

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Counter-Spacing in the Institution:  
Undocumented Student Organizing at a Community College  
from 2006 to 2021

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Education

by

Rachel E. Freeman-Wong

2022

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Counter-Spacing in the Institution:  
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from 2006 to 2021

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Rachel E. Freeman-Wong  
Doctor of Philosophy in Education  
University of California, Los Angeles, 2022  
Professor Robert T. Teranishi, Chair

Undocumented youth have been powerful leaders in the undocumented immigrant rights movement to advance a more just society for immigrant communities (Nicholls, 2013; Perez, 2016). Community colleges are important spaces in the higher education sector because most undocumented college students attend community colleges (Teranishi et al., 2011). This dissertation study seeks to better understand the priorities and experiences of undocumented community college students who organize for institutional support for undocumented students. This study is guided by theories on counter-spaces in Critical Race Theory, spaces where Students of Color create a sense of safety and community with each other. The methods for this study are a case study of one community college in California, Western College (pseudonym), that has robust programs for undocumented students such as an Undocumented Student Resource Center and a designated staff position that works with undocumented students. Research questions asked how undocumented students organized for programs at Western College from 2006 to 2021, how they navigated power dynamics on campus, and how they reflected on their

experiences. Data collection comprised 26 interviews with 11 undocumented student alumni, five current students attending Western College in 2021, and eight staff and faculty. I also analyzed over 50 documents such as webpages and institutional statements. Findings show how undocumented students envisioned building a counter-space for undocumented students where they could feel safe and comfortable away from the dominant campus culture of exclusion and hostility. They wanted support and guidance from staff, faculty, and administrators, but they made it clear they aspired to maintain the essence of a counter-space by keeping their programs student-led. As they reflected on their experiences, they were impressed by the number of resources available at their 4-year universities once they transferred, but they ultimately missed the intimate sense of community at Western College. They also sought to reproduce the counter-space they created at Western College in their areas of work. This study has implications for research, policy, and practice about the development of institutionalized counter-spaces.

The dissertation of Rachel E. Freeman-Wong is approved.

Daniel G. Solórzano

Cecilia Rios-Aguilar

Genevieve M. Negrón-Gonzales

Robert T. Teranishi, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

This dissertation is dedicated to the students and alumni at Western College  
who shared their stories with me.

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# VITA

Rachel E. Freeman-Wong

## EDUCATION

**University of California, Los Angeles School of Education and Information Studies**

Ph.D. Candidate in Education with specialization in Race and Ethnicity (Expected 2022)

**Harvard Graduate School of Education**

Ed.M. in Higher Education Administration (2015)

**The University of Chicago**

B.A. in Philosophy (2008)

## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

**Freeman, R. E.,** & Valdivia, C. (2021). Education equity for undocumented graduate students and the key role of My Undocumented Life. *Journal of College Access: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 7.* Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol6/iss2/7>

**Freeman, R. E.,** Iniestra Varelas, D., & Castillo, D. (2021). Building critical bridges: the Role of university presidents in collaborating with undocumented student activists. *Journal of College Access: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 12.* Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol6/iss2/12>

**Freeman, R. E.,** Mazumder, T., & Cisneros, J. (In Press October, 2022). Keep fighting for existence: Undocumented student resource centers as counter-spaces within community colleges. *Community College Review.*

Alcantar, C. M., **Freeman, R. E.,** Kim, V., Hafoka, 'I., & Ortega Mendoza, M. (Revise & Resubmit). Activism, racialization, and deservingness: How online news media during the Trump era represents undocumented students in higher education across differing state contexts. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education.*

Sanchez, S., **Freeman, R. E.,** & Martin, P. (2021). Educators are stressed, overworked, and not sure whom to trust: Legacy of the Trump era. In Gándara, P. & Ee, J. (Eds.), *Schools under siege: The Impact of immigration enforcement on educational equity.* Harvard Education Press.

Escudero, K. & **Freeman, R. E.** (Forthcoming 2023). *UndocuAsian Activism: Lived Experiences and Social Movement Organizing across the Diaspora (edited).* Rutgers University Press.

**Freeman, R. E.,** Mazumder, T. & Cisneros, J. (Forthcoming 2022). Physical Space and Expert Staffing: Undocumented Student Resource Centers at Community Colleges. *UndocuScholars Research and Policy Brief Series.*

Escudero, K., **Freeman, R. E.,** Park, T. M.; & Pereira, V. (2019). "Education, Not Deportation": A Pilot Study of Undocumented Student Experiences in Law and Medical Degree Programs." *Grantee Research.* 43.

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**Freeman, R. E.** (2021). *Institutional Agents' Collaboration with Undocumented Activists to Build Institutional Change at Community Colleges*. Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Annual Conference. Virtual Roundtable.

**Freeman, R. E.,** Mazumder, T., & Cisneros, J. (2021). *Establish, Build, Institutionalize: Undocumented Student Resource Centers at Community Colleges*. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Annual Conference. Online.

**Freeman, R.,** Cisneros, J. & Valdivia, D. (2020) *Institutional Support for Undocumented Students at Community Colleges: Undocumented Student Resource Centers at Community Colleges*. American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting. San Francisco, California. (Conference cancelled).

**Freeman, R. E.,** Varellas, D., & Lopez, B. (2020). *College Presidents with Undocumented Students Film Series: Case Study of Eastern Connecticut State University*. Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Annual Conference. Online.

## **SELECTED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE, COMMUNITY WORK, & SERVICE**

### **Professional Experience:**

Director of Strategy and Outreach, My Undocumented Life Blog, 2015 – 2022

Research Associate, The UndocuScholars Project, UCLA, CA, 2016 – 2022

Research Associate, The Civil Rights Project, UCLA, CA, 2016 – 2018

Administrative Assistant for Associate Deans, Harvard University, MA, 2015 – 2016

Field Researcher, MassBay Community College, Framingham, MA, 2015 – 2016

BEOC Research Intern, Jobs for the Future, Boston, MA, 2014

Graduate Assistant, Bunker Hill Community College, Charlestown, MA, 2014 – 2015

Special Assistant to the CEO, Achieving the Dream, Silver Spring, MD, 2013 – 2014

Assistant Language High School Teacher, The JET Programme, Okinawa, Japan, 2010 – 2012

### **Community Volunteer Work:**

UndocuNurses, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, 2016 – 2018

Student Immigrant Movement, Boston, MA, 2015 – 2016

College Access and Persistence Initiative, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2014 – 2015

Advocates for Education Committee, Harvard Law School, MA, 2014 – 2015

Student Multicultural Action Research Team, Washington, DC, 2013 – 2014

Refugee Transitions, Oakland, California, 2009 – 2010

The International Rescue Committee, Oakland, California, 2009 – 2010

**Peer Reviewer:** Community College Review, AERA Open, Journal for Migration and Ethnic Studies

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is interested in thinking about undocumented student organizing at community colleges. Undocumented youth<sup>1</sup> have been powerful and effective leaders in advancing a just society for immigrants (Valdivia & Valdivia, 2014). Across the country, thousands of undocumented young people have formed youth-led organizations that advocate for liberation from an interconnected web of human and civil rights abuses, including restriction from a college education. Within these organizing spaces, undocumented youth have developed political expertise to assert incisive messaging about the right to an education, which has led to substantial policy changes at national, state, and local levels (Nicholls, 2013; Perez, 2016).

Undocumented youth activists have used numerous strategies to advance change in higher education, including engaging in acts of civil disobedience (Escudero & Pallares, 2021), sharing testimonials in public spaces (Negrón-Gonzales, 2015, 2017b), contesting discriminatory policies through the courts (Freeman, 2015), and creating advocacy art in the form of films, murals, cartoons, and paintings (Pérez, 2018). For example, in the state of Georgia, youth with the Georgia Undocumented Youth Alliance pursued a lawsuit to contest the unconstitutionality of the statewide ban that blocks undocumented youth from attending the top public colleges and universities in the state (Freeman, 2015). At the same time, youth from Freedom University, a modern-day freedom school for undocumented youth in Georgia, engaged in direct actions at the university system's Board of Regents meetings to demand that the ban be removed (Zenteno, 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “undocumented” to refer to both students who have Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and students who do not have DACA for the sake of brevity, but it is important to acknowledge there are important differences in the educational landscape for students who do and do not have DACA. I also refer to “youth” as young adults in their late teenage years and early 20s.

While the contemporary undocumented youth student movement began in the early 2000s (Nicholls, 2013), youth and immigrant communities have been advocating for educational justice for years in the United States (Santa-Ramirez, 2021a). For example, the Young Lords, a group of Black and Latinx Puerto Rican young adults, advocated for the development of ethnic studies curriculum at colleges and universities in the 1970s (Ogbar, 2006). Forty years earlier, in the 1930s and 1940s, El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española, founded by Luisa Morena, an activist and community organizer born in Guatemala, advocated for expansion of educational access for Latinx communities such as bilingual education in schools (Lewthwaite, 2009).

Within the undocumented youth-led movement to expand access and equity in higher education, community colleges have been important spaces for undocumented students. Researchers estimate that most undocumented students in higher education begin their college education at a community college (Teranishi et al., 2011). Undocumented student organizing at community colleges have sometimes been at the forefront of the fight to advance more equitable policies and practices for undocumented students in higher education. For example, in Arizona, because of undocumented-youth-led organizing, community colleges were the first higher education institutions to allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition, while 4-year colleges and universities still charged out-of-state tuition.

Although undocumented students have advanced institutional change for undocumented students at colleges and universities, little research has explored these efforts (e.g., Galindo, 2012; Sanchez & So, 2015). Most research on the undocumented immigrant rights movement as it relates to education equity has focused on students' organizing for federal legislation (Nicholls, 2013). Although research on organizing at the national level is important, a better understanding of students' organizing at the institutional level is also important for advancing higher education

change. Very little is known through research about how undocumented students have organized for the development of institutional change at community colleges.

### **Advancing Institutional Change in Higher Education for Undocumented Students**

Undocumented youth have fought to eradicate oppressive policies and advance equity at the federal, state, and institutional level. At the federal level, the landmark *Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court Case in 1982 ensured undocumented children the right to a free public K–12 education, but the federal government has not provided guidance in how to develop equitable programs at the college and graduate level (Olivas, 2004). Compounding this issue, undocumented students are not allowed to access federal support programs for low-income college students, such as financial aid, because of their immigration status (Hsin & Ortega, 2018; Tapia-Fuselier, 2019). At the state level, some states, such as Georgia, ban undocumented students from enrolling in higher education institutions (Peña, 2012; Soltis, 2015). Georgia and other states also consider undocumented students to be foreigners by requiring them to pay the more expensive out-of-state tuition rates (Soltis, 2015), which can be almost three times as expensive as in-state tuition (Galvez, 2021). Whereas other states, such as California, have enacted policies that allow undocumented students to pay the more affordable in-state tuition and access state financial aid (Galvez, 2021). However, even in states like California that have more equitable policies, these policies are so confusing that undocumented youth are often misinformed by college staff and high school counselors that they cannot attend college (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017a).

At the college and university level, undocumented youth have fought for the development of institutional change for undocumented students (Nicholls, 2013; Sanchez & So, 2015). For example, they have advocated for the development of Undocumented Student Resource Centers,



physical spaces on college campuses that provide resources, information, and a sense of community for undocumented students (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). They have also advocated for designated staff positions who have the expertise to work with undocumented students (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020) as well as numerous programs such as institutional scholarships for undocumented students.

Institutional support at community colleges for undocumented students has been especially important because researchers estimate that most undocumented students in college attend community colleges (Teranishi et al., 2011). As a result of oppressive barriers rooted in systemic racism and xenophobia along the pre-K–12 to higher education pipeline, most Students of Color, immigrant, and undocumented students are restricted from accessing 4-year colleges and universities, and attend community colleges (Solórzano et al., 2005). Although there are still barriers to accessing and succeeding at a community college that need to be addressed (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017a), community colleges are often more accessible options for immigrant and undocumented students (Gonzales, 2015; Teranishi et al., 2011).

Some community colleges across the country have developed institutional support programs for undocumented students, such as resource centers, designated staff members, informational webpages, and institutional scholarships. Undocumented Student Resource Centers have been developed at approximately 20 community colleges across the country (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020) and some colleges have designated staff members who have extensive expertise in working with undocumented students (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Galvez, 2021). For example, at Mount San Antonio College, a community college in southern California, several staff and administrators facilitate their Dream program and resource center that offers resources

and programming such as counseling specific to undocumented students, legal advice, and career counseling.

Though the development of these programs at community colleges and 4-year universities across the country are to be celebrated, the field of higher education still has a long way to go in developing equitable institutional support for undocumented students at all colleges and universities across the country. For example, even though about 20 community colleges have built Undocumented Students Resource Centers, there are over 1,000 public community colleges across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), so less than 2% of all community colleges have built a resource center for undocumented students.

### **The Impact of Activism on Youth's Personal Experiences**

Although undocumented youth and students have been the leading drivers of change in advocating for a more just education system for undocumented students (Gonzales, 2013; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017b; Nicholls, 2013), undocumented youth have complex personal experiences organizing. Researchers find undocumented youth have nuanced sentiments about their motivations to organize and how organizing has impacted them personally (Muñoz, 2015). Many young people are compelled to organize because they find a sense of empowerment in working collectively to address the barriers that keep them from advancing their educational aspirations (Gonzales, 2015). Additionally, undocumented youth-led organizations are often important spaces for youth to experience a sense of community, belonging, and empowerment (Nicholls, 2013). Although organizing can have positive effects on youth activists' personal development, encounters with politicians' and administrators' blatant and covert racism and xenophobia can negatively impact students' mental health and sense of wellbeing (Nicholls, 2013).

## **The Role of Staff, Faculty, and Administrators in Advancing Institutional Change**

Staff, faculty, and administrators play a key role in advancing the development of institutional change for undocumented students on college and university campuses. Research finds that staff, faculty, and administrators can either support or hinder students' efforts to build equitable programs. Administrators may be inaccessible to students as they advocate for the development of programs. Sanchez and So (2015) describe how they had to stage a 9-day hunger strike at the University of California, Berkeley in 2010 just to get a meeting with the chancellor to discuss undocumented students. Research also finds how staff and faculty can be ignorant, apathetic, and/or racist in how they see the importance of building equity for undocumented students (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018), and some believe that institutions should not give resources to undocumented students (Gomez & Pérez Huber, 2019).

On the other hand, research also finds that staff, faculty, and administrators can be some of the biggest champions for undocumented students' organizing. At Eastern Connecticut State University, a public university in the state of Connecticut, undocumented student leaders describe how their university president, Dr. Elsa Núñez, supported their organizing in a way that was helpful to them (Freeman et al., 2021). Staff and faculty also play a powerful and important role in supporting students and student activists on campus (Chen & Rhoads, 2016; Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020).

## **Common Narratives About College Students' Aspirations and Agency**

To respect the role of students in decision-making processes in higher education, many higher education leaders and policymakers incorporate what they call "the student voice." Administrators and policymakers will invite "the student voice" to be in key meetings or speak on panels so they can hear the opinions of the student body (Brooman et al., 2015). Whereas

some scholars see “the student voice” as a viable way to understand students’ opinions (Brooman et al., 2015), others critique the concept of “the student voice” by saying that it fails to acknowledge “student as partners” (Seale et al., 2015, p. 534) in developing institutional change. Scholars argue the concept of “the student voice” therefore does not recognize students’ agency in advancing the development of programs (Seale et al., 2015).

Another common narrative among higher education leaders and policymakers espouses capitalist values. They argue that community colleges and higher education institutions are useful in advancing the country’s workforce so the United States can be competitive in an increasingly globalized world. A more educated and skilled workforce will help the country be competitive with other countries (Bridgeland et al., 2011). However, scholars critique this framing, arguing that an emphasis on students’ humanity and societal equity should be as important (Barton, 2001).

An understanding of the contemporary undocumented student movement combined with these two common narratives about “the student voice” and the purpose of higher education raise critical questions about the state of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Does it make sense to think about students as “the student voice?” Is the primary role of higher education to advance the country’s workforce so we can be competitive in an increasingly globalized world?

### **Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

Several societal problems at the nexus of policy, practice, and research confront the project of building equity for undocumented students at community colleges. First, few institutions have developed robust institutional support for undocumented students at community colleges such as Undocumented Student Resource Centers and designated staff positions (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). Moreover, few federal, state, and institutional level policies have

expanded access and equity for undocumented students at community colleges. Finally, although researchers have explored undocumented students' experiences at community colleges (Gonzales, 2015; Terriquez, 2015), little is known through research about how undocumented students have organized for institutional support at community colleges.

To address these multifaceted problems in practice, policy, and research, this dissertation study seeks to better understand the phenomenon of undocumented community college student organizing. This dissertation is a case study of one community college, Western College (pseudonym), to analyze how undocumented students organized for programs over time from 2006 to 2021. My overarching research question is concerned with understanding the story of how undocumented students at Western College organized for their community and future generations of students. I sought to understand three elements of time to their story. At the beginning of the story, I made sense of how students organized for programs for their community at Western College from 2006 to 2021. Regarding the middle of their story, I wanted to understand how they navigated the nuances of political dynamics with other key players on campus, such as staff, faculty, and administrators. Finally, at the end of their story, I analyzed how students made sense of their experiences at Western College. This study is guided by the following three research questions:

1. How did undocumented students at Western College organize for equitable programs from 2006 to 2021?
2. How did undocumented students navigate working with staff, faculty, and administrators in building programs for undocumented students at Western College?
3. How do undocumented student alumni make sense of their experiences organizing for institutional support for undocumented students at Western College?

## **Significance and Implications**

I aim for the findings from this research to speak to multiple audiences, including undocumented student activists, higher education administrators and policymakers, and scholars and researchers. This dissertation engages in “activist research” (Gutierrez & Lipman, 2016) by speaking to an audience of both students and administrators, in addition to other scholars and researchers. I aim to speak to both students and administrators as they are often in tension with one another over how to build institutional support, but they both play a critical role in building this support.

An analysis of students’ strategies and priorities to advocate for change will be useful to student activists at community colleges and other higher education institutions across the country. The findings from this research will also speak to higher education administrators and policymakers in terms of better understanding the experiences of student activists and how to work in collaboration with student activists. This research will also speak to other scholars and researchers in terms of the importance of a focus on humanizing research of community college students and the imperative of developing a more nuanced portrayal of undocumented youth and students through research.

## **Positionality and Conceptual Framework**

This dissertation is shaped by my personal experiences in the work I have done with immigrant communities and my own identity as a queer Jewish woman whose ancestors were refugees from Eastern Europe and Russia. Because I asked undocumented students and professionals to share very personal experiences for me about their experiences at Western College for this project, I aim to partake in what Pérez Huber (2019) calls “shared vulnerability” (p.2), by sharing my own story in this dissertation. I also try more broadly as a teacher,

researcher, and community member to be open about my own experiences to do what I can to help normalize the experience of being LGBTQ and to raise awareness about the history of Jewish communities and omnipresence of anti-Semitism both historically and today.

Upon graduating from college in Chicago, I have continuously volunteered to support immigrant and youth-led organizations with their community organizing efforts in numerous regions including Washington, DC, Boston, Oakland, and Los Angeles. Some of these organizations include the Student Multiethnic Action Research Team in Washington, DC, a team of high school students who are English Language Learners who advocate for language equity in DC public schools. I have also worked with youth who attended Freedom University in Georgia, a modern-day freedom school for undocumented students that offers courses in social justice, literature, science, and art all with an aim of empowering undocumented youth and fulfilling their human right to an education. At the national level, I have assisted with advocacy efforts including working with the founder of My Undocumented Life blog, Dr. Carolina Valdivia, and organizing several advocacy projects with The UndocuScholars Project at the Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education at UCLA. My experiences working directly with undocumented youth activists shape the lens through which I view the importance of ethical and just power dynamics between youth activists and higher education institutions.

In addition to my experiences working with immigrant communities, my identity as a white and citizen researcher shapes my values for humanizing research methods, reciprocity, and nontraditional, collective approaches to research that prioritize undocumented immigrants' research interests. Research has historically been a colonizing endeavor that dehumanizes and harms Communities of Color (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), but many researchers and scholars have pursued and theorized about ethical research practices, especially with undocumented students

(Pérez Huber, 2019). As a white scholar, it would be easy for me to reinforce and perpetuate colonial research endeavors that further harm the communities I seek to work with. Therefore, I think deeply about how to work in collaboration with immigrant and undocumented communities in such a way that productively advances justice. I am on a lifelong journey to learn about racism, xenophobia, and nativism and will never fully understand the nuances of the experiences of this oppression, so I strive to draw on my compassion, research skills, and experiences working with immigrant communities to make a contribution that will hopefully make a difference for immigrant and undocumented communities.

In terms of the oppression my family and I have encountered, I strive to openly discuss my own experiences being a queer Jewish woman in my writing and with the youth and students I work with. My family's experiences migrating to this country as Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe largely shape my understanding of the importance of just immigration policy. My great grandfather, Chaim, was a twin like me, and migrated to the United States with his sister Rachel and their younger siblings on a boat in the early 1900s as teenagers. Rachel was the only one turned away for unclear reasons and was deported back to Lithuania. Eventually my family stopped hearing from Rachel, and they assume she was killed in the Holocaust. The Holocaust in Lithuania was brutal and swift: in a few short months, 90–95% of the Jewish population was killed. At a very young age, my mother told me I was named after my great aunt Rachel to give her a “second chance in life.” Carrying the dreams of my ancestor Rachel is a large source of motivation in continuing to fight for just immigration policy in this country.

### **Roadmap for Dissertation**

This first chapter of this dissertation introduces the phenomenon of undocumented student organizing at community colleges, and the following chapters discuss the literature



review, theory, methods, findings, and discussion for this dissertation. Chapter 2 contains a review of the research literature pertaining to undocumented students in higher education. This chapter begins with an overview of the broader historical and sociopolitical context for understanding the importance of immigrant rights. The literature specific to undocumented students in higher education covers three groups of literature including undocumented students' experiences navigating higher education, undocumented students' resistance and organizing, and the role of higher education administrators, faculty, and staff in working with and for undocumented students.

Chapter 3 discusses my theoretical framework of counter-spaces within Critical Race Theory, and how this is a useful tool for understanding how undocumented students organized for equitable programs at Western College from 2006 to 2021. Counter-spaces are theorized as spaces where Students of Color and other marginalized student populations seek a sense of safety and support away from racism and other oppressions on college campuses (Solórzano et al., 2000). Chapter 4 discusses the methods of a case study of Western College, how I recruited participants, and how I analyzed the data. I conducted 26 interviews with 23 participants including 12 undocumented student alumni and current students (in 2021), four student allies, and eight staff and faculty. I also analyzed over 53 documents including institutional statements and webpages.

Chapters 5 through 7 discuss my findings to each of my three research questions. Chapter 5 addresses my first research question about how undocumented students organized for programs at Western College. I argue that undocumented students fought for the development of an institutionalized counter-space for undocumented students. They built a counter-space on campus where undocumented students felt safe meeting and could access information and

resources. As students found it challenging to maintain a sense of momentum and sustainability as they transferred to 4-year universities, they institutionalized their programs, so they had more stability by building a physical space on campus and hiring a staff member to support their work. They were, however, clear with the new staff member who facilitated the center that the essence of counter-space should be maintained by keeping the programs student-led.

Chapter 6 addresses my second research question about how undocumented students navigated power dynamics working with staff, faculty, and administrators to develop programs at Western College. Their relationships with other key players on campus were complex in that sometimes all three of these groups were helpful, but at other times, they blocked their efforts to build institutional support. Undocumented students described how other student groups on campus presented some of the largest barriers to their advocacy.

Chapter 7 addresses my last research question about how undocumented students reflected on and made sense of their experiences while they were at Western College. Students greatly appreciated how the opportunities to organize boosted their sense of confidence and fostered their leadership skills. Although they were impressed by the vast number of resources at the 4-year universities where they transferred, most missed the intimate sense of community in the counter-space they created at Western College. Furthermore, students described how they applied the lessons they learned about social justice organizing at Western College to their career goals, such as teaching kindergarten students how to advocate for themselves.

Finally, Chapter 8 concludes this discussion by discussing the implications of this study for practice and future research. The story of undocumented students' activism at Western College shows the value of maintaining the essence of a counter-space, even as it becomes institutionalized, in fostering students' sense of agency and leadership. Moreover, providing

opportunities for students to have final say in decision making processes is key to building an equitable campus environment. For future research, I recommend conducting another study with Western College that focuses on the story from the administrators' perspective to see if there are any key differences between the students' point of view. Moreover, I recommend studying institutional dynamics at other colleges to better understand how administrators think about working in collaboration with student activists, and how students view the role of administration in building institutional change.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As the undocumented immigrant rights movement has gained momentum in the past 10 to 20 years (Escudero, 2020; Nicholls, 2013; Perez, 2016), there has been a surge in scholarly research that strives to better understand education equity for undocumented students (Bjorklund, 2018). This research broadly covers three themes: (a) undocumented students' experiences navigating higher education; (b) undocumented students' organizing for equity in education; and (c) the role of higher education administrators, staff, and faculty in working with and for undocumented students. The literature has also addressed sub populations of undocumented students such as undocumented Asian American and Pacific Islander students (Buenavista, 2012, 2013, 2018; Chan, 2010; Escudero, 2012) and LGBTQ undocumented students (Cisneros, 2017; Escudero, 2012; Reyna Rivarola & Cisneros, 2021; Terriquez, 2015).

Although the research literature on undocumented students has been imperative in developing a better understanding of undocumented students' experiences, this body of research is limited in that it has largely focused on undocumented students at four-year colleges and universities, whereas less research has focused on undocumented students' experiences and activism at community colleges. There may be important differences in students' experiences and recommended best practices for students at 4-year institutions and community colleges, therefore more research is needed to better understand undocumented students' experiences at community colleges.

In this chapter, I discuss the research literature on undocumented students' experiences in higher education and students' activism for equity in education. Within this review of the literature, I will discuss the broader historical and sociopolitical context that shapes the

educational landscape for undocumented students. I will also discuss the research literature specific to undocumented students at community colleges.

### **Historical and Sociopolitical Context of Oppression of Undocumented Immigrants**

Often educational research does not contextualize the historical and transnational framing of the importance of immigrant rights. This framing helps us understand the broader societal forces that shape the educational landscape for undocumented students. In the past 15 years, scholars across the fields of history, sociology, anthropology, political science, and psychology have written about undocumented migration and immigrant rights activism (De León, 2015; Dreby, 2015; Hernández, 2006, 2009; Menjívar & Kanstroom, 2013; Ngai, 2014; Pallares, 2014). Though a full literature review of the broader context would be beyond the reach of this paper, I will briefly summarize key concepts of the broader context including the demographics of the undocumented immigrant population and the multifaceted oppression that impacts undocumented students and their families. Although there are numerous systems of oppression such as transitional violence motivated by capitalism, in this dissertation, I will briefly address how the U.S. government has upheld white supremacy through restrictive immigration policy and how the government has terrorized immigrant communities by stripping away protective policies. I will also mention how media discourse has reinforced harmful messaging and stereotypes about immigrant communities.

#### ***Demographics of the Undocumented Immigrant Population***

Researchers estimate approximately 11.4 million undocumented immigrants live in the United States (Migration Policy Institute, 2018). Just a little over half (53%) of all undocumented immigrants were born in Mexico, whereas others were born in countries in Asia (16%), countries in Central America (14%), South America (6%), the Caribbean (3%), and countries in

Africa (3%; Migration Policy Institute, 2018). The Asian countries with the largest undocumented populations are China, India, the Philippines, and South Korea (Rosenblum & Ruiz Soto, 2015). In some states, such as New York, Massachusetts, and Virginia, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) constitute almost 25% of the undocumented population (Migration Policy Institute, 2018).

In terms of the undocumented student population, a recent report from the Migration Policy Institute in 2018 estimates every year, approximately 125,000 undocumented students reach high school graduation age, and 98,000 undocumented students graduate from high school. Of the undocumented students who graduate from high school, the states with the largest shares of graduates are California (27,000 students), Texas (7,000 students), and Florida (5,000 students; Zong & Batalova, 2019). Although researchers have estimated the number of undocumented students in K–12 and higher education, there are little data available about the number of undocumented students because it is challenging to collect information about students' immigration status without compromising their safety and privacy.

### ***Maintenance of White Supremacy Through Immigration Policy***

For hundreds of years, the United States has sought to maintain a majority white and protestant population through restrictive immigration admissions policies (Motomura, 2014; Ngai, 2014). The Chinese Exclusion Acts in the late 1800s were the first admission policies to explicitly restrict migration of Immigrants of Color. At the time, migrants from China were recruited to build the railroads, but white populations feared the rise of the Chinese population, ultimately leading to strategic efforts to keep Chinese immigrants out of the United States (Motomura, 2014; Ngai, 2014). Building on the exclusion acts, a long history of restrictive admissions policies in the 20th and 21st century have created a landscape of admissions policies

today in 2019 that are convoluted and provide few opportunities for undocumented Immigrants of Color to pursue a pathway to citizenship (Motomura, 2014).

The evolution of restrictive immigration policies over the years (Wong, 2017) has increased the population of People of Color in the United States (Banks, 2004), which shapes the racial demographics of students in K–12 schools and higher education. Several federal policies, such as the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, broadened migration from countries with majority People of Color (Banks, 2004). Researchers estimate that by 2050, People of Color will constitute a majority of the population in the United States, which will impact the racial composition of K–12 schools and higher education institutions (Teranishi & Kim, 2017).

### ***Stripping Away of Policies That Protect Immigrant Communities***

Compounding issues of restrictive immigration admissions policies, the United States has also oppressed immigrant Communities of Color through the stripping away of policies that protect immigrants. For example, the Trump administration's threats to terminate the Deferred Action for Arrivals Program (DACA) impacts many undocumented college students and their families (Burciaga & Malone, 2021; Morales Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021). DACA was created by the Obama administration in 2012 as an executive order, a directive issued by the President, that allows deportation relief and provides work authorization and drivers licenses to undocumented young adults who came to the United States at a particular time and age. On September 5, 2017, the Trump administration announced that they would end the DACA program (Shear & Davis, 2017), though there has been an injunction in several courts resulting in the upholding of certain aspects of the DACA program (National Immigration Law Center, 2019). As of February 2022, at the time of writing this dissertation, DACA currently remains in place for those who already applied, but the program is not accepting new applicants.

Scholars find that DACA has expanded access to higher education for undocumented students (Teranishi et al., 2015). Gonzales et al. (2014, 2016) found DACA provided more opportunities for undocumented students to work and drive, which helped them afford the cost of college tuition. Moreover, many state policies on access to higher education for undocumented students allow undocumented students to pay the more affordable in-state tuition, but only if they have DACA. Students without DACA are forced to still pay the more expensive out-of-state tuition in some states (Macías, 2022; Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2022). The continual threats to DACA have increased a sense of uneasiness and fear among immigrant communities (Aguilar & Gonzales, 2020), though may remain determined to navigate higher education. Because new applicants are not allowed to apply for DACA at the present time in 2022, an increasing number of undocumented high school graduates will not be eligible for DACA as they enter college, meaning that the restrictions on DACA should increasingly be considered a higher education issue.

### ***Oppressive Media and Political Discourse***

In addition to politicians' attack on protective policies for immigrant communities, media discourse and political rhetoric have vilified and criminalized immigrant communities. Several scholars theorize about the scapegoating of immigrant communities. Chavez (2013) shows how public discourse has unethically been used to portray Latina/o immigrant communities as a threat to the safety of the United States (Chavez, 2013). Trump has built on this history of vilifying immigrants through both rhetoric and action (Valdivia et al., 2021). Media and political discourse can greatly influence administrators, policymakers, and politicians at education institutions, which can have a direct impact on immigrant and undocumented K–12 and college students' experiences (Sanchez et al., 2021).



The oppressive machines of restrictive admissions policies, the stripping away of protective policies, and harmful media messaging all impact the broader landscape for undocumented students in higher education. Next, I will address the research literature on undocumented students more specifically in the field of education.

### **Research Literature on Undocumented Students in Higher Education**

The broader transnational context of framing immigrant rights is important for contextualizing the research literature specific to undocumented students' experiences in higher education. This body of research addresses three overarching themes. First, scholars have focused on better understanding the challenges undocumented students face in pursuing higher education and the factors that have led them to be successful in navigating education opportunities (Abrego, 2006, 2008; Gonzales, 2016; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017a; Teranishi et al., 2015). Second, scholars have sought to better understand undocumented students' resistance to oppression both in the form of organizing and navigation through a racist and colonial education system (e.g., Aguilar, 2021; Negrón-Gonzales, 2015; Pérez Huber, 2009). Third, scholars have researched the role of college administrators, faculty, and staff in working with undocumented students. Although some researchers have included undocumented community college students in their larger studies about undocumented students more generally (Teranishi et al., 2015), few studies have focused on undocumented students at community colleges (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017a; Perez, 2009).

As access to higher education for undocumented students expanded in the past 10 to 20 years, more and more undocumented and formerly undocumented scholars have published works theorizing about undocumented life in the United States (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Aguilar, 2019 Chang, 2018; Freeman et al., 2021; Valdivia, 2019, 2021). Because most scholars

who write about undocumented youth are not undocumented themselves, this emerging body of literature makes a critically important impact on the field. In their edited book, *We Are Not Dreamers*, Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales (2020) worked with undocumented and formerly undocumented scholars to theorize about undocumented life. Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales (2020) argue undocumented scholars’ “work theorizing illegality, citizenship, education, and belonging has the potential to grow the field, shift understandings, and remake the bodies of literature that speak to their experiences” (p. 1). Authors in this edited book volume wrote about numerous topics including critiques of the Dreamer narrative (Cabrera, 2020; Mondragón, 2020; Sati, 2020), how undocumented queer youth navigate relationships with family (Ramirez, 2020), how queer, and especially trans, immigrants center joy in their resistance (Silvestre, 2020), and the fear of deportation for queer families (Maldonado Dominguez, 2020).

### ***Undocumented Students’ Experiences Navigating Higher Education***

Higher education institutions are nested within multiple levels of policymaking that impact undocumented students’ opportunities to access an affordable college education (Nienhuser, 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). At the federal level, although several parents of undocumented children and their advocates were able to ensure access to free K–12 education through the *Plyler v. Doe* court case in 1982 (Motomura, 2014), the federal government blocks undocumented students from accessing federal financial aid. Moreover, the federal government has not established clear policies on undocumented students’ access to in-state tuition and state financial aid, leaving these legislative decisions to the states (Olivas, 2004).

Many undocumented youth-led organizations have successfully advocated for legislation at the state level including access to in-state tuition rates and state financial aid in some states (Nienhuser, 2018). At the same time, many other states require undocumented students to pay

out-of-state tuition, and some states ban undocumented students from enrolling in public colleges and universities altogether (Soltis, 2015). These policies are continually changing because of organizing by both immigrant rights activists and antimigrant politicians. As of June 2019, a handful of states allow undocumented students to access in-state tuition and financial aid, around 10 states allow undocumented students to only access in-state tuition but do not provide state aid, around 10 states require students to pay out-of-state tuition as a result of explicit policy or lack of inclusive policies, and a handful of states have policies that ban undocumented students from attending public colleges and universities completely (Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2022).

Scholars have explored undocumented students' trajectories to college both regarding their experiences in high school and their experiences once they are in college. In terms of undocumented students' experiences in high school, researchers have found many factors that push undocumented students off the pathway to college as well several factors that shape undocumented students' pathways to college (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2015). In *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America*, Gonzales describes these two groups as early exiters and college goers (Gonzales, 2015). Gonzales explores how early exiters were pushed out of high school and did not enroll in college for numerous reasons, such as the lack of financial aid for tuition and living costs. Gonzales (2015) also found that many students attended underserved high schools where they had little support from their teachers and college counselors and dealt with racist teachers and school administrators who had low expectations of them and stereotyped them as delinquent kids). On the other hand, scholars have found that many undocumented students who pursue college after high school had a robust support system of mentors during their high school years who could help them navigate the college going

process (Gonzales, 2015; Nienhusser, 2013; Perez, 2010). In addition, many of these students had a family financial situation that allowed them to spend time focusing on their schoolwork in high school instead of working to help contribute to the family's financial obligations (Gonzales, 2015).

Once undocumented students surmount the barriers to enroll and receive enough financial aid to start college, there are still many barriers that stand in the way of them graduating from college, including lack of financial aid, discrimination, and a negative and exclusionary campus climate (Gonzales, 2015; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017a; Teranishi et al., 2015). During students' time in college, financial aid continues to be a barrier to persisting through college. In The UndocuScholars Project, a research study with a sample of 909 undocumented college students across 34 states, Teranishi et al. (2015) found 56.7% of their participants were "extremely concerned" (p. 17) about financing their education and 73.9% of students who reported stopping out did so because of financial concerns. In addition to financial concerns, it can be challenging for undocumented students to experience a sense of belonging and inclusion on a college campus (Gonzales, 2015; Teranishi et al., 2015). Moreover, undocumented students can experience a strong sense of fear of deportation and high anxiety levels because of their immigration status. 75% of the participants in the UndocuScholars Project said they feared deportation and 36.7% of participants reported anxiety levels that were above the clinical cut off level, in comparison to 9% of the total U.S. population (Teranishi et al., 2015). This research literature has been important in better understanding the multifaceted factors and barriers that shape undocumented students' educational trajectories.

Some scholars have focused on sub populations of undocumented students in terms of race/ethnicity, geographic region of residence, and state context, which is critical to developing a

more nuanced portrait of the undocumented student population. In terms of race/ethnicity, although there are still few studies that look particularly at Asian American and Pacific Islander undocumented students, some scholars have begun focusing their research on this area (Buenavista, 2012, 2013; Chan, 2010; Escudero, 2012; Teranishi, 2010). Many AAPI undocumented immigrants argue, although they share many of the same experiences as Latina/o undocumented immigrants, they also have unique experiences as AAPIs that need to be acknowledged (Buenavista, 2018).

Researchers and community organizers have found that AAPI undocumented communities are not participating in public programs as much as Latina/o undocumented immigrants. Fewer AAPI undocumented young people have applied for DACA. In 2012, only 21% of Asian origin undocumented young people who were eligible for DACA applied whereas 77% of Mexican and Central American origin youth applied for DACA (Rusin, 2015). Journalists and some community leaders have hypothesized or implied that a cultural sense of shame keeps undocumented AAPIs from openly discussing their immigration status (Hayoun, 2017; Rusin, 2015). However, Buenavista (2018) argues the United States' discriminatory policies and xenophobia, not a cultural sense of shame, keeps undocumented AAPIs from openly discussing their immigration status. Moreover, she argues blaming undocumented AAPIs' culture for their decision-making processes is harmful and dangerous because it blames undocumented immigrants for the barriers they face instead of blaming the racist system.

Tracy Buenavista is a leading scholar in studying undocumented Asian American and Pacific Islander communities and has written several articles in peer-reviewed journals about this topic. She discusses how undocumented AAPIs are often included in large research studies about undocumented students as "additive" to the research study. In other words, these research studies

primarily focused on Latina/o students and added in a few Asian American and Pacific Islander students to their studies. Although these studies have been informative about undocumented AAPIs' experiences, Buenavista argues it is important to focus specifically on undocumented AAPIs to better understand their experiences (Buenavista, 2018).

### ***Undocumented Students' Resistance and Organizing***

In addition to understanding the challenges undocumented students face in their pursuit of a college education, scholars have also explored undocumented students' resistance and organizing to build a more just education system. This scholarship has looked at undocumented students' forms of resistance including undocumented youth-led organizing (Gonzales, 2008), civil disobedience (Negrón-Gonzales, 2015), and navigation of a racist education system (Gonzales, 2015; Perez, 2009; Pérez Huber, 2010). Many scholars have sought to document and theorize about the development of undocumented student-led organizing within the undocumented immigrant rights movement (Escudero, 2012; Muñoz, 2015; Muñoz et al., 2014; Negrón-Gonzales, 2015; Nicholls, 2013; Perez, 2016).

Walter J. Nicholls has written one of the most in-depth analyses of the undocumented youth movement in his book *The Dreamers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate*. Drawing on interviews with undocumented activists and document analysis, Nicholls (2013) explains the development of the movement from the early 2000s and argues that prior to the early 2000s, undocumented youth had not organized as a national entity to advocate for national legislation. At the beginning of the movement, established immigrant rights organizations and undocumented youth had tensions over how to advocate for the DREAM Act, national legislation that would have provided a pathway to citizenship for undocumented youth (Nicholls, 2013).

Around 2010, undocumented youth began using the slogan “undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic” (Perez, 2016, pg. 97) to advocate for their rights. Scholars have sought to document and theorize about this time when undocumented youth began to engage in more acts of civil disobedience (Galindo, 2012; Negrón-Gonzales, 2015). Galindo documents how undocumented youth began to stage acts of civil disobedience in 2010 in numerous areas across the country including Washington, DC, and Tucson, Arizona in support of the national Dream Act campaign. One of the first acts of civil disobedience was conducted by several undocumented youth in Senator John McCain’s office on May 7, 2010, to advocate for the Dream Act (Galindo, 2012). Following these actions in Washington DC and Arizona, a wave of acts of civil disobedience across the country followed (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017b).

Scholars have also looked more specifically at organizing of communities within the undocumented youth movement, such as queer and Asian undocumented students (Escudero, 2012; Terriquez, 2015). Drawing on Crenshaw’s (1991) theorization of the intersection of oppression of sexism and racism for Black women, Escudero (2012) argues undocumented youth use their intersectional identities, such as being undocuqueer or undocumented and Asian, to resist dominant conceptions of their community and advocate for a more nuanced and heterogeneous understanding of the undocumented immigrant population. Similarly, Terriquez et al. (2018) analyze the ways queer undocumented youth situate themselves in the immigrant rights movement (Terriquez et al., 2018). Terriquez (2015) argues queer undocumented youth organized “intersectional mobilization, meaning high levels of activism and commitment among a disadvantaged subgroup within an already marginalized constituency” (p. 343).

In addition to focusing on particular student populations with the undocumented youth movement, scholars have also focused on particular organizations that work with and for

undocumented youth. For example, several scholars have analyzed the development of Freedom University, a modern-day freedom school that offers college level courses to undocumented youth in the state of Georgia. In 2010, when the Georgia Board of Regents implemented a ban against undocumented students from enrolling in the top five public universities in the state, undocumented youth approached professors at the University of Georgia and other nearby universities to teach college level courses. Students at Freedom University also frequently engaged in direct actions in efforts to remove the ban (Peña, 2012; Muñoz et al., 2014; Soltis, 2015; Trivette & English, 2017).

Some scholars have also noted how many undocumented college students formed undocumented student organizations that were highly influential in building a sense of community for undocumented students on campus and advocating for institutional change (Galindo, 2011, 2012; Nicholls, 2013; Santa-Ramirez, 2021b). Scholars also analyze how important student led organizations are for students' sense of well-being. However, very few scholars focus specifically on undocumented students' organizing and activism for institutional change on their college campuses, especially at community colleges.

Scholars have also framed undocumented students' navigation of a racist education system as a form of resistance. Pérez Huber (2009) highlights the ways in which undocumented students draw on their personal strengths and their community's strengths to navigate the higher education system. In addition, Perez (2009) highlights the ways in which undocumented students have drawn on inner strength and support networks to navigate higher education systems.

Finally, some scholars have written about the important role of researchers in working with and for undocumented students and activists (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017b; Pérez Huber, 2019). Negrón-Gonzales (2017b) wrote a critical piece on the importance of reflecting on researchers'



role. She emphasizes the lessons researchers have to learn from youth and the ways in which researchers should work in solidarity with activists. Negrón-Gonzales (2017b) says:

Our scholarship must be daring, must be in dialogue with and speak to the issues within oppressed communities, and must get us out of the academy and into the streets. . . . We must produce research that responds to the needs and visions of activists from marginalized groups, and our methods must be inclusive and collective. . . . This is what we do as a discipline, that is who we are called to be as activist-scholars and public intellectuals. (p. 6)

As discussed in my conceptual framework section in Chapter 1, researchers hold tremendous power to harm undocumented youth in the research process. Therefore, this explicit and open discussion about the role of researchers in working with undocumented students is critically important to continue and expand.

### ***Undocumented Students at Community Colleges***

Most of the research literature has focused on undocumented students at 4-year colleges and universities, but little research has focused specifically on undocumented students at community colleges. Drs. William Perez, Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales, Susana Muñoz, and Kenny Nienhusser are some of the few scholars who specifically research undocumented students at community colleges. Negrón-Gonzales (2017a) conducted research with undocumented students in a rural area of California and found the community college to be a site of “constrained inclusion” (p. 106) because, even though the community college was purportedly open access, undocumented students still experienced a sense of exclusion on campus. In his (2009) book, *We Are Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream*, Perez paints several portraits of students who attend community colleges. He describes how they are engaged in student activism and must balance coursework with jobs to pay for tuition and their living costs.

In addition to researching undocumented students' experiences at community colleges, several researchers have also focused on how community colleges serve undocumented students (Flores & Oseguera, 2009; Nienhusser, 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2015). Nienhusser (2014) found the community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) system have made progress in effectively disseminating information about the in-state resident tuition (ISRC) policy to their staff who work directly with undocumented students. This information was disseminated in the form of in-person trainings and manuals that explain tuition and fees under the ISRC policy. Similarly, Flores and (2009) conducted research that contrasted California's implementation of their in-state tuition policy (AB540) with North Carolina, which did not have specific policies on undocumented students at the time of publication of their article. They found the front-line staff who work with undocumented students did not get any training related to working with undocumented students. Similar to this finding, Nienhusser and Espino (2017) interviewed 45 college personnel at community colleges in four states (Georgia, California, Connecticut, and Wisconsin) and found that none of them had received training about how to work with undocumented students during their graduate school education. In part, this was because these staff had attended graduate schools over 10 years ago, before the undocumented immigrant rights movement gained significant momentum. However, Nienhusser and Espino found college staff drew on trainings they had related to cultural competence to try to work best with their undocumented students on campus.

A recent report published in March 2019 by Immigrants Rising, the Foundation for California Community Colleges, and the California Community College system found six primary challenges related to serving undocumented students at community college specifically in California including the need for physical space on campuses and more guidance from the

California Community College Chancellor's Office (Immigrants Rising, 2019). Although this research on undocumented students at community colleges has critically informed our understanding of challenges and best practices at community colleges, more research needs to be focused on community colleges. Moreover, more research needs to explore students' activism at community colleges.

### **Higher Education Administrators and Staff Who Work With Undocumented Students**

In addition to the literature focusing on undocumented students' experiences navigating higher education, the research literature on the role of higher education administrators, faculty, and staff may be important to understanding undocumented students' experiences in working with administrators to build equity at their campus. This research broadly covers three important themes: (a) the role of college staff in positively influencing undocumented students' educational trajectories, (b) how college staff negatively impact undocumented students' educational trajectories, and (c) a more focused look at the personal experiences of college staff who work with undocumented students.

Many scholars have found that the mentorship of higher education staff and administrators are key to helping undocumented students navigate higher education. Their mentorship, knowledge, and care can play an impactful role in students' pursuit of college (Gonzales, 2015). On the other hand, higher education staff have the power to negatively impact undocumented students' educational trajectories, pushing them out of high school, and pushing them away from the college's doors. Moreover, higher education staff and administrators may provide misinformation to undocumented students. For example, Negrón-Gonzales (2017a) found front-line staff in admissions and financial aid offices told undocumented students from nearby neighborhoods that they could not attend college.

Scholars have also explored the experiences of higher education administrators and staff who work with undocumented students. Nienhuser (2018) found it can be challenging for college staff to stay informed on continually changing immigration policies. Southern (2016) found college staff felt overworked and unsupported in their efforts to support undocumented students.

This chapter explored the research literature on undocumented students in higher education. It began by discussing the broader historical and sociopolitical forces that impact undocumented students such as restrictive immigration policies, stripping away of protective policies, and racist media and political rhetoric. I then discussed the multifaceted foci of the research literature on undocumented students' experiences and activism in higher education, as well as the role of staff, faculty, and administrators in working with and for undocumented students. The next chapter will discuss my theoretical framework of counter-spaces in Critical Race Theory (Solórzano et al., 2000).

### **CHAPTER 3: CRITICAL RACE THEORY COUNTER-SPACES**

This dissertation study is guided by theories on counter-spaces, spaces on college campuses where Students of Color create a sense of support and safety with each other (Solórzano et al., 2000). The concept of counter-spaces is helpful for understanding how undocumented Students of Color at Western College, with support from student allies, staff, faculty, and administrators, built a supportive community on campus for undocumented students from 2006 to 2021. In this chapter, I will discuss how counter-spaces are conceptualized within Critical Race Theory. Then, I will show how scholars expanded Solórzano et al.'s original conception of counter-spaces, and then discuss how scholars have applied these theories to study racial inequities and resistance in higher education, particularly for undocumented students.

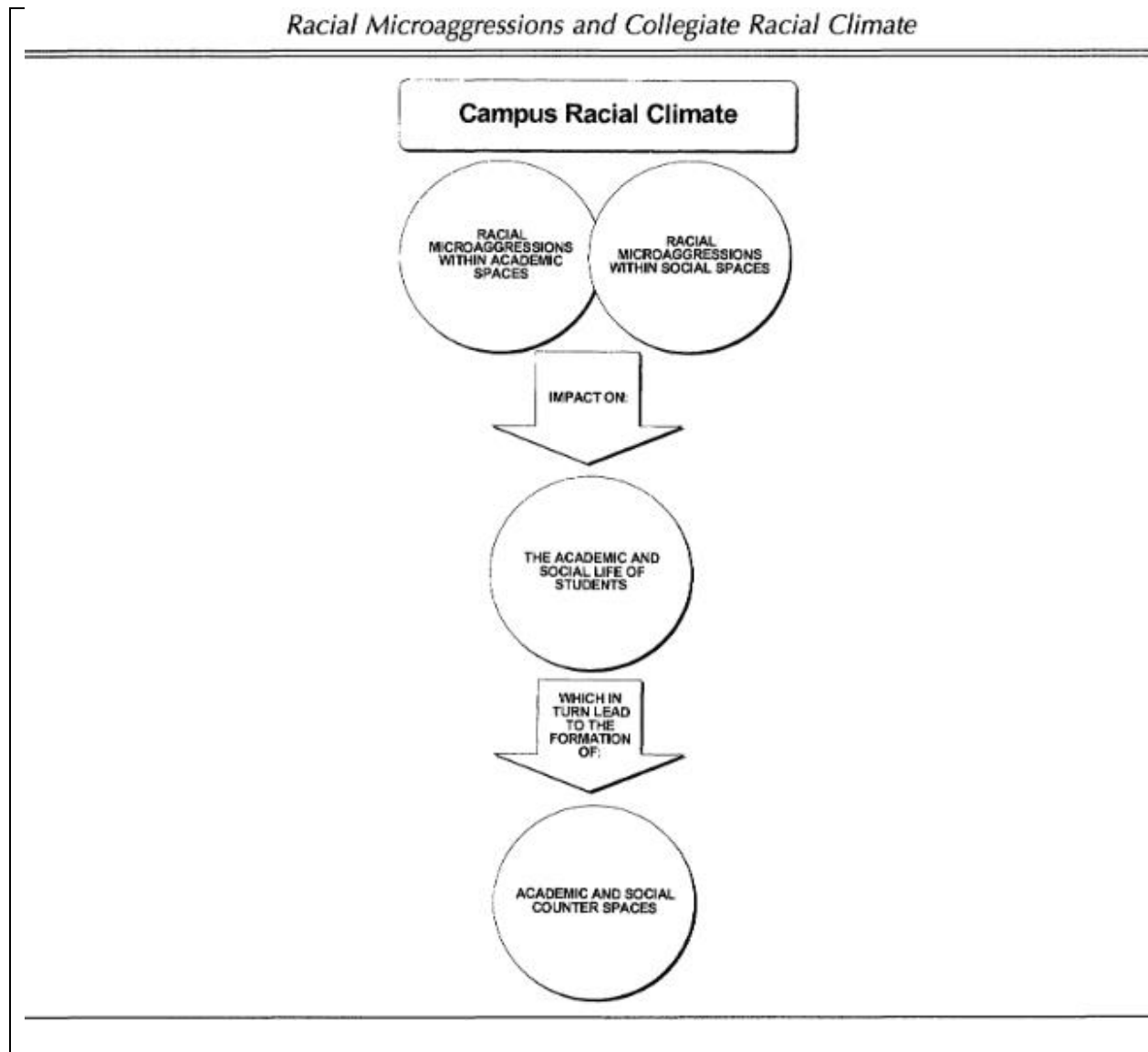
Solórzano's concept of counter-spaces developed as part of Critical Race Theory (CRT), a movement of scholars and activists who are interested in challenging dominant notions of race and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The movement was originally developed in the legal field in the 1980s to put forward the idea that racism is endemic to society, deeply entrenched in legal and political structures, and a reality of People of Colors' everyday lived experiences (Delgado, 2009; Lynn & Parker, 2006). In the 1990s and early 2000s, CRT scholars, including Drs. Gloria Ladson-Billings, William Tate, Danny Solórzano, and Tara Yosso, applied CRT's concepts to the field of education to better understand inequities in education settings (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006). Central tenets that guide CRT in education include: (a) racism is endemic to the experiences of Students of Color, (b) dominant narratives about race and racism must be challenged, and (c) and the experiential knowledge of Students of Color should be valued.

CRT theorists find that higher education institutions often have negative campus racial climates for Students of Color (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Yosso et al., 2009). These negative climates can be prominent in both academic spaces, such as classrooms, as well as social spaces for students on campus (Solórzano et al., 2000). For example, research finds that Students of Color contend with daily racial microaggressions on college campuses in both academic and social spaces (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015), which can affect the everyday lives of students in college (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Within these hostile environments, Students of Color have formed spaces with each other that feel safe, known as counter-spaces. Solórzano et al. (2000) coined the term counter-spaces and defined them as “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (p. 70). These counter-spaces can be academic, social, or a combination of both. Solórzano et al. (2000) argue counter-spaces have three key elements. First, they are spaces where Students of Color can feel safe among a community of peers who have similar experiences. Second, Students of Color can feel more supported venting frustrations about racism in counter-spaces than they do in other spaces on campus. Finally, students often coconstruct counter-spaces with Faculty of Color who are seeking to support their Students of Color and who are seeking safe spaces themselves. Figure 1 shows how Students of Color create counter-spaces in response to racially hostile college campus environments.

**Figure 1**

*Racial Microaggressions and Collegiate Racial Climate*



*Note.* Reprinted from “Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students,” by D. Solórzano, M. Ceja, & T. Yosso, 2000, *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), p. 66 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2696265>). Copyright 2001 by Howard University.

Solórzano et al. (2000) describe how Black students created counter-spaces within student organizations, Black fraternities and sororities, and peer groups. They also formed counter-spaces within Black student-organized academic study halls and offices on campus that provide services to Black students. For example, a student in their study described being excited to live on the African American themed floor in the dorms because he felt safer and more supported there than he did in other spaces on campus. In summary, Solórzano et al. (2000) describe how counter-spaces are an “important strategy for minority students’ academic survival” (p. 71).

### **Drawing on Previous Theories About Space**

Solórzano et al.’s (2000) conception of counter-spaces build on similar concepts of space as important sites of resistance for People of Color (Case & Hunter, 2012). For example, hooks (1990) discusses how “homeplaces” are critical spaces for Black women and their families to feel a sense of safety and empowerment away from the dangers of white supremacy. hooks (1990) describes in her essay “Homeplace (a site of resistance),” published 10 years before articles on counter-spaces were published:

Since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination. Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. (p. 384)

As hooks describes a “homeplace” as a space of both care and resistance, Solórzano et al. (2000) similarly conceptualize counter-spaces as spaces for both support and organizing.



## **Expansion of Theorization of Counter-Spaces**

Building on Solórzano et al.'s (2000) conceptualization of counter-spaces, scholars have expanded theories on counter-spaces to include more components, such as where counter-spaces can occur and elements that comprise counter-spaces. Citing Solórzano's original work on counter-spaces and theorizing from the field of psychology, Case and Hunter (2012) describe how counter-spaces can exist at multiple levels within society, such as within families, support networks, organizations, and broader communities. Case and Hunter (2012, 2014) also define three processes that occur within counter-spaces: (a) narrative identity work, (b) acts of resistance, and (c) direct relational transactions.

### ***Narrative Identity Work***

Narrative identity work is the process of making sense of one's experiences (Case & Hunter, 2012). This process comprises the creation of four narratives: oppression narratives, resistance narratives, reimagined personal narratives, and reimagined collective narratives (Case & Hunter, 2012, 2014). In a study with African American youth in schools, Case and Hunter (2014) explore how counter-spaces provide opportunities for youth to engage in these four stages of "narrative identity work." First, counter-spaces provide space for youth to engage in identifying an "oppression narrative" (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 909) that defines the oppression communities face. Then youth in a counter-space identify a "resistance narrative" (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 909), a shared belief within the counter-space that empowers youth to resist oppression. Third, individuals create a "reimagined personal narrative," the "meanings individual counterspace members give themselves" (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 909). Though they are part of a community of peers within a counter-space, reimagined personal narrative work is more of an individual process. Finally, counter-space members can collectively create a "reimagined collective

narrative” (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 919), a way for counter-space members to define their group on their own terms. Narrative identity work supports the development of students’ critical consciousness about the oppression they face and how they want to see themselves.

### ***Acts of Resistance***

In addition to being sites where Students of Color can engage in “narrative identity work,” Case and Hunter (2012) also define counter-spaces as sites for acts of resistance. Resistance in counter-spaces can take many forms. It can be realized as students centering their own cultural practices such as affirming how they talk and dress. These acts of resistance can also be critical in raising students’ critical consciousness about oppression on their college campuses.

### ***Direct Relational Transactions***

Finally, Case and Hunter (2012) define counter-spaces as sites where communities can engage in “direct relational transactions” where they foster a sense of community together. They can exchange resources, social support, and suggestions for navigating a racially hostile campus climate (Case & Hunter, 2012; Margherio et al., 2020). This process of community building can create a sense of belonging for Students of Color in school settings (Margherio et al., 2020).

Margherio et al. (2020) drew on Case and Hunter’s (2012) expansion of counter-space theory by exploring how the three facets of narrative identity work, acts of resistance, and direct relational transactions in a counter-space could foster students’ ability to access their community cultural wealth. The theory of “Community Cultural Wealth” challenges racist ways of viewing Communities of Color through a deficit lens and argues that Communities of Color have inherent strengths (Yosso, 2005). These strengths are defined as several “capitals” such as aspirational capital and familial capital. In a study of a professional development program for

early career neuroscientists from underrepresented groups, Margherio et al. (2020) found “direct relationship transaction” and “narrative identity work” coincided with young professionals’ understanding of their community cultural wealth including aspirational, navigational, familial, and social capital.

In addition to Case and Hunter’s (2012) expansion of counter-space theory, Vaccaro and Camba-Kelsay (2016) further expanded on the theory of counter-spaces by discussing the importance of intersectionality within counter-spaces. They focus on the gendered dynamics of Women of Color who create their own counter-space apart from Men of Color. Vaccaro and Camba-Kelsay conducted a 5-year case study of an undergraduate course on the historical and contemporary experiences of Women of Color and found numerous reasons why women felt more comfortable in a counter-space compared to other spaces on their college campus. Building on Solórzano et al.’s (2000) original conception of counter-spaces, several scholars (e.g., Case & Hunter, 2012, 2014; Vaccaro & Camba-Kelsay, 2016) have broadened theories on counter-spaces by defining the process of narrative building and the critical role of intersectionality in counter-space development.

### **Formal Versus Informal Counter-Spaces**

Scholars have also expanded counter-space theory by discussing the differences between formal and informal counter-spaces (Carter, 2007; Case & Hunter, 2012). Formal counter-spaces “include those settings that are characterized by a strict organizational structure and an explicit agenda and purpose” (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 262). Examples of formal counter-spaces are university organizations and churches. Informal counter-spaces, on the other hand, “have less of an organization structure and less of an explicit agenda and purpose” (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 262). Examples of informal counter-spaces include friend and family networks.

In a study specifically with Black youth, Carter (2007) defines formal counter-spaces as spaces coconstructed by school adults and Black students, such as Black student organizations and offices, that provide resources to Black students. “These counter-spaces represent institutionalized mechanisms that serve as protective forces for these students and allow them to maintain a strong racial sense of self” (Carter, 2007, p. 543). An example of an informal counter-space is the stairs in a school where Black youth gather. Scholars (e.g., Carter, 2007; Case & Hunter, 2012) continued to develop counter-space theory by differentiating between formal and informal counter-spaces.

### **Scholars’ Application of Counter-Spaces Theories**

Several scholars have drawn on Solórzano et al.’s (2000) conceptualization of counter-spaces in their research studies to better understand Students of Colors’ experiences on college campuses (Santa-Ramirez et al., 2022; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). For example, Yosso and Lopez (2010) applied the concept of counter-spaces to cultural centers in higher education institutions. Through a case study of a private, historically white liberal arts college in California, Yosso and Lopez describe how students in the mid-1990s advocated for the development of several cultural centers including a Latina/o center, an Asian American and Pacific Islander center, an African American/Black center, a LGBTQ center, and a Native American center. Yosso and Lopez (2010) describe, “When students confront multidimensional racism in the classroom and campus community, the culture centers provide a counterspace to facilitate their survival and resistance” (p. 111). These cultural centers functioned as counter-spaces because they provided relatively safe spaces for Students of Color to feel more comfortable on campus and prepared students to become future leaders within their communities. Students and staff in the centers also worked with students to build education equity across the campus.

Yosso and Lopez (2010) also speak to the multigenerational aspect of counter-space formation. They argue it is important to recognize the original creators of the counter-space and foster the development of the counter-space over multiple student generations. Yosso and Lopez (2010) describe:

Students and staff preserve the historical memory of the fight to create the culture centers by sharing the struggle with each new generation of undergraduates. This process of recovering and recounting collective history reminds students of their responsibility to honor those who came before them. (p. 114)

This critical component of honoring the original creators and sustaining momentum throughout multiple generations of student leaders will be a helpful concept in understanding how undocumented students at Western College organized for programs over time from 2006 to 2021.

Ong et al. (2018) drew on theories of counter-spaces to better understand Women of Color students' experiences in STEM programs on college campuses. Because Women of Color faced daily microaggressions and a sense of isolation in their programs, they formed community with each other to feel more support. Ong et al. (2018) found five ways in which counter-spaces operated for these women: "in peer-to-peer relationships; mentoring relationships; national STEM diversity conferences; STEM and non-STEM campus student groups; and STEM departments" (p. 206).

Scholars have drawn inspiration from theories of counter-spaces to discuss the experiences of other marginalized student populations such as LGBTQ students and Students with Disabilities. For example, McConnell et al. (2016) drew on counter-space theory that originated in Critical Race Theory to better understand white women's and Women of Color's experiences at the Michigan womyn's festival, a festival predominantly attended by LGBTQ women. They found that the festival could be considered a counter-space for LGBTQ women overall, but that Women of Color had to create a "counterspace within a counterspace" to feel

safe from racist oppression at the festival. For example, LGBTQ Women of Color created the “Women of Color Tent” where they could stay with each other (McConnell et al., 2016).

### **Application of Counter-Space Theories to Undocumented Students**

Theorization of counter-spaces has also been applied to undocumented by students and their families in educational settings (Arango et al., 2016; Muñoz et al., 2014). For example, Muñoz et al. (2014) explored how Freedom University, a nonaccredited university for undocumented students in the state of Georgia, functions as a counter-space for undocumented youth. Undocumented youth and university professors founded Freedom University in 2011 as a response to policies that ban undocumented youth from attending the top universities in the state and require undocumented students to pay the more expensive out-of-state tuition (Peña, 2012; Soltis, 2015). Muñoz et al. (2014) found Freedom University serves as a critical counter-space for undocumented youth where they can feel safe to learn about the “historical and political underpinnings of their immigration statuses” (p. 19).

In addition to Muñoz’s (2014) theorization of Freedom University as a counter-space, Arango et al. (2016) describe how they created a counter-space of “Latina/o immigrants, parents, advocates, and ethnographers” (p. 228) with varying immigration statuses who presented about the impact of deportation at a conference. The goal of the presentation was to foster conversations between K–12 teachers and undocumented parents about immigrant experiences. They challenged several traditions at academic conferences, such as the academic norm that presentations should be in English and researchers should share their knowledge with an audience. Instead, they sought to create a counter-space where speaking Spanish was normalized, and audience members were engaged in critical conversations with researchers and parents.

Reflecting on their experiences presenting at a conference and writing a journal article about their experiences, Arango et al. (2016) said:

We argue that these carefully crafted counterspaces helped us push beyond our traditional norms and breach silences. They fostered opportunities to open up ways in which we could reposition the safety of engaging in conversations regarding undocumented status with our children, communities, educators, and each other. (p. 228)

Scholars have explored how counter-spaces have been important sites for undocumented students and their families to find a sense of safety in academic contexts. Counter-spaces will be a useful theory in better understanding Western College's undocumented students' goals and strategies for building a supportive sense of community for undocumented students at Western College.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODS

To better understand the phenomenon of undocumented student organizing at community colleges, I conducted a case study of one community college in California, Western College. The name Western College is a pseudonym to protect the privacy and anonymity of the students I spoke to for this project. I chose to focus on Western College because they have several forms of institutional support that are generally considered to be model programs in the field. Data collection comprised 26 interviews with 11 undocumented student alumni, five students currently attending Western College in 2021 (one undocumented student and four student allies), and eight staff and faculty. I conducted two follow up interviews with one of the undocumented student alumni who became a staff member as well as a follow up interview with one of the staff members. This is why I conducted 26 interviews with a total of 23 participants. I also analyzed over 50 documents such as webpages and institutional statements.

In this chapter, I discuss how I connected with the undocumented student community at Western College and recruited participants for the study. I then explain the data collection methods that comprised interviews and document analysis. I thereby discuss my role as a participant-researcher and how I volunteered extensively with this college as I simultaneously conducted the research project. Finally, I explain how I analyzed data from the interviews and documents, and any potential limitations of the design of my methods.

This dissertation study seeks to ground itself in the interests of the undocumented community and immigrant rights activists. Prior to writing my dissertation proposal, I consulted with advocates for the undocumented student movement, including undocumented students who had attended a community college themselves, about the relevancy and usefulness of the research questions and methods. They agreed that a focus on undocumented student activism at a



community college would have practical implications for the development of equitable programs for undocumented students at community colleges.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The goal of this dissertation study is to better understand the phenomenon of undocumented student organizing at community colleges for increased institutional support for undocumented students. The research questions that guide this study are:

1. How did undocumented students at Western College organize for equitable programs from 2006 to 2021?
2. How did undocumented students navigate working with staff, faculty, and administrators in building programs for undocumented students at Western College?
3. How do undocumented student alumni make sense of their experiences organizing for institutional support for undocumented students at Western College?

### **Research Design**

This study analyzes the phenomenon of undocumented student organizing at community colleges by focusing on an in-depth case study of one community college in California, Western College. A case study allows for a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon (Yin, 2009). Even though a case study can be focused on one school or college setting, this type of study is meant to have implications for other similar sites (Creswell, 2013; Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2009). An in-depth understanding of undocumented students' organizing at one community college in California is meant to have applications for other higher education institutions across the country.

Although some case studies are about the entire case study site, case studies can also focus on the community level or collective level within a site (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). The

concept of embedded case studies is another way of understanding a focus on a particular group within a case study site. As Scholz and Tietje (2002) explain:

In an embedded case study, the starting and ending points are the comprehension of the case as a whole in its real-world context. However, in the course of analysis, the case will be faceted either by different perspectives of inquiry or by several subunits.” (p. 2)

This dissertation study is “embedded” (Scholz & Tietje, 2002, p. 2) by focusing on the “collective level” (Yin, 2009, p. 12) of undocumented students who organized for institutional support at their community colleges, as well as the other students, faculty, and staff who closely supported these students with their efforts. Through sharing narratives of individual students, staff, and faculty at Western College, the goal is to better understand the collective and community level of how undocumented students, staff, and faculty advocated for the development of institutional support at Western College.

### **State Context of Undocumented Students in Higher Education in California**

State context matters for equity in higher education for undocumented students. State policies can either broaden or restrict access to college and affordable tuition (Enriquez et al., 2019; Flores, 2010). Some states, such as Georgia, ban undocumented students from enrolling in public universities in the state altogether (Muñoz & Espino, 2017; Peña, 2012; Soltis, 2015), whereas other states, like Oregon and Washington, have more accessible policies that allow undocumented students to pay the more affordable in-state tuition rates and access financial aid (Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2022).

The state of California, where Western College is located, has developed some of the most equitable higher education policies for undocumented students in the country compared to other states (Enriquez et al., 2019). Enacted in 2001, California assembly bill AB540 allowed undocumented students who attended 3 years of K–12 schooling in California to pay the more

affordable in-state tuition rates instead of out-of-state tuition at public colleges and universities in the state (Abrego, 2008). Out-of-state tuition can be up to three times more expensive than in-state tuition rates (Galvez, 2021). Then in 2011, the California Dream Act (AB130 and AB131) allowed undocumented students to access state financial aid (Pérez Huber, 2015) and grant programs such as the Cal Grant (Galvez, 2021). Though the original inception of AB540 required that undocumented students attend high school for 3 years in the state of California, a few state bills since 2011, such as California Senate Bill 68, have further opened access to in-state tuition and financial aid to include a combination of K–12, adult school, and community college (Galvez, 2021).

These policies aided in expanding access to affordable tuition at community colleges and 4-year universities in California, but the process of applying for financial aid can still be confusing for undocumented students (Galvez, 2021; Teranishi et al., 2019), especially given staff on college campuses often give undocumented students misinformation about these policies (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017a). The combination of confusing policies and misinformation from college staff showcases the need for further institutional support for undocumented students, even in a state with more equitable policies like California (Galvez, 2021).

### **Research Setting: Case Site of Western College**

For this case study, I wanted to collaborate with a college that had robust programs for undocumented students that are best practices in the field. Several researchers, immigrant activists, and immigrant rights organizations such as United We Dream, Immigrants Rising, and My Undocumented Life, suggest best practices for undocumented students in higher education. These practices include an Undocumented Student Resource Center, a physical space on campus that provides resources and information to undocumented students (Cisneros & Reyna Rivarola,

2020; Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021). Best practices also include having a staff member on college campuses who work specifically with undocumented students (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). As a result of these suggested practices in the field, I sought to work with a community college that had both an Undocumented Student Resource Center as well as a staff member who works with undocumented students.

Prior to the start of the pandemic in March 2020, in Fall 2019, I visited a few community colleges in California that had both a resource center and a staff member to see if we could have a mutually beneficial connection working together for this project. Some of the staff at these community colleges I spoke with did not seem to value the role of undocumented student activism at their college as much as I had hoped, so I was hesitant to work with them. Furthermore, some of the staff at these colleges did not seem to see the potential benefits of working with a researcher, so I was seeking a college where we would be mutually excited about working together.

The beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic in March 2020 completely changed my approach to connecting with potential colleges. I had been visiting sites in person, but I had to regroup and begin a different strategy of connecting with colleges online at the onset of the pandemic. I was still too overwhelmed at the beginning of the pandemic at the time in March 2020, that I had not yet conceived a new plan for how to connect with a college for this project.

Thankfully, I feel lucky that my connection with Western College emerged organically and seamlessly. I had worked with Western College on a couple of projects in the past, so I had already met the staff member who works with undocumented students briefly before in person. When I first met this staff person, Carolina (pseudonym), several years prior to beginning this dissertation project, I was impressed by Carolina's description of her role working with her

students. She told me that she supported her students in running the Undocumented Student Resource Center on campus themselves and that she played a background role supporting students. She said the students did everything and she did not do much. I teased her saying, “Oh, I’m sure you actually do a lot,” to which she smiled.

I loved the way that Carolina talked about her students’ agency and her role as a staff member in working with her students. Several of the administrators and staff I had talked to at other community colleges during my search for a good case study site spoke about their students in very different ways. They spoke with much more higher education jargon about budgets and policies, and rarely spoke about the agency of their students. Some of these colleges had an undocumented student organization, but they also did not seem to collaborate with their student leaders. So, Carolina’s perspective had felt fresh and new to me.

A couple of weeks after the pandemic started, I was mindlessly scrolling through Facebook when I noticed that a student from the Undocumented Student Resource Center at Western College was hosting a live workshop on writing poetry. I was supposed to be ready to go to the grocery store with my fiancé, Jess, and we were putting on several layers of armor to navigate the grocery store (e.g., masks), but Jess spontaneously had an important phone call, so I clicked into the Facebook Live event to check it out. It felt like a serendipitous moment because that delay to be able to tune into the live event allowed the beginning of my journey working with Western College for my dissertation.

A student at Western College, Reuben (pseudonym), led the poetry writing event. It was a beautiful event that was a much-needed healing experience when we were all in shock at the beginning of the pandemic. Reuben had a warm and disarming personality. He guided us in writing stream of conscious poetry without thinking too much and without criticizing ourselves.

It was a small event with a few attendees, so it was an intimate gathering. I ended up writing a poem about my love of the ocean, but how it was disappointing and shocking how the police kept us away from the ocean at the beginning of the pandemic.

After the workshop, I added Reuben on Facebook and sent him a message telling him how much I loved his event. Because Reuben invited such a space of vulnerability, I also sent him my poem about the ocean. To be clear, I rarely write poems and had not written a poem since I was a high school student, so writing a poem was out of the ordinary for me. He seemed pleased I shared the poem with him. This began a conversation about the programs for undocumented students at Western College and he invited me to join their weekly student meetings. At the time, my primary intention was just to learn more about the programs at Western College, but I wondered if they might also be interested in being a site for my dissertation.

When I joined the first student meeting, I was pleased to see that Carolina, the staff person at Western who works with undocumented students, recognized me from when we had met a few years prior, so we had a good time briefly catching up. After that first meeting, I continually joined their meetings once a week to volunteer to help prepare for their annual conference that they had recently decided to continue online because of the COVID-19 global pandemic. I was excited to be able to contribute in small ways, like making suggestions for keynote speakers and workshop presenters. I also helped spread the word through My Undocumented Life where I am the Director of Strategy and Outreach. The post was shared over 50 times on Facebook, so many people across the country must have seen the post.

I was deeply impressed by so many things about the students' weekly group meetings. I especially loved the nature of their check ins. They asked specific check in questions, like what

are you most proud of this week? There were about six people in these meetings including myself. I practiced letting my guard down and genuinely sharing how I was doing. Similarly, at the end of our meetings, we also had a check in to close out. Check out questions included, what song is bringing you joy these days? What have you been doing for fun? One time Reuben suggested the question: what do we hope to see differently in our world? I learned team building strategies from these meetings and incorporated these check-ins into the classrooms I was leading during the pandemic.

After a few weeks working together to prepare for the annual conference, I mustered up the courage to tell Reuben about my dissertation and see if they would be interested in being a case study site for my project. Reuben was excited about the possibility and suggested that I ask all the students in our next meeting. At the next meeting, I asked if they would be interested in my dissertation. Although the concept of a dissertation was new for many of these students, they were excited to participate. Carolina, the staff member, was also very excited about my interest in focusing on this history of undocumented student activism at the college.

Upon hearing that they were indeed interested in being the case study site for my dissertation, I applied for Institutional Review Board (IRB) with UCLA's IRB office, and I contacted the institutional research office at Western College to learn about their IRB process. The director of the institutional research office at Western College requested that I send them a summary of my methods and a copy of my dissertation proposal that their college could review. They approved my request to conduct research with their college. Their main requirement was that I work with the Undocumented Student Resource Center to recruit participants because they did not want me recruiting students more indirectly through a flyer. I also signed a form agreeing

to several points such as a not sharing identifiable information about students in my writing. During the summer of 2020, I received IRB approval from both UCLA and Western College.

### **Procedures, Data Collection, and Participants**

Data for this dissertation study comprised 26 interviews with undocumented student alumni, current undocumented students, and student allies (currently at Western College in 2021), and staff and faculty. In addition to interviews, I also analyzed over 50 documents including webpages and institutional statements. In this section, I discuss how I recruited participants for the interviews, information about participants for the study, and procedures for the document analysis.

#### ***Participant Recruitment***

When I was developing my research design during the beginning stages of this study, I did not have a specific number of participants in mind because I was not sure how many participants I would need in my study to develop a good understanding of student organizing at Western College. I therefore took a less structured approach (Maxwell, 2013), meaning I had a general number of participants in mind, but I did not have specific goals for a number of participants I hoped to meet. According to Maxwell (2013), “less structured approaches allow you to focus on the particular phenomena being studied, which may differ between individuals or settings and require individually tailored methods” (p. 88). Though I hoped to talk to at about 10 undocumented student alumni, 10 staff and faculty members, and five current students of any immigration status, I kept my goals open ended because I was more interested in studying the phenomenon of undocumented student organizing at Western College than I was on specific individuals at Western College.



I used both purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013) and snowball sampling (Naderifar et al., 2017) to recruit participants for this study. For a purposeful sampling approach, “settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97).” Snowball sampling is a “method [that] is applied when it is difficult to access subjects with the target characteristics. In this method, the existing study subjects recruit future subjects among their acquaintances” (Naderifar et al., 2017). Purposeful and snowball sampling allowed me to connect with undocumented students, staff, and faculty who had been leaders in building institutional support for undocumented students at Western College.

Because I began recruiting participants during the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic in the summer of 2020, my recruitment strategies were through online mediums such as Zoom meetings, the phone, and email. When I first began conducting research with Western College, I was friendly with Carolina, the staff person who facilitates the Undocumented Student Resource Center on campus. I had also become quite close with the team of six students who ran the center in 2020. As such, both Carolina and the six students were helpful “gatekeepers” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 90) in helping me connect with other key players at Western College.

I began by inviting Carolina and the six students who ran the Resource Center in 2020 to engage in an interview. Although I conducted only one interview with most participants in this study, I conducted a total of three interviews with Carolina. The first interview was about her experiences at the college as an undocumented student alumnus herself. The two follow up interviews were about her experiences returning to the college to work as a staff member. Of the original crew of six students who I first got to know at Western College, four were interested in an interview. The other two were also interested, but they were so busy with challenges related to

the COVID-19 global pandemic that we did not have a chance to connect for this project, though we still stay in touch as friends.

I first asked the team of six student leaders if they were interested in my dissertation project. I then followed up with a group of staff members who work with undocumented students at Western College to tell them about my dissertation. During a meeting with about approximately 10 staff and faculty members who regularly work with undocumented students, I told them about my goals of showcasing undocumented student activism over the years at Western College and asked if there were any elements of the project they would like me to explore. Several staff and faculty encouraged me to not paint their story through rose-colored lenses, but to delve into more critical aspects of their work. During this meeting, about three staff members expressed particular interest in the project and that they wanted to be interviewed.

I first interviewed Marilyn, a faculty member who had been at the college for 25 years and had done extensive work with undocumented students to build the current state of the Undocumented Student Resource Center in 2021. During my interview with Marilyn, she highly suggested that I contact Alex, a faculty member who had organized with several undocumented students back in 2006. Marilyn said that not many people at Western College knew about the work Alex had done at that time so highlighting her story would be important. Marilyn introduced me to Alex through an email, and Alex followed up to the email saying she would love to do an interview.

During my interview with Alex, she told me stories about approximately 10 undocumented student alumni she had worked with around the years 2006 to 2010. She had stayed in touch with many of them and thought they would be interested in chatting for this project. She sent an email to her students and gave them my contact information so they could

get in touch with me if they were interested in being interviewed. As a result of Alex's connections, I spoke to five alumni who began their college journey at Western College in 2006 or 2007.

Carolina was also eager to connect me with undocumented student alumni over many different time frames from 2006 to 2021. She sent a mass email to all the undocumented student alumni she knew over the years and gave them my contact information. Several alumni wrote to me because of this email as well. In addition to finding connections through Alex and Carolina, at the end of every interview I asked each person if they knew any other undocumented student alumni or current undocumented students (in 2020 and 2021) who would be interested in chatting with me for this project, so I connected with a few participants that way as well.

Connecting with staff was a much easier experience than connecting with undocumented student alumni. Because I attended monthly meetings with staff, I had become friendly with several of the staff members. I contacted them directly to see if they were interested in participating in this project and almost all staff members I contacted were eager to do an interview together. During conversations with staff, I asked them if they would contact any student alumni or students they knew to see if they would be interested in participating in my project.

Because the goal of my study was to center undocumented students' perspective of their organizing at Western College, the goal of connecting with staff, faculty, and other students was to develop a broader understanding of the context of undocumented student organizing at Western. Though these interviews were very helpful in developing a deeper understanding of the culture at Western College, I ultimately focused on the interviews with undocumented student alumni in my analysis.

Because I was using a less structured approach (Maxwell, 2013) for my research design, as I was conducting interviews with students and staff, I also considered whether I should conduct interviews with administrators as well. I sent an email to a few administrators inviting them to participate in the study. I spoke to one administrator for this study, but the others were too busy to participate or told me they did not work directly with undocumented students. As Yin (2009) states:

Once the general definition of the case has been established, other clarifications in the unit of analysis become important. If the unit of analysis is a small group, for instance, the persons to be included within the group (the immediate topic of the case study) must be distinguished from those who are outside it (the context for the case study). (p. 32)

Because I was aiming to focus on the undocumented student alumni anyway, I therefore decided to stop seeking interviews with administrators and just focus on the staff and faculty who worked with undocumented students more directly.

All in all, I conducted interviews with 11 undocumented student alumni, one undocumented student who was attending Western College in 2021, four student allies, and eight staff and faculty for a total of 23 participants. Carolina fit into the category of an undocumented student alumni and a staff member.

### ***Rationale for Timeline of 2006 to 2021***

When I began recruiting participants for this study, I was not sure what year the contemporary undocumented student movement at Western College began. Although it seemed plausible that the movement began in the early 2000s around the same time as the nationwide undocumented student movement began (Nicholls, 2013), I strove as a researcher to be open to the fact that the movement could have begun much sooner or later than the early 2000s.

In my conversations with alumni who began their education at Western in 2006, I asked if they were aware of any undocumented student alumni who organized for programs before

2006. I also asked Alex, the faculty member who worked with undocumented students in 2006, if she knew of any student alumni before 2006 as well. Both Alex and the students did not know of any undocumented student organizing prior to 2006 so this was the earliest year I could trace back the contemporary undocumented student movement at Western. Therefore, my timeline for tracing the undocumented student movement at Western College is from 2006, the earliest year I heard about or could connect with undocumented student alumni, to 2021, the year I conducted interviews for this study. A limitation of this study, which I will discuss more in the limitations section, is any history of immigrant or undocumented student organizing at Western College prior to 2006.

### *Interviews*

I conducted all 26 interviews between November 2020 and March 2021. Most interviews lasted 60 minutes in length. The shortest interview with an administrator lasted 30 minutes and the longest interview with one of the undocumented student alumni was 90 minutes long. Prior to beginning the interview, I sent participants a consent form with more information about the study. At the beginning of each interview, I shared the goals of the research project and told them a little bit about myself and my work with undocumented students. I also asked if they consented to having the interview recorded. All participants agreed to have our conversations recorded. Interviews were recorded over the secure phone platform Ring Central.

I had three distinct interview protocols for the three categories of: (a) undocumented student alumni, (b) current students, and (c) staff and faculty who work with undocumented students at Western College. Interviews were semistructured (Drever, 1995), meaning I had a list of 10 - 14 questions for each participant, but I did not strictly follow this list of questions in order

and asked many follow up questions for each question so the interview felt more like a conversation.

Interview questions for undocumented students included: Tell me about your experience as a student at Western College. What was your experience like working with staff, faculty, and administrators? What was your experience like transferring? Questions for current students included: How do you think about building a sense of community for undocumented students at your college? Why do you think working with undocumented students is important? And finally, interview questions with staff and faculty included: What is your role at the college? What kind of work do you do with undocumented students? What has your experience been like, if at all, working with students, staff, faculty, and administrators in developing programs/change/initiatives at your college? The full interview protocols are at the end of this dissertation in the appendices section.

### ***Ensuring Anonymity and Privacy***

Upon completing interviews, I took several measures to ensure anonymity and privacy of the participants so their identity is not recognizable to readers of this dissertation who are outside the Western College community. I used pseudonyms for all participants and never refer to their real names. For issues of participants being recognizable within Western College, in most cases, I kept details about the participants vague to protect their anonymity. For example, some of the international students could be identified based on what country they came from so instead of referring to specific countries, I instead describe students as being from a large, general area such as “a country in South America” or “a country in East Asia.”

Because I discuss how one of the undocumented student alumni, Carolina (pseudonym), returned to Western College to work as a staff member, I consulted with Carolina to see if she

was comfortable being identified within the Western College community, but not to an audience unfamiliar with the community members at Western College. Given researchers have found several undocumented students return to their college to work as staff (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020), this fact about Carolina should not reveal her personal identity or which college is the site for this dissertation.

### *Participants*

Though I originally thought about participants in terms of the three categories: (a) undocumented student alumni, (b) current students, and (c) staff and faculty, I decided it made more sense to think of participants within these three groups: (a) undocumented students (alumni and current students), (b) student allies, and (c) staff and faculty. I made the decision to change the grouping because of experiences undocumented students shared working with student allies.

This dissertation study had 23 participants. I conducted interviews with a total of 12 undocumented students including 11 undocumented student alumni and one current undocumented student who was attending the college in 2021 at the time of interviews. Alumni attended Western College during various years from 2006 to 2021. I asked alumni and students the following four demographic questions about their identity:

- How do you identify your race and/or ethnicity?
- How do you identify your gender?
- What year were you born?
- What country were you born in?

In terms of student allies, I spoke to four students who worked extensively with undocumented students but did not identify as undocumented themselves. Three of them identified as international students. The fourth student did not disclose his immigration status.

During interviews, I asked students and staff to tell me about their background and why they were interested in advocating for and working with undocumented students. I did not ask specifically about students' immigration status to give students the option to keep this information private. All students except for one shared their immigration status.

In addition to interviewing students, I also interviewed eight staff and faculty members. They worked in numerous offices across campus and worked in various roles. For example, some were counselors, classroom teaching faculty, and directors of centers. Some worked in IT, the student equity offices, or supported students in student government. Though the sum of 12 undocumented students, four student allies, and eight staff and faculty members is 24 participants, Carolina was both a student alumni and staff member, so although she appears in both tables, there were 23 participants

### ***Document Analysis***

In addition to 26 interviews, I analyzed 53 documents related to programs and policies for undocumented students at Western College. Analysis of these documents provided further context and insight into the environment in which undocumented students at Western were organizing. I drew on Merriam's (2009) description of types of documents that can be part of document analysis to search for key documents such as webpages, YouTube videos, and flyers.

I searched for documents using Google searches by typing key words such as "Western College" and "undocumented students." This search found a few newspaper articles and webpages on Western College's website. I also navigated Western College's webpages to find as many webpages related to undocumented students as possible. Moreover, I learned about numerous webpages and flyers while volunteering for Western College. Finally, during



interviews with undocumented student alumni, I also learned about a few YouTube videos that undocumented students at Western had created.

My search resulted in a total of 53 documents related to undocumented students at Western College. These documents include 28 webpages, four flyers of events, one online guide for working with undocumented students, 11 YouTube videos, four blog posts, and five newspaper articles. The 28 webpages were all a part of Western College's main website and included such subtopics as campus wide resolutions in support of undocumented students, bios of interns of the Undocumented Student Resource Center, postings encouraging students to apply for internship positions, and event pages hosted by the Resource Center. The four flyers were for Western College's annual conference organized by undocumented students. The 11 YouTube videos mainly featured stories of undocumented students who organized at Western College. Three of the YouTube videos were recordings of the annual conferences shared publicly on YouTube. I also analyzed a YouTube video of the president of the college speaking about the importance of working with undocumented students.

Three blog posts encouraged community members to register for their annual conference and the fourth blog post was a feature about institutional support for undocumented students at the college. The newspaper articles were published in local newspapers on topics including Western College's response to Trump's threats to undocumented students, the students' annual conference, and increased institutional support for undocumented students at Western. Because all 53 documents I analyzed are publicly available on the internet, I do not directly refer to or quote any of the documents in my findings to protect the anonymity of Western College.

### *A Note on Participant Observation*

Although some case studies commonly comprise interviews, document analysis, and participant observation (Creswell, 2013), Yin (2009) describes how case studies do not necessarily need to incorporate participant observation. For this case study, I did not conduct participant observation for several reasons. Though I was hopeful to conduct participant observations of students and staff meetings at the beginning of data collection, I decided that the discomfort of observations for participants outweighed the benefits. At the time of conducting this study from November 2020 to March 2021, staff and students were struggling to build a comfortable environment for undocumented students at Western College online during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Although researchers conduct participant observation online (Merriam, 2009), the potential discomforts of conducting participant observation online outweighed the benefits.

Although I spoke to the staff person who supports the Undocumented Student Resource Center and a few students about the possibility of conducting participant observation and they were supportive of it, I ultimately decided that having a researcher in the Zoom rooms taking notes on students' interactions would add an extra and unnecessary layer of discomfort to an environment that was already uncomfortable for students. So instead of conducting participant observation for this study, I drew on my experiences and observations volunteering for Western College for hundreds of hours and attending at least 100 meetings run by students and staff to better inform my understanding of the culture and environment at Western College. I then drew on these observations to inform the follow up questions I asked participants during the interviews.

It is important to make clear that I have not included any information or data in the findings section of this study that I may have learned as a volunteer that was not also discussed during the interviews or was available in the documents I analyzed. Therefore, as I will discuss more subsequently in terms of my role as a participant-researcher, there is much I learned about the undocumented student community and my participants through my experiences volunteering for the college and building relationships with students and staff, that I have not shared in this dissertation to protect their privacy and anonymity.

### **Data Analysis of Interviews**

During interviews, I took detailed notes as the participants were speaking so I could be sure to ask relevant follow up questions. For example, if a participant briefly mentioned an experience or a thought that seemed important, but they continued to speak about a different topic, I jotted down a reminder to myself to be sure to ask a follow-up question about that experience. Upon completing each interview, I spent about 10 to 15 minutes writing “analytic memos” (Saldaña, 2016) or impressions about the interview that I thought were interesting. Saldaña (2016) describes the goals of analytic memo writing: “Analytic memo writing documents reflections on: your coding processes and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data—all possibly leading towards theory” (p. 44).

All interviews were transcribed using Otter.TI software. After using the transcription software, I listened to each interview recording to make any needed edits to the interview transcripts. I then used Atlas.TI software to code all 26 interviews. Coding of interviews were completed in two phases. During the first phase, I read through the interview transcripts to see if any codes emerged from the data using an “open coding” strategy (Saldaña, 2016). Open coding

allows for the researcher to notice any themes without prior interests or themes in mind. This first phase resulted in a total of 52 codes. These codes included such topics as “advice for other students,” “career aspirations,” “culture of Western College overall,” “development of programs,” “sense of empowerment,” “experience with staff and faculty,” “experience with administration,” “institutionalization,” “internships,” “international students,” and “mental health.”

Once these 52 initial themes were identified, I conducted a second phase of coding to label sections of the interview with these codes. I coded anywhere from a few words to entire paragraphs for these codes (Saldaña, 2016). I spent approximately 2 hours coding each interview. Upon finishing coding all 26 interview transcripts, I began to write potential outlines to see which salient themes emerged from the analysis.

### **Data Analysis of Documents**

To analyze the documents, I began by grouping the documents into two categories whether they were text based or video based. I categorized all the webpages, flyers, guides, and newspaper articles as text based, whereas I categorized the YouTube videos as video based. To analyze the text-based documents, I used a form of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018; Merriam, 2009) to code the documents for key codes and themes. According to Krippendorff (2018), “Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context” (p. 403). Similar to how I coded the interview transcripts, I also coded the text-based documents in two phases. In this first phase, I read through the documents using an open coding strategy (Saldaña, 2016) to determine key codes. Because the content matter of the documents were like the interview transcripts, I used the same 52 codes from the interview transcripts to label the documents with codes.

For the YouTube videos, I used a combination of content analysis and observations (Krippendorff, 2018; Merriam, 2009) to record key codes and themes from the YouTube videos. For example, in addition to noting the content of the words spoken in the videos, I also noted the content of the B-roll in the videos, the imagery that was not participants talking in the video. I also noted impressions of a mood that the video seemed to encapsulate, such as “positive” or “empowering.”

### **Reciprocity**

For this study, I aimed to fully engage in creative efforts to offer the student participants of the study more than traditional expectations of research through monetary compensation and mentorship. I offered \$25 to the undocumented student alumni and current students for each 1-hour interview. I drew on personal savings to compensate students and alumni, so I did not offer compensation to the staff due to budgetary limits of my study. Many of the students refused to accept the money and insisted I donate the \$25 to the undocumented student program at Western College instead.

In addition to offering monetary compensation, for the more recent alumni and current students, I also strove to build a relationship with the student where I offered to be a supportive mentor along their educational journey. I continually check in with each student to see how they are doing. I hope to stay in touch with everyone long term to both provide guidance and support along their educational journey, and to continue to collaborate and learn from their activism.

### **My Role as a Participant-Researcher**

In addition to offering monetary compensation and mentorship to the current and more recent students, I also strove to be in community with Western College as much as possible during the duration of my dissertation study. From March 2020 to the present day in March 2022

(total of 2 years), I spent hundreds of hours volunteering to support undocumented student program development at Western College. I supported four large projects: the annual conference hosted by undocumented students, the orientation at the beginning of the school year for undocumented students, the monthly meetings organized by staff, and the UndocuAlly trainings (pseudonym to protect identity of Western College).

For the annual conferences, I volunteered to help with both conferences online in June 2020 and June 2021. I suggested guest speakers and keynote speakers. I also monitored the chat during the Zoom sessions and helped facilitate the question-and-answer portions at the end of the workshops. I also cohosted a workshop with one of the current students on how to build community with each other at Western College. I supported the student in developing the vision for the workshop, creating the slides, and facilitating the discussions.

For the orientation for new undocumented students in September 2020, I also suggested guest speakers and supported the Workshops Committee in organizing workshops for the orientation. These workshops included a panel of undocumented student alumni who spoke about their experiences at Western College. For the orientation the following year in September 2021, the staff and students at Western College wanted me to lead the workshops committee. I worked with two other staff members at the college to brainstorm two workshops to host during the conference. The first workshop was led by an undocumented community organizer who specializes in mental health for undocumented students. We also organized a second workshop like the previous year where we invited five undocumented student alumni to participate on a panel about their experiences at Western College. Because I had become closely connected with many of the alumni through this project, I invited alumni who I had already connected with who were excited to be part of the panel.

In addition to supporting both the annual conferences and the orientation for new undocumented students, I also routinely attended monthly meetings where staff who work with undocumented students strategize about how to build community and institutional support for undocumented students. Some of these meetings also included meeting with the new president of Western College where they advocated for additional funding for undocumented student programs. In addition to these monthly meetings, staff at Western College also invited me to take the training to become a facilitator of the UndocuAlly trainings (pseudonym). I attended four training sessions and met with one of the trainers to discuss any feedback I had for the workshops. While I volunteered for all these events, the staff and students sent me a gift card several times to show their appreciation for my time and effort being part of their community.

Although my involvement as a participant-researcher with Western College has slowed down as I have been focused on writing my dissertation and graduating from my PhD program, I still aim to be in community with Western College in the future. I certainly aim to stay in touch with the undocumented students and student alumni I had built connections with. I consider Carolina to be a good friend. I also have plans to meet with several of the undocumented student alumni to finally meet them in person after having only connected over Zoom or the phone. Several of them chat with me over text or Facebook messenger about the possibility of meeting in person to get to know each other better as friends. I also very much intend to continue to check in with the more recent alumni and current students to show support for their educational journeys in any way I can and continue to get to know them better. For example, an undocumented student I have worked with for many years recently moved to the local neighborhood near Western College from the state of Texas. She was seeking new friends, so I put her in touch with two of the recent alumni from Western College who enjoyed meeting up

with her. Moreover, though I may not continue to volunteer so extensively for events at Western College such as leading the workshops committee for the orientation for new undocumented students, I will still plan to attend their annual conference and continue to support their other events. I look forward to when the COVID-19 global pandemic ends, so I can finally see their campus in person again and meet everyone in person.

### **Member Checks**

Toward the end of writing my dissertation, I consulted with the participants in my study to see if they thought that anything should be changed or whether anything was missing. This process is usually referred to in as member checks, which is defined as the process of:

systematically soliciting feedback about your data and conclusions from the people you are studying. This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your biases and misunderstandings of what you observed. (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126–127)

Upon finishing a solid draft of my entire dissertation, I wrote to all 12 undocumented student alumni and current students to ask them if they would like to review my dissertation. Because it is so long, if they wanted to give feedback, I suggested they could read some parts of the findings chapters, I could send them a one-page summary, or we could chat about it over the phone or Zoom. I told them I did not need them to review it from my end, just that I wanted to be able to give them the opportunity to read it over so we could discuss anything they thought should be changed. To not compromise the integrity of what I said about other participants, I did give them the caveat that if they wanted me to change something that compromised what other participants had said, then I would have to think about it and could not guarantee that I could incorporate their feedback. A few alumni responded that they trusted my judgment and did not need to read the dissertation until I completed it in its entirety. Several participants were very



excited to read over my dissertation and offer feedback. Anadaisy, one the undocumented student alumni, offered that she could read over the whole thing and she gave me line by line feedback which I greatly appreciated.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited in several ways. First, the state context of a community college located in California is unique in terms of the higher level of institutional support for undocumented students at numerous colleges and universities across the state compared to other states (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020), the rich history of undocumented student organizing in the state of California (Nicholls, 2013), and the progressive state level policies including access to in-state tuition and financial aid (Galvez, 2021; Pérez Huber, 2015). Even though the state context of California is different from other states, findings from this dissertation about undocumented student organizing at the college level and undocumented students' relationships with staff and faculty could be applied to community colleges and 4-year universities in other states.

Second, because this study is an embedded case study (Scholz & Tietje, 2002), I focused on the version of the story of the undocumented student movement at Western told from the perspective of undocumented students who attended Western during various years from 2006 to 2021. Staff, faculty, and administrators' understanding of the story may have been different, but I told this story with a focus on the students' perspective. A third limitation was my own positionality as a white, citizen researcher. Although it seemed that many of the undocumented student alumni were vulnerable with me because many of them shared their frustrations with racism and xenophobia through tears, it is possible that some alumni felt more guarded speaking to me because I represent whiteness and citizenship privilege, populations who have been

oppressive toward undocumented Communities of Color. I did not receive any negative feedback from any of the participants about our interviews, but it is possible some of the alumni were more withholding with me than they would have with a researcher who also identified as a Person of Color and/or undocumented.

A fourth limitation was conducting this study during the COVID-19 global pandemic. If we were able to meet more freely in person without concern about the virus, I would have attended more events in person and been able to get to know more people. I also would have gotten to know the local neighborhood and community better and would have gained a more in-depth understanding of the context of the local area. However, because of the pandemic, all my relationships with students, alumni, staff, and faculty at Western College were developed online. I have yet to meet many of them in person. The only person I have met in person is Carolina because of my work with her prior to the pandemic.

A fifth limitation of this dissertation study is the bounded timeline from 2006 to 2021. Since Western College was established in the 1960s (keeping the year vague to protect anonymity of the college), it is possible immigrant and undocumented student organizing occurred at Western College from the 1960s to 2006. For example, I assume there is an ethnic studies program at the college because of fierce student organizing, as is the case at many other colleges and universities across the country (Rhoads, 2016). Though there was likely immigrant student organizing at Western College prior to 2006, I decided that this timeline was out of the scope of this study.

This chapter discussed the methods for this dissertation of a case study of Western College. In the next three chapters, I discuss the findings of this study.

## **CHAPTER 5: UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS' STRATEGY TO BUILD AN INSTITUTIONALIZED COUNTER-SPACE**

Throughout U.S. history, higher education institutions have adopted white supremacist goals by keeping People of Color and immigrants out of college (Harper et al., 2009). In 2022, some universities still ban undocumented students from enrolling in college, such as the top three public universities in the state of Georgia (Soltis, 2015). Even though federal and state laws have broadened access to college for marginalized student populations in the 20th and 21st century, scholars still find college campuses have racist and exclusionary campus climates (Yosso et al., 2009). The sociopolitical climate of the time can also deeply affect school and campus environments (Santa-Ramirez, 2020). For example, scholars find that Trump's racist and xenophobic anti-immigrant sentiment led to increased bullying toward immigrant and undocumented students in schools (Valdivia et al., 2021).

College students have powerfully advocated for the development of institutional support for marginalized students on college campuses (Jones & Reddick, 2017; Rhoads, 2016; Sanchez & So, 2015). Specific to undocumented students, the contemporary undocumented student movement has increased institutional support on college campuses (Nicholls, 2013; Chen & Rhoads, 2016; Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). For example, undocumented students have pushed for the establishment of Undocumented Student Resource Centers on college campuses across the country, spaces for undocumented students to find a sense of safety and support in an otherwise racially hostile campus environment (Cisneros & Reyna Riverola, 2020; Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020).

Like many colleges and universities across the country, at Western College, undocumented students fought for the development of institutional support for undocumented

students. The students had priorities in terms of what they were trying to build at Western and had numerous strategies to fight for these goals. This findings chapter addresses my first research question: *How did undocumented students at Western College organize for equitable programs from 2006 to 2021?*

In the early 2000s, Western College had an unwelcoming and hostile culture for undocumented students. To address this hostility, undocumented students, with support from key staff and faculty, built a space where they could feel safe sharing their immigration status and access resources. As students looked to expand the space they built, they encountered another conflict. Because students only attended Western College for a few years and then transferred to 4-year universities, they struggled to maintain a sense of momentum and sustainability that survived the changing student generations. To make their programs more sustainable, they fought for their programs to be institutionalized so they could have more funding, physical space on campus to meet, and staff members who could support their work.

To maintain control of their programs and not let them get swallowed by the institution through the process of institutionalization, students insisted that their programs continue to be student-led. Students developed strategies to sustain a sense of momentum over time from 2006 to 2021 and were successful in building robust support programs. Some of their priorities for building and expanding their programs included establishing a physical space for an Undocumented Student Resource Center on campus, conducting outreach to local communities such as undocumented high school students, and organizing an annual conference on support for undocumented students.

## **Unwelcoming Climate for Undocumented Students at Beginning of Campus Movement**

At the beginning of the contemporary undocumented student movement at Western College in the early 2000s, undocumented students and staff described how the state of California and Western College had an unwelcoming educational and campus climate for undocumented students. Ixchel, a Latina undocumented student who had graduated from high school in 1995, did not start her college education at Western until 2007 when she was 30 years old because undocumented students had to pay out-of-state tuition in the 1990s when she graduated from high school. The statewide bill, AB540, that allows undocumented students to pay in-state tuition instead of the more expensive out-of-state tuition, had only just passed in 2001 a few years before undocumented students started organizing for institutional support at Western College. Ixchel was also nervous to go to college because Proposition 187 in California had just passed in the 1990s. Proposition 187, passed in 1994 but then found unconstitutional a few days later, was a draconian anti-immigrant state bill that attempted to exclude undocumented students from K–12 schools and higher education (Suárez-Orozco, 1996). Ixchel describes the xenophobic climate in the 1990s for undocumented students at colleges and universities:

I graduated high school in 1995. At the time, I couldn't go to school because proposition 187 had just passed. When I graduated high school, teachers and professors were required to record students that they thought were undocumented. Since the law had just passed, it was very controversial. Some teachers and professors were doing what the law says while others refused to report their students. But some universities wouldn't even accept you, if they knew you were undocumented, because you must show proof of residency, or you have to show that you were a U.S. citizen.

Not being able to attend college directly after high school had a devastating impact on Ixchel's mental health. Even though she had received good grades in high school, she got many rejection letters from colleges. Ixchel remembered,

It was during my senior year in high school that I was applying for colleges and I kept getting rejection letter after rejection letter after rejection letter. To receive rejection after

rejection, it was like, a stab to the heart over and over again. So that sent me into a very severe depression. In my early 20s, I was clinically depressed. And it's still hard for me, just remembering that.

When Ixchel began her college journey at Western College in 2007 14 years after graduating from high school, she was very nervous to be an undocumented student in college, especially when Western College did not have a visible and openly welcoming community for undocumented students at the time. Ixchel began by taking online courses at Western College because she was scared the college would find out she was undocumented if she went on campus. Ixchel described, "I was very apprehensive about going on campus so I signed up for some classes online figuring I'll test the waters this way." When Ixchel finally did go to campus, she described getting so nervous that she had PTSD-like symptoms:

If you've been out of school for that period of time, the transition going back to school is very challenging. I remember having severe PTSD. I would break into a sweat being in a classroom and I would get lost. It was terrible, all those flashbacks of what I had gone through emotionally. So the decision for me to go back to school was hard.

The California statewide bill AB540, which passed in 2001, opened access to college for undocumented students by allowing undocumented students to pay the more affordable in-state tuition. Whereas Ixchel began her college journey at Western in her 30s, several undocumented student organizers at Western College in the early 2000s were able to start college in their late teens.

Several undocumented students at this time in the early 2000s described Western College as having an unwelcoming campus environment for undocumented. Jesus, an undocumented student who began his journey at Western College as an 18-year-old in 2006 and identifies as gender nonbinary, Chicano, Brown, and indigenous, summarized the lack of resources for undocumented students when he first arrived on campus, "When I arrived at Western College, there wasn't a whole lot there that was specifically geared towards undocumented students."

Jesus described how Western College was an unwelcoming place for undocumented students. “I just remember Western College being this cold, just imposing place. I didn’t know where to go and study, I didn’t know where to go do my homework.” Jesus describes an atmosphere in which there were few resources and community for undocumented students in 2006.

Not only was there little community, but some staff and faculty were hostile toward undocumented students. Alejandra, an undocumented student who started her education at Western in 2006 as a 21-year-old and identifies as a multiracial Latina who was born in Brazil, described, “I’ve been in classrooms [at Western College] before where professors openly talked about immigrants and undocumented people as illegal. When you find staff or professors say things like this, you feel unwelcome and that you can’t talk to them.” Alejandra said that “hearing the word illegal is very dehumanizing and painful.” Scholars find how people use the word “illegal” to intentionally try to dehumanize immigrant communities (Delia Deckard et al., 2020), and immigrant activists have fought back arguing that no human being is illegal.

Alex, a faculty member who identifies as half Latina and half white who worked extensively with undocumented students at the time, described instances of staff and faculty being hostile toward undocumented students:

One of our students, Francisco, who was a wonderful, wonderful writer, a real poet, had gone to the tutoring center to get some help. He had written a personal essay about being undocumented, and the tutor that he met with, and to this day, I don’t know who that tutor was, all I know is that it was an older person, it wasn’t a young student, told him that he was a criminal and what he was doing was unAmerican, and that he should not even be in the country. So Francisco came to me crying.

A tutor at Western College said racist and discriminatory comments to Francisco in 2006 about being an undocumented student. This tutor’s harmful words are emblematic of common tropes in public media and rhetoric that unfairly vilify immigrant communities as “criminals.” Though this rhetoric was common in the early 2000s (Chavez, 2013), anti-immigrant rhetoric continues to be

rampant today. For example, Trump continually attacked immigrant communities by calling them “criminals” and “aliens” (Abrego et al., 2017). Alex described several situations like this in which staff and faculty at Western College in 2006 discouraged undocumented students from continuing their college education at Western College.

Western College had a few programs for Latinx students and other Students of Color in 2006 where one might think that undocumented students would feel welcome, but undocumented students described feeling ostracized from these spaces as well. For example, the Puente program, a program for Students of Color in higher education that operates at multiple high schools and community colleges (Gándara & Moreno, 2002), was supportive for some minoritized students at Western College, but was not helpful for undocumented students. Though undocumented students who attended Western College in more recent years around 2016 described the Puente program as being very supportive to them as undocumented students, undocumented students in earlier years in 2006 did not find the Puente program to be supportive.

Jesus described:

There was Puente who they did serve a Latino population, but I wasn't sure how you were able to join Puente. Puente *did* set you up with a lot of resources, like a counselor, classes, things like that, that were very beneficial. But nothing outside of that sphere. There wasn't stuff there for, like I said, for students like me, who just kind of showed up and were like, Oh, I'm here, like, What do I do? Because if you were a Puente student, you already came in with this knowledge of what you needed to do and what was going to happen, how you were going to be taken care of.

Jesus described how the Puente program was helpful for Latinx students, but he did not find Puente to be an accessible space for undocumented students. Alex described her frustrations with Puente at the time as well, “I was working in that program [Puente], which I left pretty quickly, because I found it to be very paternalistic, and patronizing its students, and I really didn't like that.” Though the Puente program seemed like a promising space to create a welcoming



environment for undocumented students at the time in 2006, both undocumented students and faculty who worked with students were frustrated with the Puente Program's lack of community for undocumented students at the time.

Puente's inclusivity for marginalized student populations, but exclusivity toward undocumented students at Western College in 2006, is reminiscent of other higher education programs geared toward improving equity in education, but ultimately exclude undocumented students. Programs like the Pell grants, federal financial aid for low-income students, and the Ronald E. McNair Scholars program, a research program for undergraduate students, have expanded access for minoritized student populations, but these programs exclude undocumented students (Morales Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021; Tapia-Fuselier, 2019).

The unwelcoming campus climate for undocumented students at Western College in the early 2000s echoes research findings about hostile campus climates for undocumented students at other colleges and universities (Abrego, 2008; Gonzales, 2015). In the early 2000s, there was little institutional support for undocumented students at colleges and universities across the country (Nicholls, 2013). Although institutional support in higher education for undocumented students has expanded since the early 2000s (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020), scholars find that in recent years, undocumented students still navigate obstacles at colleges and universities, even the ones that have institutional support (Freeman et al., 2021).

Though the campus climate at Western College in the early 2000s may seem like a phenomenon of the past to some who are used to institutions who have built a more equitable environment for undocumented students, there are still many higher education institutions across the country that have not built institutional support for undocumented students and other marginalized student populations. State and local context varies tremendously in terms of the

environments in which students, staff, and faculty try to build institutional support for undocumented students (Nienhuser, 2018). Though some may think the field of higher education has moved on from the climate demonstrated at Western College in the early 2000s, the field must keep in mind that some universities still ban undocumented students from enrolling in higher education in 2022, and we must build solidarity across state and local contexts to support each other in building institutional support for undocumented students.

### **Creating a Counter-Space for Undocumented Students at Western College**

In response to the unwelcoming environment for undocumented students at Western College, undocumented students prioritized building a counter-space on campus where undocumented students could access support, resources, and a sense of community. Scholars theorize that Students of Color can find counter-spaces to be safe and healing communities away from the racist and oppressive dominant culture on college campuses (Solórzano et al., 2000). I argue that undocumented students at Western College created a counter-space for each other on campus in the early 2000s, a space where undocumented students could feel safe with each other within the dominant culture of racial hostility on campus at the time. Over time from 2006 to 2021, undocumented students continually strategized to build and expand their counter-space that they had established in the early 2000s.

The concept of “space” included a sense of community for students, support, and a physical space on campus where undocumented students felt safe meeting. At the beginning of undocumented students’ organizing journey at Western College in 2006, Jesus described the need to build a counter-space specifically for undocumented students on campus:

That’s why we [undocumented students] were trying to organize. We’re trying to organize a space where undocumented immigrant students could come voice their concerns, a place that would be safe for them, where they would be able to get resources and guidance on how to navigate higher education.

Jesus was one of the first undocumented students at Western College to begin building a counter-space for undocumented students. He began by organizing events for undocumented students with support from Alex, a faculty member, and other students. Jesus and another undocumented student, Anadaisy, an undocumented student who started at Western College in 2007 as an 18-year-old and identifies as second-generation indigenous born in Mexico, organized a particularly impactful event in 2008 with hundreds of attendees. The students' goal for the event was to create a counter-space where conversations could be had on campus about the importance of supporting undocumented students. They also wanted to create opportunities for undocumented students to meet each other. Students were surprised to find that 200 people attended the event, many more attendees than they were expecting. Anadaisy described how many people came to the event:

There were over 200 people at that event. They just kept bringing chairs and people were standing outside or in the hallway. It was the biggest room, at the time, that we had booked and it was just packed. It was an unexpected amount of support for that type of event and attendance. That was not the typical amount of people that show up.

Anadaisy was surprised that so many people were interested in the event because usually people would not be interested in supporting this type of event. Because there was very little institutional support for undocumented students at the time across the country (Nicholls, 2013), Anadaisy was surprised that so many people cared.

At the event, Jesus and other students attempted to normalize the experience of being undocumented by speaking publicly about their experiences. It can be scary for undocumented students to speak publicly about their immigration status because of the fear of discrimination and the threat of deportation for themselves and their families (Valdivia et al., 2021; Aguilar, 2019). Many undocumented students at Western College at the time described feeling like they

had been the only undocumented student at Western because few students shared their status with others, but hearing Jesus speak on the panel made them realize they were not alone.

Alejandra described how important it was to see students speaking publicly about their immigration status:

When I went to Western College and attended that forum, and people are openly talking about it, like normalizing what it means to be undocumented and opening up space for conversations. And for me to see Jesus up there, like as a mother and undocumented student [myself], I think it set in motion that this is the safe place, even though he knows maybe it's difficult for me to talk about my status, it felt like a safe place.

Alejandra described how seeing Jesus spoke on the panel was a healing experience for her because the space felt safe to her. Anadaisy also described how seeing 200 attendees at the event made her feel less alone as an undocumented student:

This event was pretty critical, because as a student, it gave me some perspective that I wasn't the only one curious about these issues. And that there was a conversation that needed to happen. And everything that people brought up. And so it was a really successful event.

At the event, Alejandra felt inspired to share her story as an undocumented student as well.

Though she was scared to share her story, she found Jesus and Alex were very supportive.

Alejandra shared:

During my 2nd semester at Western College, there was an immigration forum that was happening. I went with my brother—at that time, my brother was living with me—I was like, can you go with me because I really want to attend? But I'm also really scared because I don't know what they're going to talk about. So we went, and the forum, I remember, it was Alex, and then Jesus was also speaking as a panelist, and there was another student, another staff person. And they were talking about undocumented students and the support that's available for students. And I remember there was a moment where, I don't know if she was a teacher or another staff, she was like, "It's hard, because we don't know which students are undocumented. It's hard for us to figure that out." And I raised my hand and I stood up, and I talked about my story. I was like, I'm undocumented. This is the first time I'm sharing that I am. It was really scary for me. It was, honestly, it was really scary for me to come here. I had to ask my brother to come with me to support me because I didn't know what to expect. I talked about it being difficult and feeling really alone. And feeling really lost. You know, you're part of this system and you want to go to college and you want to go to school, but feeling pulled in

different directions, and trying to figure out how to navigate all of it without papers. So, it was a really scary moment. And then I remember right after, Alex and Jesus approached me. And they were like, “thank you so much for sharing.”

Alejandra was nervous to even attend this forum because she was not sure what to expect and she rarely shared her immigration status with others. With support from her brother, she not only attended the forum, but she also felt empowered to share her story being undocumented with all 200 people. Research shows how family members can be a powerful source of support for undocumented students in navigating educational spaces (Aguilar, 2019; Kam et al., 2018; Katsiaficas et al., 2016). Seeing Jesus speak on the panel encouraged her to share her own story, and Jesus and a faculty member, Alex, were very supportive of her afterwards.

This event was the spark to build community and a counter-space on campus for undocumented students. The event was an important opportunity for undocumented students to meet each other and begin to build a sense of community. Many undocumented students around the years 2006 to 2009 described how much that counter-space and sense of community meant to them. Ixchel, the undocumented student who began college at Western in her early 30s, described how even though she was older than the other students, many of whom began at Western as 18- or 19-year-olds, still felt such a sense of community with other students who were undocumented. Ixchel said:

Even though I was a little bit different than the normal student body, I was a parent and I was married. I was pregnant when I was at Western College. And so my situation was a little bit different than most others, but still, I felt that there was a community of people like me and that helped me a lot.

As seen in Figure 1, undocumented students at Western College had been contending with racism and xenophobia in academic and social spaces on campus, which impacted their lives at Western College. These experiences compelled them to form counter-spaces for their community of undocumented students on campus.

Upon transferring to a 4-year university in 2009, Jesus described the community they were able to build in those 3 years from 2006 to 2009.

We spent so much time together, we would hang out together, we would go to parties together- it wasn't just the advocacy work that we were doing. But we were also hanging out with each other and building friendships, right? So with some of them, I'm still friends now. And so it wasn't just the activism work, but it was also being able to build those friendships from the work that we were doing.

The years from 2006 to 2009 were an important time when undocumented students catalyzed the beginning of an undocumented student movement and the development of a counter-space at Western College.

Although undocumented students organized at Western College beginning around the same time as the national undocumented student movement across the country in the early 2000s (Nicholls, 2013), many researchers, journalists, and higher education leaders overlook the narrative of undocumented student organizing at community colleges. As demonstrated by undocumented students' stories of their organizing at Western College in the early 2000s, undocumented community college students were at the forefront of galvanizing a powerful nationwide movement.

### **Goal of Institutionalizing the Counter-Space for Undocumented Students**

Undocumented students at Western College innovatively sought ways to institutionalize their counter-space for undocumented students from 2006 to 2021 so their programs could be sustainable. Because students were typically at Western College for only a few years and then transferred to 4-year universities, students strategized ways for their programs to be permanent even if students leading those programs left the college. Paola, an Afro-Latina Mexican undocumented student who started at Western College in 2009 as an 18-year-old, described how challenging it was to create a sense of sustainability with students coming and going:

So we saw that this is more commonly a 2-year, 3-year, or 4-year college [experience]. For many folks, mostly 2 years, right? So students are coming in and out. There's no sustainability, and we have to figure it out within ourselves, how do we train future leaders? How do we train folks to take over when we leave?

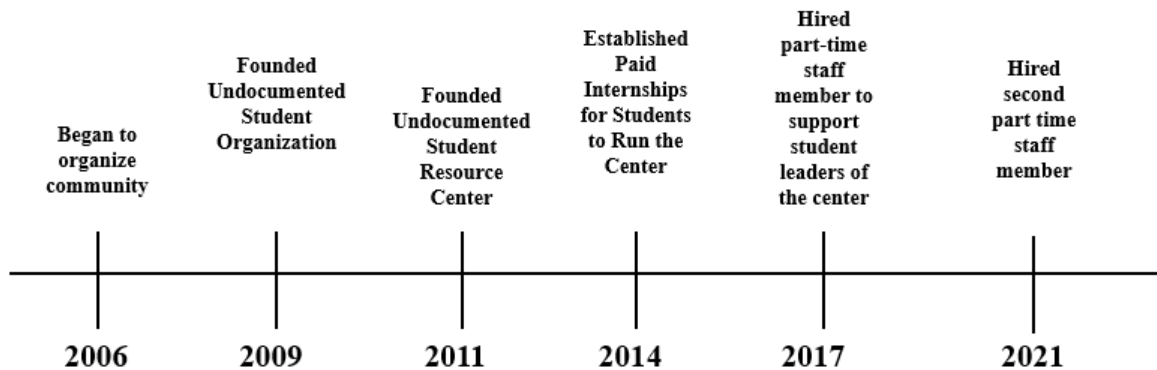
To address these issues of sustainability, undocumented students prioritized institutionalizing their programs so they had more permanent support from the college. As Paola says, "So that was our goal. Like how do we institutionalize?" For students at Western College, institutionalization meant official recognition from the college, visible presence, reliable sources of funding, support from staff, and space to meet on campus. Their concept of institutionalization is reminiscent of Kezar's (2007) definition of institutionalization. In a study of how colleges and universities institutionalize their diversity agenda, Kezar (2007) defined institutionalization as practices within a system that are "routine, widespread, legitimized, expected, supported, permanent, and resilient" (p. 415).

The concepts of counter-spaces and institutionalization may seem like opposites. There is an inherent tension, or contradiction, in the concept of institutionalizing a counter-space. Counter-spaces are meant to be safe places away from the dominant oppressive culture at institutions, but institutionalization is the essence of institutional power taking over a program. So how can you keep the essence of a counter-space as it is adopted by the institution? As undocumented students at Western College fought to institutionalize their programs so they could be more sustainable, they still insisted that their programs be student-led, a key element of counter-spaces. In this way, they navigated a complex power dynamic of how to maintain a student-led counter-space that had formal support from the college. I will discuss the nuances of a student-led, institutionalized counter-space in a later section, but first I will discuss students' priorities and strategies for how they successfully institutionalized their programs.

The process of institutionalization took many steps with moments of great success and other instances of stalled momentum. First, students fought to establish a formal student organization in 2009 with the aim of eventually turning their organization into an institutionally recognized resource center. While the students experienced exciting success in winning a \$9000 grant to establish their own Undocumented Student Resource Center in 2011, immediately thereafter a core group of students transferred to four-year universities and the remaining students struggled to continue that sense of momentum. However, students in these challenging years took on the center as their own “baby” and fiercely continued to advocate for its solidification and expansion. Finally, students saw the need to develop a part-time staff position in 2017 who could support undocumented students’ organizing efforts, and a second part-time staff position in 2021. (See Figure 2 for a timeline of institutionalization of undocumented student programs at Western College). While student alumni are thrilled about the progress they have made, many students and staff in 2021 still see many ways the college can further support their counter-space.

**Figure 2**

*Timeline of Institutionalization of Undocumented Student Programs at Western College*





### *Founding a Student Organization*

Undocumented students sought to formalize their counter-space by making it an official student organization with a formal staff adviser in the early years of the undocumented student movement at Western College from 2006 to 2011. From 2006 to the spring of 2009, undocumented students operated their own informal counter-space where they built a sense of community and resources. This group was informal in the sense that they did not have a formal staff adviser and they met in students' apartments because they did not have a place to meet on campus. Whereas Case and Hunter, theorists of counter-spaces, differentiate between formal and informal counter-spaces by defining informal counter-spaces as having "less of an organization structure and less of an explicit agenda and purpose" (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 262), I found undocumented students' counter-space before founding an official student organization actually was formal in the sense that they did have an explicit agenda and purpose, but it was informal because they did not have official support from the college.

Undocumented students dreamed about creating a formal counter-space for undocumented students by establishing an official student organization on campus for undocumented students. At the time, there was a student organization for Latinx students, but undocumented Latinx students in this organization saw the need to create a distinct student organization specifically for undocumented students. Anadaisy described how the student organization for undocumented students grew out of the organization for Latinx students, "And [the Undocumented Student Organization] started because I was part of another group called [Latinx Student Organization]." Anadaisy went on to describe,

I had an idea one time at one of those meetings, I was like, hey, do you think we could talk about the immigration issue? We're Latinos, we're focused on Latinos. It's an issue

that affects us. Do you think we could have an event around immigration? What is current, what the situation is? The response in the room was like, hey, that sounds like a really great idea!

Although many Latinx undocumented students can find a sense of commonality and comradery in spaces for Latinx students, many Latinx undocumented students tend to seek spaces specifically for undocumented students because of their unique experiences being undocumented (Valdez & Golash Boza, 2020). For example, Valdez and Golash Boza (2020) found Latinx undocumented students at a predominantly Latinx institution in Central California still sought opportunities to gather with each other as undocumented students:

For many students, being undocumented is an identity and experience they share with a select subgroup on campus, even as they share a similar social location with most students, with respect to ethnicity and social class. Nevertheless, their distinctive undocumented identity creates the desire for a dedicated space on campus for undocumented students to gather. . . . Undocumented students expressed the importance of having an undocumented community and dedicated space to gather, which made them feel empowered as well as providing a place to talk freely about their unique circumstances. (p. 492)

Although it was challenging for undocumented students at Western College to get a staff member to agree to be their formal staff adviser, as I will explain in more detail in the next chapter, undocumented students at Western College were successful in establishing their own formal counter-space or Undocumented Student Organization in 2009. Scholars find how student organizations can be key spaces for undocumented students (Nicholls, 2013) and other marginalized student populations (Harper & Quaye, 2007) to find a sense of safety and community on oppressive college campuses. This founding of the Undocumented Student Organization was a pivotal moment as it galvanized a sense of momentum to formalize their community and eventually institutionalize their organization into a Resource Center.

### *Expanding and Sustaining the Student Organization*

To build on the sense of safety created through the student organization, undocumented students strategized ways to formalize, strengthen, and expand their organization with the vision that it would eventually become an institutionalized resource center for undocumented students. Though they were successful in establishing a formal student organization, it was still not fully supported by the college. For example, students did not have a place to meet on campus and had to meet at each other's apartments instead. Carolina, an undocumented who began her journey at Western College in 2009 as an 18-year-old and identifies as Mexican-Californian, described how undocumented students met at each other's apartments, "[Undocumented students] continued to do work in the summer, and they were meeting up at the treasurer's apartment building. They had a community like office space. And so they were meeting there (laughs)." Since students did not have support from the college to have an official place to meet on campus at the time, they were creative in their efforts to find central meeting places in each other's homes.

To build their prominence and strength on campus, students in the organization prioritized growing the organization's membership. The organization grew from just a few members at the beginning to eight or nine undocumented students taking leadership roles. Carolina described the growth and membership of the student organization at the beginning stages, "There were about six of us my 1st year. Then, my 2nd year, we stayed consistently between nine to 12 folks. I would say about seven or eight were constantly the core members in a leadership role." Undocumented students in other student organizations across the country often strategize how to build the membership of their organizations so more undocumented students feel welcome coming to their space (Freeman et al., 2021).

Students in the organization at Western worked with each other to decide how students would take on leadership roles that played into their inherent strengths (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2019). Carolina describes, “We were very good about switching roles and having folks step up.” Students decided to fill the role of president of the organization for 1 year, so more students had the opportunity to develop their leadership skills as the organization’s president. Carolina says, “I don’t think any of us really were in the president role for more than a year, because the point was to develop leaders and so every year was someone new.” Paola described how they drew on each other’s strengths in the process of completing tasks:

We let folks know these are the tasks that need doing and people felt good about doing tasks and coming back, getting them done and also highlighting their own skills. So if someone was really good at creating images or Photoshop, etc., then they would be the ones that would help out with creating the logos or things like that, right? So using people’s strengths. And making them feel good about coming back to this space.

Not only did they emphasize each other strengths, but they celebrated the unique strengths and talents each member of the club could bring to the team. Paola describes:

I think that culture that we enacted right away in the beginning started it all, and I think it’s very similar to the [Undocumented Student Resource Center] culture too you know? We value every single member and we see what skills are they bringing? Highlight them and congratulate them and applaud them for their leadership and for their skills and whatever they’re bringing to the table. As well as learning and teaching different things and teaching each other because you know this whole time for all these years, which I think is powerful is, this is all student led. Student led for students.

Researchers find students in student organizations can have the goal of fostering a sense of community and encouraging each other to take leadership roles (Haber-Curran & Tapia-Fuselier, 2020; Santa-Ramirez, 2018). In a study on Latina college students’ perspectives of student leadership, Haber-Curran and Tapia-Fuselier (2020) found:

The students described how . . . it was important to maintain and invest their focus and energy on the members of their organizations and the organization as a whole. They felt responsibility to build a sense of support and community within the group. (p. 43)

Undocumented students' goals of encouraging and fostering each other's strengths is also reminiscent of Yosso's theorization of Community Cultural Wealth, a theory that Communities of Color inherently have numerous forms of cultural wealth and strengths such as the resilience to navigate oppressive educational systems (Yosso, 2005).

The undocumented students leading the student organization had many goals for the organization including conducting outreach to local undocumented communities. Paola described how impactful it was to her to be in community with other undocumented students on campus in 2009 and how she wanted to focus her efforts as the President of the Student Organization on working with the local community:

That was my first time gathering with other undocumented youth that are trying to achieve higher education or achieve *access* to higher education. And that's why because of those conversations that we were having, that's when I started seeing the *lack* of access and how difficult it is and how lucky I was to even be there and how statistically, many undocumented people don't even go to college right? During that time in 2009, many undocumented folks thought that we *couldn't* go to college. That undocumented people can't go to college. So that was one of the first things that we started doing the next year and fall when I was voted in as President, we started creating relationships with the community.

Paola describes how important it was to her to connect with undocumented students to tell them it was possible for them to go to college as an undocumented student. At the time in 2009, the statewide legislation AB540 allowed undocumented students to pay the more affordable in-state tuition instead of out-of-state tuition, but statewide legislation that provides undocumented students with financial aid was yet to pass 2 years later in 2011 (Galvez, 2021). Being able to study in college herself, Paola was compelled to use her position to inform high school students and other undocumented community members in the area that it was indeed possible for them to go to college. As President of the student organization, Paola focused on building bridges between Western College and the local community.

Undocumented students were successful in taking the first step to institutionalize their programs by establishing a formal Undocumented Student Organization in 2009 that was acknowledged by the college. Although professionals who lead organizations, businesses, and schools study effective leadership and management styles, it is impressive that it was intuitive to undocumented students at Western College to create an inclusive, welcoming environment in which students supported and valued each other's strengths. They were also more focused on supporting a sense of community than they were in advancing their own personal prestige.

### *Establishing an Undocumented Student Resource Center*

Students who ran the Undocumented Student Organization around 2010 were a particularly powerful and cohesive group of students in the history of the undocumented student movement at Western College. Carolina, Paola, and Anadaisy, among others, had a strong vision to eventually institutionalize the student organization, or counter-space, into an Undocumented Student Resource Center that was student-led. Anadaisy describes, "That's the spark of the idea of the club, that we were able to collect and gather the resources and the interest to create a resource center that was student led." By keeping the center student-led, they were attempting to maintain the essence of a counter-space. Undocumented Student Resource Centers are physical spaces on campus supported by staff members that have robust programs for undocumented students, such as healing circles, book lending programs, and counseling (Cisneros & Reyna Rivarola, 2020; Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Galvez, 2021; Salcedo, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021).

At the time in 2009, there were few Undocumented Student Resource Centers across the country, especially at community colleges (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020), so undocumented students at Western College were some of the first community college students to establish a resource center. Carolina described how they knew about the resource center for undocumented

students at UC Berkeley (Sanchez & So, 2015), but they were not aware of many resource centers beyond the one at UC Berkeley. Carolina describes, “At the time, the only resource center that we knew of was at Berkeley. It was a Dream Resource Center. That was the only Research Center that we knew existed at the time in 2011.” Carolina and her peers hoped to bring the model of the resource center at UC Berkeley to Western College, saying “And then we said alright, how do we bring that to Western College?”

As four-year universities tend to have more resources and institutional support for undocumented students across the country (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020), I seek to highlight how enterprising undocumented students at Western College were in building institutional support at a community college. A pivotal moment in the undocumented student movement at Western College is when students led the effort to apply for and win a grant to establish one of the country’s first Undocumented Student Resource Centers at a community college. To achieve their goal of institutionalizing their student organization into an official Undocumented Student Resource Center, undocumented students sought opportunities to apply for funding that would help them make the case to the college’s administration that their vision of a center should be institutionalized. Carolina described their goals in pressuring the administration to do more to support undocumented students:

We got to take this into our own hands. If we can get money then maybe we can get something started. And so then we thought this is a great opportunity for us to do it ourselves. If we can get something started, then maybe the institution would take it on.

Carolina described their goal of starting the resource center so the administration of Western College would eventually institutionalize it.

In 2011, a group of five undocumented students applied for and successfully won a \$9,000 grant to establish the Undocumented Student Resource Center. Student alumni often

proudly tell the story of winning the grant as a part of their origin story of the Resource Center. A foundation was offering grants to community college students who were leading civic engagement programs at their schools. When students heard about the competition, they jumped at the opportunity to apply. Carolina described how students led the effort to apply for this grant:

The college had nothing to do with the creation of [the Undocumented Student Resource Center]. Because [the resource center] started through that competition. So we knew we wanted to have something but we didn't know where to start when we heard about the competition. We said alright, how do we actually provide what we are asking the college to do? And so that's where we came up with those demands or the proposal for the project, and then once we get the money we said, "OK. So what does this look like on our campus?"

Carolina made it clear that students started the Undocumented Student Resource Center, not the administration of the college. Paola echoes Carolina's description of getting their peers organized to apply for the grant, saying:

I took the opportunity. When I heard about it, and I told the [Undocumented Student Organization], and I was like, hey, there's this opportunity to apply to get a grant. . . . And that's when we started thinking about [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] and brainstorming about the dream because we had, I mean at that point, this idea around research centers was just starting. I think we were one of the first.

Paola described how they met with members of the student club and advocates for undocumented students across the college to brainstorm how to compile the best pitch to win the grant:

Like working group with also staffing teams and students like undocumented Student Task Force. I forget what it was exactly called, but it was a task force and so we started brainstorming together all of us and in the community that supported undocumented students at [Western College] and what the [Undocumented Student Resource Center] could look like and what we needed. . . . I wrote it and we reviewed it as a group and then we submitted it and next thing we know is we got accepted into the competition.

At the competition, students from 10 different community colleges gave a presentation on a stage for an audience of over 1,000 members. Each presentation lasted 5 minutes. Because students from Western College were a team of five students, they created five slides and each student



took 1 minute explaining their slide. They discussed general information about undocumented students at Western College such as how many undocumented students attended the college and the need for emotional and financial support for undocumented students. Paola describes their presentation, “We created a really dope presentation. We had a member who was really good at graphic design. He designed the PowerPoint presentation so beautifully. It was five of us and five slides, and we needed to complete it in under 5 minutes.” Paola described how all five of them stood in a row holding hands as they waited to hear the news of who won the competition. They were ecstatic when they found out they won a \$9,000 grant. Undocumented students at Western College led the work to apply for the grant, echoing research findings that undocumented students often lead efforts to build institutional support at their institutions (Freeman et al., 2021; Sanchez & So, 2015; Southern, 2016). Undocumented students then used this grant to establish their Undocumented Student Resource Center on campus. They first consulted with administration to make the center official and obtain a physical space on campus, which I will explain more in the next chapter about their relationships with administrators, faculty, and staff.

While undocumented students at Western College from 2006 to 2009 prioritized organizing events so undocumented students on campus could meet each other, students at this stage of the process in 2011 prioritized spending their grant money on material supplies for their peers and community. As many undocumented students are low-income (Gonzales, 2016) this supplies could make the difference of whether students could succeed in their classes or not. Undocumented students decided to spend most of the grant money on computers and a printer. Paola described what they did immediately after receiving the grant to establish the center:

We were just ecstatic [to receive the grant]. We didn’t believe it and immediately after that the work started. You know well the work had already started. [laughs] The work

continued, but we now had literally \$9,000. We come into the college and said we want to start with this Resource Center and we have the money to start it. They can't say no [laughs], you know? We of course blasted our win everywhere we could on social media, we let the president of the college know, and so he was already supportive.

Students prioritized establishing a physical space for the center on campus, buying supplies, and gathering books to be able to loan books to undocumented students. Paola described:

We were able to get a computer, then set them up in there and get a lot of money for materials. I remember going through Office Max or whatever it's called [laughs] and getting materials. It felt good to be able to have that money and support students in that way in the field that they needed to be successful. And even getting Blue Books or Scantron for free for them. Everything that we could get our hands on, we communicated with the resources in the networks we had on campus to try to get those resources for our undocumented students and so that was the first priority is to get a space and get it set up and get resources started for undocumented folks.

Paola and her peers were thrilled to use the \$9,000 to be able to buy supplies for their undocumented student community on campus so the college could be more accessible to undocumented students. A physical space on campus, supplies, and a book lending program are often programs undocumented students at other colleges across the country strive to create (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). One of students' biggest priorities after establishing the Undocumented Student Resource Center was to provide supplies for their community.

### ***Difficult Decision to Let the Undocumented Student Organization Go***

It is noteworthy that after the Undocumented Student Resource Center was established, the group of undocumented students faced a tension in deciding what to do with their Undocumented Student Organization. Even though the Undocumented Student Organization had meant a great deal to them, especially the founder of the organization, Anadaisy, they made the difficult decision to let their student organization dissolve. Since their vision for the Resource Center was that it would be student led, they found many of the same people running the student organization were also running the Resource Center, so the purpose of the two organizations had

become redundant. If the Resource Center remained student led, they decided it was acceptable to let the student organization collapse into the Resource Center. They were essentially running two counter-spaces that were functioning as one entity but had two different names. Anadaisy, the founder of the Undocumented Student Organization, described how the role of the organization and Resource Center became redundant:

For about 6 months, the question kept coming up: is this a [student organization] issue or a [resource center] issue? Once we were starting the Resource Center, I think as individuals who were doing the work, we just literally had to let [the Undocumented Student Organization] go because it required time and energy and focus that literally needed to be put into the Resource Center. It came as a loss, I guess, but it was what needed to be done. What was helpful about [the Undocumented Student Organization] is that it was completely, entirely student led. . . . If we want to institutionalize, if we want to make the Resource Center, we literally do not have time to worry about developing interest in the other students enough to offer the guidance to provide the support that's needed to hold these positions in this club. Because it does take some institutionalization of its own, yet, like not enough to provide the stability that a Resource Center does have, right and provide. And so it just became redundant because it was the same people that were doing the work. So it's just *time*, we literally had no time so we had to choose.

Anadaisy describes how her community of undocumented peers were doing the same work running the student organization and the Resource Center so they decided that it did not make sense to continue to maintain both. Even though Anadaisy had taken great pride in founding the Undocumented Student Organization and was president of the organization at the time, she agreed it was important to combine forces and only work on running the Resource Center.

Undocumented students' priority of establishing an Undocumented Student Resource Center is like other undocumented students' activism goals at other colleges and universities across the country (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). What is different about Western College from existing research literature's findings is undocumented students' goal of turning their student organization into a Resource Center and making the decision to let the student organization dissolve. At many colleges and universities that have institutionalized programs for

undocumented students, they also have an undocumented student organization that functions separately from the institutionalized programs (Freeman et al., 2021). For example, “Freedom at Eastern” is an undocumented student organization on Eastern Connecticut State University’s campus that functions as a separate entity from the undocumented student programs office on campus even though they collaborate with each other (Freeman et al., 2021).

Interestingly, I have heard from colleagues that they did not think Western College had a history of student activism because they did not have a student organization (I was careful in these conversations to maintain the privacy of Western College as my dissertation site). My colleagues in these conversations assumed that the only space in which students organized was student organizations, it had not occurred to them that a campus Undocumented Student Resource Center could be student led. This phenomenon of running a student-led institutionalized program has important implications that may be contrary to practitioners and scholars’ assumptions, as I will explain in the next section.

Undocumented students’ persistent and pragmatic goals of institutionalizing their counter-space addressed a tension of how to solidify a sustainable counter-space. We must keep in mind that many of these students were teenagers at 18 and 19 years old when they had the foresight to advocate for an institutionalized counter-space. Though many higher educational leaders and policymakers may look down on college students as not being as knowledgeable or capable as themselves, undocumented students’ tenacity in establishing their own Undocumented Student Resource Center at Western College shows the power and expertise of young people that should be valued. Although professionals in more advanced positions in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and older may have more knowledge on some topics due to having more years of lived experience, young peoples’ expertise should not be dismissed.

## **Vision of a Student-Led Program**

As discussed before, counter-spaces and institutionalized programs may seem like opposites. Undocumented students at Western College were brilliant and innovative in maintaining the essence of a counter-space as they sought to institutionalize their programs by continually insisting upon having a student-led program from 2006 to 2021. When students established the Undocumented Student Organization, they were able to maintain a student-led culture because staff advisers for the club were not involved in their day-to-day decision-making processes. Paola describes how they were able to maintain a student-led student organization: “Of course we had advisors here and there for the club, but they were not necessarily in the everyday actions that we were taking, so we were just there to support *each other*.” Anadaisy described how they were successful in establishing an environment for the student organization where students felt supported by their peers in leading their own projects. Anadaisy describes, “The students in the cohort from 2007 through 2015 - I think we were able to create a super supportive environment for student led projects.”

The issue of maintaining a student-led program became especially complex as the students advocated for their programs to be institutionalized by the college. Carolina describes how a student-led institutionalized program was a new concept for Western College’s administration. She describes, “There had not been a group of students who were asking for an institutional program that would be 100% student run. I think that was something that you know, the college definitely had never had.”

To build a sustainable student-led program, students who first developed the Resource Center advocated for paid internship positions for students to be paid to run the center. Carolina describes:

We realized that we needed to create our own opportunities. And so for a lot of us, we weren't able to get funding through [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] because we didn't have any money [laughs], right? We only had those \$9,000 and we didn't want to just waste them all. So we tried to figure out how do we get paid? Or how do we get other opportunities to be able to do the work. A lot of us actually created our own internships—*paid* internships at [Western College] and other offices, in collaboration with for example, [the Civic Engagement Program] right? They had internships where you could work on a specific issue and so we were like, well can we work on developing [the resource center]? And so it's combining and being resourceful and hustling.

Carolina described how undocumented students sought opportunities to be paid for the work they were doing to run the Resource Center. Because they did not have enough funding to pay themselves through the \$9,000 grant, they looked for opportunities to get paid internships through other offices on campus where they could continue to facilitate the Resource Center. Research finds that internship positions can be important for undocumented students to build their professional development and career goals, but it can be challenging for students to find paid internships, especially if they do not have DACA (Enriquez et al., 2019). Moreover, research finds that some undocumented students are denied opportunities just to volunteer because organizations and companies ask about their immigration status. In a 2019 study comprised of interviews with 214 undocumented undergraduate students and 508 survey responses with undocumented students in the University of California system, Enriquez et al. (2019) found only 26% of students had participated in unpaid internships and 23% had experience with paid internships. They also found that some students were barred opportunities to volunteer at places like medical centers because they were asked about their immigration status. Because it is challenging for undocumented students to find paid internships positions, it is noteworthy that undocumented students at Western College were able to create these paid internship programs for students to run the Resource Center.

Undocumented students at Western College have been largely successful in establishing and building a student-led institutionalized counter-space. A key element of the concept of counter-spaces is that they are student-organized, and can have support from staff and faculty, though this support is not necessary to create a counter-space (Solórzano et al., 2000). A student-led institutionalized counter-space can be challenging to sustain without letting staff, faculty, and administrators take over, as I will discuss in the next sections.

### **Sustaining Momentum Over Time**

Undocumented students faced many moments of exhilarating acceleration followed by instances of frustrating deceleration in their efforts to maintain a sense of momentum over time from 2006 to 2021 as they created, institutionalized, and expanded their counter-space for undocumented students. These highs and lows seem inevitable as it would be impossible to sustain a continuously increasing sense of momentum. What is impressive though, is how despite these accelerations and decelerations, students were able to continually move their goals forward. They developed several strategies to pass the torch to the next generation of undocumented students as they left Western College and transferred to 4-year universities. At the beginning of the organizing stages from 2006 to 2009, Jesus described the sense of momentum they were able to sustain during those 3 years and how their space for undocumented students grew:

I want to say that from when I came in to when I left, I found there was more community. There was more advocacy work. The list of organizations also grew in number. Where before didn't seem like it was a lot when I left, there was more coming down the line.

When Jesus transferred to a 4-year university, he was not sure what would happen to the sense of momentum they had created. He describes, "That was one of the big questions that I kept asking myself, what's going to happen after we're gone, because we're not going to be here forever."

Jesus described his goals for sustaining momentum when he transferred to a 4-year university in 2009:

When I left, I wanted to ensure that there was something for students to latch on to, to remember, to come to, and find the resources that they wanted and that they needed. So when I left, I wanted to make sure that the [sense of community] was still there. So that there'd be that space for students to come together and work and just continue building that community.

When Jesus transferred to a 4-year university in 2009, he hoped that the sense of community they had created could continue to grow for the next generations of undocumented students at Western College.

Alejandra, an undocumented student who attended Western College from 2006 to 2008, described similar goals of keeping the sense of momentum going. She described saying to her peers and staff members, "I'm going to transfer, I got to go to [the 4-year university] soon, but I think we should keep this going." She went on to describe, "I just remember having conversations with Alex, then with Jesus, and Paola about continuing this." When Jesus transferred, he described how he had a lot of trust and hope in the next generation of student leaders to keep the sense of momentum going:

There were new students that were coming in and doing a lot of that activism work and carrying it further than what we were able to do, like Paola was one of them who helped start [the Undocumented Student Resource Center]. And so they continued and they grew that advocacy work.

As undocumented students transferred to 4-year universities, many tried to stay in touch with Western College and came back to visit to support the next generation of undocumented student leaders on campus. Alejandra described trying to come back to visit after she transferred to a 4-year university:

And then I remember after I left, I went to [a 4-year university], Paola was the one that held most of the [Undocumented Student Organization] organizing meetings. And I remember attending two meetings back then just to see like, did anybody else show up?



Is it just the core people that wanted to start or did new students show up? So that's how it all started.

When Alejandra transferred to the 4-year university, she still came back to visit Western College because she wanted to see if their organizing work had continued.

Even though many students at the time around 2010 wanted to come back to check on how they were continuing their grow their counter-space, some students found it challenging to stay connected when things were moving forward with their own lives. For example, Jesus described the challenges of staying connected when he was trying to focus on building his own career in the field of education:

After I left Western College, I tried to come back and visit. I tried to talk to Alex's classes every now and then. But it just got even more difficult. As I continued to grow and as I continued to start my career in education, it just got a little bit more difficult to be able to come back. And so now it's been a while since I was last there for sure.

Many undocumented students tried to come back to visit Western College, but some students found this to be unsustainable as time went on because they were moving into new directions in their life.

The next generation of student organizers who arrived on Western College's campus in 2009 described feeling a strong sense of responsibility in carrying forward the sense of momentum that Jesus, Andrea, Alejandra, and Ixchel started. Paola described how the previous generation of student leaders wanted them to carry their legacy forward:

The students there were a little older than me. I was a freshman, a little 18-, 19-year-old. The other students were a few years older and getting ready to transfer at that point. So that's what they were looking for: new leadership and new members as well.

Carolina, who began her journey at Western College in 2009, described this sense of responsibility, "Because we understood that the students who fought for AB540 [a California

state law enacted in 2001] made it so that we could be there, and so we were like well, what are we going to do to leave for the next generations? The students that are coming after us?”

Undocumented students faced an especially low period after the Undocumented Student Resource Center was institutionalized in 2011 and a core group of undocumented student leaders transferred in 2013. While it may seem that the establishment of the center would lead to an increased sense of momentum, with an abrupt shift in generations of student leaders, the next generation of students struggled to build the center. Carolina describes, “Most of us left at the same time [in 2013] who were the key players of organizing.” Carolina and other student alumni returned to campus to have retreats with the next generation of student leaders to guide and support them in their organizing efforts. Though these retreats were helpful, many student organizers from 2013 to 2017 described this time frame as a time when it was challenging to maintain a sense of momentum. Patricia, an undocumented student who began at Western College in 2014 and who was born in Mexico, described the challenges they faced in building and sustaining the Resource Center after the original group of founders transferred to a 4-year university:

The cofounders obviously founded [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] and they have the goals and they have a vision, but then they transfer. When they transfer, there was only one person left. And she was basically the one that was helping us and guiding us through. Like I said, the cofounders transferred so although we had a retreat with them, they will tell us like this is what we did—we were trying to learn from them. But again, they were the ones who created [the Resource Center], but then it’s like, what’s next, you know? I guess that’s where you can see where we came in. What’s the next part?

Even though the original group of founders of the Resource Center tried to come back and help students like Patricia continue to build the center, Patricia and her peers who were still at Western College found it challenging to work without enough guidance. Jay, a Latino

undocumented student born in Mexico who began at Western as a 21-year-old in 2015, also described the challenges in building the center once the cofounders left:

Nothing was described, like what we have access to, what our limits are, nothing was described. So we had to figure it out as we go, which is not right because I mean, like [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] was already there for quite a while. And for such basic info not to be passed on was a challenge because we literally had to figure out everything from scratch. And I'm not saying all of the stuff had to be figured out from scratch, but majority of the stuff, and that's one of the things that I as an intern struggled with and my fellow interns who also worked with me, I noticed that they also struggled with that.

Jay described his frustrations in trying to build the center after the cofounders left. He felt like even though the institutionalized counter-space of the Resource Center had been established, they still had to "figure our everything from scratch" because there was not enough guidance about what they should do.

Another challenge Patricia, Jay, and other undocumented student leaders at the time faced was a lack of committed staff support. The staff member who had been supporting undocumented students' efforts had to focus on other tasks at this time. Patricia describes, "The director, she had to leave, she moved to other jobs." Patricia continued to describe, "It was just two of us left [Patricia and Jay]. So we're like, Okay, well, we got some pieces from all over the place. Now, let's try to put them all together and keep it going."

To move forward, students were tenacious in their efforts to take on the center as their own. Patricia described how even though the cofounders established the Resource Center, she, Jay, and others took on the center as their own "baby." Their priority was to get more students and staff to join their work and build a clear structure for how the Resource Center would function. They started by advocating for an increased number of paid interns to join their team, and they were successful in having two more student internship positions created to work with the Undocumented Student Resource Center. Patricia describes how their team grew: "It was the

two of us for a few months, actually, a few months until they told us that we were to hire more interns. So we hired two more interns, and then we became a team of four.” Patricia and Jay were able to advocate for an increased number of paid internship positions to continue to expand their Resource Center.

Their next goal was to make decisions about how these four interns would work together to establish formal intern roles that could be sustained after this group of four students transferred. They wrote down formal agreements about job responsibilities for each intern. Patricia describes this process, “Once we had a team we were like okay, well, now we have to create the roles. And then like, what are the needs? And then who’s more comfortable doing what? So that’s how we started dividing everything out.” Patricia and other students wrote formal agreements about their job responsibilities in a folder: “So all the different roles that we had in mind, we basically came up with the titles and the duties that came along with that title.”

Patricia created a folder where they wrote down steps for how to accomplish various tasks, so the next generation of student leaders felt supported when they took over the Resource Center. Patricia describes this folder, “We decided, like, okay, you know what, let’s create a folder with everything we’ve learned so far, and the goals, and how people can use this for future reference to make [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] better than what it is now.” Patricia describes in more detail the goals of creating this folder in helping sustain a sense of momentum over time for the generations of students that would come after them:

I was trying to share everything I could cause I didn’t want [the students after us] to struggle. And that’s when we decided to create the one folder I mentioned earlier, where we had everything I could think of. During my last quarter at Western College that was my main focus, like, I’m gonna leave this here. It doesn’t mean you have to follow everything. But this is the history of how [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] was created. These are the problems that we face. This is what we can come up with. Here’s my information, you can always reach out to me, but because I know that every time there’s new interns, things change, which is a problem because that is the point, it is

a student *run* program. So, the idea is for students to come together and have these ideas and apply that also align with the mission statement from [the Undocumented Student Resource Center]. So, to answer your question, it was a fact of me just training everyone training them like, Hey, this is what I know. And, these are your go to people for anything they need, then they can help you, they can guide you because they were there too like, they know what happened with [the Undocumented Student Resource Center]. So that's basically how it happened.

Patricia thought it was important for future generations of undocumented student leaders at Western College to know the history of how the Resource Center was established, a similar value of students and staff at other institutions (Resendiz, 2021). This value for knowing one's history mirrors Yosso et al.'s (2010) findings about students' and staff members' goals of preserving knowledge about the history of the creation of cultural centers as counter-spaces at a university. Yosso et al. (2010) describe the value of learning their history:

Students and staff preserve the historical memory of the fight to create the culture centers by sharing the struggle with each new generation of undergraduates. This process of recovering and recounting collective history reminds students of their responsibility to honor those who came before them and to carry on their legacy. (p. 115)

In the folder, Patricia wrote down procedures for how to accomplish tasks like how to enroll new members for the Resource Center and how to organize an event, including how to do outreach for an event. They also created a list of contacts in the folder such as a contact person they had communicated with at the news outlet, Telemundo. Patricia describes how they wrote down as much as possible:

[We wrote] the different procedures, how to host an event. . . . Step by step, we were just trying to do the basics, because we knew that we had to learn the hard way because it was a learning experience. So to avoid any of that, we're like, no, let's have something ready for people who are gonna come in the future so they don't have to go through the whole process again on their own. And at least they'll have some history. And they'll know what to do from there.

Patricia then showed the folder to her team to make sure everyone approved, "Towards the end, I showed that to my entire team so they can approve. Tell me, am I missing something? What else

do you need? Tell me so I can try to see and apply that to the folder.” Patricia also created procedures for programs like their book lending program. Describing the program, Patricia says, “When I joined, it was messy. But as a team, we’re like, Okay, this is how we should do check out. This is our system.”

In addition to building folders, Patricia, Jay, and other students spent extensive time building relationships with other students and student clubs across campus to build solidarity and support for the Undocumented Student Resource Center. Patricia describes their goals for connecting with other student clubs on campus:

We will try to talk to the president of a club or join a lot of different meetings and say, “Hey, this is who we are, these are the services we offer to the students.” But because we know that students are students at the end of the day, let’s see how we can collaborate. So we did a lot of things like that. So I think that’s what really helped [the Undocumented Student Resource Center]. People started to know about [the resource center] more and more.

Patricia, Jay, and other students at the time were able to build on what the cofounders created and build the Resource Center into a more sustainable program. Patricia describes the effort and dedication they put into building the program over those years,

So that’s basically how we did everything, it was just the fact that we invested a lot of our energy and our time. There’ll be times that, although we were only getting paid for certain hours, we were so committed that I bet we were like, we will be there in the morning and it will be past 6pm—we were still hanging out and trying to collaborate with other groups on campus. Yeah, that’s basically how we did was just a lot of commitment and time that we invested.

Patricia summarizes their pride in seeing how much they were able to accomplish over a few years: “We were all very proud because we tried our best and we always treated the Undocumented Student Resource Center, like, that’s our baby!”

Jesus, one of the original undocumented student organizers who arrived at Western College in 2006, describes how they were able to build on what they created and sustain that

sense of momentum over time from 2006 to the present in 2021: “I left there, I’m just like, okay, hopefully this survives, and I mean, it seems like it has, and it’s thrived beyond my wildest imaginations.”

Undocumented students at Western College were innovative in their efforts to sustain a sense of momentum over time. Many of the undocumented students I have worked with at other colleges and universities across the country often encounter problems and tensions with sustaining their momentum when a core group of student leaders graduate. Although one might critique undocumented students at Western College that they could have done more to sustain progress, especially when the center was established in 2011 and students struggled to keep it going, we have to remember these are college students who are juggling many responsibilities like doing well in their classes. Staff, faculty, and administrators should do more to support students in their efforts to maintain their progress, and not leave these efforts for the students to figure out themselves.

### **Establishing and Expanding a Physical Space**

One of undocumented student organizers’ main priorities over time was to build a physical space on campus for their counter-space. At the beginning stages of building a counter-space for undocumented students around 2006 to 2009, undocumented students met in one of the students’ apartments because they did not have a designated space on campus to meet. Jesus described their goals from 2006 to 2009 to establish an official space on campus:

There was not enough money behind it, [the administration] had to scrounge around and look for funds to be able to support some of these programs or to be able to support the idea of creating a space to support undocumented students.

Once undocumented students were successful in founding their Undocumented Student Resource Center in 2011, they prioritized using the \$9,000 grant to advocate for a physical space

on campus for undocumented students. Carolina describes the students' goals to develop a physical space on campus once they won the \$9,000 grant:

We came back and we were like, alright! We have \$9,000 (laughs excitedly), so now what can we get? What do we need from the institution right? And the next thing was *space*. We were thinking, well, we can run the program ourselves and we had a club adviser. What we need is the space next, but so then our focus was on just receiving space. And we were able to with support from the president's office, we were able to secure a shared space.

Upon securing the grant to establish a resource center, students received support from the administration of the college to designate a physical space on campus. Undocumented students' goals of establishing a physical space on campus to meet is similar to other undocumented students' goals at other colleges and universities across the country of building a physical space on campus where students can feel safe meeting and have access to resources and information (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020).

This space at Western College began as a small space that was shared with other students on campus. Jay described the space they had for their Resource Center around 2015, "We used to have this little, tiny closet office and it was so small and crowded." Patricia, an undocumented student who attended the college from 2014 to 2017 echoed Jay's description saying, "It was literally one small office."

Jay and Patricia described how some of their first priorities for the Resource Center were to develop a bigger space for it. Jay describes the challenges of having a small, shared space with other student groups and the importance of obtaining a bigger and private space:

One of my ambitions was to get a bigger office so we can have access for members to go in, use computers, also a space to study. And, of course, whenever they will have something more private to ask, it will feel more comfortable because back then, being in such a small space, and asking the question among other people, it was not as private because it was such a small, tiny little place and everybody would hear what you were talking, like zero privacy. So, that's one of the things I always envisioned for the [Undocumented Student Resource Center] was to get a bigger space.



Patricia echoed Jay's sentiments, explaining why they needed a bigger and better space for their Resource Center so undocumented students could feel comfortable talking about their immigration status and not being overheard by other people who are hanging out in the shared space:

There was a *need* for us to find a bigger space because obviously, there'll be times that students want to talk about a situation, when another student is working or using the computer in the same space. . . . So we definitely knew that we have to find a [better] space.

To get a bigger space on campus, the process at the time was to advocate to the student government that there should be a bigger and better space for the Undocumented Student Resource Center on campus. Jay described how they had to submit a petition to the student government requesting bigger space: "We were asking for an increase of our budget and a bigger space. So we submitted a formal petition to the student body and that's how we proceeded with the bigger space." Jay added how it was a 9-month process to finally get their petition approved. There were several students in student government who did not think it was important to allocate resources for undocumented students which I will describe in more detail in the next chapter.

Once students, staff, and the college's administration were able to secure a shared space for the Resource Center around 2012, undocumented students continued to advocate for the development of a bigger and better space over time. It was still a multiyear journey advocating for a bigger space before undocumented students were able to secure a space on campus that they were happy with. Carolina went on to describe, "We were able to secure a shared space and then eventually our own space. And then, more recently, a bigger space that's more of a center like space versus an office." Jay described their success in finally getting a bigger space approved:

“We did get a new and bigger office, we were then relocated to a bigger space out in the east [part] of the campus.”

It is important to designate space on college campuses for undocumented students and other marginalized student populations to help facilitate and support their community organizing efforts. As evidenced by undocumented students’ experiences at Western College, they had to begin by organizing at each others’ apartments, which made it challenging to have a central space to meet. A physical space on campus was very effective in supporting Western students in their community organizing goals. Even at colleges and universities where space is limited, campus staff, faculty, and administrators should seek ways to support the development of a designated space on campus for undocumented students to meet.

### **Outreach to Local Communities**

Undocumented students from 2006 to 2021 continually saw the need to conduct outreach with local communities to make the community college more accessible. Because staff at community colleges are often misinformed in how to work with undocumented students (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017a; Nienhuser, 2018), undocumented students at Western College conducted their own outreach efforts so local undocumented youth in their neighborhoods would not be misinformed about their college choices. Students at Western conducted workshops in local high schools where they told students it was possible to go to college as an undocumented student and encouraged them to attend Western College. Alejandra, who attended Western College from 2006 to 2008, worked with the outreach office at Western College to conduct workshops for high school students in the area. Though nervous to share her story being undocumented with a room full of high school students, she wanted to share her story to help

normalize her experience for other undocumented students and she eventually become comfortable in sharing her story. Alejandra describes:

I think I was a panelist for one event, where I did talk about my story. I think it took about a year and a half before I felt really comfortable talking to a roomful of high school students, like hey, I'm undocumented, this is what had happened to me. But I'm still here, I'm still going to school. I'm still fighting, right? And trying to survive every day and trying to work and go to school.

Alejandra was keen to tell her story to undocumented high school students to help them see it was possible to go to college as an undocumented student.

Over the years from 2006 to 2021, undocumented students continually saw the need to conduct outreach with local undocumented high school students. When Paola became the president of the Undocumented Student Organization around 2010, she continued to form relationships with local high schools to host workshops for students. Paola describes:

So that was one of the first things that we started doing when I was voted in as President, we started creating relationships with the community. Specifically with all the high schools that we all came from as members of the club, and also all the high schools around Western College. So we started contacting their counselors and organizing workshops to actually go do workshops on how can undocumented students go to college. So that was our goal. We did make a presentation almost every single week.

Paola worked with counselors at local high schools near Western College to give workshops saying that undocumented students can indeed go to college. They even worked directly with the high schools they had attended themselves, essentially giving back to their own high schools as they were organizing at Western College.

Undocumented students at Western continually saw the need from 2006 to 2021 to host workshops for undocumented students in local high schools so youth knew it was possible to attend college as an undocumented student.

## **Annual Conference to Build Community and Resources**

Undocumented students also prioritized hosting an annual conference on undocumented students at Western College. The goal of the conference was to build a sense of community for undocumented students and encourage staff, faculty, and administrators to learn how to build institutional support for undocumented students. Students organized their first conference in 2015 and just hosted the seventh annual conference in 2021. The conference usually begins with an acknowledgement of Western College being on indigenous land and they have a blessing from a member of the Ohlone community. They then have keynote speakers who have spoken on such topics as nationwide immigrant rights community organizing and Asian undocumented activism. They then host workshops for students on such topics as maintaining a sense a wellness as national politics about undocumented students continually changes. Patricia, an undocumented student who attended Western College from 2014 to 2017, described organizing their first annual conference: “We planned our first summit. And it was really special because it was the first time at that time, I think it was only two of us planning. So you can imagine, we tried our best but we learned a lot from that experience.” For the first annual conference, only two undocumented students organized the entire conference. Patricia described how they tried their best and it was a successful event, but about 20 people attended and they wished they had had larger attendance.

Patricia describes their experience organizing the first conference:

We were learning how to plan a full event. And we only had, I think I can't remember how many people but it was less than 20. And we tried our best, like we were still working on our own public speaking skills. It was definitely a learning experience. But we tried. We could have had a bigger turnout, but we did our best.

For the second and third annual conference, Patricia and her peers learned from their experiences how to grow the attendance and reach of the annual conferences.

So the 2nd year came; it was even more people, everything was better. And then the 3rd year came, that's when you know, I was leaving. But it was like, it was *amazing*. Like we had art, we had a keynote speaker, we always had a keynote speaker for all of them. But for the third one, we had more people coming in trying to help us.

During the third annual conference, they were even able to get prestigious press outlets to attend the events: "And like I was saying, the outreach we were doing, it was basically going on TV.

The 2nd and 3rd year, we went to Telemundo and Univision."

One of students' main priorities for programming at the Undocumented Student Resource Center was to host an annual conference for undocumented students. Research shows how these kinds of conference can be successful in building a sense of community for undocumented students and allies who work with undocumented students in higher education (Freeman & Valdivia, 2021). For example, undocumented students who were able to attend college through TheDream.US program, a nonprofit that provides full financial aid for undocumented students, thought it was important to host conferences for students across campuses to meet each other and learn from each other's experiences (Freeman et al., 2021).

### **New Directions for Western College**

Although undocumented students were successful in establishing an institutionalized counter-space with robust programs like outreach to local high schools and an annual conferences, staff, faculty, and alumni still describe in 2021 how they think Western College could do more to support undocumented students. Speaking of their organizing work and the current state of Western College in 2021, Carolina said, "It was definitely a lot of hard work, and I definitely wish we were even further along." Staff, faculty, and alumni had two primary concerns. They were worried about the overall culture of Western College still needing to be more inclusive to undocumented students and they wanted the Resource Center to be further institutionalized.

Many staff described how they did not think Western College as a whole in 2021 had a particularly welcoming atmosphere for undocumented students. Shane, who works in the IT department and extensively supports programming for undocumented students, described being “suspicious” of other staff and faculty on campus and whether they were “really on board” to work with undocumented students. Acknowledging the broader sociopolitical climate in a post-Trump world in 2021 the year that Trump left office, he was concerned that there were staff, faculty, and administrators on Western College’s campus who espoused Trump’s values and had anti-immigrant sentiments. He described how the social justice values in the counter-space for undocumented students at Western College had not expanded to the entire college:

It’s not 100% adopted in all spaces, and I guess you can’t expect it to be. People are going to have different opinions and views. And it’s just gonna be challenging because of the environment we’re in. In a post Trump world and all that madness [during the Trump administration], it would be naive to think that people haven’t been affected by [Trump’s xenophobic rhetoric and actions] because we know that they have been globally and in this country. So to think that that kind of element isn’t on your campus, I think it’s just a little bonkers.

Shane describes how when racism, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiment continues to exist on a global and country-level scale, it is “inevitable” that those sentiments will be realized on college campuses, which highlights the need for continuing to solidify and build their counter-space at Western College.

Though some staff and students were skeptical of the overall culture at Western College, some undocumented students in recent years described how they felt that campus overall was welcoming to undocumented students. Although they acknowledged their peers may have negative experiences with professors as undocumented students, they thought the majority of staff and faculty were supportive of undocumented students. Jacqueline, an undocumented student who attended Western College in more recent years from 2016 to 2021 and identifies as

Mexican and Latina, described, “I think Western College is very welcoming to undocumented students. I know other students may have a different experience with certain professors, but I think overall Western College is welcoming.”

In addition to concerns about the overall culture and environment at Western College outside the counter-space students had created, they were also frustrated that the college’s administration had not done more to provide permanent and robust support for the Resource Center. Carolina’s position as a staff member was still part time in 2021 when many key players wanted her position to be full time. She spent half of her time supporting the Undocumented Student Resource Center and the other half of her time supporting other civic engagement programs on campus. As Marilyn, a faculty member, lamented, “I wish they had a full-time director to tell you the truth. Carolina’s time is split 50/50. I would love it if she wasn’t splitting her time 50/50, but that we really had a 100% director for the space.”

In addition to not having a full-time director, staff and alumni were also frustrated that the college did not provide more permanent funding streams for the Resource Center. Paola says, “The only thing that is truly missing is that money.” Moreover, Paola was concerned that the physical space they had secured for the Resource Center was not permanent. She had heard in some administrator meetings that the space for the Resource Center was temporary, and that made her concerned. She said, “There were some discussions last year about the space being temporary and that made me feel uncomfortable. I want it to be an official, permanent space with more resources and more money for the students.”

Even though undocumented students with support from other key players on campus had made tremendous strides in institutionalizing their programs from 2006 to 2021, they were still concerned that the Resource Center should have more permanent support. Moreover, the center

should be supported by a full-time staff person instead of a part-time position. These ongoing concerns about an unwelcoming environment outside the counter-space and the tenuous nature of the center's permanence further highlight the importance of maintaining and expanding their counter-space.

I agree with Shane's argument that although the broader sociopolitical climate of the country, and the world at large, have racist and anti-immigrant sentiments, you cannot assume that there are not staff, faculty, and administrators who espouse xenophobic sentiments, whether consciously or unconsciously. As a result of colleges and universities existing within these broader contexts, no matter how much institutions have advanced institutional support for undocumented students and other marginalized populations, there will always be a need to support students' development of counter-spaces.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I sought to answer my first research question on undocumented students' strategies and priorities for building institutional support for undocumented students at Western College. Students' priorities were to build a sense of community or counter-space (Solórzano et al., 2000) on campus where undocumented students could feel safe and access information and resources. To establish and build this counter-space, undocumented students adopted various strategies. Their main vision was to institutionalize their counter-space so it could be more sustainable with official recognition from the college, a physical space on campus, and formal support from staff. Because undocumented students began and ended their time at Western College within just a few years, they adopted several strategies to sustain a sense of momentum over generations of student leaders. Students were eventually successful in institutionalizing a



student-led counter-space where staff, faculty, and administrators did not take over the space, as I will explain more in the next chapter.

Undocumented students' priorities to build a Resource Center parallel undocumented students' priorities at other colleges and universities (Cisneros & Reyna Rivarola, 2020; Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021). Cisneros and Valdivia (2020) find how undocumented students were the driving force in establishing most of the approximately 45 Undocumented Student Resource Centers at colleges and universities across the country. However, at Western College, undocumented students' vision of maintaining a student-led center and dissolving their student organization is somewhat unique compared to the organizational structure at other colleges and universities where they have an institutionalized program and a student organization that are separate organizations. Undocumented students' success in maintaining a student-led institutionalized counter space has important implications for how staff, faculty, and administrators at other institutions can support and compensate students in running their own counter-spaces on campuses, as I will discuss further in the conclusion chapter.

## **CHAPTER 6: HOW STUDENTS MAINTAINED A COUNTER-SPACE WITH OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FROM STAFF, FACULTY, AND ADMINISTRATORS**

Undocumented students at Western College had a vision of establishing an institutionalized counter-space. To accomplish this vision of a counter-space, they needed to collaborate with other student populations, staff, faculty, and administrators on campus. The problem of having to collaborate is the question of whether these groups will uphold students' vision of a student-led counter-space.

Though researchers have found undocumented students are often the leading drives of change in building institutional support at colleges and universities across the country, staff, faculty, and administrators play a critical role in supporting undocumented students' advocacy (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Freeman et al., 2021; Sanchez & So, 2015; Southern, 2016). At the same time, scholars find that administrators' efforts to lead the charge of providing support to undocumented students often falls short of adequately building equity on campus (Andrade & Lundberg, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier & Young, 2019). For example, Tapia-Fuselier and Young (2019) found campus leaders issued statements of support for undocumented students after Trump threatened to end the DACA program, but few statements pointed students to resources that would be helpful for their daily lives.

When higher education leaders and policymakers take the lead in developing equity on college campuses, they often tokenize students' opinions by incorporating what they call "the student voice" during critical decision-making processes (Brooman et al., 2015). Incorporating "the student voice" often means providing an opportunity for students to speak at a critical event or conference on education reform. For example, at a conference where educators and

policymakers discuss how to build educational equity for undocumented students, they may decide to include “the student voice” by having an undocumented student be a keynote speaker at the conference.

However, scholars argue the concept of “the student voice” fails to engage the reality that “students are partners” (Seale et al., 2015, p. 534) in developing institutional change and cannot be simplified into one voice. Seeing “students as partners” means recognizing that students have agency and expertise and should be viewed as equal collaborators. Fletcher (2005) argues “it is not enough to simply listen to student voice. Educators have an ethical imperative to do something with students, and that is why meaningful student involvement is vital to school improvement” (p. 6). Seale and Fletcher (2005) argue the concept of “the student voice” fails to recognize students’ agency in building educational reform.

Moreover, youth and students themselves have also publicly critiqued the concept of “the student voice.” Sam Levin (n.d.), a high school student, was quoted in an op-ed in *The Washington Post* in 2014 saying:

I hate the phrase “student voice.” I’ll tell you why. People are starting to throw this phrase around a lot in discussions about education reform. “We need to give students a voice.” “More student voice!” “A place for students at the education reform table!” But I think it’s a mask. When people talk about giving students a voice, what they’re really doing—whether they realize or not (and to their credit, I suspect they don’t)—is finding a band-aid solution to a big problem that really needs surgery. “Student voice” is cushy and comfortable because it doesn’t actually require serious, deep-rooted change. We do need to give students something, but it’s not a voice. I know, because I’m a student. (As cited in Strauss, 2014, para. 2)

Levin (2014) argues “the student voice” is a “band-aid solution” for involving students and youth in decision making processed about educational reform because it does not take students’ expertise and agency seriously.

Working with immigrant communities and higher education institutions for almost 15 years, I often witness the disconnect between established organizations and immigrant communities themselves if the established organizations are not run by critical thinking leaders. I have been in numerous meetings where white citizens and other adults strategize about how to best support immigrant young people, without asking the youth directly what would feel supportive to them. I often feel uncomfortable in these meetings because the students' expertise and agency are not recognized. I have also been in meetings where higher education leaders are proud to incorporate what they call "the student voice." This often means that they will invite one student to speak on a panel or as the keynote speaker at conferences and events. Unfortunately, higher education leaders often do not follow up with these students in any meaningful way to collaborate with them. This often leaves the students I have worked with feeling unheard and hurt. As I have witnessed firsthand, the concept of "the student voice" seems to be a tool that higher education leaders use to make themselves feel like they are doing the right thing, even though they are just tokenizing students and not working with them in any kind of meaningful way.

As I will show in this second findings chapter, the concept of "the student voice" does not make sense in the context of a place like Western College. Moreover, the concept of "the student voice" is demeaning and oversimplified because (a) it suggests that students are not equal collaborators in the charge to build institutional support and (b) a large group of students' opinions can be boiled down to one "voice." The story of undocumented students' collaboration with staff, faculty, and administrators at Western College demonstrates how the concept of "the student voice" does not apply to a place like Western College, and therefore is not valid in the context of higher education at large.

In my first findings chapter, I demonstrated how undocumented students were successful in establishing an institutionalized counter-space by insisting that their programs remain student-led. In this second findings chapter, I address my next research question: *How did undocumented students navigate working with staff, faculty, and administrators in building programs for undocumented students at Western College?* Several key themes arose regarding undocumented students' relationships with staff, faculty, and administrators. In summary, undocumented students' relationships with other key players on campus were complicated. At times, staff, faculty, and administrators were supportive of undocumented students' efforts to build a counter-space and encouraged them to take leadership roles. Although undocumented students envisioned maintaining a student-led program, they also realized at various points in time they needed guidance and support from administrators, faculty, and staff. This created a tension where students wanted support from staff, but they were also clear with staff about wanting their programs to continue to be student led.

Although some staff, faculty, administrators, and other student populations were supportive of students' vision of a student-led program, the same groups of players also presented some of the largest roadblocks and barriers to undocumented students' efforts to build institutional change on campus, a phenomenon prevalent at other colleges and universities across the country (Alanis et al., 2021). These challenges arose for two reasons: either (a) other players' vision of how to support students clashed with the students' vision or (b) other players on campus thought undocumented students were undeserving of resources. These instances of hostility further highlighted the need for undocumented students to advocate for the development of a counter-space.

Moreover, dynamics between students and staff were complicated as some students and staff blurred the traditional understandings of the distinct roles between staff and students. Some student alumni came back to work for Western College as undocumented staff members, and some undocumented students ran the Resource Center as paid interns, essentially executing staff roles. As a result of these complicated dynamics between undocumented student leaders and other key players on campus, it is imperative to build structures in which undocumented students receive high quality mentorship and coaching in how to navigate complex political dynamics in building institutional change on their college campuses.

### **Opportunities Working With Other Students, Staff, Faculty, and Administrators**

Undocumented students who attended Western College during various years from 2006 to 2021 described how at various points in time they needed support and guidance from staff and faculty, but they also wanted their programs to remain student-led without staff taking over. Undocumented students also needed support from administration for their programs to be officially supported by the college. In addition to seeking support from staff, faculty, and administrators, student also sought to develop solidarity with other student groups on campus. In this section, I discuss why students realized they needed support from staff, but how they navigated power dynamics in making sure staff did not take over their programs. Then I discuss how undocumented students found the president of Western College to be a supporter of their goals and how international students were some of their biggest allies.

### ***Need for Staff to Offer Advice and Guidance for Their Counter-Space***

Undocumented students at Western College continually wanted advice and support from staff during all phases of organizing from 2006 to 2021, however, they were deliberate about keeping their programs student led. How did undocumented students maintain a student led

counter space while seeking support from staff on campus? It seems that in the process of seeking support from staff, undocumented students could quickly lose control and power over their programs. To address this issue of securing support from staff but maintaining the essence of a counter-space by having it remain student led, undocumented students navigated the complex transition of shifting from a “student-run” to a “student-led” program. In a student-run program, students took care of running everything. But for a student-led program, a staff member would value their vision of a student-led program, provide background administrative support, and offer institutional knowledge in how to navigate building their programs while allowing the students to direct the vision of the center and retain power in key decision-making processes. This transition from student run to student led was key in maintaining the essence of a counter-space within the institution.

Undocumented students were first introduced to this problem of needing support from staff in the early 2000s when they wanted to become an official student organization recognized by the college. To establish a formal student organization for undocumented students at Western College, they needed a staff adviser to serve in a formal advising role to basically sign off on paperwork. Alejandra, an undocumented student who attended Western from 2006 to 2008, described how they needed this adviser, “I think one of the hard pieces about organizing at the community college level is you need an advisor, right?” Alejandra went on to describe their process of looking for a staff adviser to guide the Undocumented Student Organization: “Jesus and I were interested in starting a group. It took a little while to figure out which advisor or which staff person would support us in starting something.” To formally establish their student organization or counter-space, they needed a staff adviser to sign on. They eventually found an

adviser to formally support them, but students faced hostility in this process, as I will describe in later sections about how they navigated obstacles from staff.

Though students were introduced to this problem of needing a staff adviser when they were founding their student organization, the problem became bigger and more acute when undocumented students needed support from staff members after founding the Undocumented Student Resource Center in 2011. At this point in time, they needed support from a staff member because they (a) were struggling to build the infrastructure of the center and (b) needed someone to stay for a longer period, as students were coming and going within just a few years.

After the Undocumented Student Resource Center was founded in 2011, undocumented students were seeking any support they could get because they felt lost in how to build the infrastructure of the center. Even though they had support from the \$9,000 grant, the newly founded center had little structure in place, and it was challenging to figure out how to run their programs. Patricia, an undocumented student at Western from 2014 to 2017, described how there was not much structure in place when she started as an intern for the center in 2014:

When I joined [the Undocumented Student Resource Center], I knew the program was very recent so there wasn't a lot of structure. We were still trying to figure things out, like our policies and how we can achieve the mission statement. The people that were working there were me and the new people. We didn't have experience; it was like everything was brand new.

Patricia describes how challenging it was to lead the center at the time, "We were lost because we were trying to figure things out."

In addition to trying to organize in an environment where there was little organizational structure in place, undocumented students also found it challenging to maintain a sense of momentum and sustainability because student leaders left Western College within a few years to transfer to 4-year universities. Because undocumented students came and left Western College



within a few years, they were looking for more permanent support from staff who would stay longer at Western College. Jay, a student who attended Western at a similar time from 2015 to 2019, echoes Patricia's comments saying it was challenging to run the center themselves as students, especially when they only stayed at Western for a few years and then transferred:

The biggest barrier was when the [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] initially started, their vision was to be student run. So I noticed that most of the interns, or whoever was involved with [the Center] were literally coming and going, cause, of course, we were only there for 2 years, 3 years and then transferred, you know, so of course, nobody was there permanently to pass on our legacies.

Patricia reiterates this point saying, "Because a lot of people are going to transfer like nobody's staying here forever." Jay and Patricia describe how it was challenging to maintain a sense of momentum when they were coming and leaving Western College so quickly as students. They hoped to find a staff member who could "pass on [their] legacies."

To address this problem of maintaining momentum and sustainability, students decided they wanted to advocate for the development of a designated staff position who could support undocumented students' efforts. Jay described how important it was to have a staff member who could be more permanent: "That was one of the biggest challenges because transferring that vision, to having someone who was there on a permanent basis." Jay goes on to explain why having a staff person was important: "I feel like that was one of the needs for the program to be successful right there and in the future, because it would solidify some sort of stability for the program to keep on going and be more useful for more students." Patricia echoed Jay's comments saying, "We learned we had to do our own research to look out for support from other staff and faculty." Upon consulting with other students in the center Jay described:

We all came to agree that having a full time director was gonna be the most beneficial thing. So we can have these legacies continue to go on and have something more solidified. So [the students with support from a director] can be able to navigate a little bit easier facing all these challenges instead of starting from scratch.

To institutionalize and sustain their counter-space, undocumented students described needing support from staff to establish formal programs and maintain a sense of momentum as students transferred to 4-year universities.

Undocumented students' desire for guidance from staff members is unsurprising, as researchers have found mentors play a critical role in supporting undocumented students with their educational journeys (Borjian, 2018; Gámez et al., 2017; Gonzales, 2015). Moreover, scholars of counter-spaces find that staff and faculty play a key role in supporting students' development of their counter-space (Solórzano et al., 2000). For example, Muñoz et al. (2014) found professors at Freedom University, an unaccredited university specifically for undocumented students in the state of Georgia, played an important role in building a counter-space for undocumented students to feel safe continuing their education beyond high school.

The role of allies, such as staff, faculty, and administrators at Western College, can be instrumental in supporting students and youth with their organizing goals. At the same time, students run the risk of staff, faculty, and administrators co-opting and taking control of their programs (Resendiz, 2021), so relationships with allies can be complex. If allies are effective in their role, allies can play a powerful role in supporting student and youth activists, but allies can also be some of the largest threats and obstacles.

### ***Maintaining a Student-Led Program With Support From Designated Staff***

In their search for a staff member who could facilitate the Undocumented Student Resource Center at Western College, undocumented students looked for someone who would appreciate their value of maintaining a student-led program and would not take over the programs. Marilyn, a faculty member who worked with undocumented students, described how students were in charge of the hiring process: "The students were in charge of hiring that person

and they were the ones to give that person their marching orders.” It was challenging for staff and students to find the right fit for the position. Marilyn describes how it took a long time to find the right person. Because funding for the position was minimal to begin with, Marilyn and the students struggled to find the right person to fill the position. Marilyn describes, “[Because the pay was little], I was never able to hire a person who really had the skills needed.” They went through a few faculty members who worked as directors and had one candidate who worked with them for a little while, but then left for a different job.

Finally, after much searching, students, staff, and faculty were thrilled to hire Carolina, one of the original founders of the Undocumented Student Resource Center, for the position. Undocumented students running the center at the time were excited for Carolina to take the position because she had experience being a student organizer herself and would understand the importance of supporting students in taking the lead. Patricia described how Carolina was the perfect person to hire for this position:

A lot of people are going to transfer like nobody’s staying here forever. That’s a *need* of having a director because the director will know the transitions. So it’s a good thing Carolina’s there now [as the director]. I mean, she’s a co founder! (laughs) So I feel like now [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] is in great hands. When she got hired, we weren’t there anymore. But I told her I’m super happy you’re here because you *really* care about [the resource center], you know that *we* care about [the center]. So we know that you’re always going to try your best to have [the center] in good standing.

Although students were excited for Carolina to take on the position, they were very clear with Carolina that the student center should remain student led to preserve the essence of their center as a counter-space. Jay remarked how this was a transition from being “student run” to “student led.” He described what it meant to have a student-led center, or counter-space, that was supported by a staff position:

The way that we decided to leave [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] and all agreed to move on was to have it student led. It was no longer student *run*, it was student

*led*. Meaning now the students still have the power of bringing their inputs of what their needs are, what's going on and how everything's like in making [decisions] around there. But it was no longer student run, because we had to create some sort of structure to be more permanent and more stable so I don't know how we want to compare [the difference between student-run and student-led]. But initially, we were student run . . . but it became student *led*, meaning the students still have these [issues] bring it up to the table? They'll count first, but with the help of a director to guide us through.

Jay discussed the complex power dynamics of having an institutionalized counter-space that is student-led with support from a director. To maintain the essence of a counter-space where undocumented Students of Color can experience a sense of safety away from the rest of the college, students made it clear to the new director that students would still have final say on important decisions. Although the center was no longer student-run, meaning the students no longer took care of all the gritty details to administratively run a center, the center was still student-led in terms of how important decision-making processes happened.

Despite being thrilled to take the new position of being a director, Carolina was also concerned the Resource Center maintained its essence of being a counter-space. She initially felt unsure about students' decision to hire a staff member to support the Resource Center because the original vision of the center was for it to be student-led, but she ultimately understood the students' decision to have support from a designated staff member. Having been a student organizer herself who valued student-led programs, Carolina shared the students' value for maintaining a student-led space even as a designated staff person came to support students' efforts. Carolina described her understanding of the importance of maintaining a student-led resource center:

We wanted [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] to be 100% student run [when they founded it in 2011] and it *was* for a long time. But then, at the same time, [the undocumented students running the center] identified when it was also time to bring in someone that was consistent. And at first, I remember being not so on board with that as an alumni. Because we were like, well, you know when we developed it, we really wanted it to be student run. But now I'm glad because I wouldn't be in this position (laughs). So, I'm glad the students decided that they did want to have more support from

the institution, with someone, either a faculty or staff member, *but* still keeping it student *led*. Because it was 100% student run and now it's 100% student led, but there is support from me as a staff member. But nothing happens at [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] unless the students decide. So yeah, it's lasting in terms of the beginning [vision] of [the Undocumented Student Resource Center].

Undocumented students described how Carolina was the “perfect” person to take the role of the new director because, as demonstrated by this quote from her, she deeply understood the importance of maintaining a student-led counter-space, having been a founder of the center herself.

After Carolina had been working as the director for several years, undocumented students in more recent years described how Carolina was successful in supporting a student-led Resource Center. Jacqueline, an undocumented student who attended Western College from 2006 to 2021, described what it meant to have student interns lead the center while Carolina supported their leadership:

We have guidance from the coordinator, Carolina, but it's mainly students who are running the center. So if we have an idea and if we want to work on something that other students have not worked on, then we have that liberty to do so. We just run it by everybody else, like the other interns, and we just get together, put our heads together to roll out the idea on how we're gonna organize.

Jacqueline further described how this kind of student-led program was different from usual work environments and what it looked like more tangibly for Carolina to support their leadership:

Typically at work, you come in, the boss tells you what to do, and then after that you get trained. You just do what you have to do because those are the rules, procedures, and protocols, right? But with the Resource Center, you have the liberty to be more creative and be your own leader, and in a sense your own boss because you don't have to go and ask somebody for permission, but you just ask the rest of the interns what we can improve on. So Carolina does more guidance. She'll say, “Hey, this is what the institute allows. If you really want to do it [and the institute doesn't allow it], we'll find a loophole.” So she's our guidance person. She'll say, “Instead of approaching it this way, let's approach it that way.” . . . So she's our go-to person and everything.

Jacqueline described how undocumented students with the Resource Center took the initiative to plan their own programs and follow their own vision. Carolina was a helpful coach in guiding

students in how to navigate institutional bureaucracy and potential “loopholes,” but students had the power to make their own decisions about what they wanted to focus their time on.

After the Undocumented Student Resource Center was established, undocumented students felt lost in their organizing efforts, especially as they transferred to 4-year universities and struggled to maintain a sense of momentum. To build a sense of stability over time and to have more guidance with their organizing efforts, they decided to advocate for the development of a staff position to support their work, though they were clear with the new staff person, Carolina, that the programs should remain student led. Many students found Carolina to be the perfect person to support the center because she had been an undocumented student and a founding member of the Resource Center herself, and therefore deeply understood the importance of a student-led institutionalized counter-space.

Scholars find that staff who facilitate Undocumented Student Resource Centers across the country can be successful in their position because many identify as undocumented themselves. Being an undocumented staff member, or having been an undocumented community college student themselves, meant that they could more easily relate to their students’ everyday experiences (Cisneros et al., 2021). In a study with practitioners at almost all the extant USRCs at both community colleges and 4-year universities across the country, Cisneros et al. found staff who were undocumented themselves saw themselves as being in the “fight” with undocumented students on their campus. A practitioner in their study described:

I approach this work from the mentality of, “I’m not here to be your savior. I’m here to fight along with you. I’m here to be a warrior with you. Because I myself, I’m in this journey still. I haven’t graduated from the undocumented life; I’m still experiencing it” (Cisneros et al., 2021, p. 5).

Some staff who facilitate USRCs at other colleges and universities who identify as undocumented themselves had a similar perspective and value to Carolina on how they think about their work with their students.

Because undocumented students at Western College were concerned about staff, faculty, and administrators co-opting their programs, as happens at other colleges and universities (Resendiz, 2021), they sought to find a staff member who shared their own values of a student-led program. Students thought that Carolina, who had been an undocumented student herself and a cofounder of the Resource Center at Western College, was the perfect fit for the position. It is noteworthy that students thought she was the perfect fit, not solely because she had been an undocumented student herself, but because she shared the same values as themselves of maintaining a student-led program. Although there has been a movement to increase representation of marginalized groups in positions of power, it is important for activists to advocate for a combination of leaders' identity *and* their values. It is not enough to simply increase representation by electing a person to a position of power who has a marginalized identity but does not uphold the values one might assume they would have because of their identity.

### ***Staff Encouraged Students to Take Leadership Roles***

Although undocumented students were successful in finding a staff member to facilitate the Undocumented Student Resource Center who shared their value for a student-led counter-space, undocumented students also experienced support from other staff and faculty who shared this same value, empowered them to be leaders, and provided emotional and holistic care for their organizing efforts.

In addition to Carolina, several other staff and faculty members at Western College understood the value of supporting student-led programs and encouraging students to take leadership roles. Shane, an IT staff member who spent extensive time supporting undocumented student initiatives at Western College, also deeply valued supporting students' leadership on campus. Offering a description of what staff and faculty collaboration with students could look like where students take the lead, he says: "I feel like the faculty and staff should be the dirt and water, and then the students should be the seeds." He argued that staff should create an environment and set the conditions in which undocumented students and student allies can take the lead and thrive in their community organizing efforts. He argues that staff should see themselves as the soil- nutrients in which students, or the seeds, can grow. Shane explains how staff and faculty can approach students in supporting a student-led program:

Hey, students, you know, I want *you* to generate a message. Show me what you think should go on the billboards. I'll tell you what I think. And then you control the green light or red light, whether we go ahead with that, or, you know, *you* generate the script. And then I can help get your message across and make sure we approach these points or do this thing . . . but you're in charge of the messaging.

Shane discussed the difference between empowering students to be leaders and seeing students as beneath you. He described tangible steps of what it would mean to encourage students to lead, such as allowing students to have final say in important decision-making processes.

In addition to Shane's value for student-led programs, in the early stages of the student movement at Western College from 2006 to 2009, one faculty member in particular, Alex, played a key role in supporting students' leadership. Alex identifies as half-Latina and half-white and was passionate about working with Latinx students and undocumented students. Many students at the time spoke about how Alex encouraged them to take the lead as student organizers. Andrea, an undocumented student alumnus who attended the college from 2007 to



2011, describes how Alex pushed students to be leaders in their advocacy efforts, “[Alex] definitely pushed us as students to be *the ones* meaning, yes, she was supporting us, but she would be like, no, it has to be done from *you guys*.” Andrea describes how Alex supported students in taking leadership roles, saying “it has to be done from you guys.”

Although staff and faculty like Alex played an important role in encouraging students to take leadership roles, Alex and other staff members also supported students emotionally by working with them holistically and empowering them to share their stories and advocate for their rights. Alejandra, an undocumented student alumnus who attended the college from 2006 to 2008, describes how Alex was genuinely interested in learning about her students and their needs. “Alex [was] a really supportive professor who was invested and interested in learning about students and their stories, and what we needed and what we wanted.” In addition to supporting students holistically, many students described how Alex empowered them to share their stories and advocate for their rights. Andrea shares:

That’s also when Alex really empowered me because I was still, like, uhhh a little embarrassed about being undocumented. Or I wasn’t open, out of the closet. So that’s when I started to become like, okay, yeah, I’m undocumented, and I should be open about it. I should share my story. And that’s one of the things that Alex really empowered her students—was to be empowered to tell your story, you know, to not be afraid. So I really appreciated that.

Andrea continued to describe, “I was pretty involved [with organizing on campus]. I really think it came from Alex really teaching us and pushing me to not be afraid of who I was, to feel empowered with my story.” Ixchel summarizes students’ sentiments for Alex: “You can see the influence that Alex has had on so many of us and our decisions and going forward, so I’m hoping that one day, I can be an Alex and inspire other students to do the same; to stick their necks out and do things that they don’t think they could or they never thought they could.” Alex

is an example of a faculty member who supported students holistically at the college and empowered them to share their stories.

Carolina also played a key role in developing students' sense of empowerment and leadership skills. Many undocumented student alumni and current students describe how they appreciate Carolina's approach to empowering students. Esperanza, an undocumented student who began at Western College in 2013 as an 18-year-old and identifies as Mexican and gender-fluid, describes Carolina's support for her advocacy efforts:

She was making enough room for us to make mistakes and grow, but she was never gonna let us fail, like she was always there to encourage us and support us in whatever way we wanted. I think throughout my time [at Western College] and there was definitely a moment where I needed more of her support and moments where I was on a roll and doing things on my own. . . . I just really appreciated her and I think I look up to her. The fact that she started [the Undocumented Student Resource Center], went and got her degree, came back, is now working as the director and is still doing her Masters, it's just like so, wow, like this is the epitome of someone who is dedicating their life to the community because she knows what it's like to struggle. That's what I wanted to do and it makes me feel like it's not impossible. So she's great and I love her and I'm so glad that she has the position because I cannot picture anyone else in that position.

Esperanza describes how Carolina supported students in taking leadership in advocacy efforts. She made room for them "to make mistakes and grow," but always supported students in their efforts. Carolina was a role model to Esperanza, showing how an undocumented student can become a staff member and continue to support undocumented students in taking leadership roles.

Many staff at Western College who worked with undocumented students shared the students' value of a student-led program and supported students in leading advocacy efforts for undocumented students. Staff members' value for a student-led program mirrors the dynamic at some other colleges and universities across the country. Cisneros et al. (2021) found, although

some staff ran the USRCs at their campus, there were a few USRCs that were run by students with support from staff members. As Cisneros et al. (2021) describe:

Most USRCs in our study operated under the leadership of one full-time coordinator, program manager, or director, while others utilized one or two part-time positions to fulfill similar responsibilities. Only a few USRCs were student run and operated, with the assistance of institutional allies. (p. 4)

None of the eight staff, faculty, and administrators I spoke to at Western College referred to their undocumented students as “the student voice.” I did not ask them specifically about the concept of “the student voice,” but at the same time, none of them brought it up. I assume this is because these staff and faculty understood that undocumented students at Western College led the charge to develop a supportive counter-space on campus and continued to insist that their counter-space be student-led so these staff and faculty understood what it meant to see their “students as partners” (Seale et al., 2015, p. 534) and collaborate with students on institutional change initiatives.

### ***Support From Administration***

Undocumented student alumni, and staff and faculty who worked with undocumented students described the President of Western College as being very supportive of undocumented students’ advocacy efforts. President Miller began his presidency at Western College in 2004, 2 years before the beginning of the movement of undocumented student organizing at Western college. Staff and faculty both described President Miller as having a strong value for supporting student activism and students’ civic engagement. Marilyn, a faculty member who leads civic engagement programs at the college, described how President Miller built an institutional culture around the importance of supporting students’ civic engagement and political activism. Marilyn describes her work with President Miller,

This is my 29th year [working for Western College]. I had a social justice club for about 25 years. Then a new president came 15 years ago [in 2004] and he wanted to get civic engagement work to happen at Western College. President Miller pulled together a focus group to figure out what civic work would look like at Western College. We got a grant to pay students to do organizing work.

Reflecting on how much progress they have made in the past 15 years to build opportunities for students to do civic engagement work, Marilyn describes, “Gosh, I think we have 25 paid interns now working on different projects.” These paid internship positions for students were in many offices across the campus including offices that supported civic engagement and student equity. Alex, a faculty member who worked with Marilyn and undocumented students around 2005 to 2009 echoed Marilyn’s description of President Miller saying, “Our president had always been very supportive of student activism and student rights. President Miller and [other senior administrators] really listened. And they began to figure out what rights do these students have.”

Many undocumented students who attended Western College over the years from 2006 to 2021 also found President Miller to be supportive of their advocacy efforts. Speaking of his experiences organizing at Western College from 2006 to 2009, Jesus described, “I don’t remember any administrators that were against what we were doing. For the most part, they seemed on board.” He described President Miller as being supportive of undocumented students saying, “[President Miller] was a very empathetic individual. He *did* listen to our concerns. We did feel, at least for me, I’m only going to speak on myself, but I did feel that when we would speak to him, we *were* heard.” Carolina, an undocumented student who attended Western College from 2009 to 2013, described their positive experiences meeting with President Miller:

We started meeting with the President of the College at the time who was John Miller and just trying to figure out what are the ways that the college can support undocumented students, but faculty and staff administrators are the ones that need to do something right? So our approach was, here are the needs and so how can the institution meet those needs. . . . We did have strong support from the president’s office and so that was great.

Although Carolina and her peers aimed for their programs to be student led, they also needed support from their administration in the process of institutionalizing their counter-space. As Carolina said, “Administrators are the ones that need to do something right?” Students navigated relationships with administrators by informing them of undocumented students’ needs and how the institution should address these needs. Furthermore, Jay, an undocumented student who attended Western College after Carolina from 2015 to 2019, described President Miller as continuing to support their efforts, “I like that the administrators were able to also be open minded and understand our needs of students was also something that was really helpful throughout the whole process and experience.”

Some specific examples of President Miller’s support for undocumented students are that he supported students in gaining a bigger space for their Resource Center and created paid internship positions for students to run the center. Paola, an undocumented student who attended Western College from 2009 to 2013, shared that when they first won the \$9,000 grant to establish the Resource Center, President Miller was supportive of the center. “We let the president of the college know, and so he was supportive.” Carolina also described how President Miller supported their efforts to gain physical space for their Resource Center, “With support of the president’s office, we were able to secure a shared space and then eventually our *own* space.”

President Miller also succeeded in establishing paid internship positions for students to run programs for undocumented students. Andrea, an undocumented student born in Mexico who attended Western College from 2007 to 2011 prior to the founding of the Undocumented Student Resource Center, described President Miller’s support for paid internships, “Alex [a faculty member] along with President Miller were trying to find creative ways that all of our efforts and all of our organizing, we would get paid, right? So they would call it internships.”

The extensive support from administration at Western College, particularly President Miller, is surprising, as researchers have found undocumented students often struggle to get the attention of administrators to care about their organizing efforts (Sanchez & So, 2015). President Miller's support for undocumented student activism in the early 2000s is especially surprising, considering that around the same time, students at other campuses had to stage protests just to get a meeting with an administrator (Sanchez & So, 2015). For example, Sanchez and So describe how undocumented students at the University of California, Berkeley in 2010 had to stage a 9-day hunger strike just to get a meeting with the campus's chancellor.

Though many administrators are hard to access, some researchers have found university leaders can be helpful to undocumented student activists. At Eastern Connecticut State University, a public university in the state of Connecticut, undocumented student leaders Daniel Castillo and Daniela Iniestra Veralas (2021) describe how their university president, Dr. Elsa Núñez, provided extensive support to their organizing efforts (Freeman et al., 2021). It is noteworthy that President Miller was so supportive of undocumented students throughout his presidency at Western College. Although students at other colleges and universities at the time had to stage multiday hunger strike just to get a meeting with a campus leader (Sanchez & So, 2015), President Miller was readily available to undocumented students at Western College. In my own meetings with President Miller about other projects we worked on prior to working on my dissertation, I was impressed by President Miller's values of supporting student organizing.

### ***Support From Other Student Populations, Especially International Students***

In addition to staff, faculty, and administrators, other student populations on campus, such as international students, were staunch advocates for the undocumented student movement at Western College. For this project, I talked to three international students, Celeste, Martina, and

D.G, who had been advocates for undocumented students. Celeste and Martina were international students from countries in South America, whereas D.G is indigenous Taiwanese. D.G. had been a student at Western College for 10 years and advocated extensively for undocumented students.

International students described how they felt they could relate to undocumented students in many ways because of their experiences also navigating racism and xenophobia. D.G., who is indigenous Taiwanese, said that she felt closely connected to undocumented Latinx students because she looked Brown herself: “I feel like there’s a lot of experience I can share [with Latinx undocumented students] like an overlapping between being indigenous Taiwanese in Taiwan and also being a Brown person in the United States.” D.G. felt she could relate to undocumented students’ struggles because of her experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination both in Taiwan and the United States.

All three of these international students believed it was important to advocate for the rights of undocumented students. When I asked D.G. why she thought working with undocumented students was important, she responded:

To make it simple, I just feel this injustice. And that’s why I wanted to work with them. But I would definitely say that, if I’m being honest, I don’t know their struggle before I work for them. And I learned their struggle more and more. Before, I just see my friends there. I want to work with my friends. That’s it. When I learn more about them, learn more about the politics, and learn more about how they were here [in the United States] in the first place, and then how United States enrolled to all the military, the war, and then the drug, something to push them out of their country and eventually have to seek asylum in the United States. So initially, I just want to work with my friends just to hang out with my friends and then I learned more about them. And then I learned that the United States cannot blame them for anything because the United States has a responsibility today for why they are here. So it will be unfair, like it also is nonsense, and just as unreasonable to push them out, because you’re the reason why they’re here. So I wouldn’t say I have any glory, like high reason, why I want to work with them. I just want to be with my friends. And when I know them, that’s why I *continue* to work with them and fight with them.

D.G. described how her primary motivation to work with undocumented students was because they were her friends at Western College. And beyond that she “feels this injustice” because the United States forced migrants to come to this country and then punishes them for being here.

Martina, an international student from a country in South America, described why she thought it was important to fight for educational justice for immigrant and undocumented communities:

I have this passion to help other people. I don't like the word helping, but giving support. It's important [to work with undocumented students] because I think we all have to have rights and opportunities to be here [in the United States], and to be in any part of the world. I think that it's not cool the way it works and it restricts most of what they want to do. So I think it's an important matter and subject. It is an important issue of this society.

When I asked Martina about her experience with other international students on campus, she felt that all the international students she had met had been supportive of building institutional programs for undocumented students.

I have friends from Russia, China, Brazil, and India. So I have this opportunity to have different friends from all over the world. My friends do a lot of civic work. One is in the Student Resource [center]. The other one is in the mental health program. And all of them has something to say about social justice. So this kind of undocumented for us, it was never a topic like they *should* have this rights or *not*. So in being part of [the Undocumented Student Resource Center], they always say it's so good that you are in [the center] because all these undocumented students need to be known because it was never in my mind that undocumented students exist, so they [my friends who are international students] agree with this statement of mine.

Martina's “statement” was that she wanted to spend a lot of her time at Western College working with undocumented students to continue to build their counter-space. She found that her friends who were international students also thought it was important to build educational justice for undocumented students. All in all, international students were some of biggest advocates for undocumented students on campus.



International students' goals of supporting undocumented students does not surprise me. Having worked with many international and immigrant students at a community college in Boston, I noticed how international students faced many of the same challenges as immigrant and undocumented students, such as limited opportunities to work off campus. Whereas some international students came to the United States with financial resources, others I worked with slipped into a state of homelessness because they could not afford the cost of rent in Boston, but they were determined to finish their degrees. Building solidarity between marginalized communities can be a powerful organizing strategy.

In addition to international students, undocumented students at Western College sought to build solidarity and relationships with other student groups on campus, who in turn supported undocumented students' counter-space. Undocumented students who facilitated the newly established Resource Center around 2013, described how one of their main priorities to build the foundation of the center was to establish relationships with other student groups on campus. Students focused on connecting with Black and Asian student groups. Dulce, who attended Western College from 2011 to 2017, described building these mutually beneficial and supportive relationships:

We showed up to events that are other causes that we wanted to support. I know that [the Black student group] wanted to get more funding at one point and we helped push for that. We also supported Remembrance Day for Japanese American internment camps. We showed up and just wanted to be present and show our support. So it was a two way street. We showed up for them, they showed up for us. And it was a great relationship on campus that we had with everyone.

Dulce described how undocumented students leading the Resource Center poured a lot of energy into supporting other student groups on campus, who in turn, were supportive of the events and programs they organized.

## **Challenges From Other Students, Staff, Faculty, and Administrators**

Though staff, faculty, administrators, and international students had been staunch advocates for the undocumented student movement at Western College, the very same groups of people also posed some of the largest barriers to their advocacy. Undocumented students at Western College encountered numerous vexing problems in their efforts to strengthen and build their counter-space at Western College. These challenges included students' perceptions of institutional barriers, class differences with other student populations, and unwillingness of institutional allies to really listen to them. Although undocumented students found the college's administration to be supportive of their advocacy, even having support from the top did not mean they could always successfully navigate bureaucratic issues at the college. Undocumented students also perceived that they encountered issues of class when explaining to other student populations why building institutional support for undocumented students is important. Moreover, undocumented students reflected that staff and faculty who touted themselves as allies presented some of the largest barriers to their efforts.

### ***Challenge With Bureaucracy and Administrators***

Undocumented students at Western College, as well as faculty and staff who supported students, explained that even though the president of the college was on their side, he did not have the ability to ensure his promises because of the challenges of institutional bureaucracy. For example, President Miller had initially promised undocumented students that he could allocate physical space on campus for their Undocumented Student Resource Center, but he did not swiftly follow through on this promise because of the slowness of bureaucracy. Marilyn, a faculty member who extensively supported undocumented students, described how even though

President Miller was supportive of undocumented students getting space for their center, the logistics of ensuring that space was complex. Marilyn said:

One of the reasons we have what we have is that President John Miller, when he was president, was that he was actually quite passionate and understood that if you care about something, you gotta give it resources. He was not super successful, but he was at least sympathetic. So for example, the first fight . . . so it was easy for the students to get their paid internships right? It's like as soon as we had paid internships, we hired them and they were ready to go and really into it and really great organizers. And that's a whole story to be told about just those individuals. [Marilyn here is referring to student alumni like Carolina, Paola, and Anadaisy.] But their first big fight was for space and basically everybody said no, sorry, we care about you, we'd love to give you space, but life is hard and we don't have space for you. And then at a certain point, President John Miller promised them space without knowing where that space would come from. And it turned into just a whole *really* difficult situation. But because he had made the promise, and he is a guy with integrity he finally got them a little space.

Marilyn describes how even though President Miller said he was supportive of undocumented students' goals, like securing a physical space for their Undocumented Student Resource Center on campus, bureaucracy became one of the biggest challenges to actualize students' goals. Even though President Miller was supportive of allocating their space, issues of bureaucracy made it challenging to secure the space. Marilyn's summarized these issues saying, "Even with very strong support from the top, it took a lot to get institutional support."

In my one-on-one conversations with President Miller for a separate project, he also mentioned that there were some issues in designating the space and the process took longer than they had hoped. In my conversations with President Miller and other students and faculty at Western College, the details of this bureaucratic hold up are still unclear to me as I did not press into the issues as much as I should have with follow up questions. Future research could investigate these issues of bureaucracy to illuminate the organizational barriers students faced, so that students at other colleges and universities across the country can be better prepared to face these bureaucratic challenges as they arise.

Compounding these issues of bureaucracy, undocumented students described challenges working with other administrators of the college. Jay described how an administrator was difficult to work with because they were not responsive to his messages. Jay recalled:

I do recall talking to the administrator who's in charge of managing all the classrooms, because there—I forgot what their title is—but there is an administrator who is in charge of administrating classrooms in every single space in the college used when classes are going to be taken in certain classrooms, in what spaces are available, and furniture stuff, so I did have to talk to him. And it was really challenging because the communication was mainly through email, but they were really unavailable in person to talk to them one on one.

Although Jay preferred to communicate in person to book rooms for important events, this administrator insisted that Jay communicate with them over email. This was challenging for Jay because the administrator did not respond to his emails. This kind of unavailability from administrators is unsurprising considering how research finds that administrators can often be unavailable for students (Sanchez & So, 2015). Though President John Miller was supportive of undocumented students, even with support from the top, issues of bureaucracy and unavailability of other administrators made it challenging for undocumented students to actualize their goals.

Having been a PhD student myself for the past 6 years, I am no stranger to this phenomenon of professors and administrators not emailing students back. Sometimes professors and administrators get busy which is very understandable and human, but to habitually be unavailable is very frustrating for students. This seems to be a part of academic culture that professors have normalized that does not exist in other work environments I have worked in. I hope that an academic culture can grow where professors can find a way to clearly communicate with their students about what students can expect about their availability.

### *Opposition From International Students*

Undocumented students at Western College perceived that socioeconomic class and ideological differences with other student populations presented some of the largest barriers to their advocacy efforts. Jesus, who attended Western from 2006 to 2009, and Jay, who attended the college from 2015 to 2019, both described their biggest challenge to their efforts being international students in student government. Though most researchers have found staff, faculty, and administrators present some of the largest obstacles and barriers to building institutional support for undocumented students (Sanchez & So, 2015), it is interesting that undocumented students at Western described how some of the largest opposition came from other students.

Jesus described how international students blocked many of their efforts to build institutional support for undocumented students because international students were powerful figures in Western College's student government. Jesus described how he felt supported by Western College's administration but faced opposition from other students: "I don't remember any administrators that were against what we were doing for the most part, they seemed on board, but [the opposition] mainly came from within students." The student government at Western College from 2006 to 2009 had the power to decide how \$3 million were spent on programs and resources for various student populations on campus. Describing students in student government, Jesus said:

They had the power to vote on the budget. So the Western College Student Senate had, I want to say at the time had—I might be wrong on the amount—but a sizable amount of \$3 million in funds that they were able to vote on. And then different on campus programs would petition for some of these funds. And so some of them would get some of that, or just how that process goes. . . . And so they had a sizable amount of money that they were sitting on. And so that's why we would always try to advocate especially at these meetings, because we would want some of those funds to create the space.

Given students in student government had a powerful say over the \$3 million budget, undocumented student leaders continually advocated to the student government the importance of allocating funds to support programs and resource for undocumented students. However, Jesus described how international students in student government from 2006 to 2009 did not think it was important to allocate funds to undocumented students. Jesus described this opposition:

Some of the opposition came from some of the elected student officials and their denial of funds or not funding some programs, or not giving money... Whenever there was a budget vote, we would always have to show up in mass. And we would have to speak on why [institutional support for undocumented students] was important. Because that threat of not having enough funds was always there. I don't know what the case is now because it's been a while, but I remember that whenever there'd be meetings with regards to funding, we would always have to show up in force, because we were always being threatened that our money was gonna be taken away. I hate to point fingers, but I would say [the opposition] would come from the international students that were on the board, or that were elected into these positions, they would be the ones that would be very ominous, and their voting and how they would vote especially for some of these funds. And so that's where some of that opposition came from.

Jesus described how international students in the student government did not think it was important to allocate resources to undocumented students. To make a case to these international students in student government, undocumented students had to "show up in force" and "in mass" to make a compelling case to the international students why they should receive institutional support to build their counter-space. Jesus continued to described how he found international students in student government thought that undocumented students were undeserving of resources:

I remember the international students there saying, why do we need this program where we also have this? Whenever we'd say we want to get counselors to support these students, they'd say, but there's already the counseling office, why can't you use that? And so there was this disconnect that was happening behind our reasons for wanting these spaces and for wanting these resources.

Jesus believed that international students were not supportive of undocumented students because of class and ideological differences. Undocumented students at Western noticed that

international students at their college tended to have more financial resources and privilege than undocumented students at Western College, who tend to be low income (Gonzales, 2015). When I asked Jesus why he felt like international students were against institutional support for undocumented students, he described complex dynamics between immigrant communities:

I want to say that international students don't want to support undocumented students is what my gut would tell me. Just because there's always this point of contention within the immigrant community, where you have the individuals that say I quote, unquote, got here "the legal way." And so there is that head butting part of the immigrant community because you have the individuals that have the privilege and the ability to get visas to be able to travel to have the money to be able to come over here because to be an international student is not a cheap endeavor.

Jesus thought that international students were frustrated with undocumented students because they themselves had arrived in the United States the "quote unquote legal way." Moreover, although Jesus acknowledged he could see international students' frustrations because studying in the United States as an international student "is not a cheap endeavor," he was also frustrated with international students because he found that they tended to be more wealthy than undocumented students at Western College:

I know that there's issues that international students face. But from where I was standing, at the time, the students that were international had a lot more privilege because they would show up in these fancy cars. They'd be living on their own in [the local neighborhood], and [the local neighborhood] is a very expensive city to live in. And so, I felt that the opposition was mainly geared towards undocumented students.

Jesus described how international students at Western College tended to have more money, drove "fancy cars," and lived in the local neighborhood where the cost of living was very expensive, whereas undocumented students tended to live in more low-income communities. Although international students can sometimes be in a similar situation to undocumented students, as international students like D.G. described, undocumented students at Western

hypothesized that other international students did not think it was important to support undocumented students because of class and ideological differences.

Despite being frustrated with international students in the student government, Jesus made it clear he did not want to generalize that all international students were unsupportive of undocumented students. He explains, “I’m trying to not be very generalistic. I don’t want to generalize what I’m saying. But international students is who I always felt we always had the opposition from.”

This dynamic between immigrants who have papers and undocumented immigrants is not new. Scholars and researchers have found throughout decades of history, although many immigrants who have papers are staunch advocates of undocumented immigrants, some immigrants with papers discriminate against undocumented immigrants. For example, Flores (2016) explains how Mexican American citizens in the 1950s advocated for their own rights by blaming undocumented immigrants for “threatening their labor and civil rights agendas” (p. 76). A publication in 1953 written by a Mexican-American-led organization titled *What Price Wetbacks?* says: “*These are the wetbacks*—hundreds of thousands of them pushing across the Rio Grande day after day, pushing their blood brothers, American citizens of Mexican descent, out of jobs . . . pushing wages down” (Flores, 2016, pp. 76–77). In addition to countless examples throughout history of immigrants with papers who advocate for undocumented immigrants, there are tensions with immigrant communities where undocumented immigrants get discriminated against.

Echoing Jesus’s description of opposition from international students in student government at Western College from 2006 to 2009, Jay described similar opposition from



international students when he was an undocumented student at Western College from 2015 to 2019:

There was this one time where we had, *I had trouble* (laughs) with Western College's student body, because one of the student body members made a comment that undocumented students should not have the access to getting all these resources cause they don't deserve it. It was a comment that was cruel and targeted our community, or a group literally of undocumented students.

Jay went to great lengths to sit down with the international students in student government to explain to them why supporting undocumented students is important.

So we stood up and gave them information on what exactly an undocumented student is, and what are the purposes of being in this country. And they were more able to understand our struggles and agree and put themselves in our shoes. So I guess it was just a matter of them not being informed. And plus, most of the people who made those comments were international students. So it makes sense, they have no knowledge of what it is to live in this country, being undocumented, while pursuing the American dream, you know?

Jay found that the international students in student government were ignorant about what it meant to be undocumented in the United States and the underlying reasons why families and individuals would migrate to this country. Jay described how he was hesitant to even share this story with me because he did not want to make it seem like he was generalizing about international students, like how Jesus did not want to generalize, but Jay made it clear that international students presented some of the largest barriers.

I don't share this too many times. I like to keep it to myself because it seems like for me, it seems like it was just a miscommunication thing and they don't have the knowledge. So after we explained to them the whole American dream of what we're doing here because it seems they're can't know in this country who was here illegally. So I was like, okay, you're definitely not getting this right.

Though Jesus surmised that international students in student government from 2006 to 2009 were against allocating resources to undocumented students because of anti-immigrant

sentiment and class differences within immigrant communities, Jay was trying to understand international students' opposition from 2015 to 2019 as primarily being a result of ignorance.

In addition to experiencing opposition from student government, Jay also had a friend who was an international student who told him that undocumented students should not receive support from the college. Jay said:

And I'm also gonna share this with you, I actually met a friend who, okay, so he was not part of the Student Government. He was just a friend and he was here under a student visa. So he was definitely an international student. And he ask me, how are we [undocumented students] getting all these free resources? How are we having access to all of that? He thought it was unfair for us to be getting all of this and for free or like having access to them. While he was being forced to pay all that [tuition and fees] and I was like, we actually are being forced to pay all of that [tuition and fees], because we don't have a social security number. Some of us don't have a social security number, we have to pay all those fees, and all of that. So we're trying to find ways to navigate that. While [international students] seem to be a little more privileged because they come from wealthy families out of the country, you know? (laughs)

Both Jesus, who attended Western College from 2006 to 2009, and Jay, who attended the college from 2015 to 2019, described how international students in student government presented some of the largest barriers to advance programming and resources for undocumented students because international students did not think it was important to allocate resources to undocumented students. Though some international students were staunch advocates for undocumented students, and international students seem to be in a similar position to undocumented students, powerful international students in student government did not understand undocumented students' circumstances.

Oftentimes the system of white cis heteropatriarchy is designed to pit marginalized communities against each other. In many instances when a marginalized community aligns itself with whiteness, as in the case of Mexican American organizers in the 1950s that I mentioned earlier, it is often because they are fighting for their own survival. Though an understandable

tactic, it is important for marginalized communities to build solidarity and fight for each other as this will ultimately make them the most powerful in fighting white supremacy. Undocumented students at Western College understood this potential of power, which is why they sought to build relationships with other student groups across the campus.

As a queer person, I can speak to this phenomenon from personal experience within the LGBTQ community. Although I dream of a LGBTQ community that is inclusive and welcoming to everyone, especially youth who are seeking safe spaces away from toxic environments they are in, there is no such thing as an overall welcoming LGBTQ community. There are of course pockets of welcoming LGBTQ communities, who I love and admire, but these communities and individuals are not always the norm. For example, though some lesbians are the biggest advocates for trans people, I have also met many lesbians who have intensely transphobic views and have expected me to agree with them. This is always disappointing when subpopulations in the larger LGBTQ community actively oppress each other instead of being there for one another.

### **Staff Also Hindered Students' Sense of Agency**

Compounding issues of bureaucracy and opposition from international students, undocumented students also encountered vexing issues with staff who presented themselves as allies but were actually some of the biggest barriers. These issues arose because staff did not deeply understand what it meant to see students as their equal collaborators, and staff had opinions about how to best support undocumented students that were harmful to students. Shane, a staff member who works in IT and extensively supports programming for undocumented students, critiqued staff and faculty at the college who lead civic engagement programs but do not deeply understand what it means to collaborate with students. He described how staff and faculty who tout themselves as advocates for civic engagement subconsciously look down on

their students. Shane said, “There’s great civic engagement efforts, but I just don’t know that it’s always centered with the students or that the students are the nucleus of it and everything branches out.” Shane describes what it looks like when staff engage students in advocacy projects, but do not give students leadership roles:

I think that there will be meetings and gatherings and rather than the students speaking first, it will be the faculty member that will speak first. And they’ll say- maybe I’m guilty too- I just think the older generation like we kind of do this in general, where we want to impart knowledge, more than we want to hear, hey, what do you want? What do you need? Because I’m a strong believer that communities... I don’t need to think of ways to help undocumented students, undocumented students are going to tell me how they need help. And I think that’s the difference. Like sometimes there’ll be people that walk into a room, and will say, I understand your problems. This is how I’m going to try and fix it. We’re going to start having initiatives, I need you to create billboards that say this, I need you to send out a message to this person that says this, I’ll give you the script.

Staff and faculty told students what to do, instead of listening to the students and collaborating with them.

Shane’s frustration with other staff members presuming what students need without asking them echoes undocumented students’ sentiments at other colleges and universities across the country. In a YouTube video produced by undocumented students at Eastern Connecticut State University, an undocumented student, Daniel Castillo, says, “If you want to know how to best help undocumented students, you should ask undocumented students.” Maribel Sanchez, a staff member who works with undocumented students at Daniel’s university, mirrors Daniel’s value, saying, “Be willing to learn, especially if you’re not an undocumented person. Be willing to listen” (UndocuScholars, 2019, 06:43).

Undocumented student alumni at Western College also reported how staff prevented students from feeling empowered and taking on leadership roles. In these instances, staff and faculty who believed themselves to be allies, presented some of the largest barriers because they made incorrect assumptions about what is best for undocumented students without fully listening

to the students. Anadaisy, an undocumented student who attended the college from 2007 to 2015, described her encounter with a staff member in 2009 who discouraged her from creating a student organization for undocumented students. At the time, students had an informal student club for undocumented students and wanted to establish a more formal student organization. To establish an organization, students needed an official staff adviser. Anadaisy sought out a staff member who had supported student organizers in the past, but this staff member discouraged Anadaisy from establishing a student organization specifically for undocumented students.

Anadaisy describes:

I went and asked her, I was like, “Hey, how do I start my club?” And so this was actually something that this individual did not feel comfortable with. And it was an hour-long conversation where they tried to convince me not to self-identify, not to say, AB540 in the name [of the student organization] or not to say undocumented. So this is 2009, I wanted to say, “Hey, this is a group *for* undocumented students, right?” At that time, after the hour-long conversation of her just being scared for me as an ally, I guess, and so I was like, alright, I’m reasonable, I can see that to be true. And so that’s why we chose a name [for the Undocumented Student Organization] that was kind of ambiguous but if you knew what it was about then it makes sense.

Though some could interpret this staff member’s goal as protecting Anadaisy and her peers for not being targeted as a student organization for undocumented students, this was harmful to Anadaisy because she and her peers were willing to take the risk and wanted it to be clear the student organization was meant for undocumented students. Through tears, Anadaisy described her frustration with this staff member:

Being at the forefront of starting a student club that would openly address the issue, I had to deal with a lot of politics. The biggest obstacle was the conversation that I had with the ally, which actually felt really aggressive to me at the time, as I was reaching out to her for support. And her response was, like, don’t do it. Was very much, ‘you’re wrong to do this. Don’t do it.’ And then all I could think of in response was, you’re not undocumented. You don’t know what it’s like. [Begins to cry]. So don’t tell me what I can talk about or not. Because it’s not your place. I think that’s still one of the most hard to process conversations.

Anadaisy describes how hurtful it was that this staff member who was a U.S. citizen had such strong opinions about the way she wanted to develop a student organization for undocumented students. Although Anadaisy acknowledged the staff member's possible intentions could have been to protect her, Anadaisy ultimately felt like this staff members' concerns were misguided and quite harmful to her.

Undocumented students at Western College encountered unexpected challenges from administration, other student populations, and staff and faculty in their efforts to strengthen their counter-space. The president of the college who was on their side did not actually have the power to do everything he promised the students. Staff and faculty who tout themselves as allies dissuaded students from advocating for themselves. And international students who have many similar life circumstances with undocumented students did not actualize understand class differences and undocumented students' experiences.

I can deeply sympathize with Anadaisy's experience wrestling with the staff member's strong opinions about how she should advocate for herself and her community. Staff, faculty, and administrators on college campuses can support students taking on risks in their organizing efforts by informing them of the nuances of the risks they are taking so students can make as informed a decision as possible. Students can also be provided with resources to support them as they take on those risks. But staff, faculty, and administrators should not restrict students' goals if they personally believe students should not be taking those risks, because it is ultimately not their place to make those decisions about risks for the students. Especially if staff, faculty, and administrators are in a position of privilege, as was the case of this staff member who was a citizen who Anadaisy spoke to, they should not be able to stop students from making their own decisions about the risks they want to take.

## **Blurring the Lines Between Staff and Students**

Educational research studies make clear distinctions between the role of staff and students. Although these distinctions traditionally make sense, I found students and staff at Western College expanded their positions while navigating the establishment of new understandings of these roles. First, several undocumented student alumni came back to work for Western College as staff members, raising issues about support for undocumented staff members. These staff members also intimately understood what it meant to an undocumented student organizer because they had been student organizers themselves. Furthermore, students stretched the common conceptual understanding of their role because they essentially served as part-time staff members in their paid internship positions with the Resource Center.

Some undocumented students who were instrumental in building the counter-space on campus were so passionate about their programs that they came back to work as part-time staff members who support students to lead the center. These alumni were excited to return to working for Western College as they felt like the Undocumented Student Resource Center had been their “baby” and they wanted to continue to see it grow. In their role as undocumented staff members, in addition to supporting undocumented students, they also advocated for increased institutional support for undocumented staff members.

Although a few staff members blurred the lines as undocumented student alumni who came back to Western College to work as staff, students blurred the lines by working in part-time paid internship positions where they ran programs for the Resource Center. The paid internship positions required that students worked at least 20 hours a week, essentially a similar role as staff members. In these ways, we can see how students and staff blurred our traditional understanding of the distinction between these two roles.

## **New Directions for Western College**

Though I talked to alumni who spoke to the dynamics between undocumented students, and other student populations, staff, faculty, and administrators over the years from 2006 to 2021, there may be a new dynamic unfolding with the overall culture of Western College at large. Moreover, whereas many students found the Undocumented Student Resource Center to be a student-led and empowering space in recent years, two students questioned how student led the programs remained.

### ***New President***

In 2018, President Miller announced his plans to retire, and a new president, President Fellows, joined Western College during the COVID-19 global pandemic in July 2020. Staff and students seemed optimistic about the new president and his commitment to continuing to advance institutional support for undocumented students. Jacqueline, a current undocumented student at Western College in 2021, described her hope that President Fellows would continue to help build institutional support for undocumented students, “Now that we have the new president, I feel like more doors will be opened for our undocumented students.” Krista, a staff member who worked in the counseling office and leads UndocuAlly trainings [pseudonym to protect identity of college] for staff, faculty, and administrators across campus, described her optimism that President Fellows would support undocumented student programming:

Overall, I see support, I see commitment from the president and senior staff. I think they are committed to going through the UndocuAlly [pseudonym] trainings, so that’s great. They’re not just talking in support, their *acting* right? And not separating themselves from it. So that’s a good sign when the leadership is also participating in the work actively. And also support resources or funding and that I don’t know the details, but it sounds like the administration or the senior admins are really pushing to support equity work and the different affinity groups and communities for Students of Color.



Though everyone I talked to was hopeful about President Fellows, several staff and students expressed feeling like they just did not know enough about President Fellows yet. Everyone was meeting the new president over Zoom online during the pandemic and almost no one had met him in person, so some staff expressed concerns about building trust with him over the Zoom platform. Shane, an IT staff member who supports programming for undocumented students, humorously described that he had trouble trusting the new president who he had only met through Zoom because he did not know how tall he was:

Yeah, I got a good vibe [about President Fellows] from the meeting [with staff and students regarding institutional support for undocumented students]. Like it's still hard when you haven't met a person. I joke with people about President Fellows. I'm just like, you know, it's weird to me that I don't know how tall he is. Like I just see him on a screen and you know, he could be as tall as like a Ken Doll but, you know, I don't know why that matters, but just like not seeing somebody in person and having like a physical interaction and like a rapport like generating trust. Yeah, it's hard to trust things over the internet. I guess I'm just skeptical in general.

The nature of meeting online during the COVID-19 global pandemic affected staff members' ability to trust the intentions of the new president. Although many staff and students were optimistic about President Fellows, they still felt like they needed more time to get to know him and trust him more.

### ***Critique of Student-Led Programs***

Though many undocumented students described the immensely positive impact of being part of a student-led program where staff and other students encouraged students' leadership skills, some students in recent years described how they did not experience the Undocumented Student Resource Center to be a student-led space. They appreciated the goal of a student-led space, but they felt that staff ran the center instead of students. A student who assisted the center in recent years described Carolina as being like her "boss" suggesting how Carolina had power over her. In a conversation with another student who was involved in working with the college's

Resource Center, she felt that the program was not student led. She described a metaphor that the program was more like a “mother bird” where the mother bird holds her baby birds close in her nest with her wings. The baby birds are encouraged to pursue their own projects, but at the end of the day, the mother bird still has power and control over the baby bird’s actions. The student said of staff who facilitate the Resource Center:

I think they already know how to control and leadership, everything at [the Undocumented Student Resource Center] because they were the creators, so they do this for 10 years. But I think that students are lazy to go for it and do it on their own. So it’s like a mother with the wings, is like a bird. And there’s the nest, and they are the bird and we are the nest. We have the freedom to do everything. But I think they will always be looking around not giving the total freedom, you know, they really want to know everything, you cannot do things without telling.

This student felt like students with the center could not lead their programs but had to check in with the staff first. When I asked them what they thought about that dynamic, they replied:

Personally, I think it’s good and bad. Part of it is that, I have four classes this fall, and I’m applying for UC so I have to maintain my GPA. So that means that I need to focus a lot to maintain it in my classes. So it kind of relaxes me that they will be there to help with things. But the bad part of it is that I like to do things on my own and not having to ask all the things for approval and everything. So this part, I think will be a little bit complicated, because I have this freedom, but it’s kind of a *fake freedom* sometimes. But it’s just my feeling. I don’t know.

Though most undocumented student alumni and student allies who were international students described the Undocumented Student Resource Center as being a student-led space, a couple of students currently attending the college in 2021 described the Resource Center as being run by staff instead of by students. This critique has interesting implications for Carolina and other staff facilitating the center to reflect and communicate with their students on how student led the students feel their programs still are.

This student’s critique of the Resource Center not being truly student-led anymore was an important critique. In a subsequent meeting with Carolina, I told her about this student’s critique

and was inspired by her response that they should do more to check in with their students to see if they felt supported in maintaining a student-led program. I thought it was especially noteworthy how much Carolina valued working with the students to ensure the maintenance of a student-led program. Even though Carolina has these strong goals, it is interesting that students do not always experience the staff members' intentions, so it is important for staff and students to keep intentionally checking in to make sure they continue to be on the same page. If Carolina were to ever leave Western College to work somewhere else, this situation speaks to the paramount importance of hiring a new person who would be open to this kind of feedback and deeply value maintaining the essence of a student-led counter-space, as Carolina does.

## **Conclusion**

As students developed and institutionalized their programs over time from 2006 to 2021, they continually found that in-depth support from a staff member was highly beneficial in helping them lead their programs. However, they were very clear with these staff members that their goal was to maintain a student-led program. Many staff at Western College were supportive of the value for student-led programs, even though there was some critique from a couple of students that the programs had not remained student-led over time.

Students also found the administration of Western College to overall be supportive of undocumented student leaders, especially the president of the college, President Miller. Though administration was supportive, undocumented students and staff described how bureaucracy was a challenge to advance institutional support. Moreover, although some international students were staunch advocates for undocumented students, some undocumented students and international student allies described how international students in student government created the biggest challenges to their advocacy efforts.

Finally, I found that students and staff blurred the traditional lines between student and staff roles. Some student alumni came back to work as staff members, so they had a unique perspective on the importance of student organizing and advocated for increased institutional support for staff members who were undocumented with DACA. Moreover, some undocumented students worked as paid interns for the college, essentially serving in a staff role.

I began this chapter with a discussion of the concept of “the student voice,” but demonstrated in this chapter, this concept does not make sense in a place like Western College. Undocumented students were clearly the leading the drivers of institutional change, and many administrators, faculty, and staff recognized this dynamic. No one I talked to for this dissertation proactively brought up the concept of “the student voice,” suggesting it is not a notion that guides their thinking in how to work with undocumented students. Moreover, we see that there were many undocumented students over the years who were leading programs, and they had their own opinions about how to facilitate their counter-space. So, reducing these many students’ opinions into one voice oversimplifies and demeans their sense of agency. Whereas this chapter discussed students’ navigation of power dynamics at Western College, the next findings chapter discusses how students reflected on the organizing work they did.

## CHAPTER 7: HOW UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT ALUMNI MAKE SENSE OF THEIR EXPERIENCES ORGANIZING

The story of undocumented student organizing at Western College challenges two prominent and intersecting narratives about the purpose of higher education and the role of immigrants in society. Policymakers and higher education leaders question the purpose of a higher education for society in the United States. Some espouse capitalistic philosophies, arguing that the purpose of higher education should be to prepare a skilled workforce that can be competitive in an increasingly globalized world (Bridgeland et al., 2011). They also focus on the functionality of education: you are just supposed to get a college degree and earn more money so our country can have a thriving economy (Chan, 2016). These dominant tropes about the purpose of higher education intersect with xenophobic and racist portrayals of immigrants' contributions to society. The xenophobic question of whether immigrant communities are deserving of access to higher education is largely spoken about in terms of what immigrant communities can, or cannot, offer to the rest of society. Many politicians argue that immigrants are a drain on society, and they are not deserving of public resources (Rodriguez, 2018).

Many researchers and activists push back on these two dominant narratives by arguing for a greater emphasis on the transformative and liberatory potential of an education (Cole & Heinecke, 2020). For example, scholars who study the impact of ethnic studies curriculum find that a social justice-oriented education can support all students, especially Students of Color, in developing a greater sense of critical consciousness about injustices in the world (Halagao, 2010; Lewis et al., 2006; Vasquez, 2005; Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019). This consciousness can lead to a greater sense of wellness and empowerment in students' lives overall (Halagao, 2010; Vasquez, 2005; Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019).

Undocumented students' reflections on their experiences organizing at Western College challenges the xenophobic and capitalistic ideas about education. Although undocumented students at Western College aspired to transfer to 4-year universities and graduate with a bachelor's degree, most were primarily interested in learning how to lead social justice advocacy efforts for undocumented communities while they were at Western College. Some students were so motivated to organize that they placed a higher value on activism than they did in succeeding in their classes. Their community organizing experiences at Western gave them a greater sense of confidence and purpose for their lives at Western as well as beyond their college years. Undocumented students furthermore drew on what they learned organizing at Western to continue to advocate for their communities when they transferred to 4-year universities and after college for their careers. Many were inspired by their organizing experiences at Western to pursue careers focused on social justice. For example, one student became an ethnic studies kindergarten teacher, whereas another aspires to become a dentist who would open a clinic for low-income Communities of Color.

In this third findings chapter, I address my last research question, "*How do undocumented student alumni make sense of their experiences organizing for institutional support for undocumented students at Western College?*" I found five salient themes that address this research question: (a) the positive impact of a student-led program, (b) the missed sense of intimate community at Western once they transferred to 4-year universities, (c) students' aspirations to pursue social-justice-oriented careers, (d) the extent of their awareness of the impact and legacy they had left at Western College, and (e) advice they would give to undocumented community college student organizers at other colleges across the country.

The concept of counter-spaces continues to be manifested in the ways that undocumented students at Western College make sense of their experiences. The five themes discussed in this chapter are related to the concept of counter-spaces in the following ways. First, in step with Solórzano et al.'s (2000) theorization about counter-spaces, undocumented students at Western College reflected on how their counter-space empowered them to have more confidence in themselves. A counter-space meant a lot to them in terms of feeling like they mattered, and they had the skills and knowledge to lead programs for their communities. Second, once undocumented students transferred to 4-year universities, they were impressed by the vast number of resources available to undocumented students at their universities, but they missed the tighter knit community in the counter-space at Western College. Third, beyond their college years, undocumented students aimed to reproduce the counter-space they had created at Western College by applying the same concepts of community organizing and social justice to their careers.

Fourth, there is a narrative force to the counter-space as stories of the past continued to have power in the present. Recent alumni and current students spoke about the organizing students had done in the early 2000s, but students in the early years did not realize the legacy they had left. In a way, the power of the stories about the counter-space became disconnected from the people the stories were about. As a researcher, I was able to reflect to these alumni that they were quite famous and had left an impact, which they were shocked and overjoyed to hear. Finally, undocumented student alumni had advice for other students as to how to establish and sustain counter-spaces on their own campuses. These five themes show how a college education should be a social justice oriented and liberatory endeavor. In a capitalistic society, we make

education just about skills, but the presence of counter-spaces can transform college campuses into places of liberation.

### **Positive Impact of Organizing and a Student-Led Program**

Undocumented students who organized for programs at Western College over the years from 2006 to 2021 described how their counter-space boosted their sense of confidence and gave them a sense of purpose in their lives overall. Some undocumented students were too shy and intimidated to get involved in community organizing when they first began their college journey at Western, but opportunities to take on leadership roles gave them a newfound sense of confidence. Once the institutionalized counter-space, the Undocumented Student Resource Center, was established in 2011 with formal advising structures from staff and opportunities to lead programs, students in more recent years expressed their gratitude for a student-led program on campus. Moreover, many students reflected on how meaningful it was to them personally to advocate for their communities.

### ***Feelings of Shyness and Intimidation Before Organizing***

Many undocumented students were interested in getting involved with the counter-space and organizing community on campus, but they felt too shy and intimidated to introduce themselves. Some students had been involved in community organizing prior to college through their local churches or high schools so they felt more confident to lead advocacy efforts at Western, but most expressed how they did not have experience community organizing prior to enrolling at Western College. Alejandra, an undocumented student who attended Western College from 2006 to 2008, felt scared at first to attend events related to undocumented students on campus. She said:

Back then 10 years ago or more, there was just a lot of fear to talk about your legal status. . . . You just didn't know who was trustworthy to talk to. When I was at [other



community colleges] I didn't tell my counselor, I didn't feel comfortable. And I wasn't part of any groups down there. It was something that felt really scary.

Alejandra kept her undocumented immigration status private and did not share this with her peers or her school counselors. She was even scared to become part of any formal student groups because she did not want anyone to find out she was undocumented. Research finds that undocumented students can feel scared to share their immigration status beyond trusted close friends and family members because they are not sure how other people will react, or if other people will share their immigration status in a way that would be harmful to them (Nienhusser et al., 2016; Raza et al., 2019; Yasuike, 2019). Golash-Boza and Valdez (2018) similarly found students felt shy or scared to share their immigration status with staff on their college campus.

Like Alejandra, Esperanza, an undocumented student who attended Western College from 2013 to 2020, described feeling insecure and unsure of herself when she first started at Western College. As both an undocumented and queer person, it was challenging for her to feel a sense of belonging in any space, especially in school settings. This lack of sense of belonging negatively affected her mental health in her efforts to pursue school. She had dropped out of high school twice and did not think she would end up pursuing college. Esperanza described:

[My experience at Western College] started off with me not really knowing where to find my *place*. I did independent study in high school and I dropped out of high school twice throughout my high school career and just have a really hard time with school in general, and just like life in general.

She further described how her experiences being both queer and undocumented affected her sense of belonging:

I had struggled so much with my mental health. I guess young adults, everyone is trying to figure out who they are, but as an immigrant person, and as a queer person, is all these different identities that I held. I felt like no one was really there for me and I wanted to change that.

Many undocumented students leave high school before graduating because the obstacles of attending college as an undocumented student are so oppressive and intimidating (Gonzales, 2015). Furthermore, undocumented students and immigrants who are also LGBTQ, often struggle to feel safe in social settings because of the multiple oppressions of homophobia, xenophobia, and racism (Cisneros & Bracho, 2019; Reyna Rivarola & López, 2021; Seif, 2014).

When Esperanza began her college journey at Western College, she spent the first 3 years struggling to make friends. She went to campus, took classes, and left without getting involved in any part of the community. Upon hearing about the Undocumented Student Resource Center and the community of undocumented students at Western College, Esperanza still felt too intimidated at first to get involved. She reflected, “I’m scared of everything and like it just . . . I don’t know, like it was too scary to talk to anyone and like it’s not that the place wasn’t welcoming or anything. I would just make sure that I was only in an out like I didn’t want to talk to anyone.” Jacqueline, who attended Western College in more recent years from 2016 to 2021, echoed other students’ experiences of feeling intimidated saying, “When I started at Western College, I was completely lost and I think the Undocumented Student Resource Center was there, but I wasn’t really as involved because I felt like it was very intimidating for me.” Jacqueline, Esperanza, Carolina, and Alejandra’s stories are examples of how many undocumented students felt shy and intimidated when they first learned about community organizing spaces at Western College. Undocumented students’ feelings of shyness and intimidation are completely relatable as it can be hard to find the strength to learn how to advocate for yourself and your community.

### ***Opportunities to Take on Leadership Roles Gave Students a Sense of Confidence and Purpose***

Even though many undocumented students felt shy to get involved in the counter-space at Western College, encouragement from staff and peers to take on leadership roles boosted many

undocumented students' sense of confidence and purpose. Upon attending an event for undocumented students at Western College where she openly shared her immigration status being undocumented with a room full of people, Alejandra felt supported by staff and other undocumented students on campus. This experience and other similar experiences made her feel more empowered to share her story more often in public. Alejandra described:

I think that one thing I realized, maybe some other students realized, but it's *okay* for us to talk about it. Then we started to share our stories, right? Our testimonies. And in sharing our stories, I think that we allowed for place for supporting each other, healing together, and then trying to take action together.

Though it can be intimidating and scary for undocumented students to share their personal stories being undocumented in public (Negrón-Gonzales, 2014), the support of mentors and peers can be empowering to students (Gámez et al., 2017; Gonzales, 2015; Pérez Huber, 2009). As Negrón-Gonzales (2014) describes in her research and community work with undocumented youth activists, "Every participant in this study identified 'coming out' as undocumented as one of the most important decisions of their lives, because of pragmatic reasons but also because of the power of shared collective identity" (p. 273).

A strong sense of community in the counter-space was also empowering to Carolina as she became more involved with the community on campus in 2009. Describing the sense of empowerment she gained from community organizing at Western College from 2009 to 2013, Carolina said: "It was very challenging, but at the same time... I would say it was very *empowering* to have such a strong community and such a *vocal* community." Carolina's community of undocumented peers in the counter-space at Western were so "vocal" and "strong" that she felt like she had an immense support system encouraging her to take on more leadership roles.

Once undocumented students were successful in institutionalizing the counter-space as the Undocumented Student Resource Center in 2011 and creating more paid internship positions for undocumented students to lead programs through the center, students expressed how much formal leadership opportunities boosted their sense of confidence. Esperanza, who took a formal internship role through the center, also developed a newfound sense of assurance and determination in believing she could successfully lead programs for her community of peers. The opportunity to take on a leadership position with the Undocumented Student Resource Center fostered her sense of confidence, purpose, and overall wellness as a queer and undocumented person. When Esperanza first interviewed for an internship position with the Resource Center, there was not a position available for her, but Carolina, the staff person facilitating the center at the time, saw potential in Esperanza and thought it was important to create an internship position specifically for her. Esperanza described how Carolina saw promise in her:

And I think the director there [Carolina] who did my interview just connected with me, and saw that even though I had no experience in any kind of community organizing but my heart was in the right place and I know that sounds cheesy [laughs] but I just told them what I wanted to do. . . . They didn't have a position for me. After meeting me, they created a position for me where I had the freedom to do the things that I wanted to do so they let me build workshops and programs and work with members in the way that I found most meaningful which was really cool because not only did I get to explore and really see how *I* could make a difference in a way that wasn't just a task given to me, but that meant something to me.

Esperanza was incredibly grateful to Carolina and the Undocumented Student Resource Center for creating a position for her to learn how to lead programs for her peers.

Although Esperanza was excited about this new opportunity, she was intimidated and overwhelmed at first by the newfound sense of power and responsibility of leading her own programs. She and her peers experienced imposter syndrome in being able to organize programs themselves. But over time, as Esperanza gained more experience in organizing and Carolina and

other staff kept coaching her in how to be a leader, she developed the sense of confidence to be a leader in her communities. Esperanza described that initial sense of imposter syndrome they felt with organizing, but how they eventually learned how to embrace the new challenge:

It's all student *led so we* created the projects. You know, we chose what to do with our time. That freedom was scary at first because we're all looking around at each other like we don't know what to do! Like that impostor syndrome of 'Oh no we took on more than we could handle!' but you know eventually we just realized that we did have power . . . and it was really cool.

Summarizing how much the encouragement to take on leadership roles meant to her, Esperanza said:

As a community organizer I struggled a lot with, well, I still struggle a lot with confidence and just feeling like I'm worth anything. And I think it was the first time where I felt like I was part of something [starts to cry]. I tell them this all the time, it changed my life going there. I felt like I could do something that was worth something.

Jacqueline, who also initially felt intimidated by the organizing space in the Undocumented Student Resource Center, was primarily motivated to get involved because of the way the Trump's administration venomously attacked immigrant communities (Castrellón et al., 2017). Trump became president of the country in 2016 just as Jacqueline was beginning her college journey at Western College. Jacqueline described how not feeling safe with Trump compelled her to organize:

When President Obama was still president, I felt safe, right? So, I wasn't involved [with the Resource Center] as much then. But then once Trump became president, I started to realize it's affecting me and not only me, because it's also affecting my parents and folks I go to school with. If I don't feel safe then I know that they're not going to feel safe, so what can I do to advocate?

The shift from President Obama to Trump increased a sense of fear in many immigrant communities (Valdivia & Clark-Ibáñez, 2018). Jacqueline described how she was not only affected by Trump's racist and xenophobic rhetoric and actions, but her family and peers felt affected as well. The need to do something to advocate for her communities compelled

Jacqueline to apply for an internship with the Resource Center. When I asked Jacqueline what it meant to her to be able to take on leadership roles as an intern with the Resource Center, she responded:

It gives students a lot of creativity and liberty. And I think all of us as students grew up with this idea of this is what the teacher says and you have to follow it right? Allowing students to roam around and do something that they're really passionate about, it really gives them a sense that they're doing something for themselves and for others, rather than "Oh that's what I'm supposed to do" and that's it.

Students who were shy and intimidated by community organizing when they first arrived at Western College found that the support from staff and their peers in the counter-space helped them build a sense of confidence to lead programs for their communities.

### ***Sense of Meaning to Organizing Work Had Positive Impact on Students***

In addition to the impact of a supportive community in a counter-space on campus, undocumented students at Western also described how the personal sense of meaning to organizing for their communities gave them a greater sense of empowerment and purpose to their lives. Esperanza described how she hoped that finding a sense of meaning in being able to offer something to her community of undocumented peers could give her a greater sense of purpose to her life. During her interview for one of the internship positions with the Undocumented Student Resource Center, she told the staff at Western how meaningful it would be to her to support her community in some way:

I was very honest with them about how much I was struggling as an undocumented person and how I didn't know what to do with my life. Not only would getting this position help me at least have some time to figure it out and be able to pay my bills. But that maybe helping other people who are, sorry I'm getting emotional, that maybe helping other people who are in similar positions would make me feel like I mattered [begins to cry] I wasn't just wasting my time or in space here, you know, 'cause I think being, and I can't speak for every undocumented person's experience, but I think for a lot of us, we're often struggling with feeling like figuring out where we belong in the world and where we belong here is a waste of opportunity because we're told so often that coming here is such a grand opportunity. But then no one talks about how hard it is to

figure out what to do with that opportunity, or how you can even do it because everything is so limited.

Like Esperanza, Carolina found the organizing work they were doing to be so meaningful that she had a very positive experience organizing with her peers, to the point that she described this time to be “the best time of [her] life.” She described:

I would probably say that my time [as a student] at Western College was the best time of my life because I was doing something that was super meaningful, right? I knew that the work that we were doing, although it was hard and, we weren't getting paid for it. Well not all of us. Some of us were able to find ways to get paid for the work that we were doing, but some of us weren't right? And so this was just meaningful work that we were super passionate about and that we were able to actually see victory.

The positive impact of a student-led program at Western College echoes other researchers' findings that engagement in political activism can increase students' critical consciousness, sense of empowerment, and healing opportunities (Muñoz, 2015). For example, in a study with undocumented college students who advocated for immigration reform, Muñoz (2015) found undocumented students developed a “critical legal consciousness” (p. 127) where they could interrogate injustices in society for undocumented communities and begin to engage in healing. Muñoz (2015) says, “It is through introspection that undocumented individuals develop a critical legal consciousness where they interrogate the system that has assaulted them. I believe it is when undocumented individuals reach this point of critical legal consciousness that healing can occur” (p. 127). Like Muñoz's study, students at Western College found community organizing to be an overall empowering experience. This sense of empowerment and boosted confidence are key components of counter-spaces.

Students' expression of how much the counter-space meant to them speaks volumes about the importance of counter-spaces and opportunities for students to take on leadership roles. Students have the innate passion and expertise to know how to work with their communities and

advocate for their needs, they just need the opportunities to take on those leadership roles. The counter-space at Western College provided the avenue for students to take on those leadership roles where they learned to thrive in their community organizing efforts.

### **Experiences Transferring to 4-Year Universities**

When undocumented student alumni transferred to 4-year universities, they missed the counter-space they had created at Western College. All 11 undocumented student alumni in this study successfully transferred to public 4-year universities. Most of these universities were within a 50-mile radius of Western College, whereas other universities were further away in the state of California. Though the students were greatly impressed by the larger number of programs and resources available to undocumented students at their 4-year universities, many missed the smaller and intimate counter-space at Western College. Some missed Western so much they did not even try to get involved in a community at their 4-year university, and some even tried to go back and volunteer or work for Western College.

### ***Impressed by Number of Resources Available to Undocumented Students***

Upon transferring to 4-year public universities, undocumented students described feeling blown away by the larger number of programs and resources that were already available to undocumented students when they arrived on campus. Generally, 4-year universities have more resources than community colleges to be able to build institutional support for undocumented students, such as designated staff positions and resource centers (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). Jesus, an undocumented student alumnus who attended Western College from 2006 to 2009, felt an immense sense of “relief” when he realized there was already a community available for undocumented students at his 4-year university. Jesus described this relief:

The thing that I enjoyed the most was the fact that the community was already there. I didn't have to start from square one. The work was already there. And so I walked into a



place that offered the same support, that offered the same environment that we were trying to build while I was at Western College. And so that, in itself, was just a *huge relief* to just be there and be present and just be authentic in myself.

Jesus described how arriving at his 4-year university felt like a relief because he could just “be present” and “be authentic” in himself as opposed to feeling like he had to always fight for his rights like he had at Western College.

Like Jesus, Alejandra, an undocumented student alumnus who attended Western College from 2006 to 2008 during the same time as Jesus, also described feeling impressed by the resources at her 4-year university once she transferred: “When I left, I remember leaving [Western College] and going to [the 4-year university] and I was just like, wow, like, there’s so much here. And there’s just so many different organizations and group leaders.”

Ixchel was also thrilled to learn that her 4-year university had more resources for nontraditional students and parents like her. “Nontraditional students” are college students who do not fit the typical profile of a college student aged 18–22 and are generally older or are parents (Kim, 2002; MacDonald, 2018; Remenick, 2019). She connected with the parent center on her campus where she felt a sense of community and support being a student who was also a mother. She described:

I am very different from the average student. I was a parent at the time. In terms of resources, there was a Parent Resource Center that I got connected with. In that parenting Resource Center, there were other women who were Latinas and Black, who had kids, some of them were single moms. So it was good getting acquainted with them. I felt like I built a connection that way, that it helped me not feel odd, it helped me feel like okay, I belong here. I belong here.

Ixchel was grateful for the Parent Resource Center because it gave her a sense of community to connect with other Latina and Black moms who were also college students. This community made her feel less left out as a nontraditional college student and gave her a sense of belonging on the college campus. Researchers find that nontraditional students tend to struggle to find a

sense of belonging on college campuses more than traditional college students (Kim, 2002; MacAri et al., 2005). Moreover, community college Students of Color who are parents tend to experience hostile campus environments (Huerta et al., 2022), so it is noteworthy that Ixchel found a sense of belonging with the Parent Resource Center at her 4-year university.

Just like other student alumni, Paola, who attended Western College from 2009 to 2013, also felt grateful for the community already built for undocumented students when she arrived at her 4-year university. Expressing her appreciation for those who already built space and community for undocumented students at her 4-year university, she said, “That was pretty lucky of me to have that and that already that was preexisting.”

Many undocumented student alumni at Western College described the sense of relief and appreciation they felt that a community for undocumented students, and programs and resources, were already available to them at their 4-year universities without them having to fight for it. Institutional support can make a difference in facilitating a sense of inclusion and belonging for undocumented students on college campuses (Freeman et al., 2021; Sanchez & So, 2015).

### ***Missed Intimate Sense of Community at Western***

Although many students were impressed by the larger number of programs and resources available to undocumented students at their universities, many missed the smaller and intimate sense of community at Western College. Jesus, who was appreciative of the community already built for undocumented students at his 4-year university, described how his 4-year university felt too big at times, and he ultimately missed the smaller community at Western. When asked what it was like being at the 4-year university after transferring from Western college, Jesus replied:

Overwhelming. Imposing. It’s hard to describe it. I went from a place that was big enough to scare me, but also manageable in size that I was able to build a community. So I went from that to this *monster* of a university.

Even though Jesus felt a sense of relief discovering that there was already a sense of community at his 4-year university where he could authentically be himself, he also missed the close sense of community at Western. Paola, who attended Western from 2009 to 2013, echoed Jesus's description of missing support from the smaller community at Western, saying:

You know it was really hard at first. The first quarter [at my 4-year university] was the hardest because I was so used to having this community behind me, you know this, not only like my friends, but also, you know the faculty and staff. So it was hard!

Although Jay, an undocumented student alumnus who attended Western College from 2015 to 2019, described feeling supported at his 4-year university, he also described, like Jesus, how he missed the smaller community at Western College:

The only thing that I miss about Western College is the community. The community cause it's so small, and you get to connect and meet mostly every individual around Western, like top, like from head to toe, in a way. [laughs] At [my 4-year university], of course being such a big campus. Of course, the communities are there but it's not as intimate as back in Western College, but the resources everything is pretty much similar to Western College so I was very lucky to find a campus that suited my needs.

Jay felt lucky finding a 4-year university that "suited [his] needs" as an undocumented student, but even though the 4-year university had more resources available to undocumented students, he missed the intimate sense of community at Western College where he could get to know all the key players involved in organizing.

Dulce, an undocumented student born in Mexico who attended Western College from 2011 to 2017, also described how organizing in a smaller community at Western College was a much easier and more gratifying experience than organizing at her 4-year university. She described the differences trying to organize at her university in comparison to her experiences at Western College:

There is a huge difference [between Western College and the 4-year university she transferred to]. And I think it's the size of the school. Western College was so intimate, like you knew everyone and at the university, it's, oof, I don't know, three, four or five

times bigger. And everyone was kind of doing their own thing. And they were in silos. So we wouldn't really collaborate as much with other groups at the university like we did at Western College. Everyone had their own agenda. And I remember at Western College was the complete opposite. We all collaborated together, we all had a shared vision of what we wanted to see. And we all supported each other's goals and it just wasn't like that at the university.

In addition to feeling like there was a lack of community at her university, she was frustrated that the undocumented student group on campus was not more welcoming, "I had made some connections [with the undocumented student organization]. However, I didn't join them because they weren't as welcoming, they were very cliquey." Though undocumented students were excited about the larger number of resources and programs available to undocumented students at their 4-year universities, they missed the support from the more intimate counter-space at Western College.

### *Effects of Preference for Community at Western Over 4-Year Universities*

Some undocumented students missed the sense of support and intimacy in the counter-space at Western College so much they either did not try to get involved with the undocumented student community at their 4-year university, or they tried to find a way to reconnect with the community at Western. Patricia, an undocumented student alumnus who attended Western College from 2014 to 2017, described how she did not find a supportive sense of community for undocumented student at her public 4-year university and missed the sense of community at Western College. She described her experience transferring:

It was really hard. It was really hard because the community there is different. And I didn't know anybody just like when I first started Western, I didn't know anyone. But it's definitely a bigger space. It took me 3 years to transfer. I think at this point, I need to really focus on my academics. So I didn't get involved with the resource center there. One of the interns that was at [the Resource Center at Western], she actually did. She worked at the [Undocumented Student] Resource Center at [our 4-year university]. But for me, yeah, it was different. I just wanted to finish school, because I really missed [Western College]. So I, yeah [laughs], it was hard. But my goal there was just to finish school. And that's pretty much it.

Like Patricia, Esperanza, who attended Western College from 2013 to 2020, described the emotional impact of feeling like she had lost the intimate and supportive sense of community at Western College. Because she felt like the community at Western was so important to her and critical for her mental health, Esperanza talked to Carolina, the staff member, to see if it was possible to still work with the Resource Center in some way even though she had transferred and was no longer a student at Western College. Esperanza described:

I am no longer a part of Western College because I transferred out and it's my 1st year or is my 1st semester here at [a 4-year university] so I'm not a part of any community but especially any organizing community 'cause I'm new to this area and pandemic and all that stuff, but I was finding myself feeling really homesick and sad that I didn't have that community that I built because I didn't really, sorry, [begins to cry] I guess I didn't realize how important it was to me and how necessary I needed it or it was in my life until it was *gone*. And then it just really hit me. But it's something that I need to feel better and feel like I matter, so I set up an appointment with Marilyn, which is the director, and Carolina. I told them that I wanted to do something to feel less powerless because I was, with the [Trump] election and everything else like, I was in a bad place.

Esperanza found it difficult to maintain a good state of mental health when she transferred to her 4-year university in 2020, especially during the challenging sociopolitical climate of both the end of the Trump administration and the COVID-19 global pandemic. She found that the community at Western College had been critically important for her mental health, so she tried to find a way to stay connected with the community at Western even though she had already transferred to a 4-year university.

Carolina, who attended Western from 2009 to 2013, discussed how she preferred the sense of community at Western because she was more passionate about developing institutional support for undocumented students at community colleges than at 4-year universities. She did not feel like she fit into the undocumented student organizing community at her 4-year university

because she was more passionate about working with community college students. Carolina shared:

I didn't feel as connected to the [undocumented student] group. But they were doing amazing work and stuff. I wanted to focus on community colleges. So I was doing more workshops with the community colleges. I think I missed that connection to community colleges, so I wanted to go that route.

Carolina missed the organizing aspect at Western College of organizing specifically at a community college. Because she transferred to a 4-year university far enough away from Western College that she could not continue to volunteer there as a student at her 4-year university, she tried to maintain that connection with community colleges by connecting with local community colleges near her university.

When undocumented students at Western College transferred to public 4-year universities, they all had similar experiences feeling impressed by the extent of resources already available for undocumented students at their university, but they missed the small community and sense of intimacy at Western College. Though some students navigated the transition and used skills they had learned at Western to find community at their 4-year universities, some missed the sense of community at Western College so much that they tried to stay involved with community colleges, or Western College specifically, even though they had already transferred.

The importance of a sense of community for students at community colleges for successfully transferring to 4-year universities is not surprising given other researchers have found a sense of community and belonging is critical for marginalized students' academic success (Harris & Wood, 2013; Teranishi et al., 2011). For example, scholars find that learning communities, or small cohorts of students taking classes together in higher education institutions, have been excellent models in the field for building a sense of community for marginalized

students at both community colleges and 4-year universities (Baier et al., 2019; Smith, 2018; Teranishi et al., 2011).

It is noteworthy, however, that undocumented students at Western College felt more of a sense of community at Western than at their 4-year universities even though they described their 4-year universities having more resources and programs for undocumented students. Research finds that academic support programs and resources for students tend to increase marginalized students' academic success (Harris & Wood, 2013), particularly for undocumented students (Cisneros & Reyna Rivarola, 2020; Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021), so it is interesting that undocumented students in this study preferred the sense of intimate community at Western even though they thought their 4-year universities had more resources available to undocumented students.

Moreover, the fact that undocumented students described missing the “intimate” and “smaller” sense of community at Western College is interesting because the size of the student population at Western College is still quite large even though it is indeed smaller than the size of the universities where undocumented students transferred. Western College has an enrollment of over 24,000 students as of 2021, and the 4-year universities where they transferred has a range of about 20,000 students to 40,000 students. Even though Western students were impressed with the number of resources available to them at their 4-year universities, students described how having a strong counter-space back at Western was in many ways more important to them. This suggests that a supportive and tight knit counter-space can at times be even more important for marginalized student populations than an abundance of resources.

## Career Aspirations Related to Social Justice

Undocumented student alumni sought to reproduce the counter-spaces they had created at Western College in their careers. All 12 undocumented students in this study aspired to pursue careers in social justice. Their personal experiences as undocumented immigrants, combined with their community organizing experiences at Western College, inspired them to pursue careers focused on equity so they could work with their communities in some way. Their aspired careers are in various fields including ethnic studies education, social work, dentistry, environmental justice, language rights, indigenous sovereignty, and administrative affairs. Table 1 provides more information about each student’s career aspirations.

**Table 1**

### *Undocumented Students’ Career Aspirations*

Pseudonym	Years at Western	Career aspirations
Jesus	2006–2009	Teaches ethnic studies at the kindergarten level
Alejandra	2006–2008	Mental health clinician
Andrea	2007–2011	High School Operations Manager (returned to work for her high school)
Ixchel	2007–2009	Aspires to work in environmental justice
Anadaisy	2007–2015	Aspires to get a JD and PhD in linguistics to work on indigenous rights
Carolina	2009–2013	Works with undocumented students at Western College
Paola	2009–2013	Leads workshops for undocumented students, wants to work at Western College
Dulce	2011–2017	Currently working in immigration law, but wants to become a student adviser at a community college
Esperanza	2013–2020	Current student at a 4-year university majoring in psychology, wants to be an art therapist
Patricia	2014–2017	Pursuing a master’s degree in administration
Jay	2015–2019	Aspires to be a dentist who works with low-income Communities of Color
Jacqueline	2016–2021	Psychology major at Western College who wants to become a doctor



### *Drawing Inspiration From Personal Experiences and Community Organizing*

Undocumented student alumni from Western College were inspired by a combination of their personal lived experiences and experiences organizing at Western to pursue careers focused on social justice. Witnessing the barriers and oppression their communities faced, they wanted to fight for justice for their communities. Moreover, their organizing efforts at Western gave them the skills to fight for justice in their careers. Jay, an undocumented student who attended Western College from 2015 to 2019, drew inspiration from his personal lived experiences to address equity issues for his career. Reflecting on his experiences growing up in a rural community in Oaxaca, Mexico where there was little access to dental care, Jay hoped to go to dental school so he could learn how to open a clinic for low-income Communities of Color. Jay described how in Oaxaca, his mother had been his “dentist” and always encouraged him to keep his teeth clean:

I come from a really rural community. I grew up in Oaxaca in Mexico. The community there is so small and rural, so I never actually met a dentist, I’m not gonna lie to you, probably the time that I met a dentist was when I came to this country, and I have this story that I always tell people. The only dentist who was back there at home was my mom. I don’t mean because she was a dentist, I mean because she was the one who would tell me like, oh, brush your teeth, or you got to do this. And I tell people this story that she will be the one striking my teeth by tying a string around my tooth and tossing it across the room with a rock [laughs]. So that’s how I got into this field.

When Jay arrived in the United States, he was able to see a dentist for the first time, but he noticed how Latinx communities and other Communities of Color continued to face barriers to health and dental care. Noticing these inequities, Jay was inspired to pursue a career in the medical field to address these barriers:

When I came to this country, that was the first time I actually went to a dentist. And I noticed, I was not able to fully communicate with the dentist. I know that there’s barriers among our communities. And I would like to help and contribute and overcome these barriers to these people. But yeah, that’s how I became interested. And I know within the whole healthcare field, minorities, People of Color, they tend to experience this whole lack of knowledge and resources. So I relate and go back and observe these things. I’m always a translator for my mom for her appointments or anything like that. I’m really her

representative. It's so scary cause most of the people that I've met, they have no idea what's going on. Most of the time, they're sitting in that chair and they're not even sure what the procedure were like. They're not even sure how they're gonna pay for it. Honestly, you're breaking this language barrier.

Jay noticed how immigrant communities in the United States faced many barriers to dental and health care. These barriers included expensive costs, lack of knowledge about medical procedures, and differences in languages. Jay's observations mirror research findings on lack of equitable health care systems in the United States (Garcia et al., 2021; Omenka et al., 2020).

Observing these barriers, Jay sought part-time work while in college working for a dentist's office that sees many patients who are People of Color, especially Filipinos and Latinos. Many of the staff in their office speak multiple languages such as Tagalog, Llocano, and Spanish so he witnessed more equitable language practices in the field of dentistry. Jay speaks about his experiences working for this clinic:

It's a huge thing for them right now working for this dentist here [in my community]. He sees a lot of People of Color. He sees a lot of Filipinos. He sees a lot of Latinos and having someone in the office who speaks multiple languages, I guess the total amount of languages that we speak in our office is four, five? So it's English Tagalog, Llocano, Spanish, So four, we speak four languages in total in our office. So it's a huge difference.

Jay drew on his personal lived experiences as an undocumented student from a rural community in Mexico to advocate for health care rights for immigrant communities and Communities of Color.

In addition to drawing on their personal experiences, undocumented student alumni also drew on their community organizing experiences at Western College to advocate for social justice issues in their careers. Anadaisy, an undocumented student alumna who attended Western College from 2007 to 2015, was motivated by both her personal experiences being undocumented and her community organizing efforts at Western to pursue joint degrees in law and linguistics PhD programs. She hoped to use both these degrees to advocate for language and

legal rights for indigenous communities in the United States. She described her motivation to work on issues from a legal lens because of her experience living in legal “ambiguity” herself as an undocumented person:

I think how it all ties in terms of who I am as a person, my values and moving forward. I think it has very much to do with my experience being undocumented, wanting to go into law and, and being able to have any sort of contribution to the legal field. Because I’ve experienced it as someone who’s lived in this ambiguity, right?

The lessons she learned about advocating for your rights and your community as a student at Western motivated her to continue to advocate for social justice issues in her career. As a student, she learned it was possible to fight for her communities’ rights. Making fun of the Trump presidential administration and her motivation to continue to work on justice issues, she says, “And so, I think that the U.S. can be, a better place. You know that slogan is Make America Great Again, it’s like, well, it’s got some issues [laughs]. But that doesn’t mean we can’t work on them. Right?” Anadaisy made fun of Trump’s campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” as Trump had antagonized immigrant communities all through his campaign and presidency (Gomez & Pérez Huber, 2019; Nienhusser & Oshio, 2019; Zepeda-Millán & Wallace, 2018). Anadaisy described her aspirations to improve equity for her communities:

I think it’s still instilled in me [from my time at Western College] that the ideologies that we can make our current circumstances change for the better. There’s a way that things are, but they don’t have to be that way. It can take a lot of work and energy and time and resources. But I think that you *can* do something, I think is what drives me. That’s why I’d like to do the PhD with an emphasis on indigenous communities is getting the sake one of the legal retribution to the I think most marginalized communities in the history of the U.S., I think is a good start. That’s what I’d like to do moving forward.

Anadaisy had learned from her experiences organizing for community and programs for undocumented students at Western College that it was possible to see positive change for her community. These realizations inspired her to continue to fight for social justice issues in her career beyond college. Many students at Western College, like Anadaisy and Jay, drew on their

personal experiences as undocumented Students of Color as well as their organizing efforts at Western College to advocate for social justice for their careers.

*Applied What they Learned at Western College to their Careers*

Many undocumented student alumni from Western applied what they had learned about community organizing at Western to their careers. They reflected on the skills they had learned organizing such as community building, creating inclusive spaces, advocating for their rights, and thinking critically about social justice, to apply these skills to their jobs. For example, Jesus, an undocumented student alumnus who attended Western College from 2006 to 2009, drew on his organizing experiences to teach kindergarten Students of Color how to advocate for social justice issues important to them. After his time at Western College, Jesus obtained his master's degree in education and became a kindergarten teacher who taught social justice and ethnic studies. Jesus summarized how he applies the skills he learned from organizing to his teaching: "My practices in teaching do stem from that community work that I did [at Western College]."

Jesus further describes:

I tried to create the same space that was created for us at Western College with my students, even kindergarten, to express themselves, to express who they are, to be fully realized, and acknowledged, and seen in our classrooms, especially in our educational space. While I do teach kindergarten, I do try to bring some of those activist goals and activist ideals that I had when I was at Western College.

Drawing inspiration from his time at Western College, Jesus encouraged his kindergarten students to think critically about social justice issues. Almost all his kindergarten students are Students of Color, so he especially encouraged his students to think about these issues through a personal lens. "The work that I do in my classroom is grounded in community to ensure that voices of my students are heard because about 99% of my students are Children of Color." To facilitate discussion about equity with young children like kindergarteners who may not have yet

heard about terms like “social justice,” Jesus encourages his students to think about issues in terms of what is fair and what is unfair:

I try to reduce these, and it sounds terrible, I say try to reduce these concepts to kinder level, but you have to make it accessible to your students, right? And so, for a kindergartener, the word “injustice,” the word “social activism,” or “social justice” doesn’t really ring a bell to them because it’s these broad concepts that they will hopefully develop into. But the way that you present it to them is by saying, what’s fair? What’s *not* fair? What do you notice? What do you *not* notice? And so that’s how I process it with my students, what do we see as fair? What do we see as unfair?

In addition to encouraging his students to think about social justice issues, Jesus also draws on what he learned about community organizing at Western College to encourage his students to learn how to advocate for themselves, even when they are 5 years old. Jesus lives in the community where his school is located, a neighborhood that is often ignored by politicians. As a result of this neglect from policymakers, he describes how his neighborhood is often “left to fend for themselves.” Because of this, he emphasizes the importance of access to school and extracurricular programs. He teaches his students how to advocate for these needs: “I try to bring the voice of my students out and what they need, or I try to bring the voice my students have, so they can be advocates for what they need, and the education that they deserve.”

Once his students thought critically about inequities, Jesus drew on what he learned about activism at Western to encourage his kindergarten students to become little activists themselves. He let his students decide what social justice they were more passionate about and then taught them how to make protest signs.

I made space for my students to create their own protest signs for things that they were passionate about. And so from there, my kids made protest signs that said, “We Belong Together” in their cute kindergarten writing, which I absolutely adore. And then one of the ones that struck me the most was “Freedom is Love.” And so, as we were making these protest signs, I played music from the civil rights era. One of my students, as he was drawing, comes up to me and said, “Jesus, thank you for playing this song. It makes my heart feel happy and my mind is growing.” That’s the power of relevant text to children, right? They feel acknowledged, they feel seen. And as a teacher, that’s my role,

right? Is to allow them to speak up, allow them to treat these voices that they have and allow them to project that voice. That project that we did was one of those projects where it started off as a conversation and went into a book and went to a conversation and then it went into a project and my kids were walking around with protest signs, and they felt proud. They felt listened to, they felt heard. And I was there for it.

In the end, many of his students felt proud, empowered, and heard throughout the process of learning about social justice issues and how to advocate for themselves as activists.

Though many undocumented student alumni at Western College felt empowered by their organizing experiences to aspire to pursue graduate school and careers related to social justice, researchers have found that multiple barriers affect undocumented students' career aspirations such as legal barriers, financial obstacles, discrimination against immigrant communities, and mental health issues due to the stress of hiding their immigration status from employers (Gonzales, 2015; Kantamneni et al., 2016; Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010). At the same time, researchers also find that undocumented students draw on their support system and a sense of resiliency to continue to push through barriers to pursue their career goals (Ellis & Chen, 2013; Kantamneni et al., 2016). As I did not ask undocumented student alumni about how their immigration status may have affected their access to work authorization and particular career paths, as the interview protocol questions were largely focused on their experiences organizing when they were at Western College, an important suggestion for future research would be to follow back up with these 11 alumni to ask them how their status may have affected how they thought about possibilities for their career trajectories.

Western undocumented students' aspirations to engage in social justice for their careers have important implications for the value of a college education beyond many policymakers' and higher education leaders' goals of developing a competitive workforce in an increasingly globalized world. Students at Western College learned how to organize their communities both

while they were in college and for their careers beyond college, suggesting that a college education can be important for creating a nationwide culture of equity, consciousness, and community.

### **(Un)Awareness of Impact and Legacy**

Even though undocumented students at Western College were successful in building a counter-space for undocumented students, some of the undocumented student alumni did not realize the impact they had left until someone told them. In this way, their legacies had taken on a narrative force of its own that for some alumni had become separated from the actual people themselves. Jay, an undocumented student alumnus who attended Western College from 2015 to 2019, described doubting the extent of the impact he made until some of his peers thanked him for the work he was doing. Jay said:

From my perspective, I didn't think I was making a huge impact in other people's lives until they were coming up to me and telling me, hey Jay, thanks for telling me to consider this or that like, so I guess I was making an impact on their lives as well, without me noticing.

Even though Jay was doing important work organizing programs at Western College, he was not sure how much of a positive impact he was making until his peers reflected this back to him.

Jesus, one of the original student organizers of the movement at Western College, did not realize the impact he had made until I personally reflected this back to him during our conversation for the research project. While I was looking for alumni to talk to for this project, several of the undocumented students who organized at Western College told me that I must talk to Jesus because he was one of the "OGs" and had left a tremendous legacy. However, when I was talking to Jesus during the interview, I wondered if Jesus realized that he was quite famous among the undocumented student community at Western. When I reflected this information back

to him to make sure he knew, he was shocked to hear this. The following reflects our conversation about this. I said:

I have to say, I've been talking to different people who've been [at Western College] over the years and a few people have mentioned you and what you did made them feel like they had community at Western College. So I don't know how much you're aware of it, but you really left a legacy there.

Jesus paused for a few seconds and then responded:

I didn't, [laughs] *Oh my god*. I, I, I. What?!? Uh, I just, I, [starts to cry]. Oh my god. I'm a little speechless. I didn't know. [pauses] I never knew the impact that I left. I didn't even think I left an impact. If anything, when I left, I'm just like, I mean, I don't know what I felt when I left, I know that I cried, I know that I was sad to see everyone go that I was going to move on to this next stage of my life. But I [pauses] didn't know that's what I left behind. Like, I, [pauses] this is one of the first times that I'm hearing it from another person. When Alex [a faculty member who worked with undocumented students] would tell me, or Alex mentioned it, I'm just like, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. But to hear it from someone that I haven't met personally, that I, it just, I don't know, it just [softly crying] I don't know, there's like a sense of joy. And like it was worth it. And it was hard [pauses crying], but that it was worth it.

After describing feeling lost at Western College because there was not an undocumented student community to welcome him when he arrived, he continued to say: "The details might have gotten lost in my memories, but the feelings are still there." I responded to him:

I'm so glad that I could share that with you. Several people have said how much it meant to them, when you spoke about your own experience at some of these events, and just how much having that one person really made such a difference for them in terms of feeling safe, and like they had community. And people a few years after you left, they're always like, you *got* to talk to Jesus. That's who you got to get in touch with. So I don't even know if you're aware of this, but I feel like you set the stage for this motion of students over the years. People really talk about what you did as being so important. So I'm really happy that I can share that with you.

Jesus continued to describe how pleased he was to hear that he had left some sort of positive impact with the community:

I appreciate you telling me that. It's definitely something different to hear it from someone who, you know, came by Western College years after to hear this from someone like you because like I said at the time, it was always this big unknown of what was going to happen, what the next day is going to look like, and now to know that it's in a



much better place. It just makes me so happy. Because that's what we were working for. That's what we wanted to do, we wanted to create this space for us to be able to be ourselves, to be in community, to feel at home, to make Western College a little less cold. And I think in the time that I was there, I went from, like I said, this cold building to a place that *does* look like home. And whenever I drive by it, whenever I drive on the [freeway], there's fond memories there, hard memories, but fond memories as well. . . . I tried to let my work speak for itself. And so, again, as a teacher, I never know the impact I'm gonna leave on my students until further down the line, like my first set of kids right now, they're about to enter the eighth grade next year. And you never know what impact you have on people. And so to hear it again, to hear it reflected back on you. It's quite a trip. [laughs]

Jesus was surprised to hear that he had planted the seeds for the development of an institutionalized and strong counter-space on campus. He had hoped a form of a counter-space could continue to persist at Western and was pleased to hear how much the counter-space had grown and expanded.

Although some undocumented student alumni described having an awareness of the impact they made for their community at Western College, a few students did not realize the influential legacy they had left. A student like Jesus did not even realize that he was famous at Western. This experience was personally meaningful to me as a researcher and scholar as I was thrilled to be in a position where I could reflect this information back to Jesus. The fact that Jesus was not even aware of the impact he had left demonstrates his purely altruistic goals of advocating for his community, instead of taking the opportunity to elevate his own sense of prestige.

If we espouse the capitalistic values that the purpose of higher education is to prepare a skilled workforce, which I do not suggest, Jesus's role at Western College should be to make him a skilled worker. But his experiences organizing at Western College made him an influential leader with a strong legacy, which demonstrates the potential of educational spaces to be transformative.

## Advice to Other Undocumented Community College Students

Undocumented student alumni at Western College had several pieces of advice about building and sustaining a counter-space that they were eager to share with students at other community colleges across the country. Jesus strongly encouraged undocumented students to “just keep going.” He said organizing can be challenging and demoralizing at times, but you must keep going. He said:

My only advice is, keep going! You’ve gone through all these journeys and this is another journey, but this journey is one that the benefit of it is going to be amazing and beautiful. And so just keep going. Even when it seems like all is gone, like everything is failing and falling apart. Take what you can from those experiences and apply it and reapply it and continue to move forward. Because indeed, that’s all we can really do. And in order for our communities to thrive and continue to succeed, we’re going to have to be reflective in our approach and take what’s worked and pay homage to what’s happened in the past. But just keep going. Don’t stop. We can’t stop the tide of progress. And we have to keep going. We just *have* to keep going and to build that community, however that community looks like. That’s all I can really say is always keep going. There’s no stop. There’s no stopping progress. And we need to progress towards a better society and a better community, *for everyone*.

Patricia echoed Jesus’s comments, describing how organizing work takes a lot of time so you must stay committed if you want to be successful. Patricia says:

Even if it takes time, trust the process, as long as people are committed, because it’s not easy. Now that I work in higher ed and I’m currently in governance as a staff. Now I see the other side [laughs], and what I learned is that things take time, it’s a long process. But if you really want it, you will get there. You will get there, aside from like, Oh, well, we don’t have this, or we don’t have the funding. As long as people actually believe in what they want to achieve, that’s what’s really gonna help people push through the process. Although, like I said, the process might not be easy. You might take *time*. But it is possible.

Jay said that if administrators are taking the lead in building institutional support at their community colleges, they have to work in collaboration with undocumented students. He described how allies will inevitably have a different perspective on these issues because they do

not have lived experience, so it is critical for allies to work in collaboration with undocumented students, when building institutional support. Jay says:

If it's being initiated through administrators, I would say reach out to students because they are the ones who mainly know what their needs are. And yes, if you have somebody who is undocumented initiating these programs, yes, but are they students? If yes, awesome. If no, everything changes. I noticed that everything changes every year within this institution. So it's nice to get a perspective over a group of students so they can understand more of their needs or what they're going through, what their struggles are and stuff like that. So I guess that's one of the main keys and because if you start with someone who does not relate to this topic at all, they might have a *different vision* and might not be as helpful as knowing the roots of how these individuals are struggling.

Dulce described the importance of marketing for your programs on campus so you can build visibility and a recognizable and respected brand for your programs, explaining how marketing helps increase visibility of programs on campus:

I would suggest marketing, that's a *huge* deal. So, who is your audience? How do they intake information? What do they want to *see*? What do they *need*? And I think that's a huge factor, at least, you know, coming from a marketing major [laughs]. It increases visibility on campus and you want to reach out to those students that haven't been touched.

Dulce also emphasized the importance of finding "allies and champions" who can support your advocacy and organizing efforts. Dulce said, "Find allies and champions on campus. See if there are any support networks outside of the campus community, you know, you definitely want to invite them to campus dialogues."

Paola echoed this advice, saying two of the most importance things you can do as an undocumented student organizer at a community college is to "ask for support" and "work as a team" with each other. Paola also described how a sense of responsibility fueled their motivation to keep moving forward with their organizing work at Western College: "A group of us and feeling that we're doing this together, right that we don't owe anyone but ourselves, that we're

doing this *for the students*. So having that sense of responsibility and sentimentality was really important for us to spend going forward.”

Many of the undocumented student alumni I spoke to for this project were thrilled to have the opportunity to offer advice to undocumented students at other community colleges across the country and hoped that their story could be helpful in some way. Their advice to be committed, persistent, and strategic speaks to how challenging it can be to create a counter-space in higher education, but how rewarding that experience can be.

## **Conclusion**

Several themes arose regarding how undocumented students reflected on their experiences developing a counter-space at Western College. Many students described how the opportunity to engage in community organizing and take on leadership roles in the counter-space positively impacted their sense of confidence and purpose in life. Students in later years at Western especially appreciated the institutionalized counter-space that provided opportunities for them to lead programs. Because they had built such a strong and intimate community in the counter-space at Western, even though many students drew on the skills they had learned from organizing to successfully transfer to 4-year universities, students missed the community at Western. Some missed the community in the counter-space so much that they returned to work for Western College once they obtained a bachelor’s degree. As a result of the positive experiences they had organizing at Western, many were inspired to replicate these counter-spaces for their careers.

The way undocumented students carried the civic values they had learned at Western College into their careers has broader implications for the purpose of a college education overall. Though many policymakers and researchers are focused on the capitalistic role of college

degrees in building a stronger workforce that is competitive in an increasingly global economy, undocumented students' experiences at Western suggest that a college education can also be important for building a just, equitable, conscious, and caring society. Programs in college for students to take leadership roles in facilitating counter-spaces on college campuses could teach students how to develop a sense of critical consciousness and learn how to apply these skills to their careers, as students at Western had done. This phenomenon would lead to more efforts to build equitable spaces in the United States.

## **CHAPTER 8: IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

Undocumented students face a labyrinth of discriminatory policies and practices in their pursuit of a college education. As college tuition is becoming increasingly expensive, undocumented students, who are often low-income (Gonzales, 2016), must find opportunities to receive financial aid to afford the cost of tuition. But policies at the federal, state, and institutional level exclude undocumented students from the financial aid opportunities that citizen students have access to (Nienhusser, 2018). Some states, like Georgia, even ban undocumented students from enrolling in the top public universities in the states (Soltis, 2015). Even in states with more equitable policies that allow undocumented students to pay the more affordable in-state tuition rates and receive financial aid, high school counselors and college staff are often misinformed about these policies, and incorrectly inform undocumented students that they are not able to go to college (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017a). Moreover, undocumented students face daily racist and xenophobic messaging about their educational opportunities (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018).

The ever-changing policy landscape for undocumented students also affects students' sense of inclusion in higher education. As the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, enacted in 2012 by the Obama administration, expanded access to higher education for undocumented students by making students eligible for work authorization and drivers licenses (Gonzales et al., 2016), evolving restrictions to DACA should increasingly be considered a higher education issue. As of April 2022, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services department that oversees the DACA program is not accepting new applications. On July 16, 2021, a U.S. District Court in Texas held that the DACA program is illegal, which placed a hold on new applications. Until DACA is open to new applicants again, a generation of

undocumented high school students and graduates will not be able to apply for DACA, which will greatly affect their opportunities to pursue higher education. Restrictions to DACA are some of many ways that undocumented students are excluded from higher education.

Undocumented students have been fierce advocates in addressing these issues of exclusion and advocating for more inclusive policy and programs at the federal, state, and institutional level. In this dissertation study, I sought to better understand how undocumented community college students organize for programs for undocumented students at their college. Since the role of student organizing at community colleges is often overlooked by public rhetoric and research, my goal was to center student organizers' expertise and experiences. I conducted an in-depth analysis of Western College, a community college in California that has robust programs for undocumented students, to analyze institutional contexts for student organizing. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How did undocumented students at a community college in California organize for equitable programs from 2006 to 2021?
2. How did undocumented students navigate working with other students, staff, faculty, and administrators in building programs for undocumented students?
3. How do undocumented student alumni make sense of their experiences organizing for institutional support for undocumented students at Western College?

The story of undocumented student organizing at Western College is primarily a narrative about student agency. While there is an important movement of staff, faculty, and administrators across the country who understand their students' agency, I challenge other leaders in the field who prioritize a narrative of what it means to better "serve" students to reconceptualize how they think about their students. I argue that a lens of how to "serve" students still espouses

condescending views that administrators, staff, and faculty have something to offer to students, while students do not have the agency or expertise to offer knowledge back to their institutions. The field of higher education should think about what it means to work *with* students as co-collaborators in the effort to build educational reform, instead of merely how to serve students, because students are experts of their own experiences and what their communities need.

Guided by theories of counter-spaces in Critical Race Theory (Solórzano et al., 2000), this case study of Western College comprised 26 interviews and analysis of over 50 documents such as institutional statements and webpages about undocumented students. Interviews were conducted with 11 undocumented student alumni who attended Western College over various years from 2006 to 2021. I also conducted interviews with five students who were currently attending Western College at the time of the interview in 2021 including three international students, one undocumented student, and a student who kept his immigration status private. Moreover, I talked to eight staff, faculty, and administrators to better understand the larger context and recent history of undocumented student organizing at Western College.

Since Western College had a cold and unwelcoming environment for undocumented students in the early 2000s, undocumented students at the time sought to create a counter-space (Solórzano et al., 2000) where undocumented students could feel safe and comfortable talking about their immigration status. Students had many strategies and priorities from 2006 to 2021 for how to establish and expand their counter-space. One of their biggest priorities was to institutionalize their programs so they could be more sustainable as student leaders graduated and transferred to four-year universities. To the students, institutionalization meant gaining funding, a physical space on campus, and a staff member who could support students in their organizing efforts. Even though undocumented students sought to institutionalize their programs,



they were clear with staff, faculty, and administrators that their programs should continue to function as a counter-space by being student-led.

Staff, faculty, and the administration at Western College were largely supportive of students' organizing efforts. The president of the college and several staff and faculty were champions of encouraging students' organizing and supporting their vision. However, undocumented students described how a few staff and administrators were harmful to their organizing efforts and discouraged them from being outspoken about their immigration status. Surprisingly, unlike other educational research findings, undocumented students and student allies reported how they faced the most opposition from international students at Western College who did not think undocumented students should receive resources from Western College. Though some international students were staunch advocates for undocumented students, other international students presented some of the largest barriers to building institutional support for undocumented students.

As undocumented student alumni reflected on their organizing experiences at Western College, they described how even though their 4-year universities had more resources for undocumented students than Western College, they ultimately missed the smaller and more intimate sense of community at Western College. They found their organizing work at Western to be so empowering and personally meaningful to them, that they wanted to continue to work on social justice issues for their careers. For example, Jesus, an undocumented student alumnus who graduated from Western in 2009, drew on the skills he had learned organizing at Western to teach his kindergarten students about ethnic studies and how to advocate for themselves.

The study of the phenomenon of institutionalization of a counter-space for undocumented students can inform the field of higher education's understanding of counter-spaces for all

marginalized student populations. Though this study was specifically about undocumented Students of Color, the lessons learned about dynamics between administrators, staff, faculty, and student activists could be applied to other student populations such as LGBTQ students on college and university campuses. To this end, though this study is helpful in better understanding educational equity for undocumented students, the broader themes of counter-spaces, institutionalization, and power dynamics apply to all marginalized student populations (Cho, 2020).

Theories on counter-spaces have explored the importance of these spaces for Students of Color and other marginalized student populations in educational settings (Santa-Ramirez et al., 2022; Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). Since higher education institutions enact the same oppressive systems as society at large, such as racism, xenophobia, and homophobia, marginalized student populations often create their own sense of safety in community with each other to resist oppression on campus. Building on the existing literature on counter-space theory (Case & Hunter, 2012; Carter, 2007; Margherio et al., 2020; Vaccaro & Camba-Kelsay, 2016), I argue that the field of education needs to explore the concept of an institutionalized counter-space more deeply. Counter-space theorists have explored the important nature of counter-spaces in educational spaces, but the field needs to think further about what it means to have a counter-space within an institution. Since counter-spaces are developed to counter the dominant culture of hostility on college campuses, the two processes of institutionalization and counter-space development are inherently in contradiction and in tension with one another. Where does the line get drawn when a counter-space has become so institutionalized that it is no longer counter to the institution? Once the institution supports aspects of a counter-space, such as providing physical space or funding, is the counter-space still inherently counter to the institution? Since research

finds that both counter-spaces and the process of institutionalization are important for developing equity, diversity, and inclusion on college campuses, future research, policy, and practice should explore the tensions between counter-spaces and institutionalization.

Much of the research on community college students, and specifically undocumented community college students (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017), explores the barriers within community colleges. While community colleges are purportedly open-access, Negrón-Gonzales (2017) finds that community colleges are still sites of “constrained inclusion” because community colleges still have so many barriers that restrict and prevent students from succeeding. Interestingly, this case study of Western College complicates these extant research findings as many undocumented student alumni found a sense of inclusion and place in the counter-space at Western College. Some felt so impacted by this positive experience within the counter-space, that they sought to return to Western College to volunteer or work even after they transferred to a four-year university.

The story of undocumented students’ organizing at Western College has implications for practice and policy in the field of higher education. Moreover, the study of the phenomenon of the institutionalization of a counter-space would be enriched by several future research efforts. In the next sections, I will discuss implications of this study for policy and practice, and recommendations for future research.

### **Implications for Practice**

The story of undocumented student organizing at Western College has implications for the urgent need for higher education leaders to face tough questions about the state of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While many higher education leaders issue solidarity statements with undocumented students thinking this is enough to support undocumented students, higher

education leaders should be grappling with challenging questions about what it really means to work *with* undocumented students and other marginalized student populations on their campuses. Administrators, staff, and faculty should not assume what their undocumented students need to be successful and have a good experience in college, but they should work in partnership with their students to better understand their needs in each temporal and sociopolitical context. For example, administrators, staff, and faculty should remember that the undocumented student population is quite heterogeneous such as students' race/ethnicity, age of arrival in the U.S., and how they came to be undocumented. Some students crossed the border with their families at a young age, for instance, while others overstayed visas (Jones-Correa & De Graauw, 2013). Administrators, staff, and faculty should work closely with their students to better understand their students' unique experiences and follow their students' lead in educational reform efforts.

As seen from this dissertation, counter-spaces had a positive impact on students and their communities. Therefore, I recommend that staff, faculty, and administrators explore ways to support the development of institutionalized counter-spaces on their college and university campuses. Implications for practice include (a) developing leadership opportunities for students; (b) creating power structures in which students have more power in decision-making processes to develop equity on college and university campuses; and (c) critical reflection for administrators, staff, and faculty on how they think about their role in collaborating with student activists on campus.

As seen from this dissertation study of Western College, opportunities for students to develop their leadership skills greatly benefited students' sense of well-being and purpose in life. Moreover, the opportunity to lead programs taught them about the importance of applying social justice and organizing skills to their future careers to give back to their communities. Therefore,

colleges and university across the country should consider how to provide opportunities for students from any kind of marginalized population to take leadership positions. Students could serve on taskforces and lead programs on campus through paid internship positions. It is imperative to compensate students for their organizing work instead of encouraging students to work for free.

In addition to providing leadership opportunities for students, administrators should consider how to create power structures in which students have more power in decision-making processes regarding the development of equitable programs and policies. Leaders of student government could have more power in determining final decisions. Moreover, students on taskforces could have more power over making final decisions instead of simply informing administrators' decisions.

Finally, administrators, staff, and faculty should reflect on how they understand the role of student activists on campus. Are student activists a problem that should be dealt with? Or are student activists an opportunity to collaborate to build a more inclusive and equitable campus environment? This reflection will help build a more equitable and inclusive environment on college campuses where student activists are seen as an asset, instead of a problem.

### **Implications for Policy**

Federal, state, and institutional policies exclude undocumented students from accessing and succeeding in higher education (Nienhusser, 2018). State context matters tremendously for considering policy recommendations for undocumented students (Soltis, 2015; Nienhusser, 2018). While some states have implemented policies that allow undocumented students to access the more affordable in-state tuition rates and financial aid, like the state context for Western College in California, other states, such as Georgia, require undocumented students to pay the

more expensive out-of-state tuition fees (Soltis, 2015). While the story of undocumented student organizing at Western College has implications for other institutions across the country, these institutions must be contextualized within their state contexts.

This dissertation study has implications for policy to build resources for the development of institutionalized counter-spaces, such as Undocumented Student Resource Centers and staff positions who work with undocumented students. National and statewide policy could also build programs and funding for students to have more opportunities to take paid internships where they can work on building counter-spaces on college campuses. As evidenced by this dissertation study and extant research literature on Undocumented Student Resource Centers (Cisneros & Reyna Rivarola, 2020; Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Cisneros et al., 2021; Galvez, 2021; Rosas, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021), these centers are important spaces for undocumented students to find a sense of safety and belonging on college and university campuses. Even though scholars and activists have highlighted these centers as model programs in the field, relatively few colleges and universities across the country have built these centers (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2018). National and statewide policy could allocate funds to support colleges and universities in building these resource centers on campus. As part of these centers, funding should also go to supporting the development of designated staff positions on campus who have the expertise to work with undocumented students. In states that have more exclusionary state policies, institutional leaders should work with their students to still build institutional support even if their states are not supportive.

National and statewide funding in all states across the country could also go towards developing more opportunities for students to have paid internships to lead equity initiatives on their campus. Though paid internships are important for undocumented students, especially

because of the barriers they face due to their immigration status, internship opportunities for undocumented students, and all marginalized student populations, would be important.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This dissertation on undocumented student organizing at Western College addresses a critical gap in the research literature to better understand how undocumented students organize at community colleges, the sector of higher education where most undocumented students enroll (Teranishi et al., 2011). The phenomenon of students' priorities to institutionalize a counter-space for undocumented students at Western College has important implications for future research. Institutionalizing a counter-space may seem like a contradiction, but undocumented students at Western College were pragmatic and creative in building an institutionalized counter-space.

The interlinking of counter-spaces and institutions lives in tension. Future research could explore how students, staff, faculty, and administrators seek to address this tension. For example, future research studies could a) explore institutional structures for undocumented students such as how, or whether, institutionalized programs collaborate with undocumented student organizations on campus, b) analyze the impact of providing opportunities for students to lead and sustain counter-spaces on college campuses, and c) focus on the administrators' point-of-view, specifically at Western College, which could reveal any misunderstandings and differences in perspective between administrators and students.

This study of the political dynamics between undocumented student leaders and staff, faculty, and administrators at Western College has important implications for future research to better understand the dynamics between established support programs and student organizations. Future research studies could explore how common it is to have institutionalized counter-spaces

on college campuses that are student-led. At other colleges and universities across the country, how do staff who lead institutionalized programs collaborate, if at all, with student organizations? How do these staff view the role of student agency? Research studies that address these questions will help us better understand the dynamics of student-led institutionalized counter-spaces, and why it may be difficult to build these entities.

While this dissertation found that opportunities for students to lead their own counter-space within the institution greatly boosted their sense of confidence and strengthened their leadership skills, future research studies could explore how counter-spaces affect students' sense of agency. For example, future studies could explore how students experience a sense of agency at a college or university that has formal opportunities for students to take leadership roles to run a counter-space, versus colleges and universities that do not have these counter-spaces. Does the existence, or nonexistence, of counter-spaces affect students' sense of agency in advocating for increased equity for marginalized student populations? These research questions will help us develop a deeper understanding of the role of student-led counter-spaces in fostering students' leadership skills.

Finally, since this dissertation study focused on the students' perspective of the story of undocumented student organizing at Western College, it would be interesting to conduct a future research study specifically with administrators at Western College to better understand how they made sense of the story. Did they have the same understanding as the students? Or did their understanding differ? In future years, I hope to conduct a follow-up study at Western College to compare the students and administrators' version of the story.



## **Conclusion**

Future research studies can help us better understand the tension of what it means to develop institutionalized counter-spaces for undocumented students and other marginalized student populations in higher education. This research can then inform practice and policy that supports the development of counter-spaces on college and university campuses. As Jesus, one of the original organizers at Western College said, “You’ve gone through all these journeys, and [building a counter-space] is another journey, but this journey is one that the benefit is going to be amazing and beautiful.”

## APPENDIX A: Interview Protocol With Student Alumni

### Welcoming Comments

Thank you so much for offering your time to talk together about your experiences at your community college. I am honored by this opportunity to talk to you. To give you some background on this research project and a little more about myself:

My name is Rachel and I'm a PhD student in the Graduate School of Education at UCLA. I am working on a research project for my dissertation regarding undocumented student advocacy at community colleges and institutional support for undocumented students. I am passionate about advocating for immigrant rights and have spent more than ten years assisting various immigrant and undocumented youth led organizations. It's been a wonderful experience volunteering for your student organization for the past six months.

We hope this study will be helpful to students, staff, faculty, and administrators at community colleges to learn more about each other's experiences working with undocumented students.

Our conversation today will last one hour and will be focused on your experiences advocating for undocumented students.

I will be giving you a consent form that asks for your permission to participate in this study and has more information about anonymity and confidentiality. I can email/text it to you. I will give you a few minutes to review the information – let me know if you have any questions.

[SHOW CONSENT FORM]

I also ask for your permission to audio record our interview and to take notes during our conversation. *[The student can choose to not be recorded. If there's no audio recording, take detailed notes when they talk.]*

Do you have any questions before we begin?

[TURN ON RECORDING DEVICE]

- 1) Tell me a little about yourself.
  - a. Where do you live?
  - b. What are you doing now?
- 2) When were you a student at [Western College]?
- 3) Tell me a little about your experience there.
- 4) I've heard that you played a role in building programs for undocumented students at [Western College]. Tell me more about what you did there.

Potential follow up questions:

- a. When was this?
  - b. How were these programs funded?
  - c. What strategies did you have for doing this advocacy?
- 5) What was your experience like working with staff, faculty, and administrators?
  - 6) What were some of the challenges, if any, that you faced?
  - 7) What would you say is the overall culture around how the college supports and works with undocumented students?
  - 8) [If applicable], what was your experience like transferring?
  - 9) How, if at all, do you feel like your experiences at [Western College] impacted your own career interests?
  - 10) What advice, if any, do you have for students at other community colleges trying to build programs like these?
  - 11) Are you still involved working with [Western College]?
  - 12) Tell me a little bit more about your background, like where did you grow up?
  - 13) What do you hope to see more of at [Western College] in the future?
  - 14) Is there anything we haven't talked about already that seems important to share?

## APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol with Current Students

### Welcoming Comments

Thank you so much for offering your time to talk together about your experiences at your college. I am honored by this opportunity to talk to you. To give you some background on this research project and a little more about myself:

My name is Rachel and I'm a PhD student in the Graduate School of Education at UCLA. I am working on a research project for my dissertation regarding undocumented student advocacy at community colleges and institutional support for undocumented students. I am passionate about advocating for immigrant rights and have spent more than ten years assisting various immigrant and undocumented youth led organizations. It's been an incredible experience getting to volunteer for your student organization for the past 6 months.

We hope this study will be helpful to students, staff, faculty, and administrators at community colleges to learn more about each other's experiences working with undocumented students.

Our conversation today will last one hour. For this interview, we can offer \$25. We can discuss afterwards how I can send this to you.

I will be giving you a consent form that asks for your permission to participate in this study and has more information about anonymity and confidentiality. I can email/text it to you. I will give you a few minutes to review the information – let me know if you have any questions.

[SHOW CONSENT FORM]

I also ask for your permission to audio record our interview and to take notes during our conversation. *[The student can choose to not be recorded. If there's no audio recording, take detailed notes when they talk.]*

Do you have any questions before we begin?

[TURN ON RECORDING DEVICE]

- 1) Tell me a little about yourself.
  - a. What are you studying at your college?
  - b. How long have you been a student here?
- 2) Tell me a little about the programs at your college for undocumented students.
- 3) Tell me more about the organizing work you've been doing with undocumented students at [Western College].
- 4) How do you think about building a sense of community for undocumented students at your college?
- 5) Tell me how it's been shifting to everything being online during the pandemic.
- 6) Why do you think working with undocumented students is important?
- 7) How did you become interested in doing this work?
- 8) What has your experience been like working with staff and administrators in developing programs/change/initiatives at your college?
- 9) Do you work with or connect with students at other community colleges doing similar work with undocumented students?
- 10) What have you enjoyed about the programs for undocumented students at your college?
- 11) What do you hope to see more of at [Western College] in the future?
- 12) What do you hope to do after your time at [Western College]?

## APPENDIX C: Interview Protocol with Staff, Faculty, and Administrators

### Welcoming Comments

Thank you so much for offering your time to talk together about your experiences working with undocumented students at your college. I am honored by this opportunity to talk to you. To give you some background on this research project and a little more about myself:

My name is Rachel and I'm a PhD student in the Graduate School of Education at UCLA. I am working on a research project for my dissertation regarding undocumented student advocacy at community colleges and institutional support for undocumented students. I am passionate about advocating for immigrant rights and have spent more than ten years assisting various immigrant and undocumented youth led organizations. It's been a wonderful experience volunteering for your student organization for the past six months.

We hope this study will be helpful to students, staff, faculty, and administrators at community colleges to learn more about each other's experiences working with undocumented students.

Our conversation today will last one hour and will be focused on your experiences advocating for and working with undocumented students.

I will be giving you a consent form that asks for your permission to participate in this study and has more information about anonymity and confidentiality. I can email/text it to you. I will give you a few minutes to review the information – let me know if you have any questions.

[SHOW CONSENT FORM]

I also ask for your permission to audio record our interview and to take notes during our conversation. *[The student can choose to not be recorded. If there's no audio recording, take detailed notes when they talk.]*

Do you have any questions before we begin?

[TURN ON RECORDING DEVICE]

- 1) Tell me a little about yourself.
  - a. What is your role at the college?
  - b. How long have you been working there?
- 2) What kind of work do you do with undocumented students?
- 3) How did you become interested in doing this work with undocumented students?
- 4) What have been some of the challenges you've faced in working with or trying to build programs for undocumented students?
- 5) What has your experience been like, if at all, with students, staff, faculty, and administrators in developing programs/change/initiatives at your college?
  - a. How do you see the role of the working meetings we have?
  - b. Are you involved with any kind of group like this for other student populations [at Western College]?
- 6) What would you say is the culture around how the institution supports and works with undocumented students?
  - a. [For folks who have been at Western College 5+ years], have you noticed a change in the culture around how the college works with undocumented students from when you first started to now?
- 7) [The Undocumented Student Resource Center] prides itself on being student led. How do you see the role of this?
- 8) I have heard that your college is famous for encouraging civic engagement. What do you think about this?
- 9) How have things been going online during the pandemic?
  - a. What are some of the challenges you've faced online?
  - b. How, if at all, have you noticed online education affected the students?
  - c. Are there any unexpected opportunities with everyone being online?
  - d. What has been something, if anything, you may have found that works well that you might suggest to other campuses?
- 10) What do you hope to see more of at your college in the future?
  - a. Where would you get started to make this happen?
  - b. What would be the first step?
- 11) Is there anything we haven't talked about already that you think would be important to share?

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