Giants Dreams: Undocumented Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

Through the collection of the life stories, this research explores the college application process of two undocumented students in Nashville, Tennessee in order to examine ways in which teachers and college counselors can positively impact the educational attainment of this population. The paper first explores the complex financial and social incentives for increasing the educational attainment of undocumented students on both personal and public levels. It then introduces Laura and Amanda, two undocumented students who have successfully completed the college application process and enrolled in postsecondary institutions. The paper compares their experiences with other case studies found in the literature and finds implications for practitioners working with undocumented kids and concludes with a call to political action.

Purpose of Study

Undocumented immigrants are people who reside in the United States, but are not legally US citizens and are subject to deportation if their documentation status is revealed (Clark-Ibanez, Garcia-Alverdin, & Alva, 2012). An estimated 11.9 million undocumented immigrants live in the United States, 1.5 million of who are children. 765 thousand of those children arrived before the age of 16, many spending the majority of their lives as unauthorized residents of the United States. (Pew Hispanic Center; Gonzales, 2007). The vast majority of these students were born in Mexico or other Latin American countries, but about 13 percent derive from Asia (Passel, 2006).

The story of Latin American and specifically Mexican immigration to the United States is full of contradiction. On one hand, private companies and even at times the American government have induced Mexican immigration since the early 1900s because of cheaper costs and labor needs. (Porter and Rumbaut, 2006). On the other hand, Mexican immigrants have long been blamed for economic downturns that are far beyond their influence (Martinez-Calderon, 2009). For example, the United States has recently cracked down on unauthorized immigrants, more than doubling the rate of deportations for undocumented workers and deploying unmanned predator drone aircrafts over the Mexican borders (O’Toole, 2011; Booth, 2011). In a very real sense, Mexican immigrants have the unique distinction of being both attracted and repelled by the same force.

Despite the costs and dangers associated with crossing the border illegally, immigrants continue to enter America in order to pursue opportunity (Gildersleeve, Rumann, & Mondragon, 2010). This opportunity is sometimes economic; the rate of illegal immigration is highly correlated to the strength of the economy. (Gaynor, 2011) Other times, the opportunity is to reunite families, to flee wars, or simply to exist in a social system that provides a chance for advancement. (Gildersleeve et al. 2010). To foreign families, the perceived rewards of living in America are often greater than the risks associated with illegal immigration.

Although their being in the United States is a violation of federal immigration law, federal education law protects the rights of undocumented children. (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2008; *Plyler* v. *Doe*, 1982). Residency legally guarantees undocumented students access to the same free public schooling that all documented residents are eligible for (*Plyler* v. *Doe*, 1982). In fact, public primary and secondary schools are not permitted to inquire into the residency status of their students and are only allowed to ask for social security numbers in exceptional and extremely rare circumstances. (*Plyler* v. *Doe*, 1982). Thus, undocumented students are criminalized and protected, attracted and repelled.

Federal legal protections for the education of undocumented students end after twelfth grade (*Plyer* v. *Doe*, 1982). At this point, the educational affordances offered to documented and undocumented children become very different and this change has serious ramifications on financial college access. Depending on the state in which an undocumented student resides, she or he may be able to access in-state tuition at public universities. (Olivas, 2012) Access to resident fees can be the difference between relative affordability and the inability to pay for a college education. Typical out-of-state tuition is about 140 percent higher than resident fees (College Board, *Trends in College Pricing,* 2005). Kaushal (2008) found that offering in-state tuition to undocumented students significantly increased college enrollment, percentage of the undocumented population with some college degree, and percentage of the population with a college degree. Currently, fourteen states do allow undocumented students to establish residency within a state and access in-state financial aid. At the same time, seven other states explicitly restrict college access for undocumented students. Tennessee, the site of this project, does not offer financial aid to undocumented students, but also does not restrict college access. (Olivas, 2012) However, the state does permit its public universities to restrict access to undocumented students and the University of Tennessee, the largest public university in the state, has decided not to admit undocumented students (Trevizo, 2011).

While undocumented students are required to pay additional fees in order to attend school, they are also excluded from receiving most federal, state, and private financial aid. (Perez, 2010) This means that undocumented students are not able to safely submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, access the Stafford or Perkins loans, the Pell or Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, or any work-study programs. These programs are traditionally designed to increase college access for children from underserved communities (Chin & Juhn, 2007). While there are private scholarships that undocumented students can apply for, they are limited in number and are extremely competitive. (Perez, 2010)

Exacerbating this situation is the poverty that most undocumented families live in. 39 percent of undocumented children live below the federal poverty level and the average family income of an undocumented family is 40 percent lower than the income of a documented family (Passel, 2005). Thus, while documented students are able to depend on their family for at least some financial assistance, even asking their parents for assistance in paying for application fees is often a challenge for undocumented students (Huber and Malagon, 2007).

Each year, 65,000 undocumented students who have lived in the United for 5 or more years graduate from American high schools. (Gonzales, 2007) While the presence of unauthorized citizens is more intense in certain regions of the country, undocumented children attend schools in all types of communities across the United States (Gildersleeve, 2010). Thus, the educational experiences of undocumented students are an important issue to the field of urban education. By urban, this paper refers to urban-intensive, urban-characteristic, and urban-emerging schools (Milner, 2012). Chaudry, Fortuny, and Jagrowsky (2010) indicate that immigration is quickly occurring within large metropolitan areas in traditional immigrant destinations such as California and New York, but also in areas that typically do not house high non-native populations such as Tennessee and South Carolina. I have not encountered any data that tracks the migration patterns of undocumented immigrants by urban, rural, or suburban. However, it is very safe to say that large numbers of undocumented children do attend schools in urban areas and their issues are issues of urban education.

There are clear public benefits to be drawn from increasing college access for undocumented students. Undocumented students may be able to help reconcile a growing divide between the skills that employers look for and applicants are trained in. (Gonzales, 2007) This so-called “skills gap” has resulted in both higher unemployment for laborers and also more difficult hiring decisions for employers. Manyika, Lund, Auguste, and Ramaswamy (2012) of McKinsey Institute found that 30% of employers in the United States have had open positions for over six months and have not found a suitable candidate to fill them and suggests a movement towards global supply chains. Historically, immigration has been used to bridge the gap between supply and demand of the labor force and recent data indicate that immigrants could again be used as a bridge between the talent demand and the available supply. (Gonzales, 2007) Nores (2010) found that undocumented students are more likely to select a major in science, engineering, and math than are their documented peers and the Immigration Policy Center (2005) noted that a disproportionate amount of immigrants labor happens in growth fields. Using undocumented students to close the skills gap could not only keep jobs in America, but also increase public revenue through taxation (Gonzales, 2007) Furthermore, increased educational attainment has been correlated with lower crime rates, better physical and psychosocial health, as well as overall happier populations (Harlow, 2003; Ross & Wu, 1995; Florida, 2010).

A popular and often parroted argument against immigration and increasing college access to undocumented students is that immigrants will take resources that otherwise would have been allotted for other residents. For example, US Representative Elton Gallegy (2011) passionately explained in a newspaper editorial, “Every illegal immigrant who takes a job that would otherwise be filled by an American just adds to the number of Americans facing economic depression.” This argument hold that workers solely consume jobs and aid and do not produce additional resources as a result of their consumption. However, economists have long challenged the rigidity of labor markets when new immigrants are introduced because the new ideas and skills immigrants bring have the potential to create new opportunities for immigrants and natives alike. (Ottaviano and Peri, 2008) Research indicates that while the introduction of new immigrants does have a very small short-term negative on native workers with no high school degree, new immigrants actually increase average native wages over time. (Ottaviano and Peri, 2008) This means that while immigrant workers do take jobs, they also produce jobs and income over the long-term. Some have expressed worries that subsidizing college attendance for undocumented students will redirect a finite and limited aid away from authorized citizens. (Berger, 2007) However, subsequent studies of states that offer in-state tuition to undocumented students have found no adverse affect on native populations in terms of educational attainment. (Kaushal, 2008) While there are certainly other arguments against immigration and in-state tuition, discussion of these points of view is beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however, important to note that anti-immigrant sentiments are often cloaked in seemingly common sensical economic theory that is not supported by the literature and instead plays to public fears in times of economic anxiety (Martinez-Calderon, 2009).

The benefits of increasing college access to undocumented students are not only public, but also private. Many undocumented students claim that their desire to attend college stems from three motives: socio-economic mobility, the potential to earn a professional job, and an opportunity for legalization (Martinez-Calderon, 2009).

The causal relationship between educational attainment and earnings is well established in the literature (Card, 1999). Information from the latest US Census Bureau and Survey of Income and Program Participation (2011) indicates that higher levels of education attainment are strongly correlated with higher earnings, higher income, and more consistent employment. A person graduating with a Bachelor’s degree can expect to earn on average about twenty-five thousand more dollars per year than a high school graduate. (US Census, 2011) Projections of future economies indicate that the financial rewards for technical expertise earned in post-secondary institutions may even accelerate (Day and Newburger, 2002). However, it is unclear if and how a person’s documentation status will affect this financial relationship because high-skill and high-wage employers may require proof of citizenship and even more may be induced to institutionalize this practice by new state laws (Kaushal, 2008). Several states have enacted laws that punishments employers that knowingly hire undocumented citizens and their right to do so has been defended by the Supreme Court (*Chamber of Commerce* v. *Whiting*, 2011; PBS, 2011). Interestingly, in a comparison between the wages of documented and undocumented workers, Rivera-Batiz (1999) discovered that observed characteristics such as educational attainment explain under half of the pay differential between those who legally have citizenship and those who do not. It is therefore fair to predict that the causal relationship between educational attainment and income may not be as strong for unauthorized immigrants. However, wage variation does exist as a result of educational attainment for undocumented immigrants and therefore earning a post-secondary degree is likely to lead to higher income and career earnings (Rivera-Batiz, 1999). Therefore, there is an economic incentive for undocumented students to attain a diploma.

Earning a college degree is not only an economic boon for undocumented students, but is also a potential step towards legalization. Kaushal (2008) finds that employers are able to sponsor immigrants on temporary work visas or visas for optional work training. However, the limited number of these visas coupled with the expense of attaining them means that employers are only likely to apply for visas for highly skilled workers. Other students are hoping the National DREAM Act will open a path to legalization. The DREAM Act is a bill that would allow undocumented college graduates and/or military members with the ability to apply for permanent residency in the United States (Martinez-Calderon, 2009). Although the bill is not law, immigration activists are strongly pushing for its approval and many students hope that it will pass. Finally, Kaushal (2008) notes the relationship between college and interethnic marriages. If an undocumented student were to marry a legal citizen, both would be authorized American citizens. Even though these paths to citizenship are not guaranteed, it is likely that higher educational attainment increases the chances that a student will become a legal citizen.

While there are both public and private incentives to get undocumented kids college and graduated, college attendance numbers remain staggeringly low. One estimate is that only 5 to 10 percent of these students will be eligible to attend college and many fewer will graduate (Passel, 2003). Only 2 percent of Latinos/as that go to college are undocumented, but unauthorized immigrants account for around 30 percent of the foreign-born population (Clark-Ibanez et. al, 2012; Passel, 2005). Due the heightened difficulty of financing education for undocumented students, one can predict that their college graduation rates might be even lower.

Given that undocumented students are severely underrepresented in universities and colleges across the country, the focus must move from whether or not undocumented students should earn a post-secondary degree to how it can be done. Policy could promote increase college access through financial incentives such as in-state tuition for all state residents. I recognize the vast potential of policy changes to positively impact undocumented students and strongly encourage policymakers to consider such measures. However, the rest of this review and project will focus on how counselors and educators can more effectively work with undocumented students during the college application process. The question that I entered this assignment with was how I could help my undocumented students access college in the state of Tennessee.

Methods

Data were collected for this project through two half an hour, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow the researchers to deeply explore themes while still maintain flexibility in the interview. Before the interview, I informed both participants that I was investigating ways in which education professionals can assist undocumented students as they apply to college. One interview was conducted in person and recorded using a laptop. The other interview recorded using Skype Recorder. Both interviews were transcribed at a later date.

The Youth Coordinator of the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition suggested the two participants of this study. After a brief discussing with the Coordinator, I made contact with both participants. I knew both participants of this study previously. Amanda and I have directed college access workshops together in the past and Laura and I have worked on DREAM Act advocacy campaigns together. One potential strength of this relationship is that the subjects might have been more willing to open up to a person that they know has advocated for immigrants in the past. A weakness of this approach is that the sample was not random.

I am a white male who is currently attending graduate school at Vanderbilt University. Although I maintain an etic perspective on the application process for undocumented students, I have spent significant amounts of time researching ways to work with these students, mentoring undocumented high school seniors, and creating a college access handbook for undocumented students. My perspective is that all students, documented or not, should have the opportunity to go to college if they so desire. This perspective is shared by the participants of the study.

The theoretical framework for this paper is adapted from Gildersleeve’s (2010) description of ethnographic inquiry into the birth and maturation of undocumented youth’s college-going experiences. Interview questions focuses on the history of the students’ lives in order to understand how students participate operate within their cultural and legal contexts. As Gildersleeve (2010) suggests, the interviews largely focused on major events, turning points, and an overall life course. This paper does not create a composite of the interviewed characters as Gildersleeve (2010) does. The reason that I am not creating a composite character is that this paper is not intended for public distribution and thus will not jeopardize the status of any interviewed participants. Furthermore, both participants are open about the citizenship status and have made public appearances with the use of pseudonyms, which I do assign. Lastly, extremely recent changes in national immigration policy indicate that deportations of undocumented youth are to be immediately stopped and work visas will be handed out. These changes were announced on the day this paper is to be handed in. (Foley, 2012)

Findings

The following section includes life histories of undocumented students who have successfully completed the college application process and are now enrolled in college in Tennessee.

*Amanda*

Amanda is a twenty-three year old student at Lipscomb University. Her path to college, like so many undocumented students, was far from linear or completely rational. Amanda was born in Mexico, but does not remember any country but America; she has literally spent her entire conscious life in the United States. She claims that her documentation status had almost no visible impact on her childhood. Her parents made it clear that she would be going to college, regardless of documentation: “I think for me and my family, college has always not been an option, but more like a ‘you are going to college kind of topic.’” These high expectations continue to shape her work ethic.

Amanda was a high achieving student in secondary school and sought advice on the college application process. But while her parents pushed college access, others offered different advice: “They would say, ‘No. Sorry. You don’t have papers. You can’t go to college. No one can go to college here without papers.” Frustrated, Amanda went to her college counselor. The college counselor could not offer much more help: “She said, ‘Sorry. I don’t know how to deal with the situation. She um didn’t have any materials that she could give me.” And although her parents communicated their expectation that she attend college, they were and remain largely unaware of the structures and legalities of the American higher educational system. She says, “My family tried to support me as much as they could, but just because of the language barrier or work they couldn’t be there every step of the way.”

It was not until a teacher approached Amanda about college that she began to receive tangible and accurate information about how to apply to college. It is important to note that while this teacher was working on the behalf of Amanda, the teacher was also in violation of the law by inquiring into a student’s immigration status. However, after learning that Amanda is undocumented, the teacher was able to more effectively respond due to past experience with unauthorized students. This teacher was not only able to inform Amanda that she was eligible to attend college, but also how to fill out applications without a social security number. Around the same time as the teacher began to give her advice, Amanda also had younger cousins beginning the college process. A self-titled “guinea pig,” she visited colleges across Tennessee with her uncle, teacher, and cousins. When she ran into resistance applying to Austin Peay State University, her uncle and teacher went to the school in order to further explain the situation. She eventually admitted to Austin Peay and planned to attend the university.

However, Amanda’s plans changed when she attended a banquet for all Hispanic students graduating from Metro Nashville Public Schools. She received an invitation via mail that invited her to attend an event with free dinner: “I figured, ‘why not?” At the event, she learned of serious financial aid opportunities available at Lipscomb University. After the event, Amanda applied to Lipscomb and was able to secure a scholarship that lowered the cost of the private institution to lower that the out-of-state tuition that she would have paid at other universities.

Even though the cost of tuition was lowered at Lipscomb, Amanda struggled and continue to struggle to meet her financial obligations. The Federal government and the state of Tennessee currently offer Amanda no financial aid and she is not eligible for many private loans. To pay for her college degree, Amanda has had to find scholarships and work. And work hard: “I’ve worked since I was 12 years old. I’ve done anything. I worked as a waitress. I worked as a manager. I worked as a secretary. I worked at an insurance agency for six years. Now I’m working at the Chamber of Commerce.” She works between 60 and 70 hours a week during the school year and puts all of the money that she earns towards living expenses and education. In one job, she has asked her employer to defer all payments to the end of the semester. Then, at the end of each semester, the employer writes a check to Lipscomb University to cover part of her tuition cost. The reason that she has set up her payments in this fashion is to avoid the temptation of spending her own money. She anticipates graduating Lipscomb in debt. She does not know what she wants to do when she graduates and admits that her options are limited because of her lack of a social security.

*Laura*

Laura is currently a freshman at Volunteer State Community College. She has been in her freshman year for three semesters because she is unable to pay for a full course load at out-of-state tuition rates. She will move up to sophomore standing after she completes an additional class.

Laura went to school in Nashville, Tennessee for the entirety of her education. She started in Metro Nashville Public School and ended there. She claims that her residency status was invisible during this time of her life. Protected by the law, Laura was not treated differently than her documented peers. In fact, she did not know that she was undocumented until she turned 15 and wanted to apply for a driver’s license. Her parents had to explain to teenage Laura that she was ineligible for state identification because she was not a resident: “It was really hard because I felt like my whole world was crashing down in the sense that I didn’t know that I was going to do next.” A few months later, Laura’s parents filed for bankruptcy. She says that, “It was really hard for them to put food on the table.”

As an upperclassman in high school, Laura was fed misinformation about her ability to apply to college. Her college counselor told her, “You can’t go to college. There’s nothing you can do.” Laura’s teachers were almost all unaware of her legal status and those she did contact were only able to direct her to community organizations for help. Her parents were also not able to provide strong informational or financial support. Laura’s mother did not finish elementary school and her stepdad never finished middle school. As a result, her parents did not have experience with the American higher education system and did not encourage her to apply to college. “They didn’t really see college as a possibility, so it was hard for me to get them to help me with access…it was hard enough to keep food on the table and we couldn’t just afford college.”

After graduation, Laura joined the Tennessee Immigrants and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) as an intern in order to get her financial feet under her TIRRC turned out to be more than just an economic resource:

The people in general are very important to me because they support me in every way to keep going and it makes me realize how fair I’ve come to get to where I am and it makes me realize how many students my success could help.

Soon after interning at TIRRC, she started attending a college access program called the STUDY Foundation and was eventually able to earn a scholarship through this group. This was the first scholarship she earned and it helped to launch her first semester of community college. To finance the rest of her education, she “works crazy jobs and crazy hours.” Her parents are not able to assist her financially.

Laura plans to finish her degree in order to spread a message about undocumented students. She is working for, “something greater” and plans to be a role model for other unauthorized citizens as they move through the college application process.

Insights from Life Histories

The following section highlights connects three major findings from the life histories of Amanda and Laura to the broader literature on college access for undocumented students. The three major findings are the dissemination of false information, the important role of non-familial relationships, and the hyper importance of finances.

*Spreading False Information*

A “master narrative” is a set of generally accepted stories and beliefs that disseminate from a dominant perspective and serve to reinforce the power of the dominant social group. Gildersleeve (2009) argues that a “master narrative” drives discourse surrounding the college access of Mexican migrant students. In general, this narrative situates responsibility for the underrepresentation of undocumented children in higher education on the students themselves; the narrative holds that the students either do not care about their education, do not want to work for their education, are not smart enough to go to college, or are simply not willing to adjust to American society (Gildersleeve, 2009). This discourse is situated within a larger belief in a meritocratic framework that holds that hard work is always rewarded. In this framework, low achievement is reflective of lethargy, rather than gaps in opportunity (Milner, 2010). Gildersleeve (2009) notes that this deficit narrative focuses on what students cannot or did not do. However, as Milner (2010) reminds the reader, all students do not start at the same place and inequitable resource distribution ensures that achievement variance is reproduced.

Gildersleeve (2009) argues that master narratives are tools of social reproduction that serve to keep dominant cultural groups in power and to continue oppressive conditions for other groups. The narrative is pervasive and spreads in multiple ways. The most helpful information that undocumented students receive typically comes from other undocumented students. (Enriquez, 2011) However, word-of-mouth is not always a reliable way of communications information as important or as complex as the legalities surrounding college access for unauthorized citizens. Abrego (2006) documents the story of Adrian, an unauthorized student, who was specifically told by his own undocumented cousin that he could not go to college because of his citizenship status. Although undocumented students were not barred from college in the state of the study, a general belief that undocumented students do not go to school dominated discourse and possibly reflected a societal master narrative. As seen in the life histories of both Amanda and Laura, most adults inside and outside of school settings are ignorant about ways to help undocumented students go to college. In fact, both students reported that their experience was similar to Adrian; both were told that they could not apply to college and should not even attempt the application. Again, the negative master narrative that undocumented students do not go to college might have played a role in creating false beliefs amongst influential actors. In Laura’s case, even the school counselor was unaware that undocumented students could go to college or unwilling to help. Perez (2010) notes that it is not unusual for college counselors to have misconceptions about the college process for immigrant and undocumented students. However, no research is ready to estimate how much of an impact the spreading of false information has had on undocumented students who were not able to attain a college degree. Amanda admits that to would have helped to know from the beginning that she could go to school, “instead of all of the negative feedback from 90 percent of the people I asked.”

*The Role of Relationships*

Enriquez (2011) notes that the most relevant college access information for undocumented students typically comes from undocumented graduates. Huber and Malagon (2007) further this point by showing how undocumented students benefit from other undocumented role models who have gone through the college application process. However, it is possible for undocumented students to not have access to other unauthorized citizens who have successfully completed the college application process. Furthermore, Abrego (2006) notes that the educational attainment of Latin@ family members is often predictive of a student’s future educational aspirations when she writes, “older cousins and siblings who are also undocumented become guides to the future.” (219) These familial guides can be positive as researchers have found that strong relations in the family can play a large role in the postsecondary education attainment of Latin@ students. (Ceja, 2004) However, Abrego (2006) wonders what the impact is on high school students who see their high-achieving older siblings unable to go to college and gain a degree solely because of their citizenship status and financial situation. It is likely that educators will work with undocumented students who come from situations where a member of their family has gone to college and work with students who will be the first to attain a postsecondary degree. It is therefore wise to consider how non-familial actors can successfully mentor and work with students from both contexts.

The life stories of Amanda and Laura help to better conceptualize how well-meaning and non-familial actors can support undocumented students as they apply to college. For Amanda, the suggestions of Enriquez (2011) holds particular weight because she did go through the process with undocumented peers. However, for both Amanda and Laura, individual teachers played a major role in their ability to go to college. After learning about her documentation status, a teacher advocated for Amanda by Austin Peay State University to speak with the admissions office on her behalf. This same teacher helped Amanda fill out her college applications. Laura’s family trusted a teacher so much that they revealed their documentation status to the teacher. Although the teacher was not able to offer personal advice on the situation, he was able to connect Laura to TIRRC. This connection has proven invaluable to her ability to get to college and stay there. In both instances, although teachers may not have been immediately able to answer questions about the college process for undocumented students, teachers were willing to go out of their way to learn or to connect the students to the proper resources. Finally, these teachers had to earn the trust of the family before students would be willing to reveal their documentation status. It is not always clear how teachers earned the family’s trust. For example, Laura’s family contacted a teacher that she had not seen since sixth grade. One possible explanation is that this teacher both knew Spanish and had previously communicated with Laura’s mother. It is again important to note that teachers should not directly ask students about their documentation status, but instead should wait for students to be willing to speak about their residency situation.

*Breaking Down Financial Barriers*

Undocumented students pay more to go to college and receive less financial assistance. As a result, undocumented students are often forced to break down financial barriers on their own by earning scholarships and working incredible hours to pay high tuition costs.

Perez (2010) finds that private scholarships that are available to undocumented students are often difficult to locate and extremely competitive. However, Huber and Malagon (2007) identify the ability to access financial as one of the four strongest factors for degree attainment amongst undocumented students. Both Amanda and Laura have been able to find private scholarships to cover portions of their tuition. Amanda has won a scholarship at Lipscomb, a private university that is able to offer tuition incentives to undocumented students. This scholarship does not cover the total cost of her education, but does lower the costs of the school to relative affordability. Laura has not won as large a scholarship as Amanda, but has won several private scholarships. Interestingly, while Amanda is scheduled to complete her degree in four years, Laura is having trouble financing her education and is likely to take a longer amount of time completing her degree. Clearly, the availability of financial aid has impacted the rate of educational attainment for these students.

Unfortunately, many undocumented students come from families that are unable to significantly contribute to the high costs of tuition. (Passel, 2005) Both Amanda and Laura report that their families are unable to cover their tuition costs. In particular, Laura’s family is unable to contribute any money to her education after entering bankruptcy.

The life stories of Amanda and Laura offer insights into how undocumented students are paying for college. The answer is that they are often working hours far beyond those of their documented peers. (American Council on Education, 2006) Both students report working any job that they can get at any time they can get it. Perez (2010) indicates that undocumented students are often forced to take on the dual role of laborer and student in order to complete a degree. Laura acknowledges that filling both roles has had an impact on her college career: “Right now, I know that I’m not getting the total college experience. But hopefully in the future, I know that I will get that experience.” It is not clear how working sixty hours a week and attending college affects the quality of a student’s education.

*Conclusion*

This project has revealed a number of ways that educators and counselors can positively impact the college application experience if undocumented students.

First, this report found that teachers and school community members are often unaware that undocumented students can and do go to college. Given the potential negative impact that the dissemination of this false information could have on the college process of an application, such naiveté must be combated with increased exposure to and awareness of the issues facing undocumented students. School districts and school of education should educate teachers and future teachers about the legal complexities of work with undocumented students as well as the possibility of higher education. Teachers who work in schools that they suspect undocumented students attend should talk to their colleagues about ways to help their students get to college. Finally, state government or local community organizations should work to make the college application process simpler for undocumented students through the production of college access handbooks. These handbooks can work to raise awareness about the college process for undocumented students.

Second, teachers should consciously work to build trust with all immigrant parents and students. This study showed that relationships with non-familial actors played a crucial role in the college attainment of Laura and Amanda. However, these non-familial actors were only allowed to perform their role after being informed about the student’s immigration status, a piece of information that the teachers were not permitted to ask about themselves. Teachers who work to build trust with immigrant students and their families will be more likely to have access to vital information such as documentation status.

Third, financial resources should be directed towards undocumented students. Attending a community college in the state in which she has lived her entire conscious life, Laura was forced to pay high out-of-state tuition fees that slow her education and force her to work nearly all of the time. Amanda reported working 60 hours a week, a number so high that it surely has an impact on her academic performance and social life. Although educators cannot be expected to finance college education, they might help students to write fundraising letters, host a fundraising opportunity like a car wash, or work with students as they complete college essays. A high English teacher might even make scholarship prompts into essays so that students are completing their schoolwork while also seeking financial aid. Lastly, college counselors should keep a list of national and local scholarships that are available to students without social security numbers.

Research will undoubtedly be impacted by the news that the United States will discontinue deportations of undocumented students and instead offer temporary work visas (Foley, 2012). It is unclear at this point whether or not these visas will help students to access federal, state, and institutional financial aid. It is my hope that this policy will be extended into a full act of law that leads to a pathway to citizenship. Until the nuances and actual implementation of this policy move forward, it is difficult to predict how the field will or should evolve.

My own work has undoubtedly been impacted by this project and the opportunity to work with Laura and Amanda. Next year, I plan to continue my work as a college mentor for undocumented students in the Metro Nashville Public Schools. Through this role, I am able to help unauthorized students prepare to apply to college, apply to college, and also prepare for college life. This work has already led me to question how the program might work to build trust with the families of undocumented students. This is a question that we will carry into the coming year and beyond.

Lastly, I hope that this project reminds all educators how what happens outside of school can impact what happens in the classroom. For this reason, the political is visible in everything that we do. It is worth considering how educators can fight for their students not only in the classroom, but also politically and beyond. Context plays an important role in the college access of undocumented students. We all can work to change the context in order to help kids get the education that they need.

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Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the incredible efforts that undocumented students all over the United States have made in order to get to college and graduate. These kids show an amazing dedication to school as well as a conscience to improve the educational outcomes of others. Lastly, thank you to Laura and Amanda for participating in this project.

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