebody unless it was brought up. But here at UC Central, I feel more pushed to say, "I'm an undocumented student." I feel prideful to say it because it's like I pushed like harder, I pushed really hard to be where I'm at. So therefore like I would want you to know that I am undocumented and I'm attending a UC.

Santiago was not sure how people in Central City, where UC Central is located, would react if they discovered his status. He explained,

> I kinda know the population but I know I felt more welcome, more comfortable here because I grew up in a small town and it's a pretty small campus. But I still don't feel comfortable just straight up saying I'm undocumented to everybody, to all my friends.

Nevertheless, Santiago had a positive experience when he did come out to a professor.

> We were doing a justice theme in the class in the course overall. . . . She was really helpful to students that just needed anybody to talk to. I really liked that because I had the confidence to tell her and she was really supportive . . . I like that she is aware of my situation and willing to help students like me. So I also have like a sense that some instructors are willing to go the extra mile for people.

Some students, like Isabella, had very positive experiences with coming out.

> When I told my professors I'm undocumented . . . they see it as a good thing—that I have overcome all the obstacles and come here. My friends . . . give me a lot of credit for what I do because I'm undocumented.

Other students asserted they were proud to be undocumented. Sonia, for example, said, "If anyone ever asks I'm proud to say I'm undocumented." This lack of shame and even pride in their status as undocumented students comes both from the institutional support existence of laws that legitimize their status at the state (California Dream Act) and national level (DACA), as well as the local context, specifically, that UC Central is an HSI with more than 50 percent of the undergraduate student population identifying as Latino/Hispanic.

Undocumented: "There Is a Brand on Me"

Yet, being undocumented is never far from focus group students' minds; it drives their academic performance and progress and their sense of belonging on campus and off. Santiago expressed a sentiment shared by many students when he explained that he felt pressure to succeed to avoid feeding into stereotypes about undocumented people. He explained,

> It always feels like there is a burden more because I feel I have to make an example. Because if I don't graduate . . . if I don't pass, it shows that, "oh, he is undocumented, that means all of them don't pass." So it always feels for me that I have to find the best options. I cannot fail because there is a brand on me.

Santiago elaborated on this by pointing out that with DACA, "you can't break the law or anything like that. It's like they are watching me more. I have to be the perfect example of a human being just to represent a normal human being." Other students in the focus group agreed that being undocumented meant they had to exceed expectations, although their reasoning is less about their precarious legal status and more about embracing their unique opportunity. Many students said that undocumented youth are more driven and motivated because they do not take their opportunities for granted. As Sebastian explained,

> I'm not saying that undocumented students are better but I'm saying . . . they're more like passionate with what they're doing because . . . they don't have, they didn't have the opportunities before and they have them now.

Other students noted that, in addition to being undocumented, other obstacles motivated them to succeed. Antonio worked in the fields every time he had a break from school. He pointed out,

> . . . having that, that background does encourage me, push me to become like a better person, to become successful. What has taught me the most out of anything else by having that background of field-[work].

Other students agreed, observing that barriers such as having to work in the fields, having several siblings, being poor, and having a single parent has made their journey more

difficult, yet also provided them with motivation to keep going, to succeed in college. All in all, undocumented students' legal status is a salient feature of their academic lives.

Beyond their own legal status, students' parents were also undocumented and ineligible for DACA (due to program age restrictions), which caused further hardships. Joaquin, for example, had difficulty finding housing because neither he nor his parents had a social security number. He explained, "Getting an apartment here was just really hard because you needed a co-signer and a co-signer needed social security. My parents didn't have a social security. None of my parents' friends had social security." He secured housing in a part of town that is not only far from campus but also has higher rates of crime. Most of the students avoided this experience by living in on-campus housing but Joaquin's story shows how housing difficulties can be exacerbated by poverty and the undocumented status of family members. Other students explained that their parents' undocumented status prevented parents from physically being there to help move them to campus or see them off —due either to their parents' fear of deportation or lack of a driver's license. Martina took the Amtrak to Central City to move in and felt terrible when she saw all the other families dropping off their kids, hugging them, and saying their goodbyes. Martina explained,

> My mom is also undocumented so it's not like she could come drop me off. It really sucked when everyone in their dorm had their parents coming in and they had their boxes and they're like, "oh, I'm gonna miss you honey." And I'm just there and I'm like, "oh, my god, this is awkward." And it's horrible. I called my mom and she was like, "you're okay, you're gonna be fine. This is for the best." And it just, it sucked.

Move-in day is an important part of the college experience, and students' inability to participate fully created a sense of exclusion.

Some of the challenges undocumented students confront are similar to those of other students; feelings of homesickness and "imposter syndrome" (Clance and Imes 1978) are part and parcel of the college student experience. Other challenges such as not having a social security number and being ineligible for loans are unique to undocumented students and contribute to higher odds of dropping out of college.

The fact that their parents are undocumented caused additional anxiety for many students. Joaquin expressed this sentiment:

> I think all the time you're just like you have that fear. I'm protected but my parents aren't so I have the fear that one day I'm going to get a call from my mom at night [saying], "I'm in Mexico." Like, they just came in to our house. It's a constant fear that they're going to come and they're going to take my parents. . . . I feel like the immigration officers can just like easily come in and take my parents and everybody that lives there basically.

The national legal context, thus, continues to play a salient role in undocumented youths' lives. Living in a relatively friendly state does not protect them or their families from the threat of deportation. And, even though they feel relatively safe on campus, the fact that their family members are not safe is never far from their minds. To the extent that UC Central provides a safe space for its students, as does DACA, the safety net does not typically extend to family members.

Discussion

The existence of a favorable local context and state laws that legitimize undocumented students' presence at university and enable their access to education suggests that undocumented students at UC Central fare substantially better than those who came before the passage of such policies or who reside outside of California. At the same time, the federal context of temporary relief combined with the threat of mass deportation increases students' vulnerability.

Our findings indicate that though undocumented students face significant obstacles, UC Central provides a measure of relief from some of the challenges associated with being

undocumented. This conclusion is related to UC Central's designation as an HSI that offers critical sources of support and resources for undocumented students from institutional agents, and the sense of solidarity that arises between active and engaged undocumented students. We further suspect that the demographic profile of the Central Valley, where UC Central is located, is also protective, as it mirrors the largely Latino, immigrant, and undocumented student population. At the same time, students express some fear of deportation for themselves and especially for their family members, which increases anxiety for these students. Finally, and in contrast to the research on the stigma of being undocumented, on this majority-minority campus, students do not express shame associated with their legal status. On the contrary, the social support and resources available to them from dedicated institutional agents and undocumented student campus organizations and activism encourage students to come out of the shadows and instill a sense of pride in their status.

California has been at the forefront of progressive policy changes aimed at improving access to college and college completion for undocumented students. At UC Central, the California Dream Act, inclusive campus initiatives, financial investments aimed at providing support, and resources, including hiring well-informed institutional agents, and the development of a vocal and solidaristic undocumented campus community, are positive factors that have improved conditions for undocumented students.

Nevertheless, the persistent salience of a vulnerable legal status and that of their family members, expressions of fear of deportation for themselves and their parents, an enduring sense of exclusion, and a lifetime of poverty are factors that need to be addressed to fully democratize undocumented students' college experiences and significantly improve their outcomes. Our findings suggest that expanding access to opportunities for all undocumented people—or better yet, a massive legalization program—have the potential to change fundamentally undocumented immigrants' social and economic life chances in the United States.

Conclusion

We introduce the concept of nested contexts of reception to reveal how favorable and unfavorable policies at the local, state, and national levels influence the educational experiences of undocumented students in California. A consideration of nested contexts of reception helps to explain how undocumented students survive and even thrive at UC Central, where institutional resources and support and state and local policy combine to facilitate their progress. At the same time, exclusionary federal policies at the national level undercut students' sense of belonging, causing anxiety and stress associated with a fear of deportation for family members, and constraining their parents' ability to support them emotionally and financially. Consequently, undocumented students continue to confront very real challenges that may ultimately affect their potential to graduate from university and succeed in the United States after college or over the long term.

Deportation threat forms the backdrop of undocumented students' lives. In a favorable local and state context, the students in this study were able to enroll in college. However, deportation is never far from their minds. An encouraging teacher, a supportive group of friends, and a full ride to university all make their lives more bearable. Yet, there are real limits to these students' ability to excel in the absence of federal immigration policy reform, especially within an increasingly hostile national climate for immigrants. Student-level support and interventions such as student-led clubs can affect campus and policy decisions and reduce barriers confronted by undocumented students (Kia-Keating et al. 2011). Our findings support this previous research, as the campus climate and strong advocacy by undocumented students for undocumented students improved their conditions. In keeping with prior studies, our findings suggest that some of the most widespread problems facing undocumented students at UC Central include being first-generation college students and coming from families with undocumented and low-income parents (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2015). Our findings also point to the continuing financial challenges confronting this

disadvantaged population. Although the California Dream Act has made a four-year institution affordable through in-state tuition and state financial aid, the extreme poverty undocumented students confront affects their ability to enroll in needed classes in time, secure affordable housing, and dampens opportunities other students enjoy, such as taking advantage of study-abroad programs. Finally, our findings underscore the importance of trained and skilled institutional agents and supportive resources on campus.

This study was completed while DACA was under no imminent threat of repeal. The climate has since changed, and we hope future research can address the extent to which a welcoming local context is able to mediate a hostile federal context. Trump's recent rescission of DACA means students who currently have DACA will eventually lose their work permits and with them, access to employment in the formal economy. This will have a critical impact on DACAmented students. DACA has had a noticeably positive impact on its beneficiaries. It has opened up better economic opportunities and allowed recipients to obtain driver's licenses, and even open their first bank accounts. Repealing DACA will also negatively affect undocumented youths' access to university as it would affect their ability to work and, thus, afford university. The Trump administration has given Congress six months to come up with a legislative response to DACA. One starting point for that is the Bar Removal of Individuals Who Dream of Growing Our Economy (BRIDGE Act), introduced by Senators Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Dick Durbin (D-IL). This bill could be a legislative version of DACA and, like DACA, would provide protection against deportation for undocumented youth (National Immigration Law Center 2017).

Nevertheless, a more permanent solution is needed. The federal Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which could provide conditional permanent residency to young immigrants, would benefit these students (J. Z. Perez 2014). Providing a pathway to legalization can help remedy the issues described in this article. When undocumented immigrants legalize, they show considerable upward mobility (Abrego and Gonzales 2010). Previous research shows that immigrants who were able to legalize through the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act secured better employment (Powers, Kraly, and Seltzer 2004) and higher wages within five years (Smith, Kramer, and Singer 1996). Results could be better for the undocumented 1.5 generation because of their increased educational attainment (Cheeseman-Day and Newburger 2002).

Our findings provide evidence that favorable policies at the local and state level improve the life chances of undocumented students in California in very real ways, with positive effects on their educational outcomes. From our perspective, then, policy reforms at the federal level that improve the national context of reception, and, thus, the nested contexts of reception overall, would alleviate some of the challenges that remain for undocumented students, expand their opportunities and chances of success, and improve the lives of undocumented students and their families across the United States.

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