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The University as an Institution of Immigrant Integration for International Students and Undocumented Students

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

in

Sociology

by

Karina Shklyan

Committee in charge:

Professor David FitzGerald, Chair
Professor John Skrentny, Co-Chair
Professor Samuel Museus
Professor Richard Pitt

2024

The Dissertation of Karina Shklyan is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2024

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my Baba.

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I arrived at UC San Diego in 2016 knowing I wanted to study immigrant integration. Little did I know that I would have to work through several different types of projects over multiple years before I landed on my ultimate research question and dissertation focus. That long and winding journey, and seeing this project through to completion, would not have been possible without the support and guidance of many individuals.

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FIELDS OF STUDY

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Studies in immigration
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Studies in higher education
Professors Samuel Museus and Richard Pitt

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The University as an Institution of Immigrant Integration
for International Students and Undocumented Students

by

Karina Shklyan

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California San Diego, 2024

Professor David FitzGerald, Chair
Professor John Skrentny, Co-Chair

Recently, researchers studying the immigrant context of reception have tapped into a new environment that influences the immigrant experience: universities. Presently, the scholarship focuses on how different types of immigrant students adjust *to* the higher education environment, but it has not focused on how the universities themselves can serve as institutions of immigrant integration. My dissertation seeks to address this gulf in multiple ways. First, I shift the focus to include an immigrant group not typically found in the immigration scholarship: international students, and specifically, those who want to stay in the US after graduating. Second, I analyze how universities serve as sites of integration for undocumented/DACA students, despite the students' lack of legal status. Finally, I offer top-down and bottom-up perspectives to analyze the role of university staff in immigrant adjustment.

Based on 83 interviews with international students, undocumented/DACA students, and staff members at a California public university, I argue that the university can serve as both a venue and actor of immigrant integration. In the context of the university as a venue, I highlight the differing strategies immigrant students pursue in higher education. Due to their 60-day post-graduation deadline to secure a job or further education, international students who wish to stay in the US try to integrate as quickly as possible and thus approach their undergraduate studies through a strategic lens of professionalization. Undocumented students have a bimodal integration approach. They view their higher education degree as an important marker of success for themselves and their communities. They also rely heavily on university staff support to establish creative professional pathways within the boundaries of their legal status. In the context of the university as an actor, I illustrate how staff members (as street-level bureaucrats) are doubly constrained at the institutional and federal levels. I show how they creatively navigate these constraints to assist students with their post-baccalaureate prospects. The findings in this dissertation contribute rich empirical data on immigrant integration, street-level bureaucrats, and strategic assimilation, all of which are essential to understanding how universities can assist immigrants in adjusting to life in a host society.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The immigrant integration literature is replete with scholarship that examines various elements that impact the acculturation experience of new immigrants, including social networks (Menjívar 2000; Treitler 2007), interactions with the native-born community (Alba and Nee 2003; Jiménez 2017), legal status (López 2015), language acquisition (Bean and Stevens 2003), intermarriage (Gordon 1964; Lee and Bean 2004), and political participation (Bloemraad 2006). Alongside these important markers is concurrent scholarship that argues the context in which immigrants settle is a strong determinant for success in the host country (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). The original components of this theory include the policies of the receiving government, the host society's reception of newcomers, and the responses of the ethnic community itself. This bedrock framing has since been expanded upon, and our understanding of the contexts which shape immigrant integration has become more nuanced.[1] To understand how contexts factor into immigrants' lives, scholars have called for going beyond policy contexts and community influences to examine more deeply the institutions that immigrants directly encounter in their daily lives.

Recently, researchers studying the context of reception have tapped into a new environment that influences the immigrant experience: the university. In their seminal study of the state of immigrant integration, the National Academies of Sciences labeled universities a "key integrating institution" for immigrants, calling universities a crucial site for incorporating new immigrants into the economic and social fabric of the United States (Waters and Gerstein

[1] For instance, policy environments are no longer a matter of just federal policy, but also include local immigrant policy (Gebhardt 2016), federalism dynamics (Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan 2015), and the complicated geographies that shape immigrants' life chances (Cebulko and Silver 2016; Singer 2015; Valdivia 2019).

Pineau 2015:136). Universities train individuals to fill skilled positions in the labor force, acculturate them to American social norms, create an environment in which intimate relationships with native-born students can be fostered, and enable students to improve and perfect their English skills. While the critical role of education in the integration experience has long since been established (see, for example, Weber 1976), scholarship on the postsecondary experience has only recently started to gain traction. Universities are among a number of bureaucratic institutions that immigrants come into close contact with, in addition to social welfare agencies, medical providers, law enforcement, and court systems (Marrow 2009). Thus far, immigration scholars have focused on undocumented students and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients in higher education and how universities are a key space that can protect them from federal enforcement efforts (Enriquez et al. 2019; Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018). This framing of universities, however, does not account for (1) how universities act as institutions and actors of immigrant integration for their foreign-born constituents, and (2) the range of immigrant experiences within universities.

My dissertation seeks to address this gulf in two ways. First, I shift the focus of attention to include an immigrant group not typically found in the immigration scholarship: international students. Sometimes referred to as foreign students, international students generally meet all the criteria of traditional immigrants. Their movements traverse geographic boundaries, are observable over time, and involve semi-permanent or permanent changes of residence. They are also one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the world (Findlay 2011). International students are not, however, always sojourning abroad just for education. Their education is often the first step towards employment in the host country on either a temporary or permanent basis. Indeed, international students are increasingly remaining in the US, at least temporarily, after

completing their degrees (Kim, Bankart, and Isdell 2011).[2] According to Ruiz and Budiman (2018), applications for post-graduate work authorization, known as Optional Practical Training (OPT), rose by 89% and 421% from 2008 to 2016 among non-STEM and STEM international students, respectively. Studying international students in higher education will thus bring this immigrant group into the fold of immigrant integration research within the context of an understudied integrating institution.

Secondly, I shift the focus of understanding universities as a safe space for undocumented/DACA students to illustrate how the space can also serve as a site of integration for these students, despite their lack of legal status. While the inclusion of these two groups in one research study may seem counterintuitive, they share an important similarity in that both groups are constrained by immigration policy in their ability to engage in opportunities and long-term planning for life after college. They are also the only two immigrant groups in higher education with formal offices dedicated to their needs.[3] As such, it is relevant to discuss in tandem not only how universities support these students on campus, but also the postbaccalaureate aims of these immigrant students.[4]

The primary research question driving this dissertation is the following: how do universities operate as venues and actors of immigrant integration for undocumented/DACA students and international students during their time in university and as they seek to stay in the US after graduation? I analyze the university as a context of reception and demonstrate if and

[2] In their analysis of doctoral students, Kim, Bankart, and Isdell (2011) show that international doctoral students' rate of remaining in the US increased from 49.5% in 1980 to 66.1% in 2000.
[3] In the conclusion, I discuss how there is a growing trend among universities to create dedicated services for refugee students.
[4] When jointly discussing international students and undocumented/DACA students, I refer to them as "immigrant students."

how universities prepare students for life in the US, predominantly from a labor market standpoint.

In the first half of the dissertation, I focus on the university as a venue of integration for immigrant students by highlighting the differing strategies undertaken by immigrant students in higher education. Chapter 2 delves into the experiences of international students who, because of their 60-day post-graduation deadline to secure a job or further education, try to integrate as quickly as possible and thus approach their time in undergraduate through a strategic lens of professionalization. In Chapter 3, I shift the focus to undocumented/DACA students who, due to the uncertainty of their postbaccalaureate opportunities, have a bimodal integration approach. First, they view their mere presence in higher education as an important marker of success for themselves and their communities. Second, they rely heavily on university staff for advice on establishing creative pathways towards professional success they could pursue within the confines of their legal status. In the conclusion I offer insights about the agentic approach these students take in higher education and how higher education functions as a critical stepping stone for immigrant students to develop skills, networks, and resources to jumpstart their professional lives in the US.

The second half of the dissertation shifts the focus to assessing the university as an actor by examining the perspectives of staff through a framing of street-level bureaucrats. Among staff who work with undocumented students and international students, this dissertation demonstrates how (1) these street-level bureaucrats are doubly constrained at both the institutional level and federal level and (2) how they try to creatively navigate these constraints to assist students with their post-baccalaureate prospects. In my analysis of staff who work with international students in Chapter 4, I demonstrate how the neoliberal drive from the university to admit and enroll

international students translates into staff focusing extensively on meeting the legal visa needs of international students (because a failure to do so would inhibit their ability to keep admitting international students). And because of the federal challenges international students face in trying to get a job after graduation (i.e., the 60-day time limit to secure a position after graduation), staff are limited in the support they can provide. To help, they offer online resources to try and reach the maximum number of students (for example, a US map detailing which employers have hired UC Shoreview international student alumni). But in advising sessions, their behavior is more adaptive and informal, and they focus on helping international students develop a sense of self, leadership, and community that they believe will benefit the international students in their lives in the US after graduation. In Chapter 5, I show how staff who work with undocumented students are institutionally constrained because of (1) privacy policies in place that restrict staff from having a roster of undocumented students and (2) an over-reliance on undocumented student resource office staff to handle all undocumented student matters. Further, staff members are federally constrained because of undocumented students' lack of legal status and their inability to be legally employed after graduation. Staff navigate this constraint by trying to help undocumented students develop creative and alternative pathways to employment. The creative approaches taken by staff members towards both immigrant groups illustrate not only the generous degree of discretion these street-level bureaucrats possess, but also how street-level bureaucrats who work with immigrant students in meso-level institutions are especially in tune with the needs of their immigrant clientele and are uniquely positioned to support immigrants during their settlement in a host society.

In what follows, I illustrate the current literature landscape on the bureaucratic incorporation of immigrants, with a corresponding discussion on the street-level bureaucrats who

do the work on the ground. I follow that with an explanation of the theoretical role that education, and higher education specifically, plays in immigrant integration. I conclude the introduction with a discussion of my data and methods.

Bureaucratic Incorporation and Street-Level Bureaucrats

Sandwiched between community responses and federal policies, bureaucratic incorporation is increasingly shaping the experiences of new immigrants in a host society (Marrow 2009). Local institutions such as churches and nonprofit organizations touch upon practically all facets of immigrant life (Waters and Gerstein Pineau 2015). While federal immigration policies dictate criteria for admission, pathways to legal status, and eligibility for citizenship, local institutions can function as "jumping off points" (Cabell 2007) for new immigrants and serve as "critical mediators of structural dynamics [and] reservoirs of social capital" (Bloemraad, Chaudhary, and Gleeson 2022:320). In other words, bureaucratic institutions impact the structure of opportunities for new immigrants by dictating access to essential services and resources that are critical for immigrants when navigating the complexities of their new environment. In other words, even in the absence of political support, bureaucratic administrators use their authority to allocate resources, expand programming, and adapt organizational services to respond to immigrant needs. In fact, scholars argue that bureaucratic incorporation is the first step towards incorporation in a host society, even preceding political incorporation (Marrow 2009).

The immigration scholarship has extensively mapped the landscape of organizations that new immigrants encounter and shown how service providers frame and support their immigrant

constituents. Bureaucrats in agencies such as law enforcement (Lewis and Ramakrishnan 2007), faith-based organizations (Janzen et al. 2016), health and social services (Marrow 2009), employment and workplace rights (Gleeson 2012), and library services (Williams 2015) have all been shown to cater services specifically to immigrants in both liberal and conservative settings. In addition, there is a substantial subset of the scholarship focusing on how bureaucrats in new immigrant gateways (Singer 2015) facilitate immigrant integration without the established scaffolding present in traditional immigrant receiving cities. While some locales struggle to find funding and offer linguistically appropriate support (Roth, Gonzales, and Lesniewski 2015), bureaucrats in small communities tend to operate from a position of moral responsibility to help immigrants, emphasizing the economic and cultural boon these individuals bring to cities (Clevenger et al. 2014).

Tending to the needs of immigrants in bureaucratic settings are street-level bureaucrats[5] (Lipsky 1980), who engage directly with individuals in delivering public services. Street-level bureaucrats work at the intersection of organizational constraints and individual discretion. They combine their personal and professional values with their organization's mission, rules, and customs to guide their work (de Graauw and Vermeulen 2022). By nature of the work, they tend to have significant independence and responsibility, resulting in potentially substantial impacts on the lives of the people with whom they engage (Lipsky 1980). While bureaucratic rules provide a framework for their work, they oftentimes exercise discretion in interpreting and applying rules due to the complexity of individual situations, their commitment to the organization, and the cultural characteristics of their environment. Their discretion is further

[5] The label of "street-level bureaucrats" can extend beyond government employees and include individuals from non-profit organizations, for-profit firms, as well as other public-private partnerships (Brodkin 1997; Hupe and Hill 2007). These employees may include social welfare agents, teachers, lower court judges, counselors, policemen, agency clerks, tax officials, and physicians, among other client-facing personnel.

shaped by normative choices, namely their view of how deserving their clients are (Baviskar and Winter 2017; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2003). This can work out favorably for clients when bureaucrats' perception of their clients is of a positive nature (Marvel and Resh 2015).

Scholars have examined various aspects of street-level bureaucrats, including how they implement policies, the factors influencing their decision-making processes, and the implications of their discretion for equity and efficiency in public service delivery. On the latter point, there is evidence to show how members of the public need to demonstrate deference to street-level bureaucrats (Dubois 2016) and, as a result, could be at a power disadvantage (Prottas 1979). Too much discretion may result in "administrative evil," whereby officials may prioritize criteria such as efficiency over equity (Cárdenas and Ramírez de la Cruz 2017). Adding to the complexity of their work, street-level bureaucrats often operate within resource-constrained environments (Lotta et al. 2022) that are typified by inadequate funding, heavy caseloads, and insufficient staffing. This further adds to street-level bureaucrats' discretionary power, as they are constantly reallocating resources and shifting budgets to try to meet their client's needs.

Despite these challenges, street-level bureaucrats play a significant role in meeting the needs of immigrant newcomers. Immigrants often rely heavily on frontline workers to access essential services such as healthcare, education, housing, and social assistance. These bureaucrats can help immigrants not only with logistical paperwork, but also with imparting critical information about rights and entitlements. Given their direct interactions with diverse populations, street-level bureaucrats develop a keen understanding of the cultural, linguistic, and social challenges that newcomers encounter, allowing them to tailor services and interventions to best meet the needs of their immigrant populations.

Street-level bureaucrats can also be agents of socialization and act as cultural bridges. Binhas (2020) studied the role of teachers in helping immigrant students adjust to their new lives in Israel and discovered a range of areas where the teachers sought to support the students, including integration in cultural, economic, social, and value-related contexts. For example, by mediating information on the news and explaining the background regarding national days, they were, in effect, transmitting societal values that become critical foundational blocks for the students' lives in Israel. These interactions can profoundly shape immigrants' experiences, perceptions of host society institutions, and sense of belonging in a new country. Overall, street-level bureaucrats do more than deliver services. They form and shape the identities of future citizens. They help to socialize citizens and hold the metaphorical "keys to a dimension of citizenship" (Lipsky 1980:4).

This is not to say that providing frontline services to immigrants does not have its own unique set of challenges. When street-level bureaucrats have not been exposed previously to a particular immigrant group, they tend to stereotype and hold prejudices that impact service provision. Such was the experience of refugee women who were job seeking in Sweden (Spehar 2021). The women felt that public-sector employees who were charged with facilitating their entry into the Swedish job market had unrealistic expectations about how familiar the women were with relevant procedures and also felt their employment skills were not recognized. In her study of refugees in Athens and Berlin, Glyniadaki (2022) sought to understand how street-level actors' understanding of migrants' perceptions of gender framed the services they provided. Unsurprisingly, the views differed. The street-level actors perceived migrants' understanding of gender identities to be more traditional and conservative than they truly were. Glyniadaki found that when the bureaucrats constructed a binary opposition to the migrants they felt could not be

overcome, they were more likely to judge their clients and use their discretionary power in a way that would negatively impact their clients. Street-level bureaucrats, in both these cases, drew upon their preconceived notions about these immigrant groups to dictate (be it consciously or subconsciously) how they frame their services to the populations. When not shrouded in judgment, however, street-level bureaucrats can play an integral role in helping immigrants acclimate to a new society. Due to their immediate and consistent contact with immigrants, they are uniquely positioned to facilitate and curate services for their unique populations.

In the case of higher education, staff and administrators play this critical street-level bureaucrat function for immigrant students in several ways.[6] First, because of their unique position between the higher education administration and their student clients, they can guide immigrant students who may be unfamiliar with the American higher education environment so that they become acclimated to university norms, policy, and culture. This support also functions in the reverse direction, as they can serve as advocates who voice the concerns of their immigrant students to higher education administrators. Second, they are also policy implementers, which, in the case of immigrant students, is an especially critical function because of the consequential role that legal immigration status plays in higher education. For example, staff who work with DACA students convey policy updates regarding legal developments surrounding DACA and ensure students renew their DACA status in a timely fashion. For international students, staff may ensure students maintain a full courseload so as not to jeopardize their legal status.

[6] While much of the undocumented/DACA student and international student scholarship that focuses on students' interactions with higher education officials draws upon Stanton-Salazar's (2011) framework of institutional agents, I instead use the framework of street-level bureaucrats because it tied in more closely to the experiences shared in the interviews. Institutional agents are helpful in supporting students as mentors, fostering productive relationships, and connecting students to resources. While these components ring true for the higher education officials at UC Shoreview, I found that the challenges they identified with their work vis-à-vis discretion, burden, and staff-client relations align more closely with Lipsky's (1980) framing of street-level bureaucrats.

Third, staff possess a high degree of discretion and are thus able to develop curated programming based on the distinct needs of their immigrant students. They can craft specialized resources to help students develop community through social events and activities. Because of the significant linkage between immigration status and mental health stressors (World Health Organization 2023), staff can also provide access to counseling support that considers the connection between their identities as students and as immigrants. Finally, since staff are intimately familiar with the challenges that face immigrant students after they leave higher education (discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5), made more prevalent by the professional shift within higher education (Grubb and Lazerson 2004), staff can offer customized employment support that can support students through this potentially challenging transition. The next section will discuss how some of these components fit into our existing theories of immigrant integration.

The Role of the University in Immigrant Integration

While scholars have rightfully introduced the higher education environment as a setting in which immigrants undergo a process of bureaucratic incorporation (Marrow 2009), we have yet to develop an understanding for *how* universities operate as institutions of immigrant integration for international students and undocumented/DACA students. We know, in general, that a university degree provides individuals with social status and prestige (Collins 1979), is a sound financial investment (Kenworthy 2019), and is increasingly necessary in today's world as a stepping stone to adulthood (Waters, Carr, and Kefalas 2011). But how might universities fit into our past and present theories of immigrant integration? The following theorization examines

the university from two perspectives: as an actor (vis-à-vis the perspectives of street-level bureaucrats) and as a venue. There are certain integration processes in which the university plays an active role (actor) and others in which these processes occur because of the nature of the university environment (venue).

Although proposed 60 years ago, Gordon's (1964) seven core assimilation variables are still relevant for how researchers qualitatively and quantitatively assess integration outcomes. These assimilation variables serve as a useful jumping off point for theorizing the university context (Table 1.1).[7] The first condition, cultural assimilation, occurs when the immigrant group transforms their cultural patterns to fit that of the individuals in the host society. Cultural assimilation can take several forms: watching host country mass media, speaking the host country language, dietary preferences, etc. For international students, we would expect that the university as a venue would be a fruitful environment in which students practice and/or improve their English and become exposed to various other forms of recreational activities that are part of the American milieu (e.g., American football). Universities can actively aid international students by creating curated opportunities and programs for international students to guide them along this process. Language programs—which can come in the form of conversation partners, community fairs, and/or host families—have shown to be effective in helping international students achieve fluency in the host country language (Moore and Patiño-Santos 2014). For undocumented students, as they usually have spent most of their lives in the US,[8] they may be

[7] It should be noted that Gordon's variables depict an end state of full integration which, according to Waters and Gerstein Pineau (2015), takes approximately three generations. Even Gordon describes these changes as taking place across the course of a generation. As such, what I draw from Gordon is an understanding of how these variables function in progress.

[8] According to the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2024), 89% of DACA/DACA-eligible students arrived in the US before the age of 9. Overall, about 71% of all undocumented students arrived in the US before the age of 17.

more attuned to US culture and require less of an adjustment. However, this step is still relevant for these students because since they usually grew up in households with other undocumented immigrants (Passel and Cohn 2018), and are often also first-generation students (Shields 2018), they may also benefit from support to acquire cultural capital from higher education.

Table 1.1. Gordon's (1964) Assimilation Variables

Subprocess or Condition	Type or Stage of Assimilation
1. Change of cultural patterns to those of host society	Cultural or behavioral assimilation
2. Large-scale entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions of host society, on primary group level	Structural assimilation
3. Large-scale intermarriage	Marital assimilation
4. Development of sense of peoplehood based exclusively on host society	Identificational assimilation
5. Absence of prejudice	Attitude receptional assimilation
6. Absence of discrimination	Behavior receptional assimilation
7. Absence of value and power conflict	Civic assimilation

This initial exposure is then followed by structural assimilation, during which immigrants enter into primary group relationships with individuals in the host country. This might take the form of being part of various political, social, and/or cultural organizations. For this tier, we would expect the university to be a venue in which students are exposed to and take part in various organizations that suit their interests and identities. We also might expect university staff to take a more active role in facilitating connections between its immigrant students and domestic students. There is ample scholarship on the formative experiences of students at universities, such as learning how to act politically (Binder and Wood 2013) and how to socialize (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). For international students and undocumented/DACA students, we might expect that an office dedicated to supporting these student groups would inform

incoming and current students about ways to get involved in campus life through student organizations, campus events, and other campus activities.

For the next dimension, marital assimilation, universities are more venue-like. Universities are certainly a space in which intimate relationships of various forms take place between students (Bogle 2008). We would not expect, however, for universities to actively facilitate intimate relationships between immigrant students and domestic students. Similarly, for identificational assimilation, universities cannot control how a person identifies, but they may play an active role in developing spaces attuned to students' identities where they feel seen, supported, and understood.

The next two tiers—attitudinal receptional assimilation and behavior receptional assimilation—involve the absence of prejudice and discrimination. Universities can play a symbolic role here that fosters a culture of welcoming for immigrant students on campus. Universities have been voicing their support for international students and proclaiming their campuses as welcoming of students from all backgrounds. For example, following the Trump administration's divisive rhetoric and exclusionary policies toward international students, over 300 universities signed on to the "You Are Welcome Here" campaign, the purpose of which was to show support for internationalization across campus communities and proclaim that universities are "diverse, friendly, safe, and committed to student development" for international students. Universities were also leaders in litigation against Trump's anti-immigrant policies (e.g., DACA termination), which affirms to undocumented students that they are welcome on their college campus, regardless of federal policy. On campus, universities can also implement policies related to discrimination and inclusivity. These sorts of programs typically fall under the

umbrella of diversity and equity initiatives and would similarly apply to international students and undocumented/DACA students.

Gordon's (1964) last measure is civic assimilation, referring to the equal participation of immigrants in the civic and political life of the host society. This includes obtaining citizenship, voting, running for public office, and being involved in community decision-making processes. While universities are obviously unable to confer citizenship on either international students or undocumented/DACA students, they can create opportunities for students to be civically engaged on campus through leadership trainings and opportunities, fostering skills that they can apply outside of higher education in the host society.

Gordon's (1964) theory, while useful for breaking down the different components of integration, does not take into consideration the context into which immigrants are integrating. For that we turn to Alba and Nee (2003), who incorporate institutional analysis in their theory of assimilation. While they build on the behavioral assumption that individuals act according to mental models shaped by cultural beliefs (such as customs, social norms, law, ideology, and religion), they argue that such rationalities are context-bound. As such, individual agency is understood as choices made by actors embedded with an institutional environment. Alba and Nee apply this theory to assimilation, arguing that the causal mechanisms of assimilation fall within two groups that align with my interpretation of the university as a venue and actor. The first mechanism is proximate in nature, in that changes occur at the individual and social network levels. These are shaped by the forms of capital that individuals and groups possess. We can analyze the university as a venue in which networks are created and strengthened. This can take on a variety of forms. Network ties can exist among individuals from the same country of origin, from the same ethnoracial group (domestic or immigrant), across ethnoracial groups (domestic or

immigrant), between students and professors, and between students and staff members. Within the university environment, immigrant students are likely to create myriad networks because of the various ways they participate on campus through classes, formal and informal clubs, and other social settings.

The second mechanism proposed by Alba and Nee (2003) argues that distal causes shape assimilation, meaning individual outcomes are "embedded in large structures such as the institutional arrangements of the state, firm, and labor market" (38). The larger structures drive the proximate mechanisms and the choices immigrants make. In the case of international students and undocumented/DACA students, I focus on the third component—the labor market—and the decisions students make within the context-bound setting of higher education in order to move ahead in the labor market after graduation.

As the literature reviews in Chapters 2 and 3 will demonstrate, there is abundant scholarship across both the immigration and education literatures that illustrates how international students and undocumented/DACA students adjust to life *on* campus and find a sense of belonging *within* the university. My analysis builds on this work and takes it one step further, utilizing Alba and Nee's understanding of distal mechanisms, to understand how the various features of assimilation outlined by Gordon are operationalized *during* college to advance immigrant students' goal of labor market access and integration *after* college. By incorporating the voices of both immigrant students and staff members, I am able to provide a more complete perspective on how the university operates as both an actor and venue of immigrant integration for its foreign-born students. The following section will go into detail about how I operationalized this work.

DATA AND METHOD

Historical State Context

This research takes place in California, a state home to 10.4 million immigrants. Immigrants make up 27% of the state's population, the highest share of any state (Cuellar Mejia, Alesi Perez, and Johnson 2024). While it is known today as an "integration paragon" (Rodríguez 2018), the state used to be a national leader for anti-immigrant policies. From its early establishment as a state in 1850, California imposed taxes on foreign-born miners and heavily lobbied the federal government to exclude Chinese immigrants. Later, California codified the exclusion of Chinese immigrants in its penal code by forbidding corporations from employing Chinese immigrants (Colbern and Ramakrishnan 2018). Fast forward to the end of the 20th century, when immigration restrictionists capitalized on the economic recession and passed laws forbidding undocumented immigrants from obtaining driver's licenses, requiring cooperation between state prisons and federal immigration authorities, and mandating employment agencies to verify immigration status. These restrictive measures ultimately culminated in the 1994 passage of Proposition 187, which would have limited access to public services for undocumented immigrants, required state officials at all levels to report individuals they suspected to be in the US illegally, and prohibited primary and secondary education for undocumented children—had the proposition not been deemed unconstitutional by a federal district court. Then, California's attitude towards immigrants began to shift as a result of immigrant rights groups forming and mobilizing across the state. Starting in 2000, California became more accepting and welcoming of new immigrants, instituting policies to "celebrate

diversity, promote tolerance, temper gerrymandering (which in turn reduced partisan extremism), and reinvest in education and health care" (FitzGerald and Skrentny 2021:13).

University and State Context

My research took place at UC Shoreview[9], which I selected due to institutional characteristics and because of the dedicated commitment at the UC and state levels to both international students and undocumented students. UC Shoreview is housed within the network of University of California campuses and is one of the top hosting institutions of international students and undocumented students in California and the nation. My work to examine immigrant university experiences within the UC context follows in the scholarly footsteps of other researchers who have examined similar student dynamics on UC campuses (Delgado 2022; Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018). Table 1.2 provides a profile of the university.

[9] UC Shoreview is a pseudonym designed to protect the identity of interview respondents.

Table 1.2. Profile of UC Shoreview

Undergraduate Enrollment	27,479
Race and Ethnicity of Undergraduate Student Population	
African American	5%
American Indian	1%
Hispanic/Latino(a)	24%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0%
Asian	36%
White	23%
Domestic Unknown	2%
International	9%
Undergraduate Top Fields of Study	
Life Sciences	23%
Social Sciences	18%
Arts & Humanities	8%
Physical Sciences/Math	8%
Engineering	9%
Other/Interdisciplinary	9%
Business	5%
Computer Science	6%
Number of Countries Represented by Students	93
Undergraduate Student Diversity by Residency	
CA Residents	82%
Domestic Non-Residents	9%
International Non-Residents	9%
Gender	
Male	42%
Female	55%
Non-Binary	2%
Other	>1%

UC Shoreview has experienced a steady increase of international students on campus since 2008, with international undergraduate students currently representing 9% of the student body (18%, if you include graduate students). As they comprise almost one-fifth of the student body, the university has increasingly devoted institutional resources towards supporting this population. When the Office of International Student Affairs (OISA) was created in the early 2000s, it had a skeletal staff of three individuals to handle all international student-related matters, and they were predominantly focused on matters related to visa processing. As they began experiencing an influx of international students, the university expanded its OISA staff count to 35 and now hosts student programming alongside legal service offerings. The student programming consists of English language partnership programs, alumni panels, basic needs services, mental health programming, craft and game nights, and outings to neighborhoods around UC Shoreview, among others. While my dissertation focuses predominantly on professional support, it is this comprehensive combination of programming, alongside university support services outside of OISA (e.g., career, academic) that makes UC Shoreview a prime case site.

Not only is UC Shoreview an ideal space to study how international students are supported, but also the state context is such that it has been historically welcoming to international students. Currently, California leads the nation in its receipt of international students. The state hosts 138,393 international students, increasing 3.2% from 2022 to 2023 (International Institute of Education 2023). Chinese and Indian students account for more than half of the total number of international students in the state (Watanabe 2023). Historically, the state has also rolled out the red carpet for international students. Starting in 1927, the Board of Regents announced a gift from John D. Rockefeller to UC Berkeley to purchase land and

construct a social center on campus that would "foster closer relations between students of American birth and those coming from foreign countries" (Stadtman 1967:299). This international house was the first of four such centers around the country intended to foster growth and understanding between international students and domestic students. Thereafter, state, national, and international trends to increase the number of international students resulted in California hosting an oversized proportion of international students compared to its state peers. For instance, California's expansion of higher education, starting with the California Master Plan for Higher Education in 1960, set the stage for the expansion of campuses across the state and the opportunity to host more international students. In 2017, however, the state imposed a cap on the number of international students in order to "reaffirm UC's historic commitment to California residents" (UCOP 2017). The policy capped nonresident enrollment at 18 percent. At the time, four UC campuses—UC Berkeley, UC Irvine, UCLA, and UC San Diego—exceeded that limit, and the Board of Regents announced the caps would be effective in the following academic year. Despite these imposed limits, the state continues to host the highest proportion of international students compared to all other states.

California has also been leading the way in creating opportunities for undocumented students to attend their universities. The state has progressed the furthest in the nation in formalizing its support for undocumented students and creating "undocufriendly" (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2015) campuses. Starting in 2001, the state legislature passed Assembly Bill 540, allowing undocumented youth who had completed at least three years of high school in California to access in-state college tuition. A decade later, the state ratified the California DREAM Act, giving undocumented students access to institutional, private, and state-funded financial aid at public colleges and universities. And finally, the legislature created the California

DREAM Loan program in 2014, which allows undocumented students to receive up to $20,000 in loans while pursuing their undergraduate degrees. The combination of these measures has lowered financial barriers and fostered opportunities for undocumented students to pursue higher education. At present, California has 87,000 undocumented college students, or 21% of the nation's total, attending universities in the state (Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration 2024). California hosts the highest absolute number and share of undocumented students out of any state in the US.

At the UC level, there have been a series of measures implemented to institutionalize support for undocumented students. In 2012, UC Berkeley was the first university to establish an official support program for undocumented students (Sanchez and So 2015). The following year, UC President Janet Napolitano announced a five-million-dollar funding commitment that would be put towards developing undocumented student resources across all ten UC campuses (UCOP 2013). In 2016, 8.4 million dollars was allocated towards the creation of the DREAM loan program and the creation of the UC Immigrant Legal Services Center. Given this dedicated financial and institutional commitment, the UCs are among the most advanced in the nation in providing comprehensive support for undocumented students.

As a campus, UC Shoreview offers a suite of services that seek to support the unique needs of undocumented students. The Undocumented Student Resource Office (USRO) provides one-on-one consultations with staff members to discuss "graduate school preparation, travel advice, family concerns, personal guidance, legal rights, and referrals" (university website). They also offer (as is the case at all UC campuses) immigration legal services for undocumented students and their immediate family members. This consists of immigration consultations, legal advice, and formal representation for immigration paperwork and proceedings. In 2021, the

center created a professional fellowship program for undocumented students to take part in while they are pursuing their studies. If admitted, students receive a $7,000 scholarship and are paired with an on-campus mentor to design and implement an experiential learning opportunity aligned with their personal and professional interests. In addition, the center offers equity grants ($1,000 per academic year) to support students' professional development, preparation for graduate school, and leadership development. Finally, the center offers e-gift cards to undocumented students who are experiencing food insecurity.

Student Sample

The data from Chapter 2 is based on 38 interviews with international students conducted between November 2021 and November 2022. Thirty of the participants were current students (senior status), and 8 participants were recent alumni (graduated in either 2020 or 2021). I limited the research to seniors because "measurement during the senior year provides important information about previous years in college, as well as student perceptions about his/her preparation for life after college" (Lingrell 1992:18). The recent alumni were added for two reasons: to triangulate the current student data in case student perspectives shift after graduation and to isolate any potential Trump effect that may have impacted current student experiences (Walker and Slate 2019). Table 1.3 provides descriptive statistics of the international student sample. I crafted a sample of students that was representative of UC Shoreview's international student body in terms of gender, country of origin, and STEM majors. The average age of respondents was 22.6 years old.

Table 1.3. International Student Participant Demographics (*N*=38)

Gender	
Men	20
Women	18

Race/ethnicity	
Asian	25
South Asian	7
White/Caucasian	2
Latinx	2
African/Black	1
Declined to respond	1

Country of origin	
China	9
India	5
South Korea	3
Japan	2
Mexico	2
Singapore	2
Vietnam	2
Indonesia	2
Canada	1
Brazil	1
Greece	1
Kenya	1
Philippines	1
South Africa	1
Taiwan	1
United Arab Emirates	1
Bangladesh	1
Austria	1
Declined to respond	1

Relationship status	
Single	27
In a relationship	11

High school country of education	
United States	6
Outside of the United States	32

Major	
STEM major	29
Non-STEM major	9

Transfer status	
Transfer student	7
Non-transfer student	31

Mother's highest educational attainment	
Less than high school	1
High school graduate	10
Some college	4
College graduate	17
Advanced degree (e.g., JD, MBA, PhD)	6

Father's highest educational attainment	
Less than high school	2
High school graduate	7
Some college	2
College graduate	12
Advanced degree (e.g., JD, MBA, PhD)	15

Decision made to remain after graduation	
Before college	20
During college	18

How long student intends to remain in the US	
Permanently	15
At least temporarily	23

The primary requirement for international student recruitment was that these individuals intended to stay, at least temporarily, in the US after graduating. As indicated in Table 1.3, 23 international student respondents indicated that they wanted to stay in the US at least temporarily, with 15 affirming their desire to stay permanently. More than half of the respondents had made this decision before even coming to the US. By including this criteria, it gave me insights into the international students' experiences as students at UC Shoreview and, more importantly, how they viewed their experiences at UC Shoreview in the context of them as potential immigrants in the US.

The data from Chapter 3 stems from ten interviews conducted between November 2021 and November 2022 (Table 1.4) with 4 seniors and 6 recently graduated alumni who are either undocumented or are a recipient of DACA. While the experiences of undocumented and DACA students may somewhat vary, they are not as distinct as one might think. DACA students may report lower deportation concerns and less financial strain, but research shows their experiences are not fully divergent (Enriquez et al. 2021). Particularly in today's political climate, DACA students feel their legal status is tenuous and fragile. As such, both populations grapple with how legal status, or lack thereof, factors into decision making about their future opportunities. Moreover, across both populations, they understand the experiences of growing up without legal status and having to contend with the stress and uncertainty of immediate family members lacking legal status.

Table 1.4. Undocumented Student Participant Demographics (*N*=10)

Name[10]	Age	Country of Origin	Gender	Major	DACA Recipient
Ricardo	24	Mexico	Male	Psychology	Yes
Maracuya	20	Mexico	Female	Business Psychology	No
Jesus	21	Mexico	Male	Biology	Yes
Alexa	20	Mexico	Female	Sociology	No
Kim	24	Korea	Female	International Relations	Yes
Rika	24	Venezuela	Female	Sociology	Yes
Jade	25	Korea	Female	Public Health and Education Studies	No
Perico	28	Mexico	Male	Aerospace Engineering	Yes
Valerie	24	Mexico	Female	Chemical Engineering	No
Jerry	25	China	Male	International Business	No

The sample size for this chapter is admittedly smaller than what is traditionally found in qualitative research. However, undocumented students are a "hard-to-reach" population (Ellard-Gray et al. 2015), which oftentimes translates into fewer interviews. My total of 10 interviews is not an uncommon number of research participants in the undocumented student literature. Peer-reviewed qualitative scholarship on undocumented students has featured works that have as few as five or six interviews (see, for example, Banh and Radovic-Fanta 2021; Castrellón 2021; Huber and Malagon 2006; Shi et al. 2018). Since there were fewer respondents, I focused on ensuring that the interviews were especially in-depth, with the average interview lasting approximately 2 hours long. Because each interview was longer, I am able to better contextualize each student's responses and situate their voices in the broader scholarship (Small and Calarco 2022).

[10] All student participants (both international and undocumented/DACA students) were invited to choose their own pseudonym (Jack 2019). I found that this component made students more engaged with the work as they felt like their own individual contributors. Students' choices and rationales were varied—names ranged from those of their best friends or pets to favorite characters in TV shows.

While all students were informed that their responses would be anonymous, I made sure to provide extra reassurances to undocumented/DACA students that they would not be identified by their interviews and that nobody had access to the transcripts except for me and a trusted transcriber (who only saw their pseudonyms in the transcript). I paid special care to creating rapport with undocumented/DACA students, which is "essential in helping to create for the participant the feeling of being respected and of being genuinely heard" (Madison 2005:31). I underscored to participants that my primary responsibility was to them. I also shared with participants that I would work to elevate the findings to university administration in meaningful ways that would ensure university resources are curated to meet their needs and goals.

Student Interview Instrument

The interview guide was semi-structured and was separated into three main components.[11] First, I inquired about how a student's familial upbringing and primary school experience shaped where they wanted to pursue higher education and the kind of college experience they sought. We discussed their application process, how and why they chose UC Shoreview, and if they were considering what opportunities in the US looked like after graduation at the time of applying. Appendices A and B provide descriptive analyses of students' responses to these questions.

Most importantly, the first section included two prompts crafted in the form of hypothetical questions (Jiménez and Orozco 2021) that framed the remainder of the

[11] The main difference between the international student and undocumented/DACA student interview instruments was that the international student interview instrument included a section about how the student made the decision to come to the US for their studies. From there, both interview instruments were largely the same.

conversation. The first hypothetical question asked students to imagine that a friend from back home was coming to UC Shoreview as an international or undocumented/DACA student and to offer them advice as an incoming student. The second question asked students to imagine their graduation day and to reflect on what defines a successful college experience for them. These questions served multiple purposes. First, it gave students an opportunity to reflect on the entirety of their college experience and pinpoint significant experiences that I could draw from in the rest of the interview. And secondly, by having students define their own notion of success, I was fulfilling my aim of operationalizing integration through a subject-centered approach. Originally proposed by Lee and Zhou (2015) in their study of second-generation Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants in the US (and since expanded upon by López and Williams 2024), this approach avoids assuming comparisons to the native-born population, as is done in much of the quantitative literature. A subject-centered approach "places the subjects' experiences and perceptions of success at the center" (17) of analysis. Instead of imposing any a priori normative assumptions about integration, I asked interviewees to define what a successful college experience looks like for them in the context of their lives as immigrants in the US. Taking a student-centered approach, particularly in the context of international students and undocumented students, is important because these population are usually analyzed through a deficit model. Studies focus on what international students and undocumented students lack and the adjustments *they* need to make in order to conform to the host society. By centering the students' experiences, I am instead giving space for international students and undocumented students to define the productive practices they engage in that gives them meaningful and rewarding academic and social experiences (Kettle 2017).

Current theories of student success in the educational scholarship leadership have also shifted towards centering student voices, and accounting for the experiences of a diverse student body (see, for example, Bennett and Lutz 2009; Clewell and Ficklen 1986; Hurtado 1994; Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996; Murguía, Padilla, and Pavel 1991; Rendon 1994; Thayer 2000). From the student's perspective, notions of success include academic achievement, making friends, psychological and physical well-being, and a desire to learn (Jennings et al. 2013). Yazedjian et al. (2008) affirm the academic achievement finding in their study of first-year students, and also add that social integration and the ability to navigate the college environment were further indicators of success. Among first-generation students, the mere act of getting through a year in college constitutes success (O'Shea 2008). Success in college also means being able to negotiate feelings of otherness (O'Shea and Delahunty 2018). Among African American students, Hughes, Shehab, and Walden (2011) find that the act of graduating is a tremendous indicator of success in and of itself. These studies, however, limit the definition of success to being restricted to the college environment.

The second section of the interview delved into the college experience and covered themes related to education (major choice and faculty engagement), on-campus networks (friendships, student organization membership), employment, and use of on-campus resources. Finally, we spoke about a student's postbaccalaureate plans, how they have structured their time at the university to further their goals, and to what extent students feel like going to UC Shoreview prepared them for their next steps after college. I concluded the interview by giving space to the student to share if there was anything else they wanted to remark on that was not covered by the interview questions, in addition to collecting demographic information.

Student Recruitment

To recruit student participants, I used a multistep method. First, I contacted 445 UC Shoreview professors and course instructors between November 2021 and October 2022 who teach classes limited to juniors and seniors and asked them to distribute the call for participants to their courses. 146 professors agreed to either share the information with students through a class listserv, or they invited me to attend the class (either in person or over Zoom) to share the research information with students and field relevant questions. I simultaneously asked the offices on campus dedicated to international student affairs and undocumented student support to share the call for participants through their mailing list. Both offices agreed and shared the information on their respective social media pages and in online mailings to students. Finally, I snowball sampled from both populations until I reached saturation. Students received a $10 Amazon gift card for their participation. If interviews needed to be conducted over two sessions, I provided them with an additional $10 gift card as compensation for their time and efforts.

I also offered myself as a resource to students if they needed any personal or professional guidance regarding their postbaccalaureate journey. This could include me connecting them to relevant peers and colleagues who could aid their postbaccalaureate pathway, reviewing resumes and cover letters, and reading personal statements for graduate school. Since the time of this research, I have been a reference for a student who was admitted to a professional volunteering program, and I reviewed and commented on the personal statement for an additional student's graduate school application.

The student interviews each lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours (international student interview average length = 90 minutes, undocumented student interview average length =

118 minutes). I gave students the option to either meet in person or over Zoom, depending on their comfort level and schedule. If the student chose the in-person option, we generally met in a group study room at the university library or at a coffeeshop on campus. I preferred to meet the students in neutral locations so as not to impose any undue power differential and to make them feel more comfortable in spaces they generally inhabit on campus. On two occasions, due to scheduling challenges, the interviews took place in my office.

Staff Sample and Recruitment

To understand the landscape and framing of services for international students and undocumented/DACA students, Chapters 4 and 5 draw upon interviews from two staff sources. First, I interviewed 11 staff members expressly dedicated to international student affairs at the Office of International Student Affairs (OISA) and 8 staff members who work on undocumented/DACA student services at the Undocumented Student Resource Office (USRO). Staff members included both career professionals and student support staff. Second, I interviewed 16 staff members and administrators across campus who serve international students and undocumented/DACA students as part of their broader portfolio. I intentionally sampled staff and administrators outside of OISA and USRO who work in academic, professional, and social support units. Most of these individuals were contacts shared from OISA and USRO. I triangulated these responses against what I learned from OISA and USRO staff. I contacted 57 staff members, 35 of which agreed to an interview (61% response rate). Interviews took place between March 2022 and November 2022 and lasted, on average, for 57 minutes. I asked staff

and administrators to choose if they would like to meet with me in person or over Zoom. In-person meetings took place in campus offices, coffee shops, and staff homes.

Staff Interview Instrument

Using a semi-structured interview guide, I initially established an understanding of the staff member's role, how long they had been in this position (and at the university, generally), and how they came to work in international student or undocumented/DACA student affairs. Following this baseline, I asked general questions about the responsibility of university staff towards its student population. I asked this umbrella question so I could drill down further and ascertain if staff felt there was a different university responsibility toward their international student or undocumented/DACA student populations. From there, I focused on questions that are relevant to circumstances that street-level bureaucrats encounter, such as how staff meet the challenges of diverse student populations and adequately address the needs of a growing international student and undocumented/DACA student population. Finally, I inquired about what responsibility staff feel, if any, towards preparing international students (who want to stay in the US after graduation) and undocumented/DACA students for their postbaccalaureate transition. Beyond determining whether they feel a mandate in this regard, I also asked how this translates to concrete services.

Interview Analysis

All interviews were initially transcribed by an automated service (Otter.ai) and were then individually reviewed and edited by an independent transcriber who received anonymized transcripts.[12] After reviewing the transcripts for accuracy, I coded the interview data using NVivo software. Data codes were developed through an iterative deductive and inductive process. The deductive codes stemmed from the interview guide structure and were grounded in theoretical interests (e.g., how different types of social networks were used for professional purposes). The inductive codes were based on patterns that emerged from the interview data. For instance, I originally had "consolidated experiences" as part of a node under descriptors of international students' experiences at UC Shoreview. This sub-node became its own mega node, where I coded all instances of international student decisions at UC Shoreview that corresponded to them having a consolidated experience, i.e., the different decisions made during their undergraduate career that impact their ability to obtain a job in the US after graduation (e.g., academic major selection). These themes emerged inductively as I heard international student participants talk about their need to engage strategically during their time at UC Shoreview because of the stress they are under in trying to secure employment within a 60-day clock after graduation.

Fieldwork Data

While the dissertation predominantly draws upon the 83 interviews conducted with students and staff, I also completed several months of fieldwork at UC Shoreview (November 2021-June

[12] One staff participant asked not to be recorded, and so I instead took extensive notes during the interview.

2022), during which I attended almost 70 orientation events, cultural gatherings, and professional workshops organized for international students and undocumented students. Attendance at these events helped me to glean an understanding for (1) what sorts of events the USRO and OISA create for their students and (2) what sorts of students attend these events (country of origin, degree, level of education). Since this dissertation research was collected when the university was still emerging from a period of exclusive online learning, 51 of the events were held over Zoom, and it was difficult to accurately gauge if attendance at these events was representative of how students were engaging with OISA and the USRO during non-COVID times. Hence, I used the data from the fieldwork to inform my findings, but I found the interview data to be more informative and instructive in answering my research questions.

Limitations

This dissertation is limited in a few ways. First, I am only capturing a snapshot of student experiences during a single (or, in some cases, two) interview. Ideally, I would have interviewed students both while they were undergraduates at UC Shoreview and several years thereafter in order to assess if the experiences they cite as important while they were undergraduates at UC Shoreview continued to shape their postbaccalaureate journey. While this is an opportunity for further research, I attempted to limit the shortcomings of my data by (1) framing questions of students that had them reflect on their entirety of their undergraduate experience and (2) interviewing students who had already graduated so I could assess if there were any changes in overall trends.

Second, the interview data may be influenced by self-selection bias. Students may have participated in the study because they were (1) interested in the study in the first place, (2) had interesting experiences they wanted to share, and/or (3) were more engaged on campus generally. I attempted to circumvent these issues by recruiting participants both via the USRO and OISA (students who were likely to be more engaged) and from courses (potentially more representative of the average student).

Next, this research does not include interviews with faculty members. Research shows how faculty members can be instrumental mentors for undergraduate students (see, for example, Baker et al. 2015). I focus on staff members, however, as they (1) are better representatives of street-level bureaucrats who have to navigate institutional dynamics and (2) have more defined relationships with students as compared to faculty members, where the process can be more individualized and informal. I invite future researchers to look at how faculty members think of themselves as more than instructors and mentors and how they might fit into the integration dynamic of universities.

Finally, this research focuses on a single university that is a top-ranked R1 institution in a welcoming state. Because of the size of the university and the welcoming nature of California, there are dedicated services for both international students and undocumented/DACA students (as opposed to being housed within broader multicultural centers, for example). I would expect the formal street-level bureaucrat dynamics at smaller universities to be less rigid, and for there to be fewer institutionalized program offerings for these student groups. I encourage future scholars to conduct comparisons between institutions and between states with varying policy climates.

Critics may argue that it may be hard to generalize to other institutions in the US. While California is unique in many respects, FitzGerald and Skrentny (2021) argue that the state is a "bellwether for other states" (1). At present, California is currently one of five states that is majority minority (Panzar 2015), and the rest of the country is expected to reach majority-minority status by 2044 (Frey 2014). And after a pandemic lull, international student enrollments at US universities have soared beyond pre-pandemic levels, and the US is not expected to lose its prominence as a desirable location for international students (Knox 2023). These national and international dynamics will undoubtedly be reflected in higher education institutions, and universities nationwide will need to continuously adjust their support programs to reflect their changing student bodies.

CHAPTER 2: THE INSTRUMENTAL INTEGRATION STRATEGIES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Abstract

The process of immigrant integration is multifaceted, involving layered components of employment, social networks, health outcomes, education, cultural adaptation, and language acquisition, among others. In general, immigrants are not approaching the process of integration in a proactive and strategic manner. By sending their children to school, befriending their neighbors, finding employment in the mainstream economy, learning the host country language and incorporating cultural idioms into their vernacular, they are "integrating" just by living their daily lives. As such, integration is generally a process that takes place subconsciously and unfolds over time. In fact, according to the National Academies of Sciences, full immigrant integration is not complete until after three generations of immigrants have resided in a host society (Waters and Gerstein Pineau 2015). This is not the case, however, for all immigrant groups. International students, particularly those who want to remain in the host society after graduation, are under heightened pressure to integrate in order to increase their odds of securing employment and a secure visa status after graduation. In this sense, international students are attempting to truncate the integration timeline from three generations to four years. I will demonstrate in this chapter the integration strategies international students use while in higher education to maximize their opportunities for remaining in the United States after graduation, and the pressures they face along the way. Drawing upon theories and frameworks of "strategic assimilation," "one-up assimilation," and "deserving immigrants," I will show how international students demonstrate their employability to future employers by making calculated decisions

regarding their academic choices, culturally adjusting through interactions with domestic students, and developing deliberate networks to assist in their post-college journey.

Turn Towards Agentic Approach in Immigrant Integration Scholarship

In early theories of assimilation and integration, theorists such as Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, Emory Bogardus, and Milton Gordon describe the processes by which assimilation would occur. Specifically, they emphasize the role of institutions—schools, workplaces, religious establishments, and legal and political organizations—in shaping the lives of new immigrants in the United States. Twenty-first century theories of assimilation and integration, however, have placed immigrant agency more squarely in the center of analysis. In Richard Alba and Victor Nee's book, *Remaking the American Mainstream*, they state that a "satisfactory theory of assimilation must, at the individual level, conceptually incorporate agency stemming from purposive action and self-interest" (2003:39). This is not to say that institutions are absent from their analysis. Indeed, they argue that any decisions made by immigrants are "context bound," meaning individuals make decisions by considering the institutional context. Agency itself stems from choices that immigrants make according to their perceptions of costs and benefits embedded in the institutional context. As such, any analysis of immigrant integration must deftly balance how immigrants make choices within the relevant institutional context.

Extending the agentic approach, Lacy (2004) builds upon Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory that decouples assimilation and mobility into three possible assimilation paths—straight-line trajectory into the middle class, downward assimilation into poor urban neighborhoods, and reliance upon the ethnic community for social capital,

employment leads, and relief from discrimination. She focuses specifically on the third path and takes it out of the immigrant context to analyze its application to Black families in the US. Specifically, she develops a framework of "strategic assimilation" to demonstrate the strategies Black parents use to prepare Black children for life outside the community. The families believed that maintaining their Black identity was crucial for providing a sense of belonging and pride, but that adopting aspects of middle-class white culture can help to facilitate upward mobility. While not immigrant-specific, her "strategic assimilation" approach has been adopted by migration scholars and demonstrates the need Black parents feel in preparing their children for the "real world" where they may experience racism and discrimination. Parents used "boundary work" to emphasize similarities with the white middle class while also displaying an affinity for their ethnoracial roots. In this case, individuals "associate selected aspects of their identity with a specific cultural repertoire" (Lacy 2004:910). This duality—socializing in the Black world and assimilation into the white world—represents individuals' conscious and tactical efforts to both safeguard their identity while also figuring out how to navigate unfamiliar (and perhaps unwelcoming) spaces.

Karam (2020) uses Lacy's approach to understand how second-generation Muslim immigrants actively construct their identities as religious minorities in the process of assimilation. She finds that these individuals *consciously* crafted a de-ethnicized interpretation of Islam—developing a Muslim-American identity—that they believed would be critical in promoting upward assimilation for themselves and their children. Once again, this approach by Karam, buttressed by Lacy's work, demonstrates how immigrants and racial minorities can be active players in the integration process by selectively navigating their interactions with the

mainstream. This enables individuals to safeguard their own ethnoracial identities while choosing how, with whom, and within which, sectors of society they want to engage in.

While Lacy and Karam discuss strategies immigrants and racial minorities use to integrate into the host culture, Tatum and Browne (2019) look at how maintaining ties with the heritage culture, while incorporating elements of the host culture, can be a strategy of "one-up assimilation" among immigrants. In their words, "by developing fluency in multiple cultural worlds, middle-class immigrants believe they hold a cultural capital advantage over their middle-class American counterparts" (1). Respondents saw this ability to straddle multiple cultural worlds as an asset that is increasingly rewarded in the global job market. In this instance, the strategy used by immigrants is not to be just culturally matched with those in the host society, but rather more culturally attuned within *multiple* spaces that ultimately places them in a position of greater potential mobility than those in the host community.

Unlike previous generations of immigrant integration theories, the scholarship is increasingly moving in the direction of recognizing the strategies that immigrants take—within the bounds of their institutions—to gain acceptance, and ultimately, upward mobility. The above scholarship takes a cultural and identity-based angle to integration, discussing in general terms how immigrants deftly navigate unfamiliar spaces to either gain acceptance or place themselves in advantageous positions. As my findings show, international students within higher education are similarly strategic in their interactions. They do not often have family members to help facilitate these strategies (as in the case of Karam and Lacy's research participants), and the students themselves take very decisive steps to demonstrate their worthiness as employable immigrants, aiming to facilitate their own eventual labor market integration in the US after graduation.

At present, the current state of the international student integration scholarship emphasizes the acculturation experiences of international students *into* the higher education environment. The literature is primarily divided into studies that focus on psychological wellbeing and sociocultural adjustment. Scholarship focusing on psychological wellbeing typically reports the effects of depression, anxiety, homesickness, loneliness, isolation, and psychological distress (see, for example, McLachlan and Justice 2009; Sullivan and Kashubeck-West 2015; Wang, Wong, and Fu 2013; Wei et al. 2015). This research shows how acculturation experiences vary by country of origin (Leong 2015) and ethnic visibility (Tan and Liu 2014). This is in contrast to sociocultural adjustment scholarship that deals with a students' overall social integration, sense of belonging, interaction with faculty and domestic students, and social capital (Han, Pistole, and Caldwell 2017; Longerbeam, DeStefano, and Lixin 2013; Van Horne et al. 2018). While both streams of scholarship are critical for understanding how international students fare in a new culture and educational system, they view the higher education environment as a discrete space. For international students who want to stay in the US after graduating, however, the university is a stepping stone for their eventual settlement in the host society, and it is thus important to understand the agentic approach students take in this environment to aid their overall settlement process in the host society.

The Deserving and/or Good Immigrant

State-imposed logics of citizenship dictate that immigrants must fulfill certain criteria of "goodness" in order to be accepted within the body politic. In this sense, immigrants must labor for inclusion (Sheehan 2022) and work hard to overcome stigmatization and prove their

deservingness. This is oftentimes the case because states impose certain conditions on who is qualified to be a member of the citizenry. In European countries, these processes are formalized through a series of legal and administrative criteria. For example, the German integration regime has prioritized language proficiency as the cornerstone of integration, alongside other bureaucratic requirements, such as finding housing, joining integration classes, and finding work. The state in this case acts as a gatekeeper and creates a powerful social imaginary about the deservingness of "good refugees" who receive certificates when fulfilling certain integration requirements (Etzel 2022). For immigrants more generally, the state dictates who is deserving of acceptance based on their economic contributions (and conversely, not being seen as a public charge), civic engagement, commitment to law and order, and being loyal through maintaining a politically or religiously moderate position (Hackl 2022). It should be noted, however, that this creates a false notion of a homogenous binary society that one can simply step from the unintegrated into the integrated sect of society, which does not account for racial and economic inequalities that perpetuate exclusion.

State-imposed definitions of a deserving immigrant can not only create an entry path into inclusion, but also work in the opposite direction to determine who can be excluded and expelled on the basis of deservingness. In Cancellation of Removal hearings that decide whether to support immigrant removal or relief, judges can fixate on certain characteristics, such as gender, to assessing deservingness (Farrell-Bryan 2022). Judges evaluate men on whether or not they are emotionally involved parents and/or partners. This criteria, Farrell-Bryan claims, is used to determine if the men are raising culturally integrated Americans and are themselves economic providers of upward social mobility who deserve to receive relief from deportation. In the policymaking space, lawmakers draw upon the concept of immutability (meaning you are

targeted on account of traits beyond your control and are thus subject to protection) to differentiate between "undeserving" Central Americans fleeing civil wars and gang violence versus "deserving" women subjected to gender violence.

Advocates and service providers also incorporate the framework of goodness in their work. In Marrow's (2009) work of healthcare providers in San Francisco, she demonstrates how they frame undocumented immigrants as hard-working, law-abiding, and worthy. The goal is both to showcase undocumented immigrants as morally deserving of equal care and to translate this inclusive view into increased financial resources. More broadly, immigrant activists and advocates strategically craft narratives of deservingness when advocating for pro-immigrant causes (Patler 2018; Viladrich 2019). Undocumented immigrants are framed as being contributing economics actors and/or as vulnerable victims (Viladrich 2019). In their strategies, advocates select "master frames" that would resonate with audiences around the US; they need to be nationalist enough to appeal to middle-of-the-road Americans but also liberal enough to provide deserving immigrants a pathway to citizenship (Nicholls and Uitermark 2021).

Beyond state-imposed criteria for inclusion, immigrants tend to believe that they are personally responsible for performing "good" behaviors to demonstrate their deservingness for being in the host country. Andrews (2018) demonstrates how undocumented immigrants self-regulate through hard work, political deference, and cultural assimilation. In the labor market, they avoid complaining and frown upon those they deem to be lazy. They eschew political protests, declaring that protest participants are "bad," in contrast to their own goodness. And they also attempt to "act" like citizens by speaking English and minimizing their home country roots. The migrants' hope is that by doing all of all these actions, it would help them curry favor with US authorities in the event of an eventual legalization. More importantly, this study demonstrates

how immigrants feel they themselves can act in "good" and "deserving" ways that can weigh positively on their immigration fate. These behaviors, however, do not typically dissipate and continue to spill over after individuals' initial encounters with immigration law (Menjívar and Lakhani 2016). Immigrants continue to alter their behaviors not out of fear of deportation, but in the hopes of inclusion and being accepted as legitimate members of society.

This notion of deservingness is also deployed by the children of immigrants who frame their belonging through their parents' migration journeys and corresponding sacrifices. Kwon (2022) paints a detailed portrait of the "inclusion work" performed by youths to show their families' worthiness of belonging in a nation where they have been typically portrayed as a drain on resources. The children of immigrants employ cultural repertoires by "Americanizing" their family's migration journey, portraying their family as collective and hardworking, and presenting them as "productive" citizens ready to achieve upward mobility. The goal of this is to showcase their family as hyper-American, with characteristics that are superior to that of a typical American family, in order to validate their family's presence.[13]

Immigrants perform acts of deservingness in different fashions and for different ends. They employ cultural repertoires of Americanness, engage in patriotic civic behaviors, affirm their commitment to being economically contributing members of society, and refrain from activities that could lead to their exclusion (or, at times, expulsion). These claims are generally made vis-à-vis the state to achieve benefits, legal status, or mere general acceptance. International students similarly employ a deserving mentality, but with respect to future

[13] This is not to say that all immigrants buy into the "good citizen" frame and adjust their behaviors accordingly. Ghaffar-Kucher et al. (2022) discuss the experiences of Muslim American youth who link their struggles with other racially minoritized groups in the US. Through shared histories of imperialism, racism, and slavery, Muslim American youth identify broadly with communities of color and no longer want to sweep things "under the rug" in the same ways their parent's' generation had to in order to achieve a sense of inclusion.

employers in the US who they hope will sponsor them for work visas. I build upon the preexisting "deserving immigrant" scholarship to show how international students use an "employable immigrant" framing to demonstrate to employers that they are worth sponsoring and hiring for employment in the US.

How Do Students Define Success?

In my interviews with international students, I asked students to reflect on their college experience and define what success meant for them. Students' answers included academic success, network formation/expansion, work experience, personal growth, and securing a job. They understood that college is a unique time, with access to resources and opportunities, and they felt a need to make the most of their (approximately) four years in the institution. They took this time to discover themselves personally and professionally in an attempt to define future interests and goals. Jack, a 22-year-old Mechanical Engineering student from Greece, moved around a great deal growing up because of his father's corporate job. Having lived in six different countries by the time he graduated high school, he told me he never really had a place to call home. Wanting to feel more rooted, he used his college experience as a period to explore and learn more about himself. He explained, "I guess I would define it by what I accomplished, like academically, I think. And at the same time, I really gained more of an idea of what I'm really interested in doing later on, which was like, my main uncertainty coming into college. And I know like, what type of work I'd enjoy and what I'm good at doing."

The process of self-discovery, however, played second fiddle to the neoliberal need to decide on professional goals. After graduation, international students are under a strict 60-day

visa deadline to determine next steps, so they prioritize professional goals and interests while in college to lay the foundation for post-college success. Unknowingly, students were buying into the understanding that a higher education degree grants them access to professional status and high wages (Grubb and Lazerson 2004). Miguel was the leader of a student organization dedicated to creating a community for international students on campus. It was thus surprising to me that his answer to the definition of success strayed away from notions of community and belonging on campus. He said,

> The sentimental part of me would want to say, "Oh, the experiences and the friendships!" But in truth, first and foremost, it would be that you were able to discover what you wanted to do with your life—talking about career, talking about life direction—and open up your road to it, basically. Basically, what that translates to practically is finding out that the major you chose is the correct one—and if not, that you changed—and that you actually did perform well in that major. That would be first and foremost.

The alignment between major and academic achievement is one strategy for achieving postgraduate success. Outside of the classroom, students defined success as building up professional acumen and experiences that can lead to postgraduate opportunities. Marcus, an enthusiastic and charismatic senior from Austria, was determined to stay in the US after graduating and doing whatever it takes to make it happen. When I asked what he needed to do in college to achieve that goal, he said,

> Internship, I think is number one. And then obviously, build on your resume—just be good, a hirable person… For immigration—you can't just stay here and do nothing. So, just get as much into the job market or academia if that's what you're into—it really depends. Just do something. Do something that that opens up a new opportunity after college.

This future-oriented perspective defines how international students perceive their college experiences because there is extra pressure to get a job after graduation. So much so that some students defined their success *in* college through the framework of landing a job *after* college. I

asked Jason, who was double majoring in Nanoengineeering and Math-Computer Science, if getting a job after graduation is important for all students, or if there is added pressure among international students. He said,

> Getting a job, to an extent, is weighted more heavily if you're international. It's well known among the international student community—it's not easy. All of us know—whether it's before or during. Because usually, if you don't know before, you're going to figure it out very quickly. I know of people who didn't know, and they also weren't really that proactive. And then by the time they realized that, they had to start finding a job, and they couldn't find any because they didn't really do much planning. They had to return. And I've heard enough of these kinds of stories that I was quite proactive from the get go.

So, for Jason, success "culminates in me getting a job." In this sense, college attendance and its meaning as a coming-of-age environment holds less importance among international students and instead serves a utilitarian purpose among international students who want to stay in the US after graduation. Yuhan echoed this sentiment and said a college experience is successful "if you have the next thing lined up, meaning you have already got your job after graduation or you got a Master or PhD school that you're going to attend." It is only after achieving these factors that students described the ability to relax, and as Yuhan phrased his own experience for his last quarter, "try to make this quarter colorful and doing a bunch of things."

To land a job, you not only need to have demonstrated academic success and professional experience, you also should be connected to individuals who can clue you into jobs. The network strategies will be expounded upon further in the findings, but through the framework of success, international students viewed network connections as part of the foundation for securing employment. Nath, a 21-year-old student from India, said,

> Even when you're an undergrad, let's say you're applying for grad school—knowing your professors helps you get those recommendation letters. One of my friends, she was looking for a job and her professor recommended the place to her and that's how she got the job. So that's something that's translated into your life

> after college as well. If you're trying to go to industry, then having that social group, knowing all these people, helps out.

There may not always be a tangible employment outcome, but the mere act of staying connected enhances one's odds of future success. Jianyu talked to me about the importance of making "real" friends. I asked him to expand on this and he explained that real friendship goes beyond the friends you make in class. Real friends are those you not only spend time with outside of class, but also stay connected after graduation. The connection, however, is not purely for friendship's sake. Jianyu explained, "The friends that I made here might help me in the future, or I can, I might help him or her in the future." Once again, the purposive nature of networks serves to be of assistance in future professional goals. However, this is not to say that the components of success outlined so far—academic achievement, professional experiences, and network connections—only matter for international students. These factors are indeed important for all college students who are looking to jumpstart their careers through employment or postgraduate studies. The difference for international students is the immense pressure they feel to check off every item in the category of success so that they will have done everything in their power to achieve their goal of staying in the US after graduation. Native-born students may feel pressure to get a job after graduation, but they do not have the added stressor of being required to leave the country if they do not secure employment. It is with this concept of success in mind that I move to explaining international students' strategies for portraying themselves as employable immigrants.

Calculated Academic Choices

When choosing a college major, international students take into consideration many of the same factors as that of their native-born counterparts, including earnings potential (Shauman 2006), intellectual interests (Quadlin 2020), difficulty of curriculum (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), and future career paths (Pitt and Zhu 2019). However, unlike domestic students, international students who want to stay in the US also need to consider how the choices they make while in undergrad will impact their postbaccalaureate prospects. Specifically, international students strategically choose, or switch out of, majors that impact their ability to obtain longer work authorization. For work authorization, all international students are eligible for one year of postgraduate work authorization called Optional Practical Training (OPT). For students with a STEM degree, they are eligible for a two-year extension, bringing their total to three years.[14] This extension is crucial because it provides students with time to build up their professional acumen, develop relationships with potential employers, and prove to employers that they are worth the cost of visa sponsorship. As such, many students will choose a STEM major with that framing in mind. When I asked Jasmine why she selected an Economics major, she replied, "First of all, because of the STEM OPT. The STEM OPT is a very important factor for me. I wanted to major in Business originally, but it wasn't STEM qualified. So I chose Econ instead." Similarly, Ana decided to take the BS option within her Cognitive Science major, because "someone told me that STEM majors, you would get three years of OPT, and BA majors, like, you wouldn't. So, when I was applying for Cognitive Science, I was like, okay. There's the BA

[14] The STEM Designated Degree Program list, coordinated by the Department of Homeland Security, lists all majors eligible for the STEM OPT extension. The most recent version of the list (updated July 2023) can be found here: https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/stemList2023.pdf

option, but, with more classes, like, three more classes than the regular BS option. And that would really be beneficial for me, because that would just allow me to, like, get more opportunities in the US later." This added layer of considering how one's major impacts future immigration prospects requires students to carefully navigate their academic choices.

International students also saw certain majors as having more job opportunities, which can enhance their prospects for sponsorship and eventual settlement. Virat, who came to the US from India to major in Computer Science, walked me through his thought process of choosing a major while keeping future opportunities in mind. In his own words,

> One thing was that companies are more eager to sponsor H-1B for Computer Science grads. There is also a factor about there being a lot of jobs for this in the first place. Computer Science still has a lot of demand in the US market… And, specifically, domains like machine learning—not a lot of people are good at it. So, you know that there is also this possibility of you getting a fast track in terms of even immigrant opportunities… you have these visa types like O-1, which are about extraordinary ability in a person who brings in something different. So, the probability of you getting an O-1 if you are into a niche like machine learning or artificial intelligence would be way better than doing something which may not necessarily have the same level of demand supply gap. So, I did definitely consider these factors before coming to a decision.

The layered components of these decisions weigh substantially on international students' minds when embarking on their academic journeys. Some individuals, however, are not as forward thinking in their thought process and end up changing course or altering plans later in undergrad upon learning details regarding immigration opportunities. Olivia was worried that her Economics degree would not translate to employment sponsorship opportunities. She expressed this concern to professors who directed her to the department's website, but she was dismayed to see that, of the job opportunities listed, none provide sponsorship for international students. She conveyed her frustration to her brother who advised her to add another major. Unfortunately, she did not have enough time to complete the requirements for a full major, but was able to add a

Data Science minor that she believed would help her employment prospects. Similarly, Jason shared with me how he was frustrated that his department did not share employability prospects as an international student for his Nanoengineering degree. “Now, if you add international student status on top of that, that adds a further wrinkle. Because one thing I noticed is that some majors are much less employable for international students than if you’re just a local. And in particular, what I realized was Nanoengineering was one of those majors.” And so, he shifted gears slightly and added a double major in Math-Computer Science. “So actually up till my third year, almost near the middle of my third year, I was thinking I picked the Math-CS as a failsafe. If everything goes badly, I can’t get to grad school, I have something. I can get a job, I can stay in America. I can get a software job, I can stay in America.” These decisions are more complicated than those experienced by native-born students because of the added hurdle or having to consider their future immigration status as it relates to their major.

While students like Olivia and Jason were able to redirect their paths when learning about immigration opportunities, others were not as fortunate. Alexis, a Psychology major, told me she had not thought about the implications of what her degree choice would be on job prospects. “I never thought about it. I wish I gave it more thought though. I think I would’ve made a different choice.” I asked her what that different choice would have been, and she said,

> I think I would’ve added another… more STEM-based degree, because I would be qualified for a lot more, like master’s programs. And a lot more jobs. Because with Psych, like—you really can’t do that much as a non-citizen because a lot of companies won’t want to sponsor you. And I heard it’s probably easier to get sponsorships through tech. So, I do wish I did something like, maybe like data or something like that.

While the predominant narrative among international students was this description of an alignment between their major choices and future career prospects, there were some students who eschewed that approach. I spoke with Lee, who followed in her older sisters’ footsteps in

pursuing her bachelor's degree in the US. Her older sisters went the more traditional STEM path, but Lee instead chose to major in Literatures of the World and minor in Film. She spoke about one of her sister's experience in Biochemical Engineering, and how "it ended up not really being anything that she wanted to do after graduation. So, part of me was like, 'If I do go to college in the US, I want to make sure it's something that aligns with my interests.'" Beyond interests, she also saw how her sisters "attributed a lot of their growth in their young adult phase to the whole experience of moving abroad and studying abroad, and having to create something for yourself… I liked that idea." Lee took the lessons learned from her sisters' experiences and charted her own path as an international student in the US. She has since graduated and applied her degree to work as a writer for a financial literacy company and has also been admitted to a higher education master's program to continue her studies. While her experience is not the norm, it does demonstrate the level of thought that goes into international students' selection of their majors.

In general, however, international students attempt to demonstrate employability to a future employer by carefully deciding which fields of study are going to aid in their long-term settlement. By pursuing a STEM-based degree, they have more time after graduation to develop firm footing in the US and get more work experience to be more established and be more appealing for sponsorship opportunities. Beyond length of time, certain fields of study are seen as more desirable because they are viewed as having plentiful job opportunities. This is not to say that international students choose majors with *only* their immigration prospects in mind. In fact, I heard many stories about childhood passions and how they are now translating into their fields of study. Maya shared with me her love of biology and how she learned that she could combine this interest with another passion of hers—coding—into a bioinformatics major. In her case, she viewed the STEM OPT extension as an added bonus. Overall, the point is that

international students' decision-making process inevitably includes broader considerations regarding their immigration status. As such, their major choice is but one component for how international students strategically structure their time in higher education to showcase their employability to future employers.

Cultural Adaptation

As briefly mentioned earlier, there is abundant scholarship demonstrating the culture shocks that international students, especially those who come from outside of North America and Western Europe, experience when adjusting to university life. The acculturation scholarship states that factors such as language barriers, social supports, racism and discrimination, sense of belonging, loneliness, and social interactions with Americans impact how an international student adjusts to the campus environment (de Araujo 2011; Brunsting, Zachry, and Takeuchi 2018; Smith and Khawaja 2011; Zhang and Goodson 2011). However, this research views the college experience as a discrete experience without any bearing on the students' future settlement in the host society. Certainly not all, or even most, international students wish to settle in the US But for those who do, college is a pivotal time in which international students strategically learn about, ascertain, and absorb aspects of cultural life in the US that they can apply both generally to their future lives in the US and within the workplace. As the findings in this section will demonstrate, international students do not view their cultural acculturation in higher education as just helping them while they are undergraduate students; they see these acculturative interactions with native-born students *during* college as helping to shape their experiences *after* college.

Among the students in this sample, there were three main components to American culture that they found to be foreign compared to their upbringing—individualism, culture of excess, and communication styles. Outside of the US, students described how they were raised in communal cultures where there is greater emphasis on humility and less focus on the individual. Kozy, a recent alum of the university, grew up in Singapore where he was taught "Be humble. Don't talk about certain stuff. You don't have to brag about stuff." He said he was raised not to focus on his own accomplishments. Once he got to the university, he said, he found that "people are more self-centered. They have stronger personalities." In this new environment, Maya said she felt anonymous and would advise a future student to "prepare to be lost." Julia went so far as to say that a future student shouldn't come to the US if they don't go out of their way to make friends "because you're going to have a very lonely time." Students were taken aback by the culture of individualism and the need to take your own initiative to assert yourself, make connections, and feel established.

The other culture shock students encountered pertained to lifestyle differences compared to what they were used to in their home country upbringing. Specifically, students were turned off by how Americans would do activities in excess. One such example is the culture of food consumption among Americans. Lee called it her personal pet peeve that "people order a lot that they can't finish and then just say, 'I'm done.' I'm like, 'Are you gonna take a to-go box?'" She was further perturbed by the excessive drinking and smoking she witnessed on campus. She comes from Singapore, where "it's like, 'No drugs! Death penalty!' Literally—even if you bring it in, you die. Then when I came here, it's everywhere. It's just a thing you do, a social activity. So that was a big shock… that kind of got me in the beginning. I was like, 'Am I lame?'" This culture of exorbitance extends to relationships. Virat shared his discomfort with the college

hookup culture. In the US, “you will find people getting into hookups the first time they meet. On the first date itself, you’ll ending up doing things which are very probably considered taboo for us in India.” International students had to reconcile what they understood as culturally appropriate based on their upbringing and what they experienced on campus. These excessive lifestyle elements pointed out by international students were not dissuading these students from eventual settlement, but they were cultural distinctions they had to reconcile with.

Finally, students had to adjust to the different communication styles and forms of speech. This finding applied to students regardless of their country of origin. For students who came from countries where interactions between strangers are more reserved, they were confused by the open-ended questions that native-born students would ask. Michael said that in Chinese culture it is more common to ask specific questions like, “Have you had your lunch?” or “How’s your wife doing?” He said, “For a question like, ‘What’s up?’ I don’t feel like there’s a specific answer to that.” Jason, also from China, said that when he encountered this on campus, he had “this feeling of being guarded, like, ‘Why are you talking to me? What’s in it for you?’” Anjali, on the other hand, shared with me that in Indian culture it’s considered okay to play pranks on individuals, even if you’re not close with them, or to be overly sarcastic in conversations. This was not what she encountered in college. “Here every time if I was just being a little sarcastic with my roommates, they would just look at me like I had told them something extremely mean or rude.” The common thread among respondents was their unawareness of certain cultural idioms. Miguel, who was raised in Mexico, told me about how students frequently say “no cap” to mean “I’m not kidding” (an idiom foreign to me, as well). He said that “coming here and actually experiencing that every day… it was actually a little jarring.” It can be extremely disorienting to not only have to speak and do your studies in a new language, but to also try and

understand this extra hidden language that actually "unlocks the treasure chest of American society," as Ted told me.

Despite these challenges, international students placed great emphasis on the need to not only understand, but to also incorporate aspects of social norms, traditions, and behaviors in their own engagements. Tom, an Anthropology student from South Africa, drew from his academic field of study and shared that,

> Most of the time, you'll find me trying to really understand about the culture of other people—the interaction, what they believe, the cultural beliefs, the norms, how they do their things. So, I've been really trying to understand, so that I wouldn't have conflict here with people—apart from my studies, that I'll be able to be able to interact peacefully with other people.

It seemed obvious to students that if they were coming to study and live in another country that they were also going to try and learn about their cultural patterns. Aurora, a Chinese student, expanded on the general importance of getting to know people outside of one's ethnoracial circles, "It's just kind of weird if, if you're studying abroad you are still making friends with Chinese people only. You need to maybe know more about the life of, um, people from another country and know more about American culture to better fit in this place." Ted, also from China, said that if you don't get to know individuals outside your ethnoracial circles, then "you're just paying a large amount of tuition to stay in a little Chinese bubble." Besides wanting to fit in, international students also wanted to prove that they belong amongst their peers, a fact that is not always clear when they initially encounter native-born students. Arya, a recent alum from Bangladesh, shared with me,

> Arya: Maybe I look different. Maybe I am different. Maybe my experiences are different. But I felt like I needed to prove that I also watch this show and listen to this music and want to wear this and do that. I felt like I needed to prove that I'm worthy of wanting to be here.

> Karina: It sounds like what you defined as proving to them was more cultural understanding. “I speak like you. I look like you. I talk like you.”
>
> Arya: “I like apple pie, too!”

This quintessential reference to apple pie makes it sound like there is an American ideal that students can aspire to—that if they know the same cultural references, and speak like native-born students, then they would fit in. Therefore, their time in undergrad was seen as a time to practice these behaviors before venturing out into the “real world.” Anjali said that it was important to understand the “differences in values in the US, so that I don’t end up making people uncomfortable or overstepping essentially.” I asked how this understanding would help her in a future workplace, and she said,

> I think it definitely helped me understand a bit more what kind of professionalism is expected, and what the etiquette of talking with your colleagues is. In India I think it’s a lot more common to talk about your personal lives. While it can still happen here, I think it’s not as common to really engage in conversations about your personal life at work.

Zola, who is interested in becoming a pediatrician, shared with me about how she had a roommate who was “trying to find out who she was, in a way.” When I inquired further, she said that this person was navigating their journey regarding gender pronouns. Zola believed it is important for her to be exposed to individuals who identify outside the male/female binary because,

> In the future when I’m hopefully in medical school in the US not everyone is gonna be how you think they’re gonna be. They’ll all have their own identities. So expanding that, there’s gonna be transgender population that I’m gonna need to treat, and people from different cultures and different beliefs.

How did Anjali, Zola, and others learn about these cultural patterns, norms, and societal trends? First, going to university events (e.g., plays, movies, art displays) helps to provide cultural context and understand what is okay to talk about and ask. Jojo said that attending these

events made it easier to "assimilate and understand the culture." This is not to say that international students pursued a linear strategy in their campus interactions. Jason's story embodied this navigational maze. He told me about how he goes to social events that feature different countries' cuisines, cultures, and customs. And earlier in our conversation, he told me he prioritizes friendships with domestic students. I asked him why he was pursuing this approach, and he said,

> Yeah, it's weird in a sense, because I'm making two efforts on two different fronts. I want to immerse myself in the culture. So it's a bit counterproductive to build your life around other immigrants, if that makes sense. On the other hand, these other immigrants are probably the people who understand your struggle. So it's sort of like this push and pull. But for the most part, trying to get used to mixing in with the locals is what I've been prioritizing more.

The second strategy students pursued is strategic engagement with domestic students. Ted, in his capacity as an orientation leader, would frequently plan events for incoming students. Ted said he got a chance to "work with the locals here" and see "how their vibes are." Elaborating further, he said this entailed, "How the American people look, you know, work. Are they like the French people, are they Germans? You know, you know—there are different stereotypes flying around. Um. But by really working with them, talking with them, you know that 'Ohh, okay. So that's what it's like.'" It's especially important for students to be able to engage in the nuances of conversations. Nath said that he had to pick up on social cues to help him understand the "common stuff" that is talked about in light conversation. He spoke about, for example, how individuals frequently reference traffic in Los Angeles. This type of water cooler-esque conversation, he says, will help him to fit into future workplaces. This process is similar to the cultural matching described by Rivera (2012) in that employers look for shared tastes, experiences, leisure pursuits, and self-presentation styles when hiring job candidates. Similarity, in fact, is one of the most powerful influences for evaluation in micro-social settings

(Byrne 1971), including job interviews (Huffcutt 2011). It is through low stakes conversations with native-born students that international students can practice these skills, learn from their peers, and discern patterns of behaviors that they wish to embody in their journey in the US after graduation.

It should be clear that international students did not wish to totally transform who they are, how they speak, and how they engage with their peers. As I mentioned earlier, international students strategically navigate spaces while in college to pick up on appropriate social cues and understand nuances of conversations. As such, they found themselves code switching between what they feel is familiar and comfortable from their home country upbringing and the interactions they have with the native-born community. Yuhan talked about how he navigates this process,

> You have to switch on a different mode when you're hanging out with United States people, compared to your mode, and then you go back to the Chinese group—you also need to turn on another mode, but this mode maybe is more natural to you… I think I have to switch a lot. I think doing things in the US way is still not my natural mode. But I'm no longer the Chinese mode either.

Students reported that code switching, despite its challenges, gets easier with time. Michael, a Chemical Engineering student who will be moving to Minnesota for his job after graduation, told me how he feels like he's "growing into one of them sometimes," with "them" referring to US-born Americans. He cited his love of the TV show *The Office*, and how his roommate shared with him a story that a friend of theirs thought he was American, as opposed to an international student. "So, I feel like, to a certain extent, I am really well prepared in terms of cultures and language." Michael's story is a prime example of how international students strategically navigate and cherry pick aspects of American culture and practices that resonate with them and will be advantageous to embody in a future workplace. Unlike preexisting

scholarship on international students that focuses on acculturation *into* college, these stories show that international students are considering how acculturation *within* college can shape their experiences *after* college. To seem employable and worthy of sponsorship to a future employer, international students feel they need to demonstrate how they can seamlessly fit into workplaces by adopting cultural nuances and practices and drawing upon their ethnographic-style experiences which teach them how to navigate conversations and interactions with individuals outside their community.

Engaging with Faculty and Within Student Organizations

While international students are pursuing their degrees, they are on a simultaneous journey to build their connections and networks. This process begins soon after they arrive in the US; international students feel the pressure to start making connections so they can compete professionally with their domestic peers. They describe how domestic students oftentimes arrive to college with friends from high school and have a readymade group of connections. In most cases, international students arrive to the US with a blank slate and need to strategically think about what connections to make that will help them secure a job offer and a secure visa status after graduation. And while their immediate goals are to find employer sponsorship, they view these networks as aiding them throughout their long-term stay in the US. While one connection may assist in that first job offer, a future connection may help with promotions, job changes, and career shifts. As such, each individual connection is foundational and important to building their network.

While individual connections are important, there is a lot of trial and error when networking in college. Students are unsure about which connections will pay off, and as such they cast a wide net and strategically connect with faculty, alumni, domestic students, international students, and student organization members. The hope is that the networking bait they cast will lure in a job offer that sets them up for long-term success in the US. In the immigration scholarship, there is plentiful research on the resources immigrants draw upon from within their ethnic communities (e.g., Chaumba 2016; Hagan 1998; Menjívar 2000; Treitler 2007) and the positive employment outcomes immigrants experience when they make connections outside their immigrant communities (e.g., Kanas et al. 2012; Lancee 2010). This section will advance this research to demonstrate how international students strategically form networks within the higher education context, specifically through their engagement with faculty and their participation in student organizations.

Faculty engagement can take many forms, such as office hours, classroom interactions, and mentorship through internships and lab experiences. As international students are typically arriving to a host society on their own and without family, professors can play an especially significant supportive role, akin to a parent. Despite being in a large research institution, students found professors with whom they could bond with and create mentorship-style engagements. When Tom was looking for an internship, his professor connected him with a colleague of his at another reputable institution in the US. I asked how it felt to be supported in his goals, and he said, “You feel nice, that you could have someone outside your country and they will [be] really helpful, really understand you. It’s something which [makes] you feel calm away from home.” Since students are unsure of what their prospects look like after graduation, they look to professors for guidance and support. Lee regaled me with stories of different faculty members

that she created connections with while in undergrad. Since graduating, she has reached out to these professors and maintained contact. “I feel like that connection is so important. I think it makes you see that there’s something deeper than just academics. It’s not just that grade that you’re vying for on the essay that they give you. It’s about creating a network, and finding where you can fit in within that network.” I asked her why it was important to create this network and she said that her whole purpose of coming to college was to find out if,

> There’s a space for me within this academic field, or that I can contribute something to it. Being welcomed into this network with other professors, other students—that’s what was important to me. It felt like that reassurance to me—you’ve found your place here… “Here,” I would say, is this university—but also, in general, in the US.

Stories like Lee’s struck me as conversations that one might have with a parent as they are trying to learn about and discover their next steps in adulthood. Faculty connections make students feel confident that there is a place for them in this new host society. It’s especially important for faculty to foster a culture of openness because not all international students feel comfortable establishing such connections. Shane told me that he has not yet engaged with faculty outside the classroom because his professors always seem busy, and he felt like he would be bothering them by going to office hours. Feeling the need for support, students assess which networks will be available to them and most fruitful for their future journey.

Faculty connections are not the be-all and end-all of networking that students need to do, but seeing faculty members who are established in their careers and have relevant resources to share is seen by international students as part of their toolkit of resources. In addition to sharing information, students see faculty members who were formerly international students or who share their same ethnoracial background as especially inspirational for them. Without many influential sources around her, Arya said that seeing an immigrant faculty member “feels like

they have done something that seems really hard... it feels like a grown-up version of me and my fellow international students." Nath found these particular faculty members helpful because they understand the challenges that international students face. Maya told me these connections gave her a sense of hope that she might succeed in the US as well. She had a professor from Ukraine and said that he "was always just so helpful and understanding and would guide me." She had a difficult time articulating what exactly was useful about the connection. "I just felt like there's an understanding when you and the other person are both international. I wouldn't say it's an unsaid bond, but it's like an inexplicable understanding. They were probably in my place 10 years ago." International students, as mentioned earlier, are not just thinking about the campus environment that they need to adjust to. Among those who want to stay in the US after graduation, they have their eyes set to the future and they view these faculty members' experiences as reinforcement that they themselves can succeed in this foreign and overwhelming environment.

Ethnoracial connections with faculty members can also provide similar comfort. Maya, who had connected with her Ukrainian professor, felt a special kinship with her Indian professors, as they hailed from the same country of origin. She felt more inclined to go to their office hours, and these professors "would actually ask me what part of India I was from, and they knew what high school curriculum I'd gone through. After being here for three years and no one having a clue about what India was like, that was really nice." Lily, a Communications student from South Korea, felt comfortable and empowered, despite her language challenges, to speak up in her course taught by a Korean professor. Nath talked about how his Indian professor asked very pointed questions about what visa status he will be on after graduation. He valued this "common shared ground" and viewed it as a stepping stone to be able to ask more questions related to professional support after graduation.

Emotional support, however, is not enough to secure a position after graduation. International students also saw faculty members as part of their web of connections they could utilize both during undergraduate and after graduation. Kozy told me how maintaining connections with professors is more important for international students than domestic students. "If you aren't doing well and you can't find jobs outside, which is a real concern for [international students], the professors can get you into certain schools. If they're good professors, they can actually give you good advice. They can actually provide an older mentorship figure. I think it's especially important for [international students] to maintain that relationship with professors." Miguel expanded on this importance further,

> Before finding a job as an international student, you got to worry about visa stuff and sponsorship and all of that stuff. The way to kind of bypass all of those things is through connections. If you're just going to apply for a job cold turkey, then there might be some difficulties. They might be like, "It might be a bit difficult to employ this person. We have all these visa stuff to worry about." The easiest way to bypass that, in my opinion, is through connections. Faculty is a good way to get your foot in the door in that sense. I'm not saying that every faculty member is going to have a million connections in the job market, but it's important to foster that network.

International students also added to their web of network connections by participating in student organizations. Like many students, international students join student organizations to develop a sense of community and find friends amidst a sea of strangers. The types of organizations students joined ranged from ethnoracial-based clubs (e.g., Vietnamese Student Association) to professional clubs (e.g., engineering societies) and social clubs (e.g., barbell association). Students found that these clubs provided a social balance to their lives, and they even used it as an opportunity to find future housemates. Beyond the social benefits of student organizations, international students assigned a direct professional benefit to student organizations. International students viewed certain organizations as providing them with

concrete professional development opportunities in the form of resume workshops, alumni panels, interview prep, and even—in the case of international-student based organizations—sessions on how to obtain OPT status and eventual visa sponsorship after graduation. Jason spoke about how he joined two societies: one geared towards nanoengineering (his major) and the other towards artificial intelligence. He joined the former to be with his friends, but the artificial intelligence organization was for the sole purpose of learning how to secure a job in that industry. Miguel runs the university's club for international students and spoke about how the club is working on designing mentorship programs with faculty who can advise international students on professional opportunities, especially those geared toward the needs of international students. International students, who already have busy schedules with coursework in a demanding academic calendar, use their limited free time to bolster their professional acumen through student organization membership that can aid them in their postgraduate journey in the US.

International students recognize that they have a limited amount of time during their undergraduate careers to foster appropriate networks and learn about the necessary steps they need to take to maximize opportunities for staying in the US. Youjin told me about a niched organization she joined geared specifically towards Korean and Korean American Scientists and Engineers. When she joined as a first year, she said it "helped me to know where I should be heading, and what I should be doing—applying to internships, OPTs, and stuff." Similar to the inspiration they received from faculty, international students appreciated seeing a roadmap to success that they can apply to their own lives. The role of clubs can also evolve through a students' time in undergraduate. Anjali told me about the chemical engineering club she joined in her first year to learn about what she could do with her degree.

> In the beginning, I just went to their workshops and events and I found it really helpful. And I ended up applying to the leadership, which is when I had more of an insider's perspective of what it looks like to interact with industry professionals, and to see resumes and have mentors who are in engineering.

Anjali's story encapsulates both the intentionality of international students with respect to student organizations and the earlier point about how international students work to bolster their resumes and employability in myriad ways. And it need not be just professional-based organizations that fit the criteria of resume building. Lee had joined an a cappella group, where she eventually became vice president and then president.

> Taking on that bigger leadership position in a cappella definitely enhanced my college experience. Such a big part is learning how to work with other people, and also lead different people on a project. It was a pretty holistic thing, where I was able to grow my social network, but also just grow in terms of as a leader and other skill sets.

Lee's experience shows how student organization membership can provide a balance for students who want to engage with peers outside of traditional professional settings but also wish to bolster their professional acumen and demonstrate their worthiness to employers in the US.

Employability, including finding opportunities to enhance employment prospects, is the overwhelming priority for international students who want to stay in the US. International students take an instrumental approach to the social capital they gain through their engagement with professors and student organization membership. Social networks, in this sense, require deliberate construction, and individuals assign direct benefits to their participation in said groups. The capital they gain from these interactions are fungible and are seen as providing them access to resources and knowledge that are part of the patchwork of strategies to secure employment and visa status in the US.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I draw upon theories of "strategic assimilation" and "one-up assimilation" to illustrate the mechanisms by which international students demonstrate their employability to potential employers in the US. First, international students carefully select majors that are STEM-designated to (1) maximize their postgraduate OPT time and network with potential employers and (2) have experience in fields that they believe are more likely to include immigration job sponsorships. Second, international students tactically interact with domestic students to understand the vernacular and the cultural references they use in order to employ these same approaches in conversations with future employers. By doing so, they seek to show employers that they are no different from native-born workers and will seamlessly integrate into the workplace. In addition, they hope that their performance will convince employers that they are worth the cost of visa sponsorship. International students also deliberately create connections with faculty members who they hope can assist them with future job opportunities. Finally, these students build up their professional acumen by joining student organizations that offer support with resumes, cover letters, and other forms of professional training.

These strategies used by international students who want to stay in the US after graduation are not necessarily uncommon approaches among students within higher education. In fact, they are in line with a professional shift within higher education, as higher education becomes further removed from its original intentions of creating moral, civic, and intellectual leaders (Grubb and Lazerson 2004). Existing scholarship demonstrates the connection between major choice and societal/familial pressures for prestige (Pitt, Brockman, and Zhu 2021). For cultural adaptation, the work of Ivemark and Ambrose (2021) illustrates how college students

can occupy an outside, stranger, or adapter status. The stranger category, most apropos for this research, refers to those who adjust to university life in a drawn-out process, yet still occupy a middle ground between insider and outsider. They carefully adapt, depending on the setting, akin to the approaches of international students in this study. And finally, mentoring relationships with faculty and other professional units have been shown to not only make students feel welcome on campus and within their disciplines (Cook-Sather and Felten 2017; Eagan et al. 2013; Seymour et al. 2004), but also provide students with access to important networks of success (Stanton-Salazar 2011).

How, then, is this work a unique contribution to the scholarship? The international students in this study demonstrate the underlying urgency by which these strategies are employed because of the deadline to attain an offer of employment or further education within 60 days of completing their degrees. As such, the stakes are higher for such students, and this stress colors many, if not most, of the decisions international students make while pursuing their higher education degrees. Their time in college is a discrete period in which to optimize their integration strategies in the hopes of landing a job offer. This truncated version of integration is a new perspective on how to understand immigrant strategies. Looking forward, future research can apply this framing to understand how other groups of immigrants with similar deadlines strategize to create the next foothold in their lives in the US. For instance, immigrants who are in the US on an H-1B visa have a maximum of six years they can be in that visa status, unless they secure employment sponsorship from an employer who will sponsor them for a Green Card. Scholars can look to H-1B immigrants to see how they strategize under a different kind of time pressure to continue their journey of employment and eventual settlement in the US.

This chapter also builds upon Portes and Zhou's (1993) theory of segmented assimilation, specifically the pathway of selected assimilation that some immigrants take. Portes and Zhou theorize that immigrants who follow this pathway (in contrast to upward or downward assimilation) work towards economic success while maintaining strong ties to their ethnic community and preserving elements of their cultural heritage. This concept rings largely true for the international students in this study, especially the notion that immigrants adopt certain aspects of the dominant culture (e.g., language proficiency) that facilitate economic success. I add to this theory by demonstrating that being strategic on its own is not enough. In fact, being strategic is the baseline expectation. To be successful, international students need to craft almost every component of their undergraduate experience to show employers that they are worthy of sponsorship and settlement.

Understanding international students' underlying motivation not only helps contextualize our knowledge of international students, but can also contribute to more culturally attuned mechanisms of advising. Learning about international students' priorities and intentions should help inform campus administration and staff about how to properly support this population. It is not enough to simply present the students with their options; it is equally, if not more important, to learn about a students' motivations so they can be advised on how to balance their goals with the practical choices they need to make in college in order to attain said options. On many occasions, the students I spoke to were seeking individualized mentorship and/or hearing from students who have gone through similar journeys. Since many of these students are here on their own, they are utilizing as many resources within their toolkit as possible, even if the future of success is unknown.

CHAPTER 3: UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: HOW THE UNIVERSITY ACTS AS A STEPPING STONE FOR STUDENTS' FUTURES

Abstract: In Chapter 2, I demonstrated how international students strategically navigated the higher education environment to improve their chances of labor market and postgraduate success. How common is this approach among immigrant students? In this chapter, I present the experiences of undocumented/DACA students. Like international students, undocumented/DACA students also have institutional resources dedicated to assisting and servicing their groups' particular needs. However, their lack of formal legal status colors their experiences and how they perceive their postbaccalaureate prospects. Existing scholarship places the emphasis on undocumented students' journeys to get to college and how they find community, belonging, and safety in this new environment. However, these students, like their US-born peers, have personal and professional postbaccalaureate aspirations they hope to achieve. In this chapter, I advance the "nested context of reception" framework (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018) to demonstrate how the higher education environment can be more than a nested space of insulation from federal authorities for undocumented/DACA students. The higher education environment can be a stepping stone—materially and symbolically—for undocumented/DACA students as they prepare for life after graduation. To demonstrate this, I show how undocumented students imagine success and opportunity through interactions with US-born peers, how undocumented/DACA students are substantively supported (financially, legally, socially, and professionally) through campus resources, and how they view their presence on campus as an important symbolic marker of success for their families and communities.

Undocumented Students in Higher Education

Navigating the transition to college can be a challenging financial, academic, and social venture for many students. It is especially challenging for undocumented students who, up until college, enjoy unfettered access to K-12 education. Because of this positive policy environment, undocumented students feel safe to excel (Abrego 2006). It is once undocumented students venture out of K-12 that they first begin to encounter the challenges associated with their illegality (Gonzales 2011). Among those who pursue higher education, they begin to confront multiple immigration-related stressors such as fear of deportation for themselves and their families, limited financial resources due to restricted job opportunities, and uncertainty about the future. These components limit undocumented students' access, enrollment, persistence, and college attainment. This section will summarize the unique challenges undocumented students encounter in higher education, and the ways they create agency and foster belonging in the collegiate environment. Moreover, I will demonstrate how most of the present scholarship focuses on undocumented students' experiences during their time in higher education, with only a smattering of studies examining how undocumented students understand their postbaccalaureate preparation and transition. I later propose that we expand beyond our current framing of higher education as a safe space for undocumented students to also consider how it functions as a stepping stone for postbaccalaureate opportunities and pathways.

Due to their lack of legal status, undocumented students have limited access to need-based financial aid. Because of the high costs of a degree at a traditional four-year institution, research shows that undocumented students often choose to initially pursue their education at a community college (Abrego 2008; Flores and Horn 2009; Flores and Oseguera 2009). Among

those who go directly to a four-year institution, they frequently work multiple jobs to finance their college educations (Contreras 2009) and describe difficulties purchasing books and meeting other school-related expenses (Gonzales 2016). As such, college can be a series of stops and starts (Gonzales 2011; Perez 2011) as students balance the need to work, scholarship unavailability, long commutes, and debt.

Academically, undocumented students enter college with stronger high school achievement relative to their documented peers, indicating a hyper-selected population (Hsin and Reed 2020).[15] The reason for this hyper-selectivity is because undocumented students, relative to college students with legal status, had to overcome greater financial and psychological barriers to enroll in college (Enriquez 2011; Hsin and Ortega 2018; Perez et al. 2009) and thus likely possess qualities that correlate with academic performance (e.g., motivation, academic preparedness). However, their lack of legal status means that these students also typically endure economic insecurity, which requires students to bear greater financial responsibility for themselves and their families. Being forced to work compromises their class attendance (Muñoz et al. 2018; Negrón-Gonzales 2017). Even when students are able to attend classes, they report being more distracted and experience greater difficulty completing class assignments because of their overarching concerns regarding their own and their family's immigration statuses (Chavarria et al. 2021). It also may be unclear what the political context is within a classroom, making students fearful of being marginalized if their status is revealed (Muñoz and Vigil 2018). As a result, undocumented students often refrain from engaging in classroom discussions (Muñoz et al. 2018). These compounding factors result in an "educational regression" (Kreisberg

[15] These findings may vary by context. Hsin and Reed (2020) conducted their research in New York, where students are able to pay lower in-state tuition rates than the students in this study who attend a University of California campus.

and Hsin 2020), hindering their ability to progress through higher education and complete their degrees.

Because of the uncertainties surrounding their legal status, coupled with the challenges of adjusting to a new environment, undocumented students report markedly elevated levels of stress and poor self-rated health (Enriquez, Morales Hernandez, and Ro 2018). They have normalized their mental strain as a natural byproduct of their unstable immigration status and view treatment as futile because it cannot address their underlying immigration-related issues (Cha, Enriquez, and Ro 2019). Another deterrent is the fear that staff will report them to immigration authorities or that they will experience discrimination and stigma due to their circumstances (Sudhinaraset et al. 2017). As such, even though the majority of undocumented students report feeling that they need mental health counseling, only a fraction actually seek out professional help (Enriquez et al. 2019).

When navigating the campus bureaucracy, undocumented students report that fear is the single most debilitating factor that produces higher-than-average levels of anxiety and stress (Pérez et al. 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011). Much of this fear stems from undocumented students' uncertainty about who to trust on campus when "coming out" about their lack of legal status (Stebleton and Aleixo 2015). When they disclose their undocumented status to campus officials, staff and administrators may lack the requisite knowledge in dealing with undocumented student matters and thus show ambivalence, or even hostility, towards students (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2015). Even when staff try to normalize the process of status disclosure, students may still experience derogatory comments and feel pressure to share their experiences (Reed, Aptekar, and Hsin 2022). This results in a sense of isolation and an unwillingness to seek

support or advice from campus personnel (Contreras 2009; Gonzales 2016; Pérez et al. 2010; Stebleton and Aleixo 2015).

There is tremendous power, however, when students find trusted allies and are provided with safe spaces to share their experiences with others and be in community with like-minded peers. When students feel supported and their experiences are authentically validated, they tend to navigate college with more success (Gildersleeve and Vigil 2015; Nienhusser 2014), especially when compared to other students who have similar risk factors and lower levels of personal and environmental resources (Perez et al. 2009). Not only do undocumented students who have positive relationships and connections to safe spaces report higher level of academic success (Valadez et al. 2021), they are also more likely to use academic support services (Sarabia et al. 2021) and feel a sense of belonging on campus (Lacomba 2021). In a survey of 909 participants across 34 states, Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco (2015) find that, of the undocumented students who have access to safe spaces on campus, 73% make use of this opportunity. Safe spaces, such as organizations for undocumented students, provide opportunities to connect with other undocumented students, identify educator allies, and find information and resources related to their status (Contreras 2009; Huber and Malagon 2006). For all the uncertainty that undocumented/DACA students experience in their personal lives, these spaces can not only make students feel protected, but also make them feel like they are members of the broader campus community.

When embedded in a supportive higher education environment, undocumented students not only feel like they are in a "refuge in an unsafe world" (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2015:453), but they also feel empowered to become active participants in civic life (Seif 2009). Undocumented students feel compelled to change the narrative around undocumented people (Chang et al. 2017)

and find that activism gives them renewed purpose (DeAngelo, Schuster, and Stebleton 2016; Forenza, Rogers, and Lardier 2017). Rosales, Enriquez, and Nájera (2021) take this engagement component further and show how campus involvement can ameliorate the exclusionary impacts of immigration policy. As such, undocumented students become active constructors of their own narratives—they show pride in being undocumented, and feel emboldened to engage more authentically on college campuses and explore their other social identities (Muñoz 2015). This benefit further demonstrates how undocumented students, when presented with the right opportunities, can take control of their identities and circumstances within the higher education environment.

There is a limited, but burgeoning, body of research attempting to understand undocumented students' mindset and process regarding their postbaccalaureate transition. Specifically, Huber and Malagon (2006) describe undocumented students' hopefulness despite their uncertain futures in the US. And Morales Hernandez and Enriquez (2021) write about how undocumented students negotiate policy constraints by drawing upon social networks and adapting their career goals to pursue opportunities that are permitted within the confines of their legal status. My work contributes to this literature by providing a comprehensive understanding of how undocumented students utilize undocumented-specific campus resources to advance their professional goals, and how they think about their postbaccalaureate prospects vis-à-vis US-born students and their family and community members outside of the university.

As summarized thus far, the predominant focus of the undocumented student scholarship to date focuses heavily on students' entry to and participation within the institution of higher education. Even from an institutional perspective, as covered in the next section, the nested context of reception emphasizes the responsibility of university staff towards undocumented

students only while in the context of them being students, and not as undocumented immigrants who are seeking to get a job and/or pursue further education after school.

Nested Context of Reception—Safety or Stepping Stone?

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) established the context of reception framework that they argue shapes the incorporation experiences of new immigrants. This context is based on a tripartite structure: immigrants' reception in a new host society is impacted by federal policies, host society responses, and how they are received by those in their coethnic community. Golash-Boza and Valdez (2018) sought to expand this research by arguing that there are more layers to the immigrant experience that shape their experiences. They propose the "nested context of reception" (NCOR) framing that adds the local institutional context as an important actor that can—together with federal and state policies—shape whether an immigrant has a positive or negative reception. In their case, they study the experiences of undocumented students at a University of California campus located in the central valley. Embedded in a positive state context, they found through their focus groups that universities can imbue undocumented students with a sense of safety and inclusiveness. While undocumented students may face significant obstacles at the federal level, they can feel a measure of relief on college campuses. This "nest" concept serves a dual purpose: it shows the Russian doll-style layering of policies, but also shows how universities can insulate undocumented students from the ever-present challenges of federal policies. Taken together, educational institutions hold great power in creating community, a sense of belonging, and inclusivity for undocumented students.

Scholars have since sought to expand the NCOR framing to illustrate the mechanisms by which universities can foster this inclusive environment for undocumented students. Council et al. (2020), in their study of how millennials experience social change, devote a section (written by Karina Santellano) to breaking down how certain institutional characteristics matter to the way that undocumented students engage with their dream resource centers (another term for undocumented student resource center). She compared three environments: a University of California, Cal State, and California community college setting. It is not as simple as stating that institutions have welcoming environments. For example, the commuter nature of the student body at the community college and Cal State campuses meant that, of the little time undocumented students already spend on campus, the dream resource center is an essential place for creating friendships. Comparatively, UC students are more residential and have greater opportunities for creating community elsewhere on campus. Undocumented students at community college and Cal State saw dream resource center employees as fictive kin, while UC students described them as "professionals" who can provide them with services and information to reach their aspirations. UC students view dream resource centers as a service-oriented locale, in contrast to community college and Cal State students who relied on staff for more socioemotional care. Santellano's work, as such, helps us to think more critically about how institutional characteristics can add nuance to the NCOR framing, even when all institutions in her study are categorized as "welcoming."

In dissecting the NCOR structure, Delgado (2022) focuses more on the effect of institutional resources and targeted programming that can help undocumented immigrants feel more accepted on college campuses. In her research at "UC Beachside," she finds that the networks of support created by universities can help undocumented students decode complex

immigrant legislation, create a sense of belonging on campus, and equip students with useful legal information that they can relay to their family members. This type of supportive environment can also have positive effects in contexts that do not have as storied of an immigration history. Perez (2021) shares how Latinx young adults in Elkhart County, Indiana had access to a greater number of Latinx peers and identity-affirming curriculum at their local university, contributing to empowered Latinx identities.

These studies significantly move the NCOR literature forward by showing how substantial of an impact higher educational institutions have on the experiences of undocumented students. While not able to alleviate the overarching dilemma regarding their students' lack of legal status, universities can foster an environment where undocumented students feel capable and empowered to participate equally alongside their citizen peers. The literature thus far emphasizes two main themes: inclusivity and safety. When embarking on their higher education journey, undocumented students are often away from their families for the first time, and they are unaware—outside of undocumented student resource centers—of what sorts of spaces are going to be welcoming to them. And on top of that, they are encumbered by worries regarding how their lack of legal status, when disclosed, will be interpreted by staff and administrators. As such, the institutional focus within the NCOR scholarship has predominantly zeroed in on the ways universities can alleviate these concerns and create inviting and safe spaces in a nested environment. However, universities are also tasked with shaping the next generation for the workplace and broader society. The findings will draw upon the foundations of NCOR to illustrate how undocumented students also use their time in higher education as a stepping stone to serve their postbaccalaureate aims and goals. Specifically, I will show how they glean inspiration for their professional future from their US-born peers, how they receive symbolic and

material postbaccalaureate support from the Undocumented Student Resource Office (USRO), and the instrumental insider role they play for family and community members who also want to pursue higher education.

Imagining Success and Opportunity in College

In *Lives in Limbo*, Gonzales (2016) illustrates the challenging transition undocumented students undergo from high school to college as they first begin to confront their illegality. Lacking immigration status is a difficult burden to bear, and it is compounded in college as students navigate a complicated university bureaucracy, have difficulty meeting tuition costs, and struggle with balancing school and work. Scholars have extensively documented these challenges and how they hinder undocumented/DACA students' incorporation into the college setting (see, for example, Contreras 2009; Reed et al. 2022; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2015; Valadez et al. 2021). And while scholars debate the extent to which immigration status functions as a "master status" (Enriquez 2017; Valdez and Golash-Boza 2018), there is a prevailing trend within the scholarship that focuses on the challenges and obstacles undocumented students undergo *while* pursuing their bachelor's degrees. My interviews confirm this as well (as will be seen at the end of this section), but the participants in this study also emphasized that their time in undergrad was an opportunity to be exposed to what success *could* look like *after* college and to broaden their perspectives through interactions with their US-born peers. Having mostly grown up in insular immigrant communities, college was a time to expand their notions of success and possibility.

Valerie and I met over Zoom, which can make it challenging to create a comfortable rapport. She was noticeably nervous at the beginning of our interview until I commented on how wonderfully ornate her nails were, which were individually adorned with jewels and looked impeccably neat. She immediately blossomed and shared with me how she learned to do her nails on her own to not only save money but to push the bounds of her creativity. I could tell from that point that Valerie was somebody who liked to challenge herself and find opportunities for growth, be it academic or creative pursuits. As such, it did not surprise me when Valerie told me how it was important to immerse yourself in campus life and bond with "other students," i.e., students who were born in the US. When I asked why this was important, she shared,

> I think it helps you see—how do I explain it? Other students that are kind of normal—they're just students, and they don't have other external factors that are affecting them—they can see their future really well. It's just very smooth. Sometimes I feel like we focus so much on what's going on, which is understandable, that it tends to get in the way of what we want our future to look like, or what it should look like or something like that. Regular students—they're just imagining and they can see it, and they know what next steps to do or to take. Or maybe their parents already kind of planned it out for them. There's a lot of learning when you are around them, because they can take that stress away from you. They just talk about their lives—this is what they're planning, maybe they're applying to internships. If you get caught up in your world, and you don't really talk to others, you forget that there is more to it.

Valerie's explanation here aligns with research illustrating undocumented status as a "master status" that eclipses other social locations (Gonzales 2016; Terriquez 2015). While Valerie was able to interpret her college experience through the lens of possibility that she sees available to US-born students (who she, interestingly, describes as "normal" and "regular"), the comparison she drew regarding possibility hinged on her inability to imagine certain opportunities because of her legal status (as opposed to other social identities, such as race and gender). However, Valerie and other students believed, that since they all gained admission to this elite environment, they should be able to similarly take advantage of opportunities.

From the beginning of our interview, Ricardo exuded confidence and a warm, approachable energy. Unlike Valerie, he did not see his legal status as an inhibitor. Instead, he told me about how he does not like to put himself in a bubble.

> If any other student could get here, regardless if they're born American, they have all their immigration up to date and everything, if they could do it… we're here for a reason. We wouldn't be here if we weren't capable of being here. A lot of students who I've talked to who are undocumented feel like, "I don't belong here because of my status," or, "Other people are smarter than me. They belong here instead of me." It's like, "No, you are just like any other student here. Yes, your status is important and does make you who you are. It's part of who you are. But at the same time, it shouldn't define your worth or your value as a student here at UC Shoreview.

How do undocumented/DACA students develop this notion of possibility? One pathway is through university programming and work experience. Jesus was a member of a student mentoring program on campus that brought in weekly speakers, ranging from professors to student affairs representatives. When I asked what impact this had on him, he said, "Being exposed to different lifestyles and being able to know more about the world and learn more about just how different people live was really cool, having that exposure, and at the same time that support." He said the mentors were especially helpful because they broke down the veneer and made him recognize professional pathways he could potentially pursue. He concluded, "I guess my experience as a whole made me feel like these opportunities were possible."

Kim and I met at a local coffeeshop in the center of town, which she chose because she said was "actually making money now" and wanted to explore more of the local food scene. Dressed in a hip light blue jumpsuit with her wispy hair pulled back in a pink hair clip, she carried with her an air of confidence and charm. She told me about how she credited her ability to get her current project management role through the opportunities she was exposed to while working for the USRO. When sharing her appreciation for the USRO director, she said that, "If

he didn't encourage me the way he did, I never would have realized I have an affinity for project management. If I wasn't working at the center, I never would have been able to work on a project where I directly handled tens of thousands of dollars to make this program work." She has directly translated these skills into her current position, and is content to not only be in a financially stable place, but also in a professional environment she did not think was possible because of her legal status.

In addition to formal assistance, undocumented/DACA students also gleaned inspiration from US-born peers. Valerie described her classmates as "well rounded" and that "being with them helped me and pushed me." While she says she was not able to bond with them intimately because their worries were primarily about school or applying to grad school, she still found it helpful to learn from them. Alexa told me about her friend's mother who is a professor at a different UC campus. She conveyed how having a parent who's a professor was far outside her reality, but she looked to her friend, and even though he himself was not a professor, she thought, "Okay, what is he doing that I can learn from, to do this and incorporate it into my life, to help me get to where I want to go." Having grown up in a predominantly immigrant community in East Los Angeles, she also used the opportunity to connect with US-born students to try and feel comfortable around individuals who were outside her immigrant community. When I inquired why this was important, she answered, "that's just what the world actually looks like, and those are the people that I'm going to be with in the future." Undocumented/DACA students attributed their presence in the university setting to helping them expand their notions of what success and opportunity look like, and they were able to imagine this future by seeing the trajectory of their US-born peers.

While undocumented/DACA students described a sense of opportunity by being around their US-born peers on campus, there still lingered a sense of resentment for these individuals who did not have overarching concerns regarding their legal status. Valerie admired the work ethic of the students she met in her student group, but then said, "That's all they're doing. So that makes sense. You have this club and school. But I have all the other things—so [*with sarcasm*] no pressure on me." Lacking legal status also translated into an inability to fully take advantage of opportunities on campus since undocumented/DACA students commonly needed to work and typically lived further from campus. Valerie compared her situation to her classmates,

> Because my classmates lived nearby, they could just go to the library during the day, whichever day they please, and study there. But I was like, "I don't want to drive all the way up there just so I can study. I can study at home." But I also wanted to go and study with them. So it was very conflicting. I didn't want to waste two hours, and waste gas, and drive, then come back home late. Also, I would have to buy food if I was there all day. There's a lot of expenses that come with living on campus and going to study on campus. I didn't want to buy takeout every day if I wanted to go study there. It was hard. I did it a couple of times, but I would just be like, "It's too much."

This tension also translated into how undocumented/DACA students discussed their postbaccalaureate plans with friends. Kim would have conversations with her friends from church and would deliberately shift the conversation away from her future. She said she would try her best "to not make a big deal about it" and would brush over the realities of what her future looked like but it was challenging because she wanted to be able to pursue the same opportunities as her US-born peers. Despite these challenges, undocumented/DACA students expressed appreciation for being in this new setting that shows them opportunities for advancement that they did not know existed before college. And beyond expressing hopefulness for their postbaccalaureate trajectories (Huber and Malagon 2006), these findings demonstrate how undocumented/DACA students gleaned inspiration from various sources to help them chart

a pathway after college. By taking advantage of work opportunities and engagements with their US-born peers, they were able to envision how college could be a stepping stone towards a professional career in the US after graduation.

Undocumented Student Resource Center: On-Campus Support and Mobilizer for Success

Kim: It's a necessary resource. I've been bringing them up for every single answer. Without them, I'd be nowhere—literally nowhere. 100%.

Across the country, there are over fifty undocumented student resource/dream resource centers designed to meet the unique needs of undocumented/DACA students (Nienhusser 2018b). The scholarly literature has compared these centers to other campus resources for marginalized groups, such as Black cultural centers (Cisneros and Valdivia 2020). And similar to those centers, undocumented student centers have evolved to be not just a safe house for students, but also offer a broad range of support services (Sanders 2016). As will be discussed more in Chapter 5, these centers aid undocumented/DACA students with college enrollment, provide legal immigration support (for the students and oftentimes their families, as well), offer financial assistance, promote civic and community involvement, advocate for undocumented-specific issues on campus, and support undocumented/DACA students' wellbeing with academic/mental health counseling and leadership development (Cisneros and Valdivia 2020;

Nienhusser 2018b).[16, 17] The staff members at these centers are uniquely attuned to the needs of undocumented/DACA students and can assist them with navigating institutional obstacles and creating opportunities for campus engagement.

At UC Shoreview, undocumented/DACA students placed such great emphasis on the importance of their Undocumented Student Resource Office (USRO) that they used it as part of their calculus when deciding which university to attend. Alexa had received admissions offers from schools that were more highly ranked, but she ultimately chose UC Shoreview because of the undocumented student support she would receive on campus to enable her to pursue her interests and not be restricted by her status. Jade's mom encouraged her to reach out to USRO staff when she received her admissions offer to learn about how financially feasible it would be for her to attend. The staff informed her about AB 540, a state law that grants in-state tuition to certain undocumented students living in California. When asked how this communication factored into her decision, she said, "I think that the USRO played a big role, because initially I wasn't even sure if I could attend any university. But they got back to me and what they said was helpful and their communication was active." Before students even set foot on UC Shoreview's campus, the USRO is there to offer them guidance on how to navigate the complex university bureaucracy.

The center itself offered comprehensive wraparound services (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5), which prompted undocumented/DACA students to go there first when they needed

[16] When campuses do not have undocumented student resource centers, undocumented/DACA students generally seek out community through race/ethnicity-based student organizations, diversity offices, or cultural centers (Contreras 2009; Huber and Malagon 2006).
[17] See Cisneros and Rivarola (2020) for a comprehensive list of resources offered by undocumented student resource centers.

on-campus guidance. Perico, an Aerospace Engineering alum, shared that when he needed help with anything on campus, he immediately turned to the USRO.

> All the resources they offered usually covered all the help I needed. For example, with food, money for food—they would provide that. Information on DACA status or updates—they would email out updates on that. What else? They would email me scholarships that were available to undocumented students. They would give me a link to scholarships, and then I would look at that and try to apply to them. What else? When I was going into my third year, it was very hard to find housing. So I spoke to the director and she was able to give me some information on emergency housing, in case it came to that.

When I asked him how it felt to have such comprehensive support, he said, "It felt amazing. It felt secure. I just feel like otherwise it would have been extremely difficult. You have to reach out to multiple different organizations. I felt like the USRO just had it all." Undocumented/DACA students sometimes even regretted not having gotten in touch with the center sooner. When I asked Rika to describe UC Shoreview to a new student and what advice she would give them, she said she would immediately guide them to the USRO website "so they can take advantage of that early on." In her case,

> My first year at UC Shoreview, I don't think I used the USRO until the third quarter, maybe spring quarter. It's just two quarters that I missed out on, but maybe there was something there that could have really been something that I needed. The USRO always holds these events and activities and workshops and stuff. They do a bunch of stuff over there that I felt like could have been extremely helpful, but I didn't take advantage of because I wasn't aware of it. So, I definitely would expose them to that.

Every undocumented/DACA student I spoke to extolled the benefits of engaging early on with the USRO and how they would share this information with friends and other incoming students. Ricardo felt that the staff had his "best interests at heart." He later served in an advisory role for other marginalized students on campus and shared, "I always [told] my mentees too, and anybody else who's undocumented, 'Go there. Go there. Go there.'" The litany of USRO benefits extended beyond what might be advertised on their website. Jade even shared her

appreciation for the warmly decorated environment and how the snacks in the center would encourage students to gather in this safe and welcoming space.

By convening in a setting dedicated to their specific identity, undocumented/DACA students felt they were part of a cohesive and supportive community. Kim, when discussing the importance of the USRO for an incoming student, said that the center's benefits are both emotional and logical in nature. She expanded,

> Emotionally, they're most likely going to be the people that understand you the most. They'll understand to a deeper level of what you're going through. There's also a chance that they'll have resources available to you that you didn't know about. Then the logical aspect of it is just, if someone is undocumented and you get to know them, you would feel empowered that there's someone like you out there—that you're not alone, and that, even though you don't have status, you can still do something. It's corny, but we're stronger together. You can see yourself as this one undocumented person, but if you see someone else who's struggling through the same thing, you're like, "This is not fair." It becomes more than just you.

Even though students were describing a network of undocumented/DACA students, this community was purposefully cultivated and fostered by USRO staff. Ricardo said that, "They actually care about you, and they make it known. That's so important. They're not just doing their job. They are doing their job, but they're not just there to work or make money. They're literally there to help students. I felt it as soon as I walked in." The USRO develops these connections by maintaining consistent and ongoing contact with undocumented/DACA students. Ricardo further shared how he worked on his resume with the USRO program manager, who would then check up on him every two to three days. "He would make sure how I'm doing—'Send me your resume, send it over. How's it going? How's your update?'" This consistent engagement provided undocumented/DACA students with a sense of purpose that let them explore what their potential could be on campus and beyond.

Thus far, the sentiments shared by undocumented/DACA students at UC Shoreview reflects the present scholarship on how undocumented student resource centers support students without legal status. They have been credited with fostering a welcoming and supportive environment (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018; Sanchez and So 2015), nurturing student development through regular engagement (Council et al. 2020), and sharing pertinent information that helps students advance personally and professionally (Delgado 2022). The undocumented/DACA students at UC Shoreview, however, also remarked on the benefits of the USRO in helping them outline and chart a postbaccalaureate path that was feasible within the confines of their legal status. Since these undocumented/DACA students are oftentimes also first-generation college students, they lack mentors and examples of what postbaccalaureate options exist. Perico shared his appreciation for the alumni panels organized by USRO staff. He felt motivated by one alumni in particular who has gone on to start her own business.

> Sometimes it's hard to see the bigger picture, the end goal. With her experience and her story, I was able to see that she was able to graduate and then she was able to do something after graduation and build something. It looks like the USRO was able to provide her with that help.

Jerry, a Chinese student majoring in International Business, said that he relied on professional advice from USRO staff more so than the professors in his major. Interestingly, Jerry was one of two undocumented/DACA students I spoke to who did not feel limited by his lack of legal status (Millán 2021). For all other students, they described ever-present obstacles in participating on campus and getting jobs after graduation. Jerry expressed to me, "as an individual, I didn't live my life as a status. I live my life as a person who has specific characteristics and personality." Despite his disconnected relationship with his legal status, he still appreciated how USRO staff could help students define their future path, illustrating the USRO's capacity to connect with a wide swath of undocumented students.

> They would always encourage you to know what you want. If you don't know, they'll push you to the direction or help you out towards the direction that is suitable for you. Professors can only help you on certain things, because everybody's knowledge is not vast on the specific things that you want… USRO help you out on every direction.

When options are not readily obvious, or professional opportunities are restricted to those with legal immigration status, USRO staff helps undocumented/DACA students get creative about what they can do after graduation that would be fulfilling and productive. Jade had shared her frustration when encountering the foreboding question on job applications that asked if she was legally authorized to work in the US. She then participated in a professional fellowship through the USRO, which included professional advising. She shared, "I just remember, constantly, that question—'What do you want to do? How can you make it work? There's always loopholes that you can get around'… So it was just constantly encouraging." Knowing that there were creative opportunities for professional advancement, and that Jade was going to be assisted by advisors who would help her delineate a path forward, gave her motivation to keep excelling academically and professionally.

In addition to feeling encouraged by USRO staff that postbaccalaureate opportunities *do* exist for college graduates without legal status, undocumented/DACA students also felt empowered to take control of their professional journeys through the encouragement they received from USRO staff. Rika, a Venezuelan student majoring in Sociology, was trying to source funding for flights and hotels to send students to Sacramento for an extracurricular project. After consulting with USRO, she gained the courage to speak to faculty directly to request funding. She reflected,

> Professionally speaking, it definitely is a stepping stone to force yourself to put yourself out there. You might miss out on opportunities. I think we're always, even in our personal lives, so afraid of rejection… Having gone through the

> experience, I think it gives me an adrenaline rush. Those encouraged me to be able to do something like this again in the future.

Even though they might be precluded from certain professional opportunities, undocumented/DACA students felt inspired by USRO staff to find creative pathways for success. This emotional support that USRO staff provides works in concert with formal programs they offer that serve as a stepping stone to help students attain their educational and professional goals. Alexa credited the USRO's financial assistance with helping her apply for graduate school. She said, "With [the USRO] giving me the financial assistance, I see that as helping me in the future—I can use the savings for grad school." Perico attributed his success in receiving graduate school offers to the professionalization opportunities he took advantage of through the USRO. He explained, "I feel like the reason why I got into grad school was because, through one of their programs, I did a fellowship, and I was able to do research in a Biophysics laboratory. Then I met the professor and he was able to write a really good letter of recommendation." Perico is referring to a fellowship (explained in more detail in Chapter 5) offered by the USRO in which students identify an on-campus mentor who will guide them on a research/professionalization project with financial support from the USRO. Given the legal uncertainties of hiring an undocumented student, the USRO eliminated this hurdle for on-campus employers and encouraged them to hire undocumented/DACA students as a way of helping undocumented/DACA students get concrete professional experiences to put on their resumes.

While undocumented students felt substantively supported by USRO staff in pursuing on-campus opportunities, they also said that USRO staff would ask them difficult questions about their future because they wanted students to be realistic about their employment prospects given their lack of legal status. While undocumented/DACA students could pursue professional fellowships through the USRO during their studies, these sorts of experiences were not available

after graduation. Maracuya started off her studies at UC Shoreview as an Earth Sciences major, later switching to Marine Biology. She loved her STEM courses, but was starting to feel uncertainty about what jobs she could pursue after graduation. She sought advice from the USRO and said,

> After speaking with the Undocumented Student Resource Office, they asked me the hard questions. They sat down and talked to me. I remember I just started crying, because I realized that these are hard questions I had to ask myself, and I really did have to sit down and think about it instead of avoid it. It is my future we're talking about, and I can't continue to turn a blind eye to it and feel like things are just gonna work out, when in reality that's not how it is for me. For me in my situation, I have to really calculate these moves and see what I'm actually doing.

Heeding advice from USRO staff, she switched to a Business Psychology major and feels more confident about the possibility of being an independent contractor. But the uncertainties remain. She said she needs to continue to be in contact with the USRO "so they can help me with that process, and just find more people who can mentor me, because I can't do this alone. I can't. I don't know what I'm doing." Jade shared a similar dynamic regarding the USRO's postbaccalaureate advising. She said there were individuals she spoke to outside the office who were the "go for what you want!" people. But the USRO was more practical. She said, "They're like, "If you like it, I don't want to deter you from it. But it's gonna make your life harder. Do you want to maybe go for something that's more like entrepreneurship or independent contractor where you can work as long as you can pay tax?" She appreciated this approach because it felt she had agency in a process that seemed out of her control. Even after graduation, she continues to visit USRO staff on campus and shares that they continuously offer practical solutions for her employment situation.

Overall, undocumented/DACA students sung the praises of USRO staff for the abundance of programming they offer to support undocumented/DACA students professionally,

socially, financially, and legally. They felt these individuals were more than staff members—they expressed genuine interest in the growth and development of the students. They fostered this through maintaining continuous contact with students. Viewing the USRO assistance as a stepping stone, students attributed their ability to chart a postbaccalaureate path to the myriad resources offered by the USRO. Despite the many obstacles standing in the way of undocumented/DACA students' professional growth, they felt they could rely on USRO staff to provide uplifting, yet also realistic, support.

Undocumented Students as Hubs

Regardless of what their futures look like after college, undocumented/DACA students saw the fact that they gained access to this elusive space (and internalizing the cultural knowledge that comes along with it) as an important marker of success in and of itself. Using this knowledge, these exceptional students act as "hubs" for future undocumented/DACA students. The hub model is based on Bashi's (2007) ethnographic study of West Indians who migrated to the US. Bashi developed the hub and spoke framework to illustrate how migrant networks operate. She distinguished between certain migrants who can act as "hubs" (veteran migrants who act as migration experts or brokers) and others who are "spokes" (newcomers). The veteran migrants help newcomers with border crossings, job seeking, housing—all of which are intended to help them reach socioeconomic stability while being connected to their community. Spokes, in her study, also are selective in their assistance because they intend to maintain their standing in the community. Since then, the hub and spoke model has been used to explain how networks function during different stages of the labor process (Morales 2016), the

role of trust within migration networks (Flores-Yeffal 2013), and how they encourage circular migration (Hwang 2021), among other applications. In this instance, undocumented/DACA students function as hubs for both new students and members of their families and communities who intend to pursue higher education.

The desire to help future members of their families and communities pursue higher education stems from the sacrifices undocumented/DACA students saw their parents make when journeying to the US. Because of the hardships their parents experienced to make a new life for themselves and their families, undocumented/DACA students saw it as their responsibility to pay it forward to the next generation. Jesus talked about how he feels a lot of people depending on him. He said, "For me, that was a huge motivating factor, to know that my parents were trailblazers in bringing me here. I'm a trailblazer in hopefully figuring it out for my [younger] sisters, and for my parents as well." He frequently mentioned the responsibility he felt vis-à-vis both his sisters and his parents. Neither of his parents finished high school and were thus less able to help his sisters move in the direction of higher education, let alone in a country where they were unfamiliar with the education system. He explained further,

> My motivation is always very much family. My little sisters are age six and eleven. If I can get to know the system and help them along the way and help them be well connected, hopefully not just with what they want to do, but just living in this country honestly. It's not something that I can always relate to if I'm with my parents, because their experience is very different. It's going to work. It's going to church. It's existing within the communities.

Even when students are not meeting traditional markers of academic achievement in undergrad, they view the impacts they have on their communities as indicators of success in their own right. Kim said she would have originally defined her success in college in terms of the GPA she received, but looking back on her college experience, she also defined success as the ability to give back to her loved ones. "It turns out that the thing I was most proud of when I graduated

was the impact I had on the communities I cared about… to the point my GPA suffered. But I don't care about that anymore… It also allowed me to channel my pain and struggles into something productive that helps other people. It gave me purpose in life." Undocumented/DACA students' role as hubs for their communities was an important driver of success since they were able to channel their struggles into an opportunity to help their communities advance.

Students also shared with me how they felt innately connected to and responsible for incoming undocumented/DACA students who may need help navigating the unfamiliar terrain of higher education. When I asked Jesus what sort of advice he would give to a new incoming student, he said,

> I would be like, "What aspect do you want to know? I can help you with the financial aspect, if that's something that you want to go through. I can help you with the legal aspect, if that's something you ever want to go through, if you ever want to apply to Advance Parole or want to talk to a lawyer as to whether you or your family can apply to anything. That's something I have knowledge about, very thankfully. If you ever want to seek out the psychological services as well, that's something that I can approach you to… Because it's hard to navigate this institution and deal with the privilege that we see, and sometimes talking to your mom and her still not knowing English or her getting lost in the streets or whatnot and dealing with that dynamic.

Undocumented/DACA students understand the duality of experiences that students who do not have legal status experience while getting their degrees. It can be challenging to feel worthy of taking up space in this unfamiliar environment, especially when they still feel innately connected to their family's daily challenges back home. They try to help those in their community to "take up space," per Ricardo's words. He said that wants to put "my people" into these rooms "not just these richer, white folks… any chance that I get to help anybody that has DACA, I'm like, 'You're looking? Apply here.'" Students felt like they had been the recipients of individualized support and guidance (see Appendix B) and wanted to make sure that they paid it forward to new students who needed help navigating the confusing maze of higher education.

Knowing that their presence in higher education and the knowledge they glean from this space is so impactful for their communities drives these students to keep moving forward in their education and careers. Perico shared, “There is some motivation in the fact that I know that if my family sees that I’m accomplishing these things, I’ll have a cousin that I don’t even know about and he’ll be like, ‘I know him. He was able to do it. I want to be an engineer when I grew up. If he could do it, then I could do it too.’” While undocumented/DACA students are examples for their communities, there are also expectations from their community about what they should be able to achieve with their degrees. Ricardo said that his family thought he was “going to have this amazing career and buy my own house or cars, do all of this and have all of this money.” He was unsure how to explain to them that in order to be successful, he needed more than just his bachelor’s in psychology. Internally he thought, “How do I even explain to them that I need so much more schooling and to prepare way more to get to where I want to be?” I was very anxious, thinking about it all the time.” Undocumented/DACA students felt they needed to educate their families/communities both on how to get to college, but also share the reality of what their college degree affords them.

Undocumented/DACA students felt like their receipt of a higher education degree can not only help incoming students, but can be used as social capital by their families. Kim, a Korean student who studied International Relations, said that she sees herself as holding the most potential in her family and has considered the impact that major personal and professional decisions will have on her family’s livelihood and stance within the community.

> Kim: My decision to go into the corporate world rather than maybe working at a nonprofit, that’s also for them, so that when they talk about me to their friends they can brag. That’s like social capital for them to be noticed and get more help in their community as well, which sounds ridiculous, but it’s just kind of how it is. If you are able to brag about your kids in that community, you get more stuff. So it’s that as well.

Karina: What kind of stuff?

> Kim: Just more opportunities. My dad is a pool cleaner. My mom is an esthetician. So there's even a chance of getting more customers that way. Like, "Did you hear about that family? I heard their daughter went to UC Shoreview, tuition completely covered, and now she's a project manager at a biotech company." That sounds so good. It's like, "I think we can trust them." And I'm queer, but I'm choosing not to date someone of the same sex as me for now, because that would ruin my family's reputation. So it's just these big personal sacrifices that I do. But to me, it's worth it.

For undocumented/DACA students, getting a bachelor's degree is more than just a piece of paper. They not only see their time in undergraduate as a stepping stone for their own success, but also to jumpstart opportunities for their families and communities by way of knowledge and advice that can help others similarly advance to higher education. They deeply understand the challenges of getting to this space and are thus innately equipped to help other undocumented/DACA students. Driven by their families' stories of sacrifice, they function as key hubs by both directly helping incoming or current students and serving as model examples of success for future generations and their broader communities. While this comes with its own set of pressures, it is also a driver for them to keep excelling.

Unlike Bashi's (2007) findings, the undocumented/DACA students in my study did not safeguard any information. To them, there was not a finite set of resources available to undocumented/DACA students that they wanted to keep for themselves. Instead, they wanted to make sure other undocumented/DACA students had access to the same opportunities that they did. While their postbaccalaureate opportunities remain unclear, undocumented/DACA students felt a sense of achievement and success in serving as a hub, and representative, for their undocumented community.

Conclusion

Undocumented/DACA students endure undue burdens during college that make it challenging to both gain access and persist through their undergraduate studies. Lacking formal legal status makes it challenging to engage fully on campus because these students typically work more to finance their educations, live further from campus, have mental health challenges related to immigration statuses, and need to navigate a complex university bureaucracy. These difficulties can be at least somewhat ameliorated when students are properly supported and have spaces on campus where they feel comfortable, safe, and are in community with like-minded peers. When equipped with the proper resources, undocumented/DACA students can engage more fully on campus and take advantage of professional, civic, and social opportunities.

A supportive campus environment, as argued by Golash-Boza and Valdez (2018), can function as a nested environment that acts in concert with federal and state policies to impact an undocumented student's incorporation. The image of the nest illustrates how institutions can play a critical role in shaping the safety and belonging of undocumented students. But in this chapter, I have argued that UC Shoreview does more than safeguard students; it also acts like a stepping stone for undocumented students. Undocumented students, like all students, need to consider their lives and professional prospects after graduation. With the future in mind, they view college as an opportunity for them to be exposed to various professional pathways and opportunities for success. They glean information from their interactions with US-born students and look for inspiration through university programming, classes, and work experience. This individualized

approach is coupled with comprehensive support from the USRO. Through constant and engaged communication, the USRO provides undocumented/DACA students with examples of success and formal programing to help with resumes, graduate school applications, and alternative career pathways. And finally, this stepping stone function extends beyond the individual. College is not just a time for undocumented/DACA students to learn about professional opportunities for themselves; they believe their families and communities will also benefit from their newfound cultural knowledge about gaining access to and succeeding in this unfamiliar environment.

There is a debate among scholars as to the role that being undocumented plays for students in college. On the one hand, scholars argue that being undocumented functions as "master status" that governs students' experiences over all other social identities (Gonzales 2016; Terriquez 2015). Enriquez (2017), however, takes issue with this framing and says that other social identities—including race, class, and gender—feature more prominently through undocumented students' college experiences, but that it is their lack of legal status that is the "final straw" that may cause them to not be able to complete their degrees. My findings in this chapter align most closely with the "master status" school of thought. Each of the three findings in this chapter hinge on the students interpreting their experiences through the lens of being undocumented. They compare themselves to US-born students, and they recognize the opportunities US-born students are able to access because they are *not* undocumented. My respondents seek support from the USRO because this is the primary site on campus that understands how the nuances of being undocumented can infiltrate all aspects of both the college and postbaccalaureate experience (more so than other identity-based organizations, such as a Latinx student resource office). And finally, because they identify so innately with their undocumented status, they seek to create support for future undocumented students who they

know will encounter similar hurdles and struggles. While my findings do demonstrate how the higher education environment can function as a stepping stone, it is with the overarching context of how to move through this space as an individual lacking legal status.

There is an unsubtle context to this chapter. While universities can play a supportive function for undocumented students and attempt to help them carve out pathways for success that work within the confines of their legal status, this is no match for draconian immigration policies that keep undocumented immigrants excluded from fully participating in society. Undocumented/DACA students expressed jealousy, and even resentment, towards US-born students who could pursue professional and educational opportunities without any concern for how immigration status may impede their progress. The USRO had to tell students that certain professional pathways would be inherently unavailable to them because they required legal immigration status (described in more detail in Chapter 5). Without comprehensive immigration reform that provides a pathway for citizenship and full incorporation, undocumented/DACA students will continue to fight an uphill battle to accomplish their professional and educational goals. While universities can play this crucial stepping stone function, it is ultimately up to the federal government to establish formal legal pathways for status adjustment and incorporation.

CHAPTER 4: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT: NEOLIBERAL UNDERPINNINGS, VISA COMPLIANCE, AND INFORMAL GUIDANCE

Abstract: Research shows how universities in the United States have been educationally, intellectually, financially, and culturally enriched by the presence of international students (Ford and Cate 2020). To ensure student growth and success, there exist dedicated university support services to help international students navigate both a new host society and a foreign educational setting. However, as international students are increasingly seeking to remain in the US after graduation (at least temporarily), how are staff and administrators helping to shepherd international students through the postbaccalaureate transition to ensure they are prepared for life in the host society, even for a short time but perhaps for a lifetime? To answer this, I draw upon Lipsky's (1980) concept of street-level bureaucrats to illustrate the dual constraints faced by staff at both the institutional and federal level and how they operate under said limitations. First, staff are constrained by the neoliberal institutional messaging of international students, and that corresponds to seeing students as deserving of services because of the financial benefits they provide to the university. Secondly, because of this institutional constraint, staff focus their efforts on maintaining international students' legal status (because failure to do so may impact future student enrollments). Finally, staff feel the federal constraint of international students needing to get a job 60 days after graduating, and because of this, they focus their efforts on providing students with informal guidance and anecdotal advice about what kinds of tools would be helpful on the job market (soft skills, leadership opportunities, and community building) and tempering students' expectations about landing an employer sponsorship after graduation.

Staff and Administrator Support for International Students

As noted in Chapter 2, international students encounter a unique combination of challenges when studying at an institute of higher education. They not only have to adjust to new program requirements, academic cultures, and participation styles, but also to unfamiliar social and cultural norms, such as communication styles, eating options, living arrangements, and making friends. When international students arrive on a US campus, they must navigate at least three different cultures: their native culture, American culture, and the culture of the institution (Awoniyi 2014). Because of the uncertainty they feel in their new environment, they may wait longer to seek professional assistance than American students because of a stronger adherence to getting help through family members (Crockett and Hays 2011; Dillard and Chisolm 1983). But it is especially important for this population to receive specialized and personalized assistance and support.

When international students receive customized support, they experience a host of positive outcomes. Koo and Kim (2021) identify the instrumental role of international student advisors in helping international students navigate cultural and linguistic barriers, which leads to greater academic outcomes and social integration. Relatedly, Lee, Park, and Cho (2020) show an increased sense of belonging on campus among international students who received substantive support from international student advisors. Not only do international students feel more included on campus when there are dedicated resources to help facilitate their campus inclusion, but they also experience reduced psychological stress (Cho and Yu 2015). In fact, international students cite the presence of specialized support services as a factor that attracts them to apply and enroll in particular universities over others (Zhang and Goodson 2011). Given these

students' unfamiliarity with the host institution and host country, support services can play a major impact in shaping their undergraduate experiences.

Universities are responsible for many functions that help international students acclimate to campus life. These tasks begin before an international student arrives on campus, as universities are charged with guiding international students through the visa process (applications, consular appointments, etc.). Once international students arrive to the US, university advisors help to orient students into the community, educate them on academic norms, and make them aware of relevant institutional and governmental policies. International student advisors will host a wide variety of programming to assist international students. In their website content analysis of the top international student receiving universities in the US, Martirosyan, Bustamante, and Saxon (2019) identified several common themes of programs such as English language programs, academic support and student success initiatives, targeted writing support, social and cultural events, professional development workshops, and family member support programs. To accomplish this, university staff and administrators need to possess cross-cultural knowledge and intercultural sensitivity, which will ensure their programming is inclusive and cognizant of diverse backgrounds and interests.

Beyond cultural and academic support, international student advisors have a significant responsibility to help maintain and keep record of international students' legal status while they are studying in the US. As a result of the 1993 truck bombing on the World Trade Center and the 9/11 attacks, the US Department of Homeland Security developed a centralized database, known as SEVIS, with the goal of maintaining records on international student enrollment and visa information. International student advisors on campus are responsible for keeping the information current, which requires significant resources by way of time and knowledge. This

increased legal responsibility has shifted the role of advisors from student advocates to government enforcers (Rosser et al. 2007). International student advisors spend less time on student programming because of the need to ensure regulatory compliance. This system has resulted in decreased morale among international student advisors (Rosser et al. 2007), as international students see the role of the advisor primarily through the lens of someone who counsels them on immigration issues, such as visa renewal, I-20s, and on-campus employment regulations (Clark 2002).

At present, the roles of university staff and administrators are seen as predominantly assisting international students in getting to the US (administrative and legal support), helping them adjust once they get to campus (academic and cultural orientation), helping to maintain their legal status, and facilitating experiences on campus that help them foster a sense of community and belonging. These functions are indispensable, and are indeed a great deal of responsibility for staff who are generally responsible for overseeing advisor and administrative duties for an outsized proportion of international students. While my findings generally confirm this rolodex of responsibilities, I illustrate the consequences of dual pressures university staff feel from both the institution and federal government and how this translates into how they frame both their services and the informal strategies they share with students who want to stay in the US after graduation. Specifically, university administrators see it as their responsibility to provide international students (who want to stay in the US) with a toolkit of resources, information, and skills that will help their postbaccalaureate transition and acculturation.

Increased Tuition Translates to Deservingness

In both the immigration and education literatures, there is evidence that demonstrates university administrators' perception of international students as "customers" who pay a premium to attend the university and help the institution meet their bottom line (see, for example Robertson 2011; Yao and Mwangi 2022; Yao and Viggiano 2019).[18] This framing depicts international students as "cash cows" that provide a reliable cash flow to help fund the growth of universities (Choudaha 2017). This perspective is also used at the state level, as international students are typically touted as providing an economic boon to local and national economies and contributing jobs to the US economy.[19]

UC Shoreview prides itself on fostering "an inclusive and welcoming environment for reciprocal learning and intercultural exchange" and helping "cultivate a culture of global citizenship" (university website) for students. Despite this holistic and multicultural approach, staff also emphasize the neoliberal perspective that drives their work.[20] There were several instances in which staff made the connection between how much international students pay and the services they should receive as a result. Marco, a career advisor for international students, had only recently stepped into his role as an international student career advisor when we spoke. He showed up to our interview with perfectly coiffed hair and was wearing a navy polo shirt from a high-end brand. I stressed to him beforehand that this research interview was meant to be

[18] International graduate students, on the other hand, are seen as a commodity to help universities drive down the costs of employment and research (Skrentny and Novick 2018; Yao and Mwangi 2022).
[19] For example, the National Association of International Educators created an economic value tool depicting international students' annual economic contribution to the national economy that you can break down by state and congressional district: https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2#main-content.
[20] I draw upon Museus and LePeau's (2019) definition of neoliberalism, which includes key elements of consumerism, competitive individualism, surveillance, precarity, and declining morality.

informal and conversational, but it was clear he was nervous and wanted to make sure he answered the questions "correctly." I was surprised then when he spoke so casually about the connection between international students and how much they pay to attend UC Shoreview. "They're investing a lot of money into their experience. I don't want to say they have to have that kind of [career] support, but they kind of do… if they don't have that, they're not going to be successful, and they're not getting a return on their investment." Marco does not describe international students as deserving of career support like any other student; instead, they are deserving *because* of the increased amount of tuition they pay to the university. Carla runs one of UC Shoreview's student support units asked that I reassure her about the anonymity of the study before she stated, "I think universities bring in international students for money, as opposed to benefiting the subject... Ideally, universities bring in international students for the sake of diversity and thought… The reality is, they bring with them a bigger price tag." These two individuals work closely on a daily basis with international students and could not disassociate the financial gains international students bring to universities from the repository of curated resources they receive as a result. In other words, these street-level bureaucrats framed deservingness through a financial lens. The organizational framing of international students, in this case, trickles down to how staff frame international students, which they connect to the quantity and quality of services they should receive in return.

Others were even more outspoken about the university's financial need for international students. James runs a series of intercultural workshops for international students to help them get acclimated to the university, and so it startled me to hear him say that "People run universities like businesses. They are depending on these high-paying clients to be able to continue their businesses at the level of production they have it." Labeling international students

as these "high-paying clients" stresses the importance of how much their funds help to keep the university's wheels turning. When I asked Rachel, an academic tutor on campus, what the university's responsibility is towards international students, she said it is to give them confidence, and expanded further, "You're luring them—they're coming to this campus from wherever in the world… I think that it is the responsibility of the university to take care of this additional vulnerability that they've taken on to come here, to be a student here." When I asked her to expand on what she meant by luring this population, she explained "International students pay more to come to UC Shoreview. It is in the interest of the university's bottom line to have a big international student population. If this is the case, then we should have the resources for international students." This financial driver underpins the perspectives of administrators. Because of this, international students are seen as deserving of specialized services *because* of how much they contribute financially to the university. It is not enough that they are enrolled students at UC Shoreview just like any other undergraduate student. They are framed as constituents that are deserving of resources because of the financial benefit they provide to the university.

This is not to say that all international students come to UC Shoreview with padded pockets and bank accounts brimming with cash. Staff made it clear that there is socioeconomic diversity within the international student population and that this nuance is often not captured in popular rhetoric. Blanca has been at UC Shoreview for close to two decades and thus speaks from a deep understanding of how UC Shoreview has operated over time. She shared with me about how when global events happen, their less affluent international students are more adversely impacted and need special attention to make sure their needs are met. Ashley, an international student advisor, pushed back on the financial framing because she said that this

ends up "missing out on other students that may be just as qualified to be here and all that, but they don't have the funding to come."

That said, this perspective was in the minority. Even out of the international students I interviewed, I only encountered three students who shared that they did not fit the standard picture of a well-off international student. Overall, international students felt they were deserving of services that were on par with their tuition fees. Linda, an international student advisor, even told me that, "there was definitely the feeling in advising sessions when students were getting frustrated trying to get answers to things, and felt like, 'I'm being treated as a number. I should be getting better service if I'm paying this much money.'" This perception demonstrates how the client framing of international students operates from both the administrative and student perspective. Instead of thinking of themselves as part of the broader campus community, international undergraduate students felt they were deserving of extra support that was on par with how much they were spending on tuition. In other words, they also bought into the "cash cow" framing (Robertson 2011), knew their funds were helping to line the university's coffers, and believed they should be treated accordingly.

Lipsky-inspired analyses of client-bureaucrat relations have used the framing of "deservingness" to demonstrate bureaucrats' attitudes towards clients and the subsequent services rendered. Bureaucrats use framings of morality (Kallio and Kouvo 2015), value orientation (Petersen et al. 2011), proximity to the in-group (van Oorschot 2008), and others to dictate their work and services provided to clientele. I add to this robust scholarship by illustrating the institutional financial framing of deservingness driving the work of UC Shoreview staff when providing services to international students. While previous immigration and education scholarship have established that universities depict international students as "cash

cows," my findings move this work forward by showing how this framing is used not only when admitting students, but also when framing the relative need for services for this high-paying clientele.

Institutional Constraint—Visa Status Compliance

To benefit from international students' increased tuition dollars, universities need to have clear legal and administrative processes in place to help international students with their visas to come to the US and to ensure visa compliance while they are attending the university. Street-level bureaucrats who have a legal mandate as part of their job duties are generally required to communicate relevant laws and regulations to their clientele, assist with filling out and processing documents and forms, and record their actions regarding legal compliance. Successfully fulfilling this component of their work is especially critical for international student advisors because failure to do so correctly may inhibit their ability to admit international students in the future. Stories like US students participating in visa fraud schemes (James 2010) and repercussions for universities that operate as "visa mills" (Robbins 2016) keep international student office officials on high alert, as they do not want to be flagged by Immigration and Customs Enforcement for review and possible repercussions. As such, there is a strong desire among university officials to ensure compliance and rule-based operations. What I show in this section, however, is that there is more to legal processing than just keeping students compliant with their visa status; university staff are incentivized to help international students maintain their legal status so as to continue the cycle of international students coming to UC Shoreview.

Before thinking about how to accommodate international students on campus, university staff are mandated by the university administration and federal government to assist international students with getting to the US and campus. This requires aiding them with lengthy visa applications, helping them schedule consular appointments, and offering informational sessions about visa rules and guidelines. Visa denial rates for international students are at an all-time high (Fischer 2023), requiring ever more support from university administrators.[21] The visa process begins up to one year before an international student even arrives on campus, and many administrators see this as the basis of their work. I spoke with Linda, who works closely on international student programming, at a university coffeeshop, and she enthusiastically shared information about the different social programs her office offers to international students. But before even thinking about programming, she said that her office's work starts "with the core of providing the documentation and paperwork to even be here. That will never go away for international students. There is a specific need to be able to get them here in the status they need to be in, and then help them maintain that status." Her co-worker, Shannon, said that legal status compliance is the "bread and butter of their work." They need to make sure immigration documents are accurately and efficiently processed and legal statuses are properly maintained. This sentiment came up time and time again. When I would ask international student advisors about their fundamental responsibility towards international students, it always boiled down to helping an international student with their immigration status. As there are several thousand international students at UC Shoreview, any programming to help international students adjust to life on campus is secondary to making sure their immigration documentation stays up to date.

[21] The high denial rate is primarily due to the requirement for international students to demonstrate lack of dual intent at their consular appointments. Since F-1 visas (the most popular visa option for international students) do not offer a pathway to permanent residency, international students need to prove to consular officers that they do not intend to stay in the US after graduation (even if that is their ultimate goal).

These street-level bureaucrats focus first and foremost on ensuring that nothing they do could negatively impact a student's visa status.

This fundamental responsibility to ensure visa status compliance continues after an international student completes their studies and plans to stay in the US. When I asked Ashley how she structures her advising to consider the plans of international students who want to stay in the US long term, she rattled off a list of potential factors that international students need to consider that may affect a future Green Card application, such as unpaid positions and investing. Ashley said that she does not want any student to experience any challenges with long-term settlement in the future. When helping international students with their postgraduate work visa documents, she says Office of International Student Affairs (OISA) staff need to have certain documents and information in place because, "as an institution, we do draw lines. We have to protect ourselves as well." When I followed up and asked what the consequences are of not having certain documents in place, she connected it directly to their ability to "admit and enroll more international students in the future." Ashley's explanation here demonstrates the extra pressure staff face when helping students with visa matters and the cascading consequences of not following visa guidelines. It is not as simple as advising students on legal matters. If international students are improperly advised, it not only impacts the individual student but has a potentially bigger impact on the ability of the university to admit more international students in the future and, as discussed in the previous section, maintain their flow of this financially lucrative source of revenue.

Street-level bureaucrats are oftentimes left to their own devices to interpret legal guidelines and are given significant discretion to interpret rules in ways that best fits their clientele's needs (Bell and Smith 2022; Edlins and Larrison 2020). In the case of international

students in higher education, however, maintaining visa compliance not only benefits the international student clientele, but also ultimately benefits the university overall. To help students maintain their legal status, I found that staff sometimes worked to analytically and creatively interpret legal guidelines. For example, while international students look for paid employment after completing their degrees, they may not always be successful in securing a position. For those who want to stay in the US after graduating, they look to international student advisors to help them carve out alternative pathways. James, an international student advisor, says that volunteering is a nontraditional pathway that isn't frequently marketed. For those whom this is a financially feasible option, he says he suggests this pathway as a way of maintaining legal status while continuing to search for paid employment to continue their Optional Practical Training (OPT). Staff often referenced "gray areas" in interpreting legal requirements that they use to help support students and make sure there are no gaps in legal status that can adversely impact their futures. James says that OISA staff at UC Shoreview is more liberal in interpreting legal guidelines as compared to other universities he is familiar with. He estimated that 30-40% of universities are more conservative in their interpretation of legal guidelines, which he said boils down to fear. "If they decide to take a certain stance on policy, they're going to lose their ability to host and manage international students on behalf of the university." At UC Shoreview, however, staff try to be more lenient with guidelines because this not only benefits students but also helps the university to keep hosting international students in the future.

Even though staff feel a responsibility towards the students and the university to ensure proper legal processing, they acknowledge that the process of finding a job after graduation is stressful and cumbersome. Moreover, such stressors are compounded for international students who have a 60-day clock after graduation during which they need to have landed employment or

be required to leave the country. After graduation, staff are only required to process legal documents for international students to help maintain their OPT status. However, staff do consider the undue stressors international students face when checking in with them to get paperwork processed. Shannon, an OISA employee who helps international students with legal affairs, said that students do not typically outwardly state that they are feeling anxious or stressed, but she said that "after years of doing this, you can read a student… you can kind of see, 'Okay, you're having a harder time. What about reaching out to some networks within your department?'" She proceeded to list several other suggestions she would offer to students who are exhibiting mental health concerns. As these staffers are closely clued in to student needs, they see fulfillment of their roles as extending beyond legal duties. While not required to do so, they know that continued success in the US requires that students are both on the right legal pathway and also feeling mentally stable as they navigate life in the US after graduation.

How common are these practices? While this project does not explicitly compare UC Shoreview's practices with other universities, I asked staff to reflect on what they saw was unique or the same about UC Shoreview's legal approach towards its international students as compared to other universities. Ashley told me she came to UC Shoreview after working at an international student office in Boston, which she described as more conservative in its legal advising for students. She said, "Where I came from before, we would probably be very hardline— 'No, we need the offer letter in this template. That's all we'll accept.'" Why, then, is UC Shoreview staff more lenient in their interpretation of legal guidelines? As mentioned earlier, they work creatively to help students maintain their legal status because it ensures US Shoreview is able to maintain its flow of international students on campus. In addition, staff shared that they did not want the complicated immigration legal system to impact students' experience. Blanca

said that her priority is that students are able to "focus on their academic and professional success, versus worrying about the compliance and the immigration pieces that would derail them from achieving that success." To that end, staff try to balance the administration's responsibility of wanting to continue accepting and enrolling international students at the current rate, while also helping students progress on their academic and professional journeys.

Legal advising is central to the work of university staff and administrators working with international students. Even among academic advisors, they shared that they had to consider if a student's academic decision (e.g., not taking a full course load) may impact their legal status. Among street-level bureaucrats who are tasked with legal matters, their primary responsibility is to convey information to their clientele and ensure paperwork is processed appropriately. The findings in this section demonstrate how there is an added layer of responsibility staff feel towards the institution for ensuring international students maintain their status, because doing so ensures that the university can keep admitting students. As such, staff are inclined to creatively interpret guidelines to help students maintain their status and ensure a successful transition into OPT status.

University Staff's Integrating Strategies—Sharing Informal Strategies and Practical Realities

As outlined in the introduction, international students encounter a strict federal constraint after graduating. If they want to stay in the US, they have a 60-day clock after graduating to either secure a job offer or continue their education at another accredited institution in the US. If they do not do this, they are required to leave the country and, should they choose to return to the

US, they must start the visa process over again from their home country. This federal constraint, as established in Chapter 2, weighs heavily on the students and dictates their undergraduate experience and how they strategically structure their time to try and attain a job offer.

It is not just the students who feel this constraint; it also reverberates to the staff and colors their interactions with students. Unlike policymakers and higher-level administration, street-level bureaucrats have more face-to-face and consistent interactions with their constituents and are therefore tuned into these challenges and keenly aware of the students' stressors. Marco, a career advisor, said he recently met with one student who scheduled three appointments in one week to review his resume, cover letter, and get advice on applying for internships. "They want to get things done as soon as possible… they know what they want." Paula, an OISA employee who focuses on student programming, expressed her admiration for the tenacity she witnesses among the international student population. "I'm constantly impressed with them—just the grit that it must take and determination, and what they have to go through to be able to stay here. It's amazing. They're just always impressing me."

Acknowledging international students' concerns about the constraints they face, staff are starting to shift in terms of how they serve this population. Elaine, a fellow OISA employee, summarized this sentiment when she said,

> You can tell talking with me—I'm like, "Holistic student experience!" I'm a product of that. But for me it's also been helpful to check some of my expectations. A lot of students come to the US to set themselves up well professionally for post studies. They want to be set up well for graduate school or getting a job. I'm classic—I just want to do it all. I want to do the more student affairs type programming. But I feel like, even recently, I've shifted to wanting to do more career employment programming… From the research I've read, as well as talking with students, that tends to be a high priority for a lot of our students.

OISA staff understand that the current suite of international student services may not fully meet the needs of what international students who want to stay in the US need in practice. But after

these individuals graduate, there is little university staff can do for them (other than being required to help transition and maintain their legal status if they work on OPT). As such, while international students are still enrolled at UC Shoreview, staff behavior is adaptive, consisting oftentimes of informal strategies based on what their clientele require. For example, while staff and administrators who work with international students (who want to stay in the US) offer a host of workshops and online employment resources to equip their students with information, these resources are not enough on their own. As such, staff priorities include equipping international students with a host of soft skills they deem necessary for success in the US. They do not view international students simply as "empty vessels to be filled with information and theories" (Fasheh 1984:319). Instead, they want students to feel in command of their experiences because they won't have the scaffolding of university resources and programming to support them fully after graduation. While this is the case for all students regardless of country of birth, international students feel this more acutely since they do not traditionally have established networks and family connections to buttress them after graduating.

To help them with this transition, staff and administrators emphasize the importance of international students learning to advocate for their particular needs. Linda, an OISA employee who oversees student programming, said she spends time during her advising sessions "encouraging [international] students to take part in opportunities that will increase their leadership skills. We want to see international students… really be able to advocate for their needs further down the line." According to James, they want "students to take on more responsibilities and build out a success plan for themselves." The hope is that students are prepared in their understanding of self, which will prepare them, according to James, for the "challenges that come with adapting to another country, and normalizing that so that they don't

also alienate themselves thinking they are going through that alone." Shannon, an OISA employee tasked with international student legal affairs, framed these qualities as particularly "American" traits. She discussed how she wants international students to have finished their time at UC Shoreview having learned the tools to succeed past their program and how to navigate the job market. As a result,

> They know to be proactive and advocate for themselves and ask questions. They don't sit back and wait for things to happen. It's like gaining that confidence or that skill to really make things happen for themselves… I think to develop that skill set is so culturally different from what they're used to back home—not that things are handed to them back home, but it's just culturally very different. You have to hustle here.

Staff equated this need to hustle with success in the US. One way they have accomplished this is by directly providing leadership opportunities for international students; they invite them to participate in an advisory council specific to international students where OISA staff hear firsthand about issues facing international students. Staff also share other leadership outlets on campus, such as running for student government. By outlining opportunities for them to be engaged on campus, OISA staff hope students will view these experiences as opportunities to advocate for themselves and their needs while practicing skills that will be required of them in a professional capacity in the US after graduation.

While noting the personal importance of leadership skills, staff also believed in the value of creating community and the benefits this provides after graduation. Staff members often stressed the seemingly elusive importance of international students achieving a sense of belonging at UC Shoreview. Liliana, one of OISA's newest employees, said that "feeling a sense of belonging can make or break an experience… [it's] something every student wants to experience, especially coming as an outsider." Alice, who works on equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives on campus, made it clear that achieving a sense of belonging does not mean

students should conform to the majority. Instead, she hopes that the campus environment is a space where students feel a "sense of connectedness, a sense of care." But, she also believes that "it's important to make sure that we prepare our [international students] for the increasingly diverse world that they will inherit, that they will inhabit. It's both of those things." Tina helps to coordinate student organization activities on UC Shoreview's campus and talked about the importance of international students finding "spaces of integration" on campus. When I followed up and asked how these practices can shape international students' experiences after graduation, she said, "I don't know how it couldn't. I would imagine it would be very difficult to come to campus and feel like you're an outsider, and then go into life after college and try to find your way. I think developing those relationships and the friendships—nesting and finding your place in the world is a similar process, but without some of the programming and the scaffolding that we have the opportunity to do in higher ed." Paula acknowledged that this is important even for international students who prioritize employment in the US after graduation. While having a job may be top of mind, "you also want life outside of work to be somewhat positive and somewhat meaningful. Being able to feel like you can interact confidently in different, quote unquote, 'American culture' and contexts helps with that." Students can reflect on what kind of community is important to them and where to find it while they practice engaging in environments that may be unfamiliar to them. These steps, according to staff, will pay dividends when having to create networks after graduation.

Staff also believe that an international student's undergraduate experience is more complete when it includes cross-cultural interactions. There was a foundational understanding that creating community within one's ethnoracial network provides international students with a sense of home. But, according to staff, international students gain the benefit of understanding a

broader worldview when they step outside their ethnoracial circles. And the best time to do so is in a higher education environment where such opportunities are plentiful. Paula believed that these interactions are beneficial in "creating intercultural competence—a curiosity, a suspending judgment—to help us as we navigate different environments." Lawrence, a senior-level campus administrator, stressed that while international students are undergrads, "they're on an equal basis as other students, and they should take this opportunity at heart." When asked what this looks like in practice, he suggested that international students should work as resident advisors in dormitories as a way of getting to know students who share a different ethnoracial background. Elizabeth, a university administrator overseeing academic student affairs, said that if students only surround themselves with people who look like them, then she doesn't know if they're "going to be very successful in the world. Your workplace isn't going to look like that… meeting other people, you learn about yourself, you learn about what you want, you put yourself out there… you can't build resiliency if you never challenge yourself." Staff and administrators felt it was their responsibility as first-line contacts with international students to share with them information and strategies that would help them succeed both in higher education and in their lives in the US after graduation.

Whether it be encouraging students to expand their own soft skills (in the form of leadership), or teaching them the importance of creating expansive and diverse networks, these qualities will be those they need to exercise in the "real world" in the US after graduation. This advice, however, is not part of any manual or formal guidelines. Since staff are aware of the federal constraints international students face after graduation, they hoped that imparting such advice to students would equip them with tools to help ease their transition and promote students' ability to steer what they can of their postbaccalaureate experience.

However, even with these strategies, staff try to educate students on the realities of how difficult it may be to land an opportunity after graduation. While website information may outline in a neat and tidy infographic about how to secure employment, the reality may not be so simple. Staff believe it is their responsibility as frontline workers to be honest and straightforward during advising sessions with students. For a career services perspective, I spoke with Stacy, a career advisor at UC Shoreview who focuses exclusively on advising international students. She sees it as her responsibility to take a measured approach to share the reality of how challenging it is for international students to get sponsorship from an employer in the US and the need to think broadly about postbaccalaureate options. She expanded,

> I tried to help students come up with plan A, plan B. Obviously, their plan A is they're going to get a job in the US once they graduate. But I wanted them to understand, the reality is not many international students do. It takes a lot of time, preparation, and also a fair amount of luck, and the right "being in the right place at the right time" situation to get those jobs in the US. It was really about helping them say, "If this is the direction you want to go, here are the resources. But also think about if that doesn't work out. What's going to help you get to your next step? What are your options? How can you get there?" It was just trying to give them a realistic sense of, "Yes, that's a nice dream. You may get there. You may not get there. But let's make sure that you have something to fall back on. There's going to be a good job in your home country, or a good opportunity."

Street-level bureaucrats are clued in not only to what their constituents need, but also to the broader policy context in which they are operating. They act as the bridge between policy (in this case, federal policy) and on-the-ground services. First and foremost, as mentioned earlier, they feel their fundamental responsibility is to ensure international students' legal status is not compromised. This translates into their postbaccalaureate transition and educating them on the academic and professional pathways they can pursue. But Stacy's story demonstrates how there is another layer to these interactions. As these staff have years of experience, and have seen countless student experiences, they are tuned in to the nuances and accompanying difficulties

that may introduce challenges for international students. Lawrence has advised dozens of international students, and his quote demonstrates how difficult the situation is for international students and how he translates this into his advising.

> I would give them the information where to look for [jobs], but giving them the realistic estimation of the level of success they will be getting in applying for those opportunities—not very high. They have to work very, very hard to be able to get to something. On the other hand, if they come here with the expectation that they would like to stay, they have to do more planning ahead. They cannot wait for the end to look for [jobs.] Just be real. Immigration is really hard for international students these days, not just the from the visa perspective, but even for jobs. There's so many regulations and labor laws against giving jobs to non-domestic applicants.

While this may not be the information international students want to hear, staff and administrators believe this approach better serves their populations because they can help them come up with multiple avenues of success. As street-level bureaucrats possess a lot of discretion in their individual interactions with their populations, they feel responsible for conveying information that provides a more measured perspective. They want to support students' postbaccalaureate goals in the US, if that is their ultimate aim, but they want students to be prepared for any accompanying challenges that may arise and to plan multiple postbaccalaureate options.

Rachel, a writing advisor who specializes in supporting marginalized students, demonstrated the power of knowledge and how she tries to convey that message when advising international students in particular. "I am a big believer in 'if you're aware, then you can situate yourself into this.' There was an international student who wanted to get into journalism. Journalism can be especially exploitive." Rachel had worked in journalism before advising and told the student,

> Here's my experience. I want you to know that this is possible… If you want to continue, we can talk about how you can negotiate your salary, or how you can

> talk about boundaries, or how you can talk about your terms, your job description, things like that… All of college is like, "Just get a job." Not all jobs are created equal. Different fields require different boundaries. How do you protect yourself? That's the thing—if you know, then you can protect yourself… I think that's what international students lack—where would they get that knowledge? Where would they have that knowledge? Who could they go to?

Staff and administrators feel it is their responsibility to convey this information to international students who may lack the cultural capital necessary to know the nuances of different jobs and professional opportunities in the US. International students sometimes feel a great deal of pressure from family members to gain access to a university in the US and secure a successful job in the US afterwards (Pimpa 2005; Singaravelu, White, and Bringaze 2005), but family members may not be clued in to the realities of what this process looks like in practice. Staff and administrators are acutely aware of this fact and feel subsequently liable to fill this gap in knowledge and ensure their international students are moving forward in their academic and professional careers with both accurate information and plans that consider potential policy roadblocks.

Conclusion

There is a unique balance that university staff street-level bureaucrats are trying to strike when aiding their international student clientele. On the one hand, they feel financial pressure from the administration to comprehensively support this population because of the high tuition dollars they bring to the university. This deservingness frame permeates their efforts as they find themselves buying into the neoliberal rationale of admitting and enrolling international students at UC Shoreview. This framing is further applied when aiding international students with legal matters. It is of utmost importance for staff to ensure proper processing of international students'

visa documents so as to maintain the flow of international students. In this case, staff exercise discretion by working creatively to help students manage their status in order to avoid any one student having their legal status jeopardized.

Conversely, university staff feel the federal constraint international students are under as they try to find a job within a regimented 60-day clock after graduation. As there is no official handbook on how to help students along this process (other than helping them transition and maintain their legal status on OPT), staff utilize informal strategies to educate international students on what they may encounter in the professional world and how they can utilize their time at UC Shoreview to set themselves up for success. This means encouraging them to take part in leadership opportunities so they know how to advocate for themselves. It also takes the form of engaging in cross-cultural experiences so they are better prepared to succeed in diverse work environments. This information transfer also comes with a warning—staff feel duty bound to share the realities of how challenging it may be to land an employment offer in the US as an international student and the need to temper expectations and prioritize creating multiple pathways of success. And as will be discussed in the next chapter, staff who work with undocumented students similarly employ strategies of helping students creatively and strategically map out their postbaccalaureate prospects.

CHAPTER 5: IMMIGRANT BACKGROUND, PRIVACY CONSTRAINTS, AND GENEROUS DISCRETION: THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACED BY UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT RESOURCE OFFICE STAFF

Abstract: For an administrative perspective on undocumented students, the prevailing scholarship focuses on how university officials create a welcoming and safe atmosphere, and how they help undocumented students navigate unfamiliar higher education terrain. While this focus on the dynamics and process is important, applying a street-level bureaucrat framing helps us to advance our knowledge of the complex work of higher education officials who serve undocumented students. In this chapter, I contribute to the street-level bureaucrat scholarship in three ways. First, I demonstrate how the boundary between client and bureaucrat is not always entirely clear. In the case of UC Shoreview, the bureaucrats who serve undocumented students bring with them a strong immigrant- and community-oriented background that motivates their work and creates a blurred boundary between client and provider. Secondly, like the international student staff members, I document the dual constraints faced by UC Shoreview staff. Street level bureaucrats typically know or have a roster of their clientele, which is not the case at UC Shoreview. Due to institutional privacy constraints, staff face extra obstacles when trying to serve an "undocumented" undocumented population. In addition, because of a general campus misunderstanding on how to help undocumented students, Undocumented Student Resource Office (USRO) staff feel an additional institutional constraint to provide a complete suite of services for undocumented students that they may not be receiving elsewhere on campus. Building on this last point, my final contribution illustrates the generous degree of discretion staff possess when assisting undocumented students. Because of the federal constraint

undocumented students are under in terms of not being able to work legally in most sectors, USRO staff exercise significant discretion in thinking outside the box to provide creative support for undocumented students' higher education and postbaccalaureate journeys. This chapter provides a nuanced perspective into the challenges and corresponding opportunities street-level bureaucrats have when engaging with marginalized populations.

Rise and Proliferation of Undocumented Student Support Services

In Chapter 3, I outlined how undocumented college students experience elevated levels of fear and distrust, much of which stems from not knowing which staff members to trust when disclosing their lack of legal status. I also detailed—through an application of the nested context of reception framework—the importance of safe spaces as integral to undocumented students' sense of belonging, academic success, and sense of activism. The literature review for this chapter, however, focuses more on the process of universities developing undocumented-friendly processes and programs.

When it comes to matters relating to undocumented students, universities have historically been either unaware of their unique challenges or reticent to develop programming for this specific population. For instance, Ryscavage and Canaris (2013) interviewed faculty and staff at Jesuit colleges and found paradoxical statistics. While more than 75% of administrators, faculty, and staff agreed that admitting and supporting undocumented students fits within their mission, 40% said there were no processes or outreach programs specific to undocumented students. Similarly, in their nationwide study of financial aid administrators, admissions officers, and registrars, Burkhardt et al. (2012) found that more than a quarter of respondents were

unaware if their institution had any particular practices in place regarding admission and support for undocumented students. In addition, more than half of staff disclosed that their institution did not offer undocumented student-specific training or procedures to help process financial aid and admissions requests from undocumented students. There is a general lack of accountability when it comes to knowing who is responsible for undocumented student matters. For example, the Department of Education released a resource guide to help universities develop programming for undocumented students (DOE 2015). Despite the level of detail in the recommendations, the guide itself is remarkably short on specifics about which campus leaders should champion organizational programming.

Why is support specific to undocumented students so crucial? To put it simply, undocumented students experience outsized challenges in college compared to their US-born peers. Because of their lack of legal status, they oftentimes have accompanying financial hardships, challenges balancing school and work, and are perpetually concerned about the consequences of their lack of legal status for themselves and their families (Gonzales 2016). Add to this a complicated web of campus bureaucracy that comes with its own host of challenges. Undocumented students may not know who they can trust regarding their undocumented status (Stebleton and Aleixo 2015), may feel pressured by staff members to disclose their status (Reed et al. 2022), and could be subject to a series of microaggressions from staff members (Nienhusser, Vega, and Saavedra Carquin 2016) or outright racism (Contreras 2009), making them feel further isolated. These factors can make college an overwhelming and daunting time for students.

However, when undocumented students *are* properly supported in higher education, the benefits can make a significant difference in their experiences as students. Staff members hold

access to social capital that is essential to successfully navigating educational institutions for historically marginalized populations (Museus and Neville 2012). In fact, studies show that having supportive and sensitive staff who are knowledgeable about institutional practices can counter the negative and discriminatory messaging undocumented students receive (Chen, Budianto, and Wong 2010; Contreras 2009; Pérez et al. 2010; Pérez and Rodríguez 2011). Supportive staff members can help students feel like they belong and can persist and succeed (Gildersleeve and Vigil 2015). Moreover, dedicated support on campus can also foster a sheltered feeling that is disassociated from immigration enforcement (Enriquez and Millán 2019). In 184 interviews with undocumented students attending the University of California, Enriquez et al. (2019) show how supportive university policies are just as important as state and federal efforts to facilitate the integration of undocumented students. In their words, universities "can intervene to improve educational experiences and opportunities" (679) in a way that mediates the feeling of illegality experienced by undocumented students.

In practice, support for undocumented students has become more formalized in recent years, stemming from the mobilization of undocumented students (Cisneros and Valdivia 2020). As of 2018, there were over 50 dedicated centers on college campuses across the US that addressed the unique needs of undocumented students (Nienhusser 2018b). While some centers are standalone offices, others are merged within multicultural or international student centers (usually at campuses with smaller populations of undocumented students). These centers provide services such as assisting undocumented students with college enrollment, providing legal support for students and their families, advocating for and delivering workshops about issues facing undocumented students, and supporting undocumented students' wellbeing through academic and mental health counseling. The hope is that these centers not only help

undocumented students overcome academic and personal challenges, but also help to facilitate broader campus inclusion (Sanchez and So 2015).

While there are tremendous benefits to having a dedicated campus resource center for undocumented students, there are also drawbacks for staff members. Because there are generally few staff members housed at these centers as compared to the number of students they serve, employees often report feeling isolated, unsupported, and overworked (Southern 2016). These frustrating sentiments make sense; undocumented student office staff members are enveloped in a complex higher education bureaucracy that often does not understand undocumented student needs, and staff frequently have to adjust to changing policy landscapes at the federal level that impacts their student work (Nienhusser 2018a). Despite these challenges, staff members who work with undocumented students can make an indelible impact on students' lives, both while in college and after graduation. As my findings will show, the institutional overreliance on undocumented student staff members and federal constraints on undocumented student employment pathways means that staff are given freedom to think creatively when assisting students, while also trying to navigate an environment with heightened privacy concerns.

Blurred Client-Service Provider Boundaries Drives USRO Efforts

Lipsky (1980) describes the dynamic of client and street-level bureaucrat relations in terms of a power relationship, whereby clients need to consent and accept the legitimacy of the street-level bureaucrats' position. Clients comply because of the superior position of the workers and the workers' control over desired benefits. This inherently unequal relationship enables the street-level bureaucrats to justify certain behaviors, such as rationing resources and prioritizing

quantity over quality of services. Embedded in this description is an assumption of a binary and clear-cut boundary between client and street-level bureaucrat. It is assumed that because of the power differential, the two groups do not share any uniting characteristics or background. This is not the case among the street-level bureaucrats who provide services to undocumented students at UC Shoreview. The staff members I spoke to had deep and personal connections to the undocumented student population, with several individuals speaking from their own personal experience being currently or formerly undocumented themselves. The binary, in this case, is broken down and it is this immigrant (and undocumented, specifically) connection that motivates the work of UC Shoreview staff.

I asked each staff member to tell me about their background and how they came to work in undocumented student affairs. Isabel, a staff member at the USRO, prefaced her origin story with "This is gonna be a long one." She painted an elaborate portrait of her upbringing, beginning with how she and her mother journeyed together to California from Panama, eventually settling in Utah. She spoke about the challenges she experienced in high school when she was told by a college counselor that she was not eligible to attend college because she was undocumented. At her mother's insistence, she persisted and attended a local university where she developed a passion for undocumented student advocacy. Working with student affairs professionals, she created the first undocumented student resource center at her university. Galvanized by her success at creating such a pivotal resource in an inhospitable state, she jumped at the opportunity to go back to California where she could create similar opportunities for students, albeit in a more hospitable policy climate. Her ability to achieve seemingly impossible goals in a conservative state, combined with her own personal story of gaining access to higher education as an undocumented student, created a kinship between herself and the undocumented

students she serves. When she took on her role at the university, it was not a new dynamic she was stepping into where she saw herself as a bureaucrat helping unfamiliar clientele; it was a continuation of her story of assisting undocumented students.

While Isabel drew upon her former undocumented student programming experience to create related services at UC Shoreview, Julian sought to develop curated programming for undocumented students precisely because that is what he did *not* have as an undocumented college student. He started developing scholarship programs and community events because he knows that he would have benefited from such opportunities. He said, "I know I needed it. I'm sure they need it. They still need it now. Let's make it happen." This personal connection motivated his efforts because he had intimate knowledge of what his clientele required. He did not see these undocumented students as clients. They were, in a way, younger versions of himself. While administrations may change, the challenges of being an undocumented student remain. As such, Julian was able to directly draw from his own personal experiences to develop programming that closely meets the needs of undocumented students.

Even if staff did not have a formal connection to being undocumented, they leveraged their own personal immigrant background or interest into helping undocumented students. Luiz, the staff attorney who assists undocumented students with legal matters, said that growing up near the border in Arizona exposed him to "border issues and injustices," which inspired him to pursue a career in immigration law. Like other staff, he viewed his professional work as an extension of his personal background. While his work as a staff attorney was more "formal" in nature than some of the other USRO staff members, he still felt innately motivated by his upbringing, which defined his approach to helping students. Even though there was an official attorney-client dynamic, he spoke about how he attempted to develop relationships with each

student and learn about their individual backgrounds and how that might translate into a legal pathway for them. By doing so, he was able to get creative in his approach and described nontraditional pathways towards legalization that he was able to obtain for a significant number of undocumented students (explained in more detail below).

The staff-student dynamic was blurred further still because of the influence and connection to local immigrant communities. Instead of viewing the students as just clients within the university context, they were seen as part of the broader undocumented community. In this sense, staff saw their work in higher education as an application of what the undocumented community has been able to achieve at the local level. Why is this important? By viewing the undocumented student as a community member, they were seen as battling a shared struggle of how to survive life as an undocumented individual in the US. Staff looked to community members for inspiration and advice and shared lessons learned to their student populations. Community, in this sense, refers to two populations. The first is the local community around UC Shoreview. Community members' physical proximity to UC Shoreview meant they could advise on the local context and teach undocumented students how to navigate physical spaces near campus to avoid immigration enforcement detection. Isabel spoke about how she relied on the advice of community members when advising undocumented students on how to navigate a nearby internal Customs and Border Protection checkpoint.

> They're rarely open. That's what we tell [the students]—they're rarely open… one of the things that ICE cannot do is they cannot open up a border checkpoint and cause more traffic. Normally they don't open it up during rush hour, and moments that there's a bunch of people already on the freeway, because they can't cause more traffic… So we just try to normalize and share the tips that [community members] have created for themselves to navigate these spaces, and trying to let them know, "You're not the first individual to come to UC Shoreview who's undocumented. There's many of us. There's many undocumented folks here. These are the tips and tricks that they have found to navigate this space safely."

The community connection dismantles the formal client-street-level bureaucrat binary. Even though the staff members are part of the university system, they do not see themselves as holding power over the students. Instead, they act as an informational intermediary between community members and the students. In fact, they feel they can best serve their student populations by relying on the support of those who have tried and true lessons for how to navigate public spaces where they may encounter heightened levels of enforcement.

As community members were subject matter experts on local immigration dynamics, UC Shoreview staff also worked to create partnerships with the local community to help advance campus opportunities for students. As will be discussed later, staff who work directly with undocumented students are often isolated from the rest of campus bureaucracy because of a general misunderstanding on how to effectively engage those without legal status. As such, staff rely on on-the-ground information from local nonprofits on how to work with this specific clientele. Whether it be how to create professionalization programs that are legal within the higher education bureaucracy, or offering community-based referrals for employment support, staff described this community partnership as a strong motivator for their efforts. This motivation drove their work, so that they saw it less as a formal service offering to a student population, and more of an extension of community work.

The second form of community comes in the form of the UC network of undocumented student centers, which share tips and best practices with each other. Isabel explained that the respective centers meet one to two times per month, and "We will ask each other questions and share certain situations that we've gone through. If someone else has gone through it before with a student, they'll be like, 'I took this method. Try it out. See if your institution would be willing to do this,' or, 'Ask this person for help. That's who helped me last time.'" This mimetic

isomorphism creates a shared bond among UC employees and acts as a motivator for UC Shoreview staff. By seeing successful examples at other campuses, they feel further empowered in their efforts to create opportunities for undocumented students at UC Shoreview. While they still operate within institutional constraints (expanded further in the next section), this feeling of collaborating within the higher education undocumented community enables them to think creatively within their own local context. Whether UC Shoreview staff are connecting their work to the local community, or to the broader network of UC employees working with undocumented students, this networked component makes the staff-student connection feel less like a power relationship. Instead, staff see themselves as an extension of community members who seek to help undocumented immigrants, of which they are often members of themselves.

Privacy Concerns as Institutional Constraint

As discussed earlier, the staff at UC Shoreview have an intimate understanding of their undocumented student clientele's experiences based on their own personal backgrounds. But understanding the student experience is not enough. To develop customized programming, account for budgeting, and figure out needs for a physical space, these street-level bureaucrats also need to know *who* these individuals are and how many students qualify for their services.[22] In other street-level bureaucrat scenarios, individuals will have a list of their clientele. For

[22] It should be noted that that there are particular challenges to gaining access to information related to undocumented students for fear of having their status linked to their identity in formal documented settings. This could pose a risk to them if Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) ever gained access to the list and used it as part of deportation proceedings. However, there are two reasons why this concern is, at least slightly, alleviated in a higher education context. First, the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits the release of student information to government agencies without a judicial warrant, subpoena, or court order, unless authorized by a student. Second, educational settings are considered a protected location, like hospitals and churches, whereby ICE is deterred (albeit not prohibited) from conducting enforcement actions.

example, teachers will have a class roster, public health workers will have vaccination records, and social workers will have case files. Knowing who their clientele is enables street-level bureaucrats to better serve their constituents. The USRO's inability to get a full list of undocumented students at UC Shoreview serves as a significant hindrance for the staff and speaks to a broader campus climate of staff not effectively engaging and supporting their undocumented students.

Several years ago, USRO staff worked out a partnership with the university's financial aid and registrar's office to receive a list of AB 540 students[23] and those who applied for the California DREAM Act.[24] With this list in hand, USRO staff were able to conduct targeted outreach to incoming and existing undocumented students to encourage them to attend their events and apply for various scholarships and funds that were available to only these students. That first year, USRO staff said they went from having 50 students at their events to seeing 300 students the following year. Unfortunately, because of newly instituted university privacy policies, the financial aid and the registrar's office no longer supply the USRO with this list. Julian said,

> Now that we don't have the list, we've gone back to—nowhere near 50, because we had relationships with students that we've kept—but we've seen that drop. Getting that answer from your colleagues—"We can't share that information,"—it was like, "Oh my gosh—please! We need that. This could be impactful for students. This could make a major difference in their college experience." But the answer is, "This is just the policy."

[23] AB 540 is a California law passed in 2001 that states that undocumented students who meet certain requirements (e.g., attending three years of high school in California and graduating from a California high school) can be exempted from paying nonresident tuition at California public colleges and universities.
[24] The California DREAM Act allowed undocumented students who qualify for a nonresident exemption under AB 540 to receive certain types of financial aid, such as private scholarships, state administered financial aid, California College Promise Grant, and Cal Grants.

Without the information, USRO staff now can only reach out to incoming undocumented students through the financial aid office, who sends emails to everybody on the California DREAM Act list. Their previous methods were more impactful and allowed them to start building individualized connections and relationships with students. Now, USRO staff have to rely on the financial aid office middleman and also setting up booths at orientation events, a method unlikely to work since undocumented individuals (especially new students) are not likely to approach a booth for undocumented student services and "out" themselves in a new environment. They try to piece together different outreach methods through social media and word-of-mouth from current student participants, but they are still not able to engage with the same number of students as in the past.

The ripple effects of this privacy policy means that the USRO ends up being a reactive unit for undocumented students. Since the USRO does not know how many undocumented students start UC Shoreview in any given year, they are unable to effectively plan programming, predict how many students will attend any given event, or even do targeted outreach. Julian summarized it as follows,

> We essentially become a go to unit if the student needs support. But we can't proactively reach out to students. We can't proactively plan our programming, and know we are going to use this amount of money for this number of students, because we don't know how many students we'll have.

Isabel told me about how this privacy policy shift impacted the number of applicants the USRO received for their professional mentorship program they offer for undocumented students.

> We had no freshmen apply. Not one single freshman applied. I feel like we would have had a lot more freshmen apply if we would have been able to do that one-on-one outreach. I think freshmen already are very scared and hesitant of the entire college experience. So, getting a mass email from Financial Aid about the USRO just doesn't feel right to them. They're dealing with so much. I just feel like receiving a personalized email would have been a lot more impactful for them.

Undocumented college students are contending with a lot of changes. They are entering an environment where they may not know who to trust regarding their lack of legal status and are unsure of what spaces will be accepting of them (Stebleton and Aleixo 2015). The fact that the USRO is unable to engage these vulnerable students from the onset of their college experience makes a challenging period unnecessarily difficult. These street-level bureaucrats may have the best of intentions when it comes to programming for their students, but not being able to directly reach out to these students when they arrive at UC Shoreview significantly dampens their ability to foster community and create comprehensive relationships with undocumented students.

Undue Burden on the USRO as an Additional Institutional Constraint

Street-level bureaucrats encounter many challenges when providing services to their clients. They may be overwhelmed by high caseloads, constrained by limited resources, and stymied by bureaucratic rules, among other challenges. Despite these difficulties, there is typically at least a clear understanding of their baseline responsibilities towards their clientele. There are systems and rules in place that, theoretically, apply to all clientele. In the case of undocumented students in higher education, however, their lack of legal status functions as a metaphorical red flag to staff members. When they encounter students that they suspect or know do not have legal status, they are unaware of what resources apply to these students (e.g., financial aid, career services) and, as such, students are consistently funneled to the USRO for support. The constant handoff to the USRO, while theoretically a positive approach, has two drawbacks. First, non-USRO staff do not become educated on how to support this population if

they consistently pass off the responsibility. And secondly, it creates an undue burden on USRO staff to be the only reliable resource for undocumented students on campus.

In their survey research, Enriquez et al. (2019) find that most campus staff members outside of undocumented student centers are not able to accurately answer questions about undocumented student status or about how to complete a university procedure as an undocumented student. This is in the event that undocumented students even share their status with a staff member. What happens when this information is not immediately available or shared? The UC Shoreview staff I spoke to expressed a common desire to support undocumented students, but as Elizabeth, who oversees an academic advising unit, said, "You can't just ask someone if they're undocumented. How do you ask someone?" Unlike other student identities that may be more visible, staff rely on hints either from the student (e.g., if a student says they were denied financial aid), or data inferred from student records, that help them figure out if a student may be undocumented. Claire, a staff member overseeing several student affairs units, said,

> We need to enter every encounter with humility, with all our EDI training, to be aware of that so we're listening as closely as we can. We're taking our cues from the student. Sometimes it takes me multiple times meeting with a student for them to disclose something—as it should be. They don't know me, necessarily, and I have a very scary title.

There is an understanding that language and phrasing matter. Staff are aware that one inappropriate engagement can turn off a student from positively engaging with the university bureaucracy. As such, they choose their words wisely. Veronica, who oversees writing support at the university, spoke from her own personal background, having attended university as an undocumented student. She shared her angst when asked by university officials for her social

security number at the financial aid office. She draws from this experience when training her student support staff to be purposeful in how they interact with undocumented students.

> In the undocumented culture, it is so hard to ask for help. To muster that courage up, and for it to be shut down by, "We don't have any appointments," or, "What do you need help with?" or, "You don't get that? That's so easy!" For me, it's being very intentional about the professional development that we provide our student [staff] so they can properly support students with any legal status.

If staff become aware of a students' lack of legal status and foster a positive relationship with an undocumented student, this does not, unfortunately, translate into providing undocumented-specific support. Every staff member I spoke to outside of the USRO shared how, upon learning a student was undocumented, they would direct that person to seek out support from the USRO. Maria, a longtime staff member at UC Shoreview focusing on student affairs, said that her approach to directing a student to the USRO is done "sensitively… giving the student the information and encouraging them… but again, trying to do it with as little paper trail—like, none." Elizabeth was blunt in saying that she does not know enough about undocumented student matters. "We refer them to the USRO. That's it." There's a prevailing fear that they will incorrectly advise or share inaccurate information that could potentially impede a student's progress.

To be clear, undocumented students *should* be directed to and informed about the USRO. The unit exists on campus for a reason. Undocumented students require very specific support and USRO staff members are extensively trained to deal with undocumented-specific matters. The issue with having the USRO be a one-stop-shop is twofold. First, it makes the students feel like the only way they can get answers or proper support is vis-à-vis the USRO and that the rest of the campus community is not a place where they can be accurately supported or advised. In this sense, USRO staff see undocumented student support on UC Shoreview's campus as

inconsistent. They have some reliable partners, but overall, Julian said, “It’s a very random pool of people who want to work with us, and say, ‘Hey, I want to support you.’ Sometimes it’s one college. Sometimes it’s a resource center. It really varies.” This patchworking could have the effect of further isolating undocumented students who already have a difficult time finding safe, reliable, and trustworthy support on college campuses (Huber and Malagon 2006).

Second, this reliance on the USRO places undue burden on USRO staff to be more than just a support unit for undocumented students. Their website states that they offer “personal guidance, immigration legal services, community building, partnerships, and referrals.” Reading this, an undocumented student would expect to receive legal support, social programming, and one-on-one advising. In practice, the unit also offers career services, mental health support, financial guidance, and academic advising, among other functions. They feel the need to offer this level of support because they do not see customized guidance for undocumented students on campus. Julian expressed his wish to “do all the things that other units are not doing. But at the same time, it is their responsibility.” He proceeded to share several examples of programming the university’s career services center could develop to better suit the needs of undocumented students. At the USRO, he doesn’t “want to develop that program to do that, or have the money to do that. We have those units that can do it. It’s just a matter of *them* growing that component.” USRO staff wish for there to be better campus-wide attention paid to the unique needs of undocumented students, and for programming and support to reflect that.

While USRO staff is proud of their accomplishments in fostering an engaging and safe atmosphere for undocumented students, their hope is that students would feel comfortable engaging as their complete selves in other departments and units on campus. When I followed up with Julian and asked what he considered to be a successful college experience for

undocumented students, he did not focus on academics, safety, sense of belonging, or any of the notions of college success the literature has found for undocumented students. He said it would be an experience "where the students felt comfortable, and felt supported by units other than us." He expanded on his frustration,

> I've heard it many times from our students—they tell us, "I don't think I would have stayed at UC Shoreview if it wasn't for you. You were the ones who made a difference in my college experience." I'm like, "But why was it only us? Why did your department not come through for you? Why did Career Services not come through for you? Why did Financial Aid not come through for you? Why was it only us?" In a way, it makes me it makes me feel good about the work that I do. It tells me I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm successful at what I'm doing. But looking at it in a different lens, I'm thinking, "What's going on with the rest of the campus?"

The title of street-level bureaucrat, as applied in the current scholarship, refers to roles such as teacher, social worker, and clerk. With the job title, there are set fundamental roles and responsibilities. As an academic advisor, you provide students with academic support. As a career services professional, you guide students on their professional trajectory. When encountering a student without legal status, the relationship becomes more complicated. What I find with undocumented students is that there is wariness and caution among non-USRO staff to customize their support given their undocumented status. Instead, staff unfailingly send undocumented students to the USRO. Most non-USRO staff I interviewed at UC Shoreview feel that matters related to undocumented students are too complex, loaded, and potentially consequential. While it is completely appropriate and necessary to make undocumented students aware of this resource, it makes non-USRO staff unaware of how to effectively support this population and places excessive responsibility on USRO staff to be the most comprehensive resource for undocumented students on campus. The impacts to the student, unfortunately, are such that they are perpetually cautious about engaging as their complete selves at UC Shoreview.

Overcoming Federal Constraints: Creativity is the Name of the Game

As outlined in the previous two sections, USRO staff face institutional hurdles because of privacy policies and a general overreliance on USRO staff to be a one-stop-shop for all international students. However, because the clientele they serve lack legal status and are subsequently constrained in the legal employment opportunities they can pursue after graduation, staff feel this federal constraint when trying to properly advise students. Because of this, staff are forced to think creatively, boldly, and outside the box when helping their undocumented student clientele with both college and preparations for life after UC Shoreview.

As mentioned earlier, USRO staff feel motivated in their efforts because they see it as an extension of the work that local community members have been doing for decades to assist undocumented immigrants. In the university context, they feel further empowered because the reason their center even exists is because of motivated undocumented students who advocated for their right to have dedicated support on college campuses (Cisneros and Valdivia 2020). Building on this foundation, they feel emboldened to take risks and try new methods to best support their students. Isabel said, “A lot of the times we’re just having to share ideas that might sound a little crazy or different, and being willing to be open to it, and hearing it, and trying it. Be willing to take risks... it takes a lot of fearless people to continue doing this work.” What does this look like in practice? For example, the USRO pitched the idea to HR departments across campus to initiate an inclusive fellowship that would be available to undocumented students. Even though employment options for undocumented students after graduating are limited, the USRO still believed it to be important for undocumented students to develop professional

training in undergrad. The idea of offering a type of employment in exchange for payment, however, raised eyebrows across campus. Isabel expanded,

> We got a lot of hesitation, because people don't want to get in trouble. So, it's a constant. As undocumented people, we're always trying to find loopholes and ways around policy. As an institution, we have to follow policy. So having to try to bring that into higher ed is sometimes tricky, because we do have certain policies that we need to follow… It's always just constantly trying to jump and go through red tape, because other community members have done it. It's like, "Let's just try this." But then at the end of the day, we do have certain policies that we need to follow. We do get stumped sometimes—but hey, at least we tried.

Even though they were unsure if their efforts would pan out, USRO staff continued to try and think outside the box when assisting undocumented students.

This style of advising translated to postbaccalaureate support as well. When helping students to brainstorm, their approach very much centered the student and their needs and interests. Valerie said she would begin discussions with students that did not focus on their legal status. Instead, she would ask about their major, interests, and hobbies.

> Nowadays, a lot of people end up being their own boss. They start their small business and stuff like that. There are other undocumented people that I follow on Instagram that have their own food stand, or they make t-shirts, or some service that they provide. So, it's a lot of talking to students and seeing what their interests are and what they're good at. I'm just like throwing out ideas—just whatever I can think of off the top of my head that they can maybe be interested or look into.

These options may not seem palatable for high-achieving students who are specializing in particular fields of study and are being trained for professional careers. But as discussed in Chapter 3, undocumented students appreciated when USRO staff were frank with them about their postbaccalaureate opportunities and helped them to iterate on different options. In other cases, the USRO hosts workshops on working in the US as an entrepreneur since they are not allowed to be formally employed. Isabel told me what she would say to a student during an advising session, "When it comes to post graduation, we let them know, 'If you don't have work

authorization, maybe the traditional route of applying to a job won't be your route as of right now. Let's talk about different routes, perhaps creating your own company or being an independent contractor.'" She added how she would also share with students that this method of employment is something those in the undocumented community have been doing for years. Normalizing this process helps the student to feel like they are not alone, and do have options available to them.

In addition to sharing information about entrepreneurship, USRO staff also conveyed information about alternative employment pathways that undocumented students could investigate. Yolanda, a career services professional, told me she connects undocumented students with employers who could sponsor them. I asked her to clarify what this looks like in practice, since employers are not legally allowed to hire undocumented immigrants. She told me about how she has successfully encouraged employers in the past to create stipend programs that enable them to hire undocumented college students without hiring them as an official employee, or offering them consulting roles via a 1099 agreement. As established in Chapter 3, undocumented students rely heavily on USRO support, and it is examples like this that demonstrate the depth of knowledge staff possess in helping undocumented students with their postbaccalaureate transition. Outside of formal career services, USRO staff exercise significant discretion in their assistance and support for undocumented students. These alternative pathways could be a tremendous resource for students, and it is because staff think creatively that students learn about these options as potential professional pathways after graduation.

USRO staff feel responsible to present undocumented students with all potential pathways which, according to Julian, could include "in some cases, [going] to a different country and work[ing] in a different country." This particular suggestion, listed after Julian provided

other alternative employment pathways, struck me as quite significant. Here they are, higher education professionals, advising undocumented students on what they could do after graduation, and they offer an option that would preclude these "Americans in waiting" (Motomura 2012) from re-entering the United States again for at least 10 years.[25] Often, this is the only country these students consider home, and suggesting to them that they uproot their lives from what they know is not an option to be taken lightly. This recommendation suggests, however, that these higher education officials strongly desire for these students to be successful after college and want undocumented students to know all options so they can make their own reasonable decision.[26] There is no official guidance for how to advise undocumented college students on postbaccalaureate pathways.[27] As such, staff work to not only be creative in the advice they offer, but to make sure that it is comprehensive and inclusive of all potential options.

Postbaccalaureate opportunities for undocumented students do not only include professional pathways, but also potential pathways towards legalization. As the staff attorney, Luiz seeks to identify potential legal pathways for undocumented students (and their immediate families) to regularize their status. He shared with me a shocking statistic. If you include DACA, he estimated that 75% of the undocumented students he sees are eligible for some form of legalization. "The Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) status has been a lifesaver. Unfortunately, so

[25] According to US Citizenship and Immigration Service, individuals who are here without documentation are accruing unlawful presence. If an individual's period of unlawful presence exceeds one year and then they leave the US, then they are barred from reentering for at least ten years. In the case of undocumented students, they will, in most cases, have been brought to the US as children and have accrued well beyond one year of unlawful presence.
[26] When offering these alternative recommendations to students, staff struggle because they strongly want to be able to offer more concrete and stable options for students. Julian expressed his despondency at not being able to do more for students, "I feel limited and sometimes defeated. I'm a problem fixer. I like fixing problems. This is something that I can't fix. I have run out of options. All I can do is to say, 'This is how I can mitigate the impact of this limitation that we can't overcome today.'"
[27] FWD.us (2024), a nonprofit dedicated to immigration reform, has written a report titled "Empowering Undocumented Students: A Guide to Career Services." This report details the challenges undocumented students face in the job market process, how students can be eligible for employment in certain careers in certain states, entrepreneurship pathways, the need to inform undocumented students of what to do if they face employment harassment, and how students can develop professional skills in undergrad.

many people didn't grow up with their dads. That's the big one there. If their dad wasn't around, then they're eligible." In other words, if an undocumented student was abandoned by their parent, then they are eligible for SIJ status that can then be converted into permanent residency. Even though it requires drawing on previous trauma, it is through Luiz's creative work and rapport building with undocumented students that opens opportunities to work legally and participate more fully in society.

USRO staff adhere to university guidelines by offering students professional workshops, one-on-one advising, and socialization opportunities, among other student affairs functions. But unlike other student affairs units, the mechanisms by which they do so and the advice they offer differ because of the student population they serve. Instead of offering standard employment opportunities, they need to propose and pitch an alternative fellowship option that is legally permissible for undocumented students. Instead of hosting a traditional career fair, they suggest alternative routes of entrepreneurship and contract work. In other words, creativity serves as the bedrock of their work because of the federal legal status constraint faced by their student population. The variable of legal status forces student affairs staff to behave outside the typical functions of street-level bureaucrats.

Conclusion

As an institution, universities have historically been either unwilling or reticent to focus on the specific needs of undocumented students. Even when universities have been willing, there existed a lacuna of proper procedures and policies to assist this vulnerable population. With the rise of undocumented student resource centers around the country, universities have started to

commit dedicated staff and resources that have the potential to make undocumented students feel welcome and like they belong on college campuses. Based on the literature about street-level bureaucrats, we would expect to see a clear delineation between staff and the students they serve, staff's comprehensive knowledge of their clientele, and some degree of discretion in how they carry out their responsibilities.

At UC Shoreview, I heard from both USRO and non-USRO staff members about how undocumented student affairs works in practice. First, I found that there is a blurry boundary between USRO staff and the students they serve. Instead of seeing undocumented students as clientele, USRO staff felt a strong kinship with the students, for they identified as part of the same immigrant, if not undocumented, community. It is their background that motivates their work. In combination with local community efforts, this notion of being part of a shared struggle gives them momentum to provide comprehensive support for students. Hindering their progress, however, are institutional constraints that create privacy roadblocks and impede on their work. These street-level bureaucrats, in other words, experience challenges in completing their fundamental responsibilities (e.g., budgeting, planning events) because of the university's blanket privacy policy. This focus on privacy extends beyond policy, as non-USRO staff do not know how to properly assist this population, and they over-refer undocumented students to the USRO. While not a bad practice in theory, this signals to students that the only place they are accepted and fully seen is at the USRO and not campus more generally. In addition, USRO staff deal with the federal constraint of their clientele's lack of legal status, which forces them to creatively and resourcefully provide undocumented students with alternative employment pathways that could lead to success.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In their 459-page account of the state of immigrant integration in the United States, Waters and Gerstein Pineau (2015) write that "the experience of integration is, in reality, an inherently local one… the current research-based understanding of the local context of immigrant reception is regrettably incomplete and often superficial" (208). In this dissertation, I sought to fill this gulf and provide a comprehensive analysis of both how immigrant students experience one particular local context—higher education—as a stepping stone into a host society and how universities support their immigrant students in this process. This bottom-up and top-down perspective on immigrant integration within one research study lends itself to a more fulsome analysis, with both theoretical and practical implications.

For the first half of the dissertation, I focused on illustrating the university as a venue for immigrant integration and the corresponding tactics employed by international students and undocumented students. By looking at the university as a stepping stone, I moved beyond scholarship that focuses on how these two student groups incorporate *into* the university by instead showcasing how immigrant students' integration *during* higher education is done with a lens of incorporation, specifically into the labor market, *after* college. In Chapter 2, I drew upon theories of strategic assimilation and one-up assimilation to illustrate the tactics employed by international students as they attempt to demonstrate their deservingness for visa sponsorship to US employers. Through calculated academic choices, strategic incorporation of cultural behaviors, and deliberate networking with faculty and student organizations, international students use a multifaceted approach to try and integrate as quickly as possible and enhance their prospects of remaining in the US after graduation. In Chapter 3, I voiced the experiences of undocumented/DACA students who assign both material and symbolic importance to their

incorporation on campus and the value it holds after graduation. Symbolically, they look to US-born students for inspiration for what success and different opportunities look like after graduation. They also see their mere presence in higher education as an important marker of success that acts as a motivator for their friends and community members. Materially, these students feel like the staff members at the Undocumented Student Resource Office (USRO) have their best interests at heart, in that they help them to outline all available employment pathways. Because of this guidance, they feel empowered to take control of their postbaccalaureate journey. Whether it is proving worthiness of sponsorship to employers, or finding ways to simply break into the labor market after graduation, immigrant students in higher education demonstrate how they capitalize on the opportunities and resources in higher education to advance their goals. As a venue, universities are a prime site for immigrant students to foster and enhance appropriate networks and seek out support from seasoned student affairs experts to help them on their postbaccalaureate pathways.

As an actor, universities encounter unique institutional and federal constraints when it comes to supporting their immigrant students but find ways to persevere and creatively assist students as they consider their employment options after graduation. In Chapter 4, I showed how staff who work with international students feel the neoliberal institutional constraint of admitting and enrolling international students, which means they concentrate much of their efforts on ensuring their international students' legal statuses are not jeopardized. Federally, staff feel limited in the support they can provide because of the strict 60-day visa clock for international students to get a job after graduation. As such, their support is manifested in more behavioral and adaptive strategies that they believe will help the students after graduation. Shifting gears in Chapter 5 to staff who work with undocumented students, I showed a different set of institutional

and federal constraints that these staff members encounter. Institutionally, staff bear the brunt of university privacy policies that inhibit their outreach efforts and also feel the strain of UC Shoreview staff members overly relying on USRO staff to be a complete campus resource for undocumented students. And federally, staff are limited in the help they can offer because of undocumented students' lack of legal status and subsequent lack of access to traditional employment opportunities. Despite this, staff work with their student clientele to develop creative and alternative employment pathways that they can pursue after graduation.

Theoretical Advances

As detailed in Chapter 1, immigration scholars have theorized the role of bureaucratic actors and institutions in shaping the process of immigrant incorporation in a host society. Because of the wide range of institutions immigrants encounter on both a regular and irregular basis, these institutions can markedly impact immigrants' perceptions of belonging, access to opportunities, and formation of networks, among other critical functions. In this dissertation, I focus my efforts on exploring higher education as one particular institution, which is unique from other types of bureaucratic institutions immigrants may encounter. How is it distinct? Attending a university as an undergraduate student is a complete and immersive experience as universities prepare students for the "knowledge society," which "is built around the university—its abstracted and universalized understandings and its all-important degree certifications" (Frank and Meyer 2007:307). Compare that to an immigrant's encounter with a different bureaucratic institution, such as a social welfare agency, whereby a singular (or at most, several) encounter may not fundamentally shift the course of an immigrants' trajectory in a host society. Immigrant students in universities, on the other hand, exist in this microcosm of society for several years.

Their time in a university is a formative and foundational journey as they develop new skills and networks and have opportunities to explore their personal and professional interests. While this journey is not necessarily unique to immigrant students, the implications for these immigrant students carry more weight than for average US-born students. The weight is increased by the time pressure of the 60-day clock to attain an employment offer (for international students) and the distinct challenge of lacking legal status and being excluded from traditional employment arrangements (for undocumented students).

In the immersive environment of the university, it is possible to see several facets of integration occurring at the same time. This veers from Gordon's (1964) analysis, in which he describes how different conditions of assimilation need to be met sequentially before proceeding to the next step. In this dissertation, I demonstrated co-occurring instances, building on Gordon's categorization and use of "assimilation" language (even though I interpret assimilation through a contemporary integration lens) of cultural assimilation, structural assimilation, identificational assimilation, and civic assimilation. As such, I show how the structure of universities is a fruitful environment in which the various elements of integration can not only occur simultaneously, but also in a consolidated fashion.

I ultimately find that the university serves its purpose as both a venue *and* actor for immigrant integration. As a venue, the university is a prime site in which to examine the agency that international students and undocumented students possess and how immigrants take distinct strategies to further their aims in a host society (albeit within the context of institutions). The notion of "strategic assimilation" thus far has been primarily examined with respect to individuals adopting cultural- and identity-based strategies to gain acceptance within certain segments of mainstream society. Karam (2020) originally introduced the concept in her analysis

of Black parents teaching their children about similarities with the white middle class so that their children are prepared for the "real world." In the case of higher education and immigrant students, I illustrate that postbaccalaureate goals inform the strategic ways in which these students assert agency during their college experiences. For example, both groups developed strategic networks, although for different aims. International students looked to US-born students for information on "American" cultural practices they could adopt to illustrate to future employers that they could seamlessly integrate into a workplace. For undocumented students, networks with US-born students exposed the students to what success and opportunity could look like. With their eye towards the labor market, these students also made calculated choices about the best possible resources to consult to try and increase their odds of landing employment in the US after graduation. Undocumented students' strategy involved a heavy reliance on institutional support, while international students looked to faculty members and student organizations for support in navigating the postbaccalaureate journey. Irrespective of immigration status, these explicit actions demonstrate how immigrants make deliberate efforts and choices within their integration process. Although Alba and Nee (2003) argue that assimilation occurs incrementally and is what happens when immigrants just live their lives in the host society, I show here how the process, at least for certain immigrant groups, is consolidated, intentional, and goal-oriented.

As actors, university employees serve an integral function as street-level bureaucrats for their immigrant student clientele. In this work, I contribute to the street-level bureaucrat scholarship by illustrating the dual level of constraints (institutional and federal) faced by staff who work with immigrant students. Despite these barriers, I also show how the staff who work with these students (via the USRO and Office of International Student Affairs [OISA]) are

uniquely in tune with the needs of their students and, despite the challenges they face, attempt to support them on their postbaccalaureate journeys. This does not mean that universities automatically see themselves as a gateway; in fact, the findings show how both OISA and USRO staff feel they sometimes need to deliver harsh news to students about their postbaccalaureate prospects. But it is because they want these students to succeed that they share all opportunities and work with the student to help identify a path forward. Unlike other works of street-level bureaucrats in meso-level institutions where there is a more formal and distanced dynamic between staff and client, these staff members feel committed to seeing their students succeed.

Finally, my work adds to the sociology of education scholarship, which has grown in recent years to demonstrate the impact of college beyond academics. Scholars have assessed several latent functions of the university experience, including teaching students to create a sociopolitical consciousness (Castillo-Montoya 2013), how to socialize (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), and how to act politically (Binder and Wood 2013), among other functions. My work attributes another role to universities—immigrant integration—by showing the mechanisms by which this occurs from both the students' and staff's perspectives.

Recommendations

The findings in Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate how the street-level bureaucrats who work with international students and undocumented students persevere in the face of administrative challenges. However, it need not be so challenging. There are fairly straightforward solutions to be implemented in the higher education environment that would create a more welcoming campus environment and aid the postbaccalaureate journeys of international students and undocumented students. For international students, the process of change requires a culture shift

in the narrative surrounding international students and customized programming. The culture in higher education is such that international students are framed as helping universities to financially meet their institutional goals (Ford and Cate 2020). Instead of focusing on the dollar signs, universities need to instead listen to the needs and concerns of students (as outlined in Chapter 2), namely the extreme pressure they are under to obtain a job in the US after graduating (assuming they want to stay). Universities can adjust programming with their international students' needs in mind. For example, since international students need to find an employer who is willing to offer an Optional Practical Training (OPT) opportunity, university staff can either explicitly bring in employers who are willing to hire international students or create an international student-specific career fair. And while UC Shoreview currently has one singular career person who services all international students, a more effective arrangement would be a dedicated team of individuals whose staff size is commensurate with the number of international students. A larger team would allow staff to provide more customized solutions for students. While these are just two examples, university administration can learn from the findings in this dissertation about the unique pressures facing this student population and adjust programming accordingly.

With respect to undocumented students, UC Shoreview needs to reexamine its privacy policies. Overly protective privacy agendas can have unintentional negative impacts on undocumented students, as the USRO is prohibited from directly contacting undocumented students. Second, UC Shoreview currently has a training available online for staff about how to work with undocumented students, but this training is not mandatory. If university administration required this training of all staff members, not only would campus members be more informed of policies related to this student population, but they would also be able to appropriately assist

students (in addition to encouraging them to connect to the USRO). And finally, university administration outside of the USRO must normalize alternative employment pathways for undocumented students and provide more employment opportunities for them. As of May 22, 2024, the California legislature is considering AB 2586, which would exempt California's public colleges and universities from legal penalties if they hire undocumented students. This would be a major inroad into making undocumented students feel more included in campus life and providing them with necessary professional training. Outside of comprehensive immigration reform, there are clear steps that universities can take to facilitate undocumented student inclusion on campus and their postbaccalaureate transition.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Higher education reporters and politicians frequently debate whether the US will continue to remain a top destination for international students to study and settle. With travel restrictions in place during the pandemic, international student enrollments plummeted, but have since returned to levels higher than before the pandemic (Knox 2023). In addition, other top hosting countries have begun instituting more restrictive policies regarding international students. In both Canada and Australia, the governments have announced visa caps on international student enrollments (Brown 2024; Fischer 2024). Canada announced in December 2023 that it was increasing the amount of money international students would have to prove they had in their bank accounts to get visas. Independent research organizations show how, in response to these policy shifts, international students now prefer the US over other top hosting

countries (IDP Connect 2024). To the extent that the US continues to be a top receiving country, universities will continue to have to pay attention to international student needs and concerns.

For undocumented students, the future is murkier and more difficult to predict. President Trump rescinded Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2017. Current DACA recipients can continue to renew their applications, but no new applications are being accepted. This means that as of 2025, no incoming undocumented college students will have DACA. The 2024 presidential election will likely be a distinct determining factor in the policy climate and action from the federal government for this group of students. Because of the federal tug of war when it comes to undocumented students, I believe much of the responsibility for enrolling and assisting undocumented students will take place at the local and state levels—particularly through the passage of in-state tuition policies. And as argued in this dissertation, universities are uniquely positioned to support this population through comprehensive and creative service provisions.

As mentioned in the introduction, international students and undocumented students are the only two immigrant groups in higher education that have dedicated offices that focus on their unique needs. This soon may change as universities are increasingly paying attention to refugee students and declaring their intentions to assist them with resettlement. Founded in 2015, the Every Campus a Refuge (ECAR) higher education initiative has made it its mission to "make every US college and university a resettlement campus to host refugees on campus grounds and support their successful integration" (ECAR 2024). Since its inception, 19 campuses across the US have signed onto the initiative, with an additional 25 campuses in the process of becoming part of ECAR. While the number of campuses is still very limited compared to the almost 4,000 degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the US, the measure is an important symbol of the

instrumental role universities can and do play for immigrant integration in a host society. At the state level, Utah passed a law allowing for in-state tuition for refugees and asylum seekers, once again demonstrating a shift towards creating access to higher education for this distinct group (Damond 2023). At present, seven percent of refugees worldwide are enrolled in higher education (up from one percent in 2019), with the United Nations setting a global enrollment target of 15 percent by 2030 (Byun 2023). Given this trend, I encourage future researchers to take the lessons learned from this dissertation and examine the unique intersection of university support and refugee resettlement in a host society.

APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Parental Support, International Schools, and Language Preparation as a Form of Pre-Integration

In my sample of 38 international students, 19 students had some form of international experience or exposure before coming to the US. Being exposed to what life might be like in a host country is not uncommon among immigrants who arrive to the US. In fact, immigrants have been shown to partake in media and cultural aspects of the host society, which helps them advance in their linguistic capacities (Dalisay 2012). In the case of international students, this exposure either took the form of parental-led early contact with the English language through American media and/or was inculcated in them through formal school curricula in international schools. Whatever the medium, these international students were more readily equipped with English language capabilities, cultural competencies, and general knowledge of the US and its educational system. This enabled students to bypass many of the traditional challenges faced by immigrants and helped them to work more resolutely towards their goal of staying in the US after graduation. Moreover, they drew fewer boundaries between themselves and domestic students and more readily immersed themselves in campus life, similar to the privileged poor discussed by Jack (2019).

Before even entering the educational system, students' parents intentionally exposed them to English language and media from an early age. Miguel, a senior from Mexico, talked about how he not only was surrounded by American media growing up, but his favorite movies and

songs were from the US. Starting from the age of 3, Miguel's parents were deliberate about the media he consumed.

> In order to get us to learn English really quickly and really naturally, my parents only let us watch movies in English. We could only watch movies in Spanish on Saturdays, for example. They were just trying to get us to adopt this as fast as possible… I definitely had a very clear idea, from both the media I consumed, and from my own exposure to it whenever we would go on trips there—I was very well aware of what American culture was like, what kinds of things they do, what kind of things they like. I was very, very aware of it.

When I asked Joyce how her high school experience shaped her decision about whether to go abroad, she told me that this plan originated earlier through her mother's efforts when Joyce was three or four years old. She explained further, "I think she was the main force of shaping me, preparing me for a university life abroad. I think she's been doing that all along the way. I think that's more important than high school or anything." When I asked what her mother did to lay this foundation, Joyce said, "Most importantly, she's been very focused on the training of my English skills. She sent me to a kindergarten that also taught English to young kids. It was just simple words like "apple," "pencil," but there was this environment of English language that was always around our household." These experiences broadened students' exposures from an impressionable age, setting an early foundation for them to feel comfortable in a future English-speaking environment.

The lengths students will go to in order to work on their English skills before coming to the US was most apparent in Emily's story. She was born in Japan, but Emily's father's job prompted them to relocate to Southern California for three years while Emily was in elementary school. Despite being only six years old when she arrived, this period left an indelible impression on Emily. She said, "The impression of the United States—it has been always good to me, because I remember traveling to many national parks with my family. I lived in San Diego for

two years and one year in New Jersey. I remember going to SeaWorld and even Legoland." After returning to Japan, Emily wanted to continue her English language training, and her parents paid for her to do weekly English conversation lessons through middle school. Upon entering high school, Emily's goals for her education did not resonate with her peers' desire to overexert themselves for the college entrance exam. Her high school experience was so overwhelming that she switched to an online high school and graduated early. Because she finished before her peers, Emily convinced her parents that she should move to Canada on her own to continue her English language studies. When asked why she chose Canada, she explained, "the reason I chose Canada for my language school is because of my parents. I told my parents that I wanted to come to the States for the language school. But my parents were like, 'The tuition and the living expenses are really high in the States. If you want to study abroad, choose Canada, because it's more affordable in terms of the expenses.' So that's why I chose Canada." The six months she spent studying in Canada solidified her desire to pursue her college degree in an English-speaking country. Her story came full circle as she set her sights on pursuing a degree where she spent such a formative period of her life: California.

Beyond parental influences, students were better prepared for their education abroad by attending international schools. Angelo, who was born in the Philippines and raised in Singapore, said he did not have a desire to return to either country because he felt like an outsider in both places. When I asked if he felt a similar outsider status in the US, he said he felt more accepted and better able to connect with the people here. Confused, I pushed slightly on how he could feel more connected with the people, having not grown up or lived before in the US.

> I guess, because I had an international education. And so when I was growing up, I went to a lot of international schools and a lot of the students that went there were expats. So, like their parents, like a lot of them were from, from the US as well, who were, who were just staying in Asia for a while. So, they sent their kids

> to these schools. So, I guess interacting with these people kind of made it a lot easier for when I when I got here to, to connect with the people.

For Angelo, the international school experience lowered the barriers to connection with students once he arrived in the US for his studies. For other students, going to an international school inherently meant that one was going to apply to universities abroad. Youjin had completed her high school education in South Korea and said that everyone in her high school "applied either to the US, to Canada, or somewhere in Europe, or maybe Australia. I think since like most of my friends were applying to either the US or Europe, I just decided to do so as well." There was a readymade migration pathway for these students that, as we will see shortly, was set into place by both their educational systems and familial expectations.

By attending an international school, students were exposed to English-language materials and a US-college style of curriculum and classes to prepare them for their education abroad. Michael said his curriculum in China shared similarities with that of a US high school.

> So, for example, in our literature class we read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This is a very common US high school reading. We will do some readings of the Bible as well. The textbooks that we use are all from the US. We have US history and US civic classes as well. So, I happen to know something about Mayflowers and George Washington, all those stuffs.

Yuhan, also from China, told me that once he committed to the international track upon entering high school, he was able to select his own courses. Unlike the traditional track where the school plans your curriculum and you stay in the same classroom for every subject, the international track has you choose which courses you want to take and you move to different classrooms, all of which is intended to mimic what a higher education experience abroad would be like. To further prepare students, Yuhan said,

> We had foreign—American—people, which is foreign to China, as our teachers. We studied something like world history instead of the history textbook from like a Chinese education system. And we had English language—basically like

> English writing class. We had some interesting acting class that we can take as electives, and I actually took two. Our teacher was from Australia. But yeah, so he taught us how to critique and how to act—sort of.

Yuhan and Michael's stories elucidate several key facets about how international school preparation can act as a form of pre-integration. First, being taught by foreign educators enabled students to practice their English language skills with a native-born English speaker who could teach them cadence, affect, idioms, and various other aspects of language that would go beyond simply enhancing one's vocabulary. Having acting classes, in particular, is an especially striking mode of preparation, as students can quite literally practice how to "perform" in a foreign setting. Finally, students were exposed to subjects typically encountered by native-born American students, which would better prepare them for the varied perspectives and backgrounds they would encounter in a US college classroom.

Some students' families also hired private agencies who not only coached them through the application process, but also advised them on how to structure their high school experience to be more appealing to US college admissions counselors. Ted explained, "They're going to plan your entire, um, like, high school career. Like, for example, you wanna do clubs, you wanna do sports, you wanna get a good SAT, a good TOEFL score… They train people to do that so they are better candidates." These advisors get very specific in their support. As was the case with Joyce, they would "plan out the days that we should take different tasks and activities that we'd better get engaged in, to have something to look better on application materials." Private agencies, part of the migration industry, are a commonly used resource by international students (Baas 2019) in that they not only help students with the logistical steps needed to pursue their education abroad but provide students with the insider know-how required in order to have a successful higher education experience in a foreign country.

The pre-integration measures these students take differ from what you might typically see in the migration scholarship. It is not state-ordered, like the language or country knowledge tests required of new immigrants in the European Union (Böcker and Strik 2011; Groenendijk 2011), which ultimately serve exclusionary outcomes (Goodman 2011). Nor is it an official process, like the pre-integration classes for Turks in Germany, in which immigrants learn notions of morality, culture, and gender (Rottmann 2022). The actions taken by international students are meant to expose students to what they will encounter both in the educational system and in the US more generally. By being exposed to English language media and taking courses from native English speakers, students not only work on their language proficiency, but they also learn idioms and speech cadences. This shortens the gulf between themselves and members of the host country, giving students confidence to more comfortably participate in their courses and interactions with students and faculty.

Reason for Choosing the US? Family, Allure of US Higher Education, and Future Potential

International students who travel abroad for their education and eventual employment in the host country do not generally make such decisions in a vacuum. These students' decisions are embedded in broader cost-benefit considerations being made by the household. Potential migrants, according to the New Economics of Labor Migration theory, carry out interpersonal income comparisons with other people within their relevant social settings. The relevant decision-making unit is typically the household, and the decision to have a family member migrate can be understood primarily as a way to hedge against risk (Katz and Stark 1986). The New Economics of Labor Migration theory "sought to harmonize actor- and structure-orientated

approaches" (de Haas 2010:241). In this case, migration is a "calculated strategy" and not…an act of desperation or boundless optimism" (Stark and Bloom 1985:175). The decision to migrate extends beyond individual cost-benefit decisions but is also not entirely subsumed under the structural emphasis of historical-structural approaches.

For international students, the seed to migrate abroad for higher education was planted early on by their parents. Zola, an international student of Chinese ethnicity who was born in Mexico, said that "Honestly, I think my parents' plan, since I was born, was for me to come to the States… And, you know, they were like, 'Oh, it's nice here. You should probably come here to live here.' But I don't really know the story." It was a given that Zola would come to the US and follow her parents' advice and encouragement. Kozy's family, on the other hand, was influenced by others who had taken similar journeys. "One family sends over their kid and then my mom will be like, 'Where did you send your kid?' They get more information and they slowly start to shape that path. Even when I was really young, when I was 16 in high school, my mom would already start telling me, 'You need to go overseas and study.'" Parents were investing in their children's educations and future career potential.

The information that parents conveyed to their children was partly based on their own experiences in the home country's education system and labor market. Quan's parents believed that the US held better long-term opportunities for him. His parents told him that "in Vietnam it's more like a rat race, where you have to pretty much fight other people, push them out of the way, hoping that you get on top. But in America, everyone tries to help each other as a community, to push others forward." The other benefit cited by parents is that a US education better prepares you for securing a job, as opposed to education in the home country that primarily focuses on helping students excel at exams. Jason elaborated on this point, "my parents feel that [a

Singaporean education] doesn't prepare you for a job—it only prepares you to take exams. And they feel that the American system prepares you to get a job, at least comparatively speaking." Students did not necessarily have the foresight to understand the connection between degrees from certain countries and job prospects; therefore, they relied on their families' advice on what kind of degree would best set them up for future success.

How did parents learn this information without having studied in the US themselves? Often they relied on the wisdom of extended family members in the US. Maya, a 25-year-old alum from India, was drawn to the US system of education that allows individuals to explore different pathways and opportunities, which was distinct from the Indian system that requires one to have a specialization upon entry. When I asked her how she knew about this distinction between the US and Indian style of education, she said, "I have some extended uncles and aunts that have moved here. It's just what I grew up hearing as a kid in India—just kind of word of mouth." Relatedly, students would follow in the footsteps of older siblings who had pursued their degrees and careers in the US. Jack, originally from Greece, recounted his brother's experience. "My brother is five years older than me—he attended UCLA. And I think that was a big factor in me deciding the US as well. Sort of, like, follow what he did. He had a really great experience. So, I ended up actually only applying to schools in the United States." Lee saw the transformation her older sisters went through when they pursued their degrees in the US and wanted something similar.

> When I've had conversations with them about it, they always attribute a lot of their growth in their young adult phase to the whole experience of moving abroad and studying abroad and having to create something for yourself. Basically, the whole experience of having to create something of your own—create a community, or just shape a life outside of what you're used to.

This chain migration of immediate and extended family members played a significant role in the decision-making process of international students. When considering the next step in such a formative period of their lives, these students relied upon the advice and experience of family members who have travelled similar journeys. This provided them with information and confidence that pursuing a degree abroad would be a worthwhile investment in their future.

While family members planted and nurtured the seed that influenced students' decision making, it was not the only factor students considered when deciding to move abroad. For many students, especially those who came from Asian countries, there is a uniquely high degree of stress associated with simply getting *into* college in the home country. Oftentimes one's status and prestige were determined based on the university they were admitted to. As such, education was less about growth and learning new information and more about impossibly high standards for success that made students feel like they were part of a rat race. Jianyu, who had overcome a difficult struggle with a brain tumor when he was in middle school, took the equivalent of the US General Educational Development (GED) test in Korea instead of finishing high school. After studying for the Korean version of the SAT for an entire year, he was not able to gain admission into his desired university. Upon reflection, he thought back to a six-week experience he had in the US when he was in elementary school. This positive memory catapulted him to study English and apply for community college in the US. He elaborated, "As I've been studying in the United States, I'm learning… I'm learning something to really learn something. But in Korea, um, I'm learning to get into college. So, they make it more difficult to sort out who's the best and who's the worst… And students are struggling." Students equated the challenges of getting into university with how their experiences would be once they were actually in college, and this deterred them from pursuing a degree in their home country. As mentioned earlier, many of these

students had been exposed to a Western style of education before applying for colleges outside of their home countries. It not only served as a form of pre-integration, but ignited a desire in them to seek an education where they had more freedom, opportunities to excel, and chances to discover what it is they want to pursue.

Students distinguished the potential freedom they would experience in the US higher education system as compared to other countries. For example, among students who were debating between universities in the US versus the United Kingdom, they would say they favor the US system because it gives you more time and opportunities to be undecided, and you are able to attempt multiple paths before committing to your major. Jack told me he was unclear of what academic direction he wanted to take and said he preferred the flexibility of the US system. Jason said he favored the US system over his home country of Singapore because in the US, "grades are based on an incremental. As long as you do the homework, you can show the understanding, you're good, you're great, it will reflect that." He contrasted this to the cutthroat system in Singapore, where your entire grade is based on an exam. By eliminating that singular pressure, students can immerse themselves more completely in their courses and focus on the materials—not just the final grade. This system was more enticing to students, and they favored this over both their home countries and other English-speaking countries.

Beyond the opportunities they get while in undergrad, students saw their decision to come to the US for their bachelor's degrees as the initial stepping stone to their careers and lives in the US. This long-term planning is examined more thoroughly in Chapter 2, but the theme arose early when students were deciding which country to go to for higher education. Laddu walked through this patterned thinking,

> I could grow much, much more than staying in India. Not to downplay Indian colleges—they are great, especially for academics… But I could also get research

> opportunities here. The headquarters of companies that people apply to later on—I could get direct access to them sooner in my life, and all those things.

For particular industries, such as computer science, students saw the US as the place where they would be at the cutting edge of work and research. For Virat, his interests were primarily in machine learning and artificial intelligence. He said, "I realized that the main research or 'ground zero' for this domain is still in the West. So, the US continues to be the leading country in terms of research or even companies that are set up." To excel in this field professionally, international students believed a degree from a US university would provide them the buttress they needed in order to work for companies that were most renowned in particular domains, which happened to be in the US.

Alongside company prestige were the corresponding high salaries that students hoped to achieve, especially after paying exceedingly high tuition fees as international students. Pravan had hoped to study in the UK, "but the thing that changed me, like, flipped me from the UK to the US, was earnings… because when you go into the UK, you go into a national healthcare system, versus where if you go into medicine here, you go into a private kind of practice kind of thing. And even if you do go into public, you still earn a lot more than you would in Europe." Pravan had done a great deal of research on industry salaries and examined job growth for medical professions using data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. His extensive research into his earnings potential demonstrates a common theme among international students: their decisions to come to the US were not haphazard. Their choices were calculated and informed. They considered the long-term career and employment implications of their educational choices.

Whether it be following in the footsteps or advice of family members, preferring the US style of education, or seeing their US degree as a means to a career in a desirable industry, international students' decisions to move to the US were multifaceted and deliberate. Students

compiled information from reliable sources to ensure they were making sound decisions. By including immediate and extended family members in the conversation, they could holistically weigh the costs and benefits of a move abroad. They reflected on the style of education that was most conducive to their growth and learning, preferring the American style of education that enables them to explore multiple paths. And finally, they thought beyond their four years in higher education to consider how their degree from an American university would open opportunities—professionally and socioeconomically—that they may not have had access to in their home countries. As I show in Chapter 2, this deliberate approach to moving to the US and pursuing a degree from an American university also translated into how they structured their time in higher education to be purposeful, intentional, and future-oriented.

Choosing a University

When choosing where to pursue their undergraduate education, the international students in this sample pointed to three main factors: university ranking, campus diversity, and proximity to family. Above all else, almost every student emphasized the importance of the university's ranking and recognizability. It was important for them, regardless of their journey after graduation, that their degree would be accepted worldwide. And beyond recognition, international students felt they needed to show they gained admission into an elite university based on worldwide rankings. In this case, admission to a university abroad is a success in and of itself (Cebolla-Boado, Hu, and Soysal 2018). This human capital perspective is common among international students who want to enhance their labor market and career positioning (Beine, Noël, and Ragot 2014). As Arya, a 24-year-old alum from Bangladesh, explained,

> I think one of the main things I was looking for, that definitely influenced me to make that decision—maybe, in hindsight, it's not how I would have done it entirely—but recognizability was a big thing. Because I'm coming from so far away, I wanted to be able to tell people, 'I'm going to UC Shoreview.' I wanted people to be able to recognize it, just because it feels like inherently something to brag about, I guess. So that's one thing that was actually pretty important to me.

Miguel had done a lot of research beyond official rankings. He dove into Reddit groups and found "People were talking really well about the school and saying that it was almost as hard—maybe this isn't a good thing—but it was almost as difficult as an Ivy League. So, I was just like, that means it's actually a really good school." Getting this verification from both official and unofficial sources gave students the confidence that moving abroad for their degree was a worthwhile investment.

A secondary motivation for students was the degree to which the campus was ethnoracially diverse and/or had a substantial presence of individuals hailing from their home country. Hearkening back to the scholarship on the importance of ethnic enclaves for new immigrants, international students felt that having a diverse student body meant there would also be other amenities in the area that cater to them, such as ethnic grocery stores and restaurants. Moreover, being amongst a group of coethnics helped international students to feel less homesick. As Ana from Brazil said, "I really enjoy that feeling of we're all from the same country, the same place, and we're experiencing this foreign country together." Even if you are not close friends with these individuals, their sheer presence helps to ease the mental load. Joyce expounded on this point, "It's just the possibility that we can be friends. Even if it's just a thought that they are there, and sometimes we still can help each other—I think that's better than knowing that you're on your own." Seeing these individuals on campus helped to ease the mental load of adjusting both to a new country and a new educational environment.

For students who valued a diverse student body, they cited the importance of novelty, especially if they were raised in an ethnically homogenous environment. Lee is ethnically Chinese but was raised in Singapore where Chinese people are the majority. He said, "All through middle school or high school, I really only knew fellow Chinese people. Those were my friends… You end up moving in the same social bubble very much throughout your life. I knew that I wanted to get out of that, and just see what else is out there, and meet different people." Nath said that by having a diverse student body, which he defined in geographical and ethnic terms, they will "know what you've been through in your life to get to this point." International students make great sacrifices to leave the comfort of their home countries and enter an unknown environment. There is an inherent bond that forms when meeting other individuals who know what it is like to be in unknown environments. As Chapter 2 shows, this rationale also applied to the decision-making process international students made when choosing who to befriend on campus, and for what purpose.

Finally, students also discussed the importance of being near immediate or extended family members when choosing which university to attend. This proximity, however, did not necessarily need to be close, or even within driving distance. There was an inherent comfort to knowing that they could reach family, even if family was a short flight away. Kozy picked to go to college in a different part of the state from where his extended family members live. He said that, for him, "it just gave me comfort that, if something happens, I would have at least a place to go to." Similar to the rationale of wanting to be near their coethnic community on campus, international students felt that it was important to have family nearby who could provide emotional support or simply a place to stay during holidays and school breaks. In other words,

these individuals could play the role of a proxy immediate family who could support them during a critical life period.

APPENDIX B: DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF UNDOCUMENTED/DACA STUDENTS

Parental influence

In my sample of ten undocumented/DACA students, every student spoke about the role their families played in the journey to get to college, the decisions they made while attending university, and their plans for after graduation. Undocumented students generally cite parental expectations and support as motivating their efforts (Shi et al. 2018), which colors the choices they make throughout the entire college application and decision process.

After learning about their family's journey to get to the US, undocumented/DACA students' relationship with education often becomes more nuanced, and many students feel motivated to excel academically. Jesus' parents sat him down when he was in eighth grade and confirmed his suspicions of being undocumented. His father shared how he crossed treacherously through the desert, and his mother talked about paying a coyote to be snuck in under a truck. His mother was only 15 when she came to the US, bringing Jesus who was already 2 years old. Jesus commiserated with his parents, who were doing their best to parent a young child when they were still children themselves. Once he learned this story, he said that a switch flipped in him. "I was very appreciative of all the things that they did. So, when they told me all that, I started focusing so hard on my GPA—I think I went from a one point something to a 4.0." He began to appreciate his ability to access education, an opportunity his parents never imagined possible for themselves.

Most parents supported their children's decision to go to college, but were admittedly reticent about how their lack of legal status would impact the experience. Maracuya applied to

several UCs and Cal States. She said that, because of her status, she wanted to stay in California. When I asked if this was her own reasoning, or if her family played a role, she said, "My family supported me 100% where I wanted to go." Maracuya's family began to get nervous, however, when she ultimately did decide to attend a university further from home, because they were concerned about the omnipresence of Customs and Border Protection agents that may be near the campus.

Distance played a role for Alexa's parents as well, but they did not stress concerns about immigration enforcement in the same way that Maracuya's family did. During the college application process, Alexa did not get into any of the UCs she applied to but did receive admission offers from all the Cal State programs. She was planning on going to a Cal State near her home and living on campus. Unfortunately, her parents were not proponents of this plan. "They're like, 'We don't want you leaving us. You're too young.'…My parents didn't want me to go. They were like, 'We're gonna pay rent for you to live away from us?' They really didn't want to do that." Upon the advice of a friend, she decided instead to go to a local community college and live at home before applying again for UCs and transferring. This time, she got into her desired UC, which was a two-hour drive from her parents' house. Because of her decision to live at home the first two years, her family supported her choice to go to a university that required her to live away from home.

While in college, the participants in this study could not disassociate their education from its impact on their family unit. At the very end of our interview, I asked Kim if there was anything that I had not asked about that she felt was pertinent to her experiences at UC Shoreview and the decisions she was making for the future.

> Maybe the only thing would be my family definitely played a lot more into my life than the way I answered, just because they're also undocumented. So a lot of my

> decisions and actions are really solely for them sometimes. It's really hard to separate myself from my family and have that own independent life, because I'm the child with the most potential. So even that whole thing about me wanting to do things for money is really for them. I have a whole separate savings account just for my parents, because they don't have Social Security. They don't have any retirement funds that they can have. I would say that's a really big aspect of my life.

I asked Kim to expand further on how her parents influenced her decisions while at UC Shoreview. Kim cited several examples—she chose to pursue a degree that would prepare her for a law career because she would then be able to better support her parents financially. She has since veered more into the corporate world. While she wanted to work for a nonprofit, she said this corporate decision was for her parents "so that when they talk about me to their friends they can brag. That's like social capital for them to be noticed and get more help in their community as well." Finally, she said she also chose not to pursue professional help for her mental illness because, she said "it was akin to someone coming out to their parents." Undocumented/DACA students felt a sense of obligation and commitment to their parents for their sacrifices, and this directly translated into the academic and professional choices they made.

Not all parents, however, were approving of their children's decision to attend university. Valerie's case was an outlier in my sample, but telling nevertheless. As the youngest of five children, Valerie was the first in her family to attend college. She talked about the conflicted attitude towards higher education between herself and her family. "I did get a lot of backlash from my family. And I still do, in a way. They still don't fully understand—which is okay, because they don't know. Nobody has a degree. For them, I don't think they understood what came after that, or if that was actually real. Basically, they just thought it was like a hobby, and I was wasting my time." Not only were her parents disapproving of her choice to go to college, but they would also institute punishments. "They used to raise my utility bills, or my expenses, so I would stop going to school." Valerie's parents did not see her degree as a pathway towards social

mobility. They were concerned with getting an income, and they saw her focus on education as a distraction, especially since none of her other siblings pursued higher education (with the exception of one sister who took a few community college courses). Despite these obstacles, she persevered and was committed to getting a degree.

Whether one's family was supportive or not, the role of parental influences was indelible in this sample of undocumented/DACA students. It manifested by academically and professionally motivating students, who wanted to use their degrees to give back to their parents. In the case of international students, parents were more involved in exposing their children to the English language and placing them in international schools to prepare them for higher education in the US. While both groups of students were motivated by their parents, the case of undocumented students was more of a response to their family's struggles, as opposed to international students who were following the trajectory put in place by their parents from what was generally a very young age.

Getting to UC Shoreview—Pre-college Support and Navigating Misinformation

Out of the ten undocumented/DACA students in this sample, eight participants were the first in their family to attend college. As such, for these students, college was not something even on their radar. Valerie was unknowingly placed in a college preparatory class while in high school, and "because I was placed in that class freshman year, I started learning about what college was. I didn't even know what it was, to be honest. I had no idea there was more after high school. I just thought you graduated, you started working, and that was it." This preparatory class not only redirected her into more academically rigorous courses, but also shifted her

attitudes towards wanting to hang out more with individuals who also had their sights set on college.

Three other students also shared with me their experiences receiving support from college preparatory programs that helped them to get on the road towards higher education. For example, Jesus participated in two types of preparatory programs. The first helped him with SAT preparation and homework. The second program was an immersive college stay at UC Shoreview for several weeks, which he found out about from one of the volunteers in the first program. He said that "being able to come here and get an exposure to what education is, and take a college class… was just a very wide opening experience." Jesus then set his sights on getting his degree at UC Shoreview, and he credits his ability to do so from the mentorship he received from both programs.

Getting to UC Shoreview, however, was not always a direct path. Out of the 10 students in this sample, seven went to community college first, albeit for different reasons. Some did not get into their desired school when they originally applied in high school. This was the case for Alexa, who did not get into any UCs when she first applied. Since she had her heart set on graduating from a UC, Alexa decided to go to community college first, which she said, "felt like a second chance from high school." It was during her time at community college that she began to speak more with counselors and explore various academic pathways. It was through conversations with counselors that Alexa learned about a prestigious national fellowship that she applied for and ended up receiving, which helped her to complete her degree at UC Shoreview without any debt. Others went to community college first for financial reasons. Rika did get into UC Shoreview when applying in high school, but "I just chose to go to community college. I think at that time, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I just kind of followed my group of

friends at that time, who also went to community college, and then transferred out two years later. I would say that my decision to go to UC Shoreview wasn't one that was made educationally, it was for financial reasons."

Finally, since most of my sample were also first-generation students, they often had to navigate misinformation from people who did not understand the implications of their lack of legal status. Ricardo was convinced growing up that he would not be able to attend college. "People around me would always be like, 'You can't go to college because you're undocumented. It's just not possible. You need to be born in the US or have papers.'" But upon talking to his high school counselors, he was correctly advised that he would be able to attend a California public university. He ultimately chose to go to community college first, and he later settled on UC Shoreview after he received a full scholarship. Valerie had gotten into UC Shoreview in high school but received misinformation about the cost of tuition. Her college counselor told her that she would be on the hook for paying out-of-state tuition, and because of that information, she decided not to attend and go to a community college instead. She later found out that the information she received was incorrect. "So, the second time, I was very familiar with the application for UC schools. I obviously had to write the essays and stuff like that. So, I felt more confident in my applications and the financial aid situation the second time around… The first time, I had no idea what I was doing."

Getting to UC Shoreview was challenging for students who had to navigate misinformation, but the challenges were tempered for those who received targeted support from college preparatory programs designed to help students navigate the complicated journey to higher education. International students, on the other hand, had more consistent and formalized support (generally engineered through their parents' involvement). Their attendance in

international schools and support from private agencies not only eased the logistical burdens of applying to and getting into a university abroad, but also helped expose them to a more Americanized style of education. Undocumented/DACA students did not need this cultural training because they had generally attended most, if not all, of their schooling in a K-12 setting in the US. That said, both groups greatly benefited from pre-college support that helped to ease their burden and transition to higher education.

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