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# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF UNDOCUMENTED LATINO STUDENTS TO ENROLL IN AND PERSIST AT A FOUR- YEAR PUBLIC HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTION IN TEXAS

Angela C. Stuart-Carruthers

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, christinestuartcarruthers@gmail.com

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF  
UNDOCUMENTED LATINO STUDENTS TO ENROLL IN AND PERSIST AT A  
FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTION IN TEXAS

by

Angela Christine Stuart-Carruthers

A DISSERTATION

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For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Educational Studies

Under the supervision of Professors Brent Cejda and Richard Hoover

Lincoln, Nebraska

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF  
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Angela Christine Stuart-Carruthers, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2014

Advisers: Brent Cejda and Richard Hoover

Undocumented students in the United States are trapped in a myriad of completing federal, state, and local laws that impact their lives daily. While approximately 60,000 undocumented students graduate from high school each year, the college going rate for this population is substantially lower than their documented peers. Since President Obama signed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals executive order, undocumented students have gained national attention. Despite this new focus on undocumented students few studies have been conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the live experiences of these students.

Framed by Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure and Latino capital theories, this phenomenological dissertation study focused on the lived experiences of four students who attended a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution in Texas. Through a series of interviews conducted during the 2013-2014 academic year, this study sought to answer the question: why have undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree? Through a comparison of the themes against Tinto's Student Integration Model capital theories, three findings emerged: (a) undocumented students were able to enroll in an institution of higher education by leveraging the capital they possessed; (b) the determination of the

undocumented students was so great, it allowed them to overcome the obstacles in their way; (c) the undocumented students persisted because the university community provided support.

## Acknowledgements

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

“Opportunity in this country is more and more a function of education.” (Boswell & Wilson, 2004, p. 7)

At its core America holds that “this is land where a person born in humble circumstances, if she is willing to work hard, can rise to the highest level, can grow wealthy and secure, can contribute, can become president” (Boswell & Wilson, 2004, p. 7). The Declaration of Independence espouses “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. At the base of the Statue of Liberty is the phrase, “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Individuals reciting the United States Pledge of Allegiance close with the words “liberty and justice for all”. These iconic symbols of America demonstrate the promises and hope for a better future on which this country was built upon. The foundation of all of these promises lies in the principle of opportunity and equality for every individual.

However, these promises have lately been tempered with an “increasing reliance on education as the arbiter of economic opportunity” (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004, p. 39). America has shown a commitment to allowing the masses access to educational opportunity through the Morrill Act of 1862, the GI Bill, the Truman Commission Report, and the Pell Grant (Boswell & Wilson, 2004). This commitment allows opportunity to be extended to those willing to sacrifice, while still holding individuals responsible for their success (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004). However, for those in our country without proper documentation, access to higher education is difficult at best, and ultimately may not lead to economic opportunity.

This study sought to answer the question: why have undocumented Latino

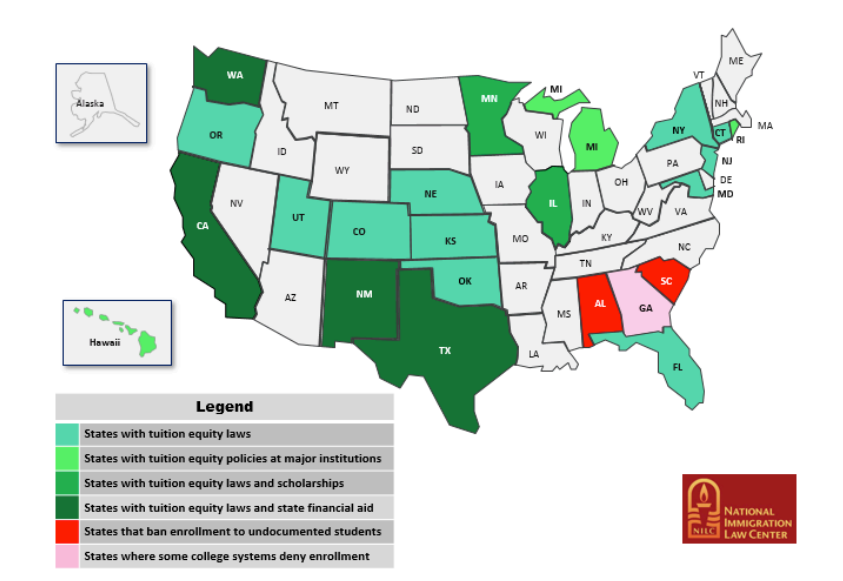
students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree at a public Hispanic-Serving Institution? The research presented allows us to understand this subset of the Latino population and what strategies facilitate their persistence in spite of overwhelming odds. In addition, this research adds to the understanding of the struggles undocumented students face in higher education and how institutions specifically can support this population.

### **Context**

Each year, between 65,000 and 80,000 undocumented youth graduate from American high schools (Lopez, 2010). These students have the same dream of continuing their education as that held by their documented (or papered) peers. In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that states may not deny school-aged children the right to a free public education because of their immigration status. However, due to Section 505 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, undocumented students are banned from receiving in-state tuition or federal financial aid once they try to enter higher education. In spite of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, at least 17 states have laws that allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition once certain criteria are met: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, and Washington, Figure 1 below (National Immigration Law Center, 2014b). As well, Boards of Regents in Hawaii, Michigan, and Rhode Island voted to allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition (National Immigration Law Center, 2014b). Two states, Alabama and South Carolina, deny undocumented students access to public postsecondary institutions, and in

Georgia, some institutions deny access to undocumented students (National Immigration Law Center, 2014b).

### State Laws & Policies on Access to Higher Education for Undocumented Students



*Figure 1.* Access to Higher Education for Undocumented Students. National Immigration Law Center. (2014b). Maps: State laws & policies on access to higher education for immigrations. Toolkit: Access to postsecondary education. Retrieved from <http://nilc.org/eduaccesstoolkit2.html>.

Since 2001, the Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act has been introduced several times in the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate. The proposed legislation would extend a six-year conditional legal status to undocumented youth who meet several criteria: entry into the U.S. before age 16, continuous presence in the U.S. for five years prior to the bill's enactment, receipt of a high school diploma or its equivalent, and demonstrated good moral character (Perez, 2009). Undocumented youth who meet the criteria would have a six-year period to graduate from a two-year college, complete at least two years of a four-year degree, or serve at least two years in the U.S. military to be eligible to gain permanent legal resident status. While the DREAM Act has not passed, this legislation would mark the first time

that legal status would, in part, be based upon participation in higher education. Once again, this highlights America's belief that opportunity is tied to education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The current landscape of higher education is less than welcoming for undocumented students. Many undocumented students have lived in the U.S. for the majority of their lives; yet, these students often have fewer rights than visiting international students (Price, 2010). While international students may be able to work limited hours, undocumented students are not eligible to work, despite being among those students with the highest economic need. Research has shown that 11% of undocumented immigrants have income below the poverty level, even though they only represent 5.5% of the total population (Passel & Cohn, 2009, p. 17). However, undocumented students are not eligible to receive federal financial aid and, in many states, they must pay out-of-state tuition with little promise of state aid. To compound the issue, once undocumented students graduate, very few will have the legal right to work even though they have the ability to become productive members of society (Perez, 2009).

Thus it is not surprising that many undocumented students choose not to pursue a higher education once they graduate from high school. Only a decade ago, only 10 to 20% of undocumented youth that had completed high school went on to attend college (Passel, 2003, p. 2). However, as of 2008, 49% of undocumented students between 18 to 24 years of age who graduated high school, attended or have attended college (Passel & Cohn, 2009, p. 12). Although undocumented students are attending college at record

rates, they still lag behind their documented peers whose college-going rate is 71% (Passel & Cohn, 2009, p. 11).

Although more undocumented immigrants are attending college, our knowledge of the population is limited in part because of their fringe status. Price (2010) explained that “they do not want to call attention to themselves because they have a secret - their lack of legal residency status - they fear they will be discovered” (p. 1). For these students being discovered could result in, at least shame and at worst, deportation (Price, 2010). Despite the risks, undocumented students have participated in research efforts.

In 2009, Perez shared the stories of undocumented students in high schools, community colleges, and universities, along with current undocumented college graduates and those who had obtained legal residency. This research allowed individuals to have a glimpse at the lives these remarkable young people live. Lopez (2010) took a narrow focus and chronicled high achieving high school students’ journeys towards college in North Carolina and the struggles they faced in continuing their education. There has also been substantial work in law and policy analysis (Olivas, 1988; Olivas, 1995; Olivas, 2004; Olivas, 2005; Passel, 2006; Passel & Cohn, 2008; Passel & Cohn, 2009), issues related to access (Frum, 2007; Gildersleeve, 2010; Perez, 2010), and awareness for student affairs professionals (Perez, 2009; Price, 2010; Rincon, 2010). However, there has been limited research examining what drives undocumented students to persist in college despite their severe disadvantages. Ortiz and Hinojosa (2010) explained:

While scholars, policymakers, administrators, parents, and students acknowledge that the purposes of higher education are multidimensional, most agree that



graduates should have explored and decided on a career, gained some knowledge and training to begin to pursue that career, and know the steps to take to find that first job or enter a graduate program (p. 53).

Completing a bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree will not allow an undocumented student to receive the legal right to obtain a job in the U.S. This highlights that one of the primary motivating factors for completing college for many young adults does not apply to undocumented students who attend an institution of higher education. Since two tenets of the DREAM Act that would allow undocumented students to gain permanent legal residency in the U.S. rely upon the individual completing two years of postsecondary education, more research must be conducted on what factors influence undocumented students to enroll and persist in higher education.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to explore why undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree. To support the purpose of the study, the objectives of the research were: to determine who and what influenced undocumented Latino students to enroll in college, to explore the lived experiences of undocumented Latino students at a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution, and to determine what barriers undocumented Latino students faced and how they overcame them. This study continued to build on the research of the topic that has been previously conducted (Albrecht, 2007; Burton, 2012; Feranchak, 2007; Garcia, 2011; Lopez, 2010; Munsch, 2011; Perez, 2009; Villegas, 2006). The findings of this study will be discussed against the backdrop of the existing literature and future research topics have been included in Chapter VI of this dissertation.

## Conceptual Framework

In order to have a framework in which to view the findings, literature on student persistence in general and Latino student persistence was reviewed, which will be discussed in depth in Chapter II. Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) proposed one of the foremost models of examining student departure from higher education. In Tinto's Student Integration Model, a variety of factors were explored that could impact a student's decision to withdraw from an institution of higher education, below:

### Tinto's Student Integration Model

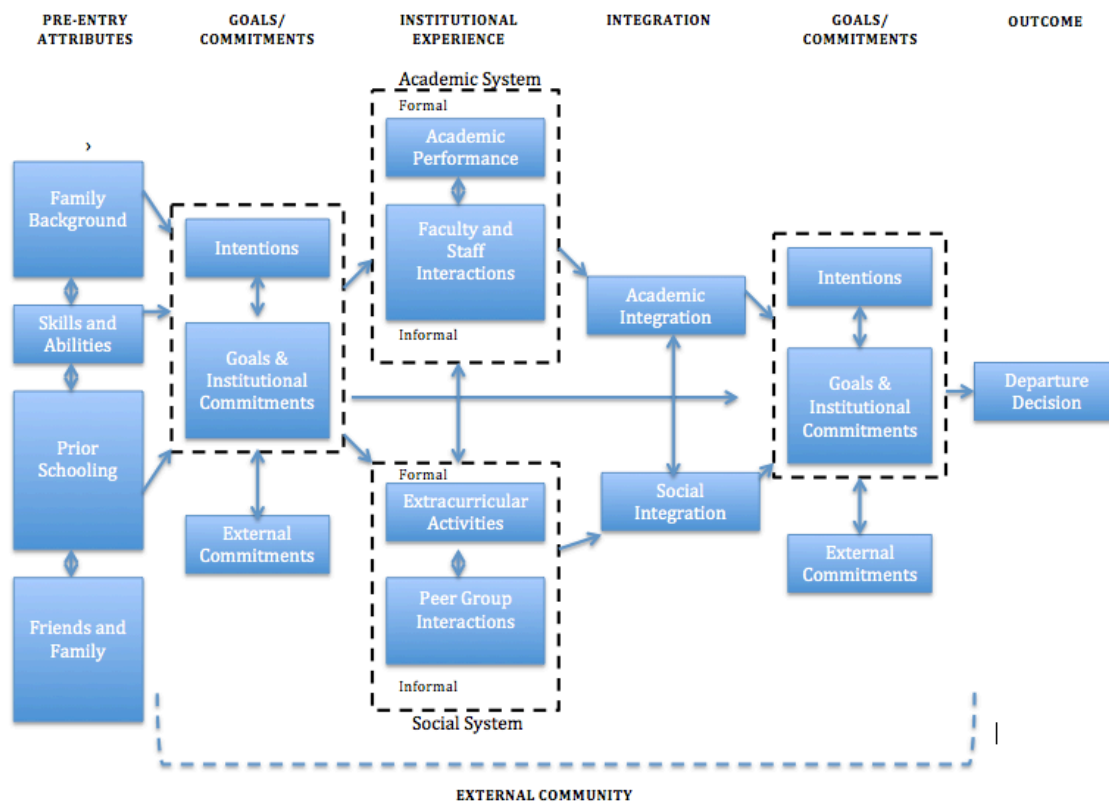


Figure 2. Tinto's Student Integration Model. Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the cause and cures of student attrition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

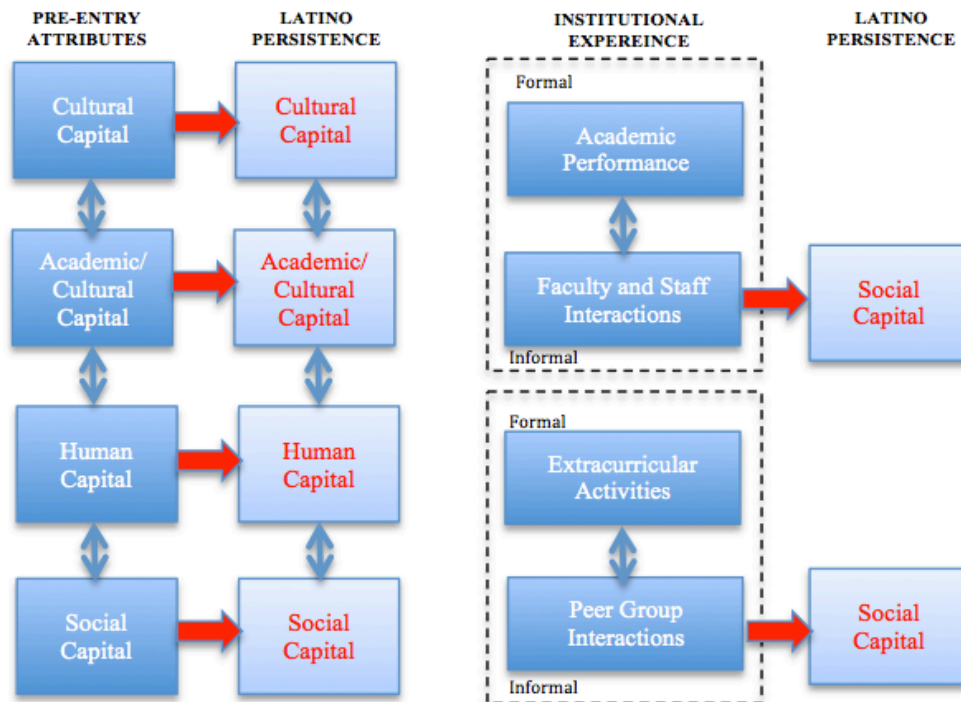
Tinto's work has formed the basis for an understanding of why students persist in higher education and while Tinto's model has been criticized for not being responsive to minority cultures, at this time Tinto's model is still regarded as the most relevant theory for understanding persistence in higher education. Since the primary focus of this study is persistence of undocumented students in higher education, it would be remiss to not compare the findings to Tinto's work.

Within the literature, there has also been a substantial amount of research on the factors that impact Latino students' persistence in college that do not focus on Tinto's work. The outcome of much of this research has identified that Latinos utilized multiple forms of capital to aid them in persisting in college, also discussed in Chapter II. Latino students are able to overcome many of the barriers that are placed in front of them by drawing on various resources: academic capital, academic preparation, and skills (Cho & Larke, 2010; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005); cultural capital or information that is necessary to navigate institutions but not explicitly taught in schools (Ortiz & Santos, 2009; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Torres, 2010; Torres, 2004; Torrez, 2004); human capital, skills, and abilities that influence academic performance; and social capital, the potential for social networks, and connections to facilitate access to educational institutions (Nunez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, & Vazquez, 2013; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Although this work does not directly tie to Tinto's work, this research has led to important findings, which may be applicable to undocumented Latino students as well.

When comparing Tinto's work to the literature on Latino students' persistence,

there is an overlap of Tinto's Pre-entry Attribute and Institutional Experiences with the varying capitals discussed in Latino persistence literature as seen below.

### Intersectionality of Tinto's Student Integration Model & Latino Persistence



*Figure 3. Intersectionality of Tinto's Student Integration Model & Latino Persistence. Tinto, V. (1993). Leaving college: Rethinking the cause and cures of student attrition (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.*

While research has not been conducted that explicitly links Tinto's pre-entry attributes and institutional experiences to forms of capital, by overlapping these two distinct research trends a conceptual basis can be built that allows for a richer analysis of the data collected in this study.

### Research Questions

The Grand Tour question of this research was: why have undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college

degree? In addition, the following sub-questions guided the research on this topic:

1. How do undocumented Latino students describe their interactions with the individuals who influenced them, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college?
2. What has the lived experience been like for undocumented Latino students attending a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution?
3. What driving forces did undocumented Latino students identify that aided in overcoming the barriers that were faced in the enrollment process and as enrolled college students?

### **Data Gathering and Methodology**

Qualitative studies are used when:

...a problem or issue needs to be explored; we need a complex detailed understanding of the issue; and we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher the participants of a study (Creswell, 2007, p. 39).

Since there has been limited inquiry into why undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree, a qualitative study was appropriate to explore the perceptions of undocumented Latino students.

However, qualitative studies can take on many flavors and Creswell (2007) explained the purpose of a phenomenological investigation is to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 58). In this research, a phenomenological investigation was used to understand the lived experience of four

undocumented Latino students at a four-year public Hispanic-Serving Institution in Texas in order to understand the universal essence of the experience.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

A phenomenological investigation has several philosophical assumptions that support the method. The reality of the experience for the undocumented Latino students was interpreted through the meaning of the experience for the student (Creswell, 2007). In order to document this reality, the researcher had to “suspend all judgments about what is real until they are founded on a more certain basis” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58).

While it was assumed that the researcher could bracket her judgments throughout the research, there was also an assumption that the undocumented Latino students would willingly and accurately report their experiences during the study. It should be noted that the researcher is of a different ethnic background of the students, but has lived in the area in which the students currently reside for most of her life. Although this may have affected the rapport with the students, the researcher was able to build a relationship with the students through multiple interviews such that in-depth information could be gathered. Finally, the researcher assumed the research from one campus in Texas could identify themes that are true on other campuses.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

Creswell (1994) explained that delimitations address how the study will be narrowed in scope. This study focused on undocumented Latino students attending a four-year public Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Due to the proximity of this institution to the Texas/Mexico border, the population of undocumented students is constantly in flux. Rather than limit the study to students who had been in the U.S. a

certain period of time, this study was open to all students who identified as undocumented, were 18 years of age or older, identified as Latino, were enrolled in the institution full-time working towards their undergraduate degree, and were at least juniors at the university. By restricting the study to students who were at least juniors, the students had experiences from which to draw to aid in their perceptions of what impacted their persistence. Since students were identified by their involvement in a student organization on campus that promotes the DREAM Act or through referral of a DREAM Act member, the undocumented students were engaged on the campus and had been actively thinking about their immigration status. Thus, the students were somewhat or completely out of hiding, which may have influenced their perceptions.

In addition, the research was limited to a snapshot of the students' experience through two interviews. This study was designed to capture the lived experiences of four undocumented Latino students during one academic year. While a longitudinal study, such as was conducted by Lopez (2010), provides richer data; through multiple interviews, this study aimed to understand the students' perceptions to date.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Creswell (1994) also stated that it was important to examine the limitations of the study, which identify its potential weaknesses. Due to the rapidly changing legal, political, and societal opinion regarding immigration in the U.S., this study only captured a moment in time, which was affected by the current cultural landscape. As well, this study only represented the voices of four students who were in their junior and senior year at a four-year public university in Texas. Due to the small sample size and the uniqueness of the university at which this study took place, the results may not be

generalizable to other undocumented students across Texas or the U.S.

### **Definitions of Terminology**

The following terms will be used throughout this research study:

- *Academic Capital* is defined as academic preparation for college.
- *Cultural Capital* is defined as the knowledge parents possess that increases the likelihood their children will advance in the educational system (McDonough, 1994).
- *Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI)* are defined by law as “accredited and degree-granting public or private non-profit institutions of higher education with 25 percent or more total undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent student enrollment” (Santiago, 2006, p. 5). Even though institutions have to apply for this designation from the Federal Government, HSI’s represent 6 percent of all institutions of higher education and educate almost half of all Latino undergraduates (p. 5).
- *Human Capital* is defined as the skills and abilities that one possesses when they enroll in college.
- *Latinos* are defined as a person who was born or lives in South America, Central America, or Mexico or a person in the U.S. whose family is originally from South America, Central America, or Mexico (Merriam-Webster, 2014).
- *Persistence* in higher education “is understood to be the progressive reenrollment in college, whether continuous from one term to the next or temporarily interrupted and then resumed” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 374).
- *Social Capital* is defined as “social relationships from which an individual is



potentially able to derive various types of institutional resources and support” (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, p. 116).

- *Undocumented (unauthorized) immigrants* are residents of the United States who are not U.S. citizens, who do not hold current permanent-resident visas or who have not been granted permission under a set of specific authorized temporary statuses for longer-term residence and work (Passel & Cohn, 2008).
- *Undocumented students* are defined as a foreign national who: (1) entered the United States without inspection or with fraudulent documents; or (2) entered legally as a nonimmigrant but then violated the terms of his or her status and remained in the United States without authorization (National Immigration Law Center, 2014b).

### **Significance of the Study**

As a nation we have created an inconsistent web of policies regarding access to higher education for undocumented students. Legislation regarding undocumented students differs from state to state, region to region, and at the federal level; which effectively either provides or limits access to an affordable higher education (Harmon, Carne, Lizardy-Hajbi, & Wilkerson, 2010). Tucked within the debates swirling around these students is a struggle that has been occurring since our nation was founded that speaks to “inherent cultural, societal, and systemic bias around beliefs, power, and privilege” (p.1).

In regards to education, in the landmark case of *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), Justice Brennan argued that it is unjust to hold students accountable for the actions of their parents and allowed undocumented students access to the same K-12 education of U.S.

citizens. While the *Plyler v. Doe* decision provides clear guidance for students in the primary setting, the rulings of the Supreme Court have been less clear when addressing the issue of undocumented students in higher education. The same year, in *Toll v. Moreno* (1982) the Court found that the state of Maryland could not have a statute that prevented undocumented students from establishing residency. Then, the Court held in *Regents of the University of California v. Bradford* (1990), that states may discriminate against undocumented students (Yates, 2004), creating an inconsistency in the treatment of undocumented students when it comes to the American ideal of education.

Of the 11.5 million undocumented immigrants, 12% are under 18 years of age and another 14% are between 18 and 24 years of age (Hoefer, Rytina, & Baker, 2009, p. 6). In 2008, the Pew Hispanic Center estimated that the children of undocumented immigrants comprised 6.8% of the students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools across the nation (Passel & Cohn, 2009, p. 1). This statistic included children who were undocumented (1.5 million) and children that were born in the U.S. and were citizens (4 million) (p. 1). Passel and Cohn (2009) noted that while the number of children born in the U.S. to undocumented parents has risen, the number of children who themselves are undocumented has remained steady since 2003. Since the numbers of undocumented students graduating from high school and attending college are on the rise, higher education will continue to see substantial numbers of undocumented students for the foreseeable future.

Thus, while we have come to recognize that there is great variety within the Latino population when examining ethnicity and nationality, the subgroup of undocumented Latinos is just beginning to be acknowledged. This created an

opportunity for this study to add to the knowledge base of why undocumented Latino students chose to enroll in college amongst the competing legal rulings and what factors influenced their persistence. It is anticipated that colleges and universities may be able to take this research and create more inclusive environments for this population of students.

### **Summary**

This chapter introduced the broad strokes of the size and the legal landscape for the undocumented Latino student population in the U.S. It is clear that the experiences of these students have been under-researched in higher education. Thus, a grand tour question and three sub-questions were posed as they related to the identified purpose and significance of this study. In order to gather information, a phenomenological qualitative approach was used and the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations outlined.

The next chapter will discuss the relevant literature as it pertains to the legal framework for undocumented students. Persistence literature is reviewed as it pertains to general students attending higher education as well as for Latino and undocumented students. In Chapter III the methodology of the study is outlined and a profile of the four students are presented in Chapter IV. To summarize this data, the findings are outlined in Chapter V and Chapter VI discusses how the findings compare to the previous research that has been conducted.

## **CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW**

Since the purpose of this study was to explore why undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in pursuit of their four-year college degree, it is helpful to review the literature pertaining to both Latino and undocumented students. The current body of literature regarding undocumented college students has been expanding over the last ten years to include not only legal and policy analysis, but also research on issues of access, financial barriers, and narratives about students' experiences. To frame the literature, an overview of the population is provided to explain the size and demographics of the undocumented population. The discussion then turns to legal and policy analysis to highlight the tenuous nature of the legal debate. Finally, the literature is reviewed in relation to persistence for all students, Latinos, and undocumented students.

### **Overview of the Population**

Hoefler, Rytina, & Baker compiled the most recent statistics on the size of the undocumented population in the U.S. in January of 2011, published in 2012. It was estimated that 11.5 million undocumented immigrants were living in the U.S., down from the revised 2010 estimate of 11.6 million (p. 1). The authors explained there has been a decrease in the number of undocumented immigrants since 2007, when the unemployment rate in the U.S. began to rise, countered by improved economic conditions in Mexico. In addition, the U.S. dramatically increased the levels of border enforcement, resulting in fewer individuals trying to cross. Statistically, 55% of undocumented immigrants entered the U.S. between 1995 and 2004 with only 14% entering since 2005

(p. 1). Over 6.8 million (59%) of the undocumented immigrants came from Mexico, which is the leading source country of the undocumented population (p. 4).

The top ten leading states in which the undocumented population settles account for 73% of the population (Hofer, Rytina, & Baker, 2012). California is the leading state of residence with 2.8 million, followed by Texas (1.8 million), Florida (740,000), New York (630,000), and Illinois (550,000) (p. 4). As the numbers of undocumented immigrants has increased across the U.S. “hostile media images of undocumented immigrants, scapegoating of immigrants by politicians, and anti-immigrant rhetoric by nativist groups have led to persistent negative public opinion about undocumented immigrants” (Perez, 2009).

Of the 11.5 million immigrants, 12% are under 18 years of age and another 14% are between 18 and 24 years of age (Hofer, Rytina, & Baker, 2012, p. 6). In 2008, the Pew Hispanic Center estimated that the children of undocumented immigrants, both those who are undocumented themselves (1.5 million) and those who are U.S. citizens (4 million) comprise 6.8% of the students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools across the nation (Passel & Cohn, 2009, p. 1). Passel and Cohn (2009) noted that while the number of children born in the U.S. to undocumented parents has risen, the number of children who themselves are undocumented has remained steady since 2003.

Since the Supreme Court ruling in *Plyler v. Doe* in 1982, undocumented children have the right to a K-12 education. However the chart below, compiled by Passel and Cohn (2009), shows that undocumented immigrants’ education is lagging behind those born in the U.S. and legal immigrants:

### Educational Attainment for Ages 25-64, by Status 2008

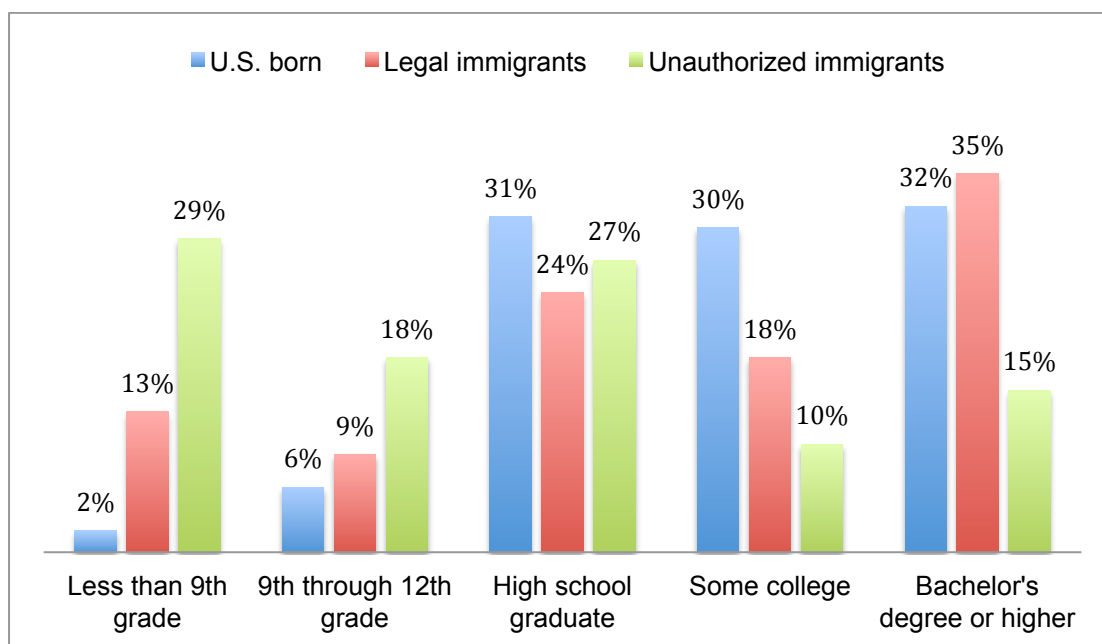


Figure 4. Education Attainment. Passel, J.S., & Cohn, D. (2009). *A portrait of unauthorized immigrants in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.

This chart shows that many undocumented youth do not finish high school, with 47% exiting the school system before they graduate (p. 12). Upon a closer analysis though, there are some differences in educational attainment that are tied to the length of time in the U.S. When undocumented youth enter the U.S. at the age of 14 or older, statistics show for 18-24 year olds, 46% will not complete high school and only 42% are in college or have attended college (p. 12). However, for those who enter the country before age 14, only 28% will not complete high school and 61% are in college or have attended college (Passel & Cohn, 2009, p. 12).

A grasp of the sheer numbers of undocumented students is not enough to understand the complex issues surrounding these students. The lives of undocumented students are positioned in a nexus of competing federal, state, local, and institutional laws and policies that are in a constant flux. While immigration has long been understood to

be under the purview of the federal government and education under the purview of the state governments, these boundaries have been blurred. Thus, it is important to understand the laws and policies that have shaped undocumented students' lives.

### **Legal Rights and Privileges**

**Federal.** Contrary to popular belief, undocumented immigrants have a variety of rights while in the U.S. Olivas (2004) outlined that undocumented immigrants have rights to emergency health care, emergency shelter, and disaster aid; due process in relation to unlawful search, seizure, and arrest; protection from unfair employment practices; and defense from work-related and housing discrimination. While undocumented immigrants have basic protections while in the U.S., a series of court cases and statutes have further shaped undocumented immigrants' access to education.

The landmark case regarding undocumented students and education came in the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plyler v. Doe* in 1982. In 1975, the Texas Legislature passed a law (Texas Education Code, Section 21.031), which withheld funds from public schools that admitted undocumented children. This effectively denied undocumented children access to public schools. In order for school districts to comply with the law, they were allowed to ask for proof of citizenship and deny admission to those who could not verify their legal status. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Texas law violated the equal protection provisions of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. As a result of *Plyler v. Doe*, it is illegal for states to deny access to public education due to immigration status. Furthermore, "subsequent court cases resulted in prohibitions against attempts to identify undocumented children because of the perception that they could then be discriminated against" (Strayhorn, 2006, p. 3). However, *Plyler v. Doe* did not address what happens to

students once they leave compulsory education and wish to matriculate into higher education institutions.

The two federal statutes that have implications for undocumented students' access to higher education are the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. Both of these laws were created during the declining economy of the early 1990s, resulting in an increased support for limiting immigration (Connolly, 2005). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act stated that:

An alien who is not a qualified alien is not eligible for any Federal public benefit [including] any retirement, welfare, health, disability, public or assisted housing, postsecondary education, food assistance, unemployment benefit, or any other similar benefit for which payments or assistance are provided to an individual, household, or family eligibility unit by an agency of the United States or by appropriated funds of the United States. (8 U.S.C. §1611).

While the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act denied a multitude of benefits to undocumented immigrants, for those hoping to pursue a higher education, this act denied access to federal financial aid and federal work-study programs. In addition to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, Congress also implemented the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which further limited the rights of undocumented immigrants. According to section 505 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act:



An alien who is not lawfully presented in the United States shall not be eligible on the basis of residence within a State (or a political subdivision) for any postsecondary benefit unless a citizen or national of the United States is eligible for such a benefit (in no less amount, duration, and scope) without regard to whether the citizen or national is such a resident (8 U.S.C. §1623).

At first glance, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act would seem to keep states from providing any postsecondary education benefit to undocumented students and the varied reactions of the states to the Act highlight the confusion (Connolly, 2005). While some states have interpreted the Act to prohibit undocumented students from gaining in-state tuition, other states interpreted the Act to only prohibit in-state tuition if qualified U.S. citizens are also ineligible for in-state tuition rates (p. 5). The 17 states that grant in-state tuition to undocumented students argue that their laws do not violate the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. Connolly (2005) outlined that the states side-step the Act by evading “the resident classification by basing eligibility for in-state tuition not on residence, but on other criteria such as attendance of an in-state high school, graduation, and intent to seek residency in that state” (p. 5). In effect, these criteria create a higher burden for undocumented students to reach than individuals who legally reside in the state, thus the states argue this does not violate the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. However, critics argue that since the federal government has spoken, these states are violating the act and are providing a benefit for which not all citizens are eligible, namely out-of-state citizens.

To deal with the confusing language of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate have proposed legislation that would change the current law regarding undocumented minors. The legislation that has garnered the most support has been the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, commonly referred to as the DREAM Act, which was originally introduced in July of 2001. Although there have been several versions of the DREAM Act, the 2009 version gained the most support. This version of the DREAM Act would address the issues surrounding the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act by repealing Section 505 of the Act and giving the states discretion to determine residency requirements for higher education (The DREAM Act of 2009). Most importantly, the DREAM Act would allow eligible undocumented children to become conditional permanent residents for up to six years. In order to qualify for conditional permanent residency:

They must have entered the United States prior to age 16; they must have been in the United States continually for the five years immediately preceding the enactment of the DREAM Act; they must be of good moral character; they must be admitted to an institution of higher education or earn a high school diploma or GED certificate; they must never have been under an order of exclusion, deportation or removal; and they have not reached the age of 35 on the date of the enactment (The DREAM Act of 2009).

If the student is able to meet the requirements of the DREAM Act, they then would be granted conditional permanent residency for a period of six years, during which time the student would be protected from removal and able to obtain work authorization. As well,

the student would be eligible for federal student loan programs, federal work-study programs, and services under Title IV. After the six years but not more than eight years, the student could petition to have the conditional label removed if the student has: maintained good moral character; avoided grounds of inadmissibility and deportability; continued living in the U.S.; and either served in the military for two years, obtained an associate's degree, or completed two years of a bachelor's or graduate degree program (The DREAM Act of 2009). If the petition is accepted, the student could stay permanently in the U.S. and the time spent in the conditional status would count towards the requirements for naturalization. The greatest downfall of the DREAM Act is that it would only be applicable for those students who had been in the U.S. for five years at the time of enactment, thus it is conceivable that a similar situation could exist several years after the DREAM Act was implemented. Frum (2007) stated that:

Even if the U.S. border were hermetically sealed today, the immigration patterns of the past 20 years mean that U.S. high schools will be graduating undocumented students for at least the next 15 to 20 years, which raises the policy question of what to do with such students when they do finish high school (p. 98).

In 2010 a new version of the DREAM Act was introduced which attempted to address many of the concerns that had been raised about previous versions. While the DREAM Act of 2010 made it much more difficult to qualify for conditional permanent residency, the DREAM Act of 2011 resembled the DREAM Act of 2009 much more closely. As part of the 2010 analysis of the cost and impact of the DREAM Act, the Center for Immigration Studies estimated that 2.1 million undocumented immigrations would have

met the residency and age requirements under the DREAM Act, including 934,000 children under the age of 18 (Bruno, 2012, p. 2).

Although legislative action on the DREAM Act stalled, on June 15<sup>th</sup> of 2012 the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano unveiled the “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals” program sponsored by the Obama administration. Under this program, eligible undocumented immigrants ages 15 to 30 who arrived before age 16 could qualify for deferred action if:

They have continuously resided in the U.S. since June 15, 2007; they were physically present in the U.S. on June 15, 2012; they are enrolled in school, have a high school diploma or GED, or have been honorably discharged from the military or Coast Guard by the time of their application; and they have not been convicted of a felony, a significant misdemeanor offense, or three or more other misdemeanors, and do not present a threat to national security or public safety (Passel & Lopez, 2012, p. 4)

Undocumented immigrants who met these criteria were eligible to apply for a deferred action permit that shielded them from deportation for two years for a fee of \$465 and allowed them to qualify for work authorization (National Immigration Law Center, 2014a). Even though this program did not provide a path to permanent residence or citizenship, beneficiaries are able to apply for a two-year renewal. The Pew Hispanic Center estimated that approximately 950,000 individuals were immediately eligible and that another 770,000 may become eligible by aging into the program or by enrolling in school before applying for deferred deportation action (Passel & Lopez, 2012, p. 5). In February of 2014, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services released the number of

I-821D, Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals by fiscal year, which can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Number of Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals by Fiscal Year*

Fiscal Year Total	Request Accepted	Request Rejected	Request Under Review	Approved	Denied	Pending
2012	152,420	5,372	29,747	1,687	-	105,733
2013	427,601	16,352	44,987	472,473	11,191	94,670
2014 (YTD)	30,673	5,636	22,712	47,655	4,77	72,911
Cumulative Totals	610,694	27,360	N/A	521,815	15,968	N/A

*Table 1.* U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (2014). Number of I-812D, consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals by fiscal year, quarter, intake, biometrics and case status: 2012-2014 first quarter. Retrieved from <http://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Resources/Reports%20and%20Studies/Immigration%20Forms%20Data/All%20Form%20Types/DACA/DACA-06-02-14.pdf>

This document also showed that the top country of origin was Mexico with 467,983 applications of which 403,302 had been accepted (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2014). As well, the highest three states of residence were California (153,571 accepted), Texas (83,226 accepted), and Illinois (33,936 accepted) (2014).

**Texas.** Texas became the first state to provide college access to undocumented students in 2001 and laid the path for 17 other states to follow (National Immigration Law Center, 2014b). The battle in Texas began at the community college level in Houston and grew to encompass the entire state. During the spring of 2001, Rick Norega (D-Houston) and Domingo Garcia (D-Dallas) introduced House Bill 1403, which allowed undocumented Texas high school graduates to pay in-state tuition at public colleges and universities. To garner enough support for the bill, advocates relied on an economic

rationale based upon a report from the Texas State Comptroller stating that, for every dollar the state invested in higher education for undocumented students, the yield would be more than five dollars (Perez, 2009, p. xx). The basic requirements of H.B. 1403, detailed to become a resident for tuition purposes, students must have:

1. Resided with a parent or legal guardian or conservator during at least a portion of the 3 years leading up to high school graduation or the receipt of GED certificate;
2. Graduated from a public or private high school or received the equivalent of a high school diploma in the state;
3. Have resided in the state for at least three years as of the date the person graduated from high school or received the equivalent of a high school diploma;
4. Registered as an entering student in an institution of high education not earlier than the 2001 fall semester;
5. Provide to the institution an affidavit stating that the individual will file an application to become a permanent resident at the earliest he or she is eligible to do so; and
6. Not have established a residence outside the state (Strayhorn, 2006, p. 5).

In the fall of 2001, there were 64 students attending universities, 29 students attending health related institutions, and 300 students attending community colleges under House Bill 1403 (Strayhorn, 2006, p. 5).

Due to legal concerns, in 2005, the Texas Senate revisited the issues of resident status and passed Senate Bill 1528 which made residency requirements uniform

regardless of legal status (Strayhorn, 2006). To qualify for in-state tuition as of fall 2006: students must have lived in Texas for three years before graduating or receiving a diploma equivalent from a high school; must have lived in the state for 12 months prior to enrollment; and students who were not a U.S. citizen or permanent resident still needed to sign the affidavit as outlined in House Bill 1403. In the fall of 2007, it was reported that 9,062 students stated they were classified as residents for in-state tuition purposes under SB 1528. This represented slightly more than 0.8% of the enrollment in public institutions' (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2008, p. 2). It should also be noted that these numbers are for all students, regardless of their immigration status or nationality.

The size of Texas, and the historic undocumented population, caused this legislation to be a catalyst for other states. As of 2012, 17 other states followed Texas in enacting some level of in-state tuition legislation. It should be noted that as of 2009, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas also permit students to apply for state financial aid regardless of immigration status. These laws represent an extension of democratic rights for undocumented students; however, the reality still exists that without a change in federal legislation, these students' futures are still tenuous.

### **Persistence in Higher Education**

Persistence is one of the most studied areas of higher education and has produced volumes of literature. However, even though the research on persistence has spanned the last 40 years, there have only been marginal gains in retention at institutions of higher education over the last decade (Tinto, 2006). To begin, a brief overview of the path the retention literature has taken over the last 40 years is presented from Tinto (2006),

followed by a discussion of his Student Integration Model. Then a brief overview will be given of Bean's Student Attrition Model. Finally, the concerns that Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora raised about Tinto's theory will be discussed, which set the stage for a minority retention model to be developed.

**Overview of persistence.** Tinto (2006) provided a brief overview of the trends in persistence literature related to higher education, beginning approximately 40 years ago. The first theories regarding student attrition were viewed through a psychology lens and focused on the individual attributes, skills and motivations of students (p. 2). Students who did not persist were viewed as "less able, less motivated, and less willing to defer the benefits that college graduation was believed to bestow" (p. 2). From this viewpoint, the institution was held blameless for the student not succeeding. However, in the 1970s this began to change as the focus shifted to view the role the institution and/or environment played in a student's decision to stay or leave. Both Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) examined the interrelated connections among the environment, the institutional representatives that shape the environment, and student retention (Tinto, 2006, p. 2). The foundation of these models was that the relationships between the student and other members of the organization impacted the student's decision to stay or go.

Many of the early theories were criticized for their lack of complexity as they focused on traditional-aged, predominately white students who attended a four-year institution full time while living on campus. In part, this was attributed to the lack of minority students on campus before the 1980s. However, once campuses became more diverse, the research began to shift to students of different backgrounds and a broader array of environmental forces (Tinto, 2006, p. 3). Now, not only has the role of ethnicity



been taken into account, the variety of institutional types has been examined through a plethora of lens including sociological, psychological, and economic (p. 4). In order to understand the new research on persistence it is helpful to review Tinto's Student Integration Model.

**Tinto's Student Integration Model.** Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993) formed the first interactive longitudinal model regarding institutional departure by college students based on a sociological perspective (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In brief, Tinto's model began with the characteristics that the student brings to college with them such as "family background (e.g., socioeconomic status, parental values), personal attributes (e.g., sex, race, academic ability, and personality traits), and experiences (e.g., precollege social and academic achievements)" (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978, p. 348). These pre-entry attributes affected not only the student's initial goals and commitment to the institution, but also how the student engaged with the academic system. Engagement occurs in a variety of ways, which can be seen in the student's academic performance, interactions with faculty/staff, involvement in extracurricular activities, and through peer group interactions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The interaction with the academic system allows the student to integrate with the institution not only on an academic level but also on a social level, which further solidifies the student's goals and commitments. As Tinto (1975) explained, "other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion" (p. 96). Over time, Tinto's work has been tested in many settings and the basic theoretical underpinnings have been supported (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Some have criticized

Tinto's work, however, for its focus on assimilation/acculturation to the college environment, which may not be appropriate for minority students (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). While this will be discussed later, it is also helpful to examine Bean's Student Attrition Model.

**Bean's Student Attrition Model.** Taking a different approach to student attrition, over several years Bean (1980; 1982; 1985) advanced an alternative model regarding college persistence. Rather than look to sociology the way Tinto does, Bean drew his process from psychology and models of organizational turnover (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993). Bean hypothesized that students leave institutions of higher education for much the same reasons that employees leave work organization (Bean, 1980). Thus, Bean's Student Attrition Model "presumes that behavioral intentions are shaped by a process whereby beliefs shape attitudes, and attitudes, in turn, influence behavioral intentions" (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993, p. 125). Students' beliefs are affected by academic factors (pre-matriculation academic performance and academic integration), social-psychological factors (goals, utility, alienation, faculty contact, and social life) and environmental factors (finances, opportunity to transfer, and outside friends) (Bean, 1982). Those beliefs impact college grades, institutional fit, and institutional commitment, which lead to dropout syndrome. Thus the Student Attrition Model takes into account internal and external factors that lead students to drop out, while Tinto primarily examined internal factors. Through the model, Bean and Metzner (1985) further studied non-traditional students and found variables external to the college environment had a greater impact than internal variables. Furthermore, Bean and Vesper (1992) found finances had a significant impact on persistence and a small but significant

effect on institutional fit. While Bean's model gives us a different way to examine retention efforts, most of the literature regarding minorities has been based on Tinto's work.

**Critique of Tinto's Student Integration Model from a minority perspective.**

During the 1960s, many of the retention models focused on the importance of integration and assimilation into the dominant culture and thus into collegiate life. By the 1970's and 1980's however, critics began to question the perspective of white culture as superior and the minority culture as inferior (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993). Caplan and Nelson (1973) shifted the dialogue when they introduced the concepts of person-centered and situation-centered problems. When looking for solutions to person-centered problems, one would examine the characteristics of the person rather than any environmental factors that might be impacting the situation. On the other hand, when examining the context of the situation and what environmental changes are needed to help individuals succeed, one would use a situation-centered approach. Thus, in order to support minority students in higher education, the focus becomes a situation-centered approach to counteract the deficit thinking that has surrounded minorities in general.

To further look at approaches to aid in the retention of minority students, Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) used Tinto's Student Integration Model to explore how the constructs of the theory are flawed for minority students. While the authors stopped short of proposing a new retention model for minority students, the discussion highlighted the needs of minority students and gave us a basis for reframing the dialogue. Tinto's assumptions of separation and academic/social integration are critiqued against the interactionalist framework.

***Separation.*** In Tinto's early work on the Student Integration Model, the foundation relied on students separating from their families and previous lives to acculturate and assimilate into the collegiate environment. For a majority of students, this separation was often easy as the environment was familiar from their upbringing. However, for minority students, separating from their close ties with their family and leaping into a strange world was difficult. Thus, the first model to address this incongruence was Valentine's (1971) bicultural model based on African American students' experiences. The bicultural model stated that individuals could be committed to both an ethnic culture and the mainstream culture at the same time. Minority individuals have the ability "to step in and out of the repertoires of two cultures that were seen as distinct and separate" (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000, p. 134). While this theory was a starting point for examining how minorities address multiple cultures, it is very difficult for an individual to segment their lives in the ways that Valentine described.

In 1984, de Anda proposed the dual socialization model in which the ethnic culture and mainstream culture overlap, rather than being distinct spaces (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). The greater the overlap between the cultures, the easier time the individual will have socializing in multiple settings. Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) cautioned that dual socialization does not occur naturally in higher education settings and opportunities for students to relate to both their ethnic and the mainstream culture must be provided. For example, many institutions of higher education celebrate cultural holidays, which allow students to bridge their multiple cultures. As well, the notion of dual socialization assumes that both the ethnic culture and the mainstream culture are equally valuable, rather than assuming the mainstream culture is dominant (Rendon,

Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). In his later works, Tinto (1993) has stated that colleges are made up of many subcultures and individuals need to only find one community in which they can gain membership. While this is more in line with the dual socialization model, it would be ideal if colleges could adapt to a multicultural model.

*Academic/social integration.* In Tinto's original Student Integration Model once students separated and transitioned into the collegiate environment they then should focus on being incorporated into the life of the institution. Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora argued that incorporation is analogous to integration, which once again leads us to believe that minority students need to assimilate to the dominant culture. This assimilation framework fails to recognize the strengths of the minority culture and indicates that the only way minorities can succeed is to become more like the dominant culture. Thus, from the beginning, minorities are expected to fail rather than exploring the systemic barriers that have prevented them from excelling (p. 141). These systemic barriers are even present in the research on minority student persistence, as theories are used that were formed from the experiences of full-time residential white males. Even at this stage, the lack of research leading to a more comprehensive view of the minority student in regards to persistence is still a problem. The next section will look at factors that have been found to aid in minority student persistence.

**Latino student persistence.** Research demonstrating the challenges undocumented students face in transitioning to college has been limited. However, there is substantial literature about Latino students, who are also often low-income and first generation, accessing college. In order to understand the transition, it is helpful to

examine the educational pipeline, in terms of academic and social capital from both a Latino frame of reference and an undocumented perspective.

*Academic capital.* While the Pew Hispanic Center has found that Latino youth are as likely to enter postsecondary education by the age of 26 as their White peers, their pathways through college are often different (Fry, 2004, p. 2). Throughout the educational pipeline Latinos are not competing at the same level as their White peers. For immigrant students who join the U.S. educational system once they have already begun schooling, the differences in language, teaching style, and expectations are not the same as their home country. The No Child Left Behind Act led to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, which teach students in English only. Due to the increase of immigrants speaking Spanish, enrollment in these classes has continued to expand, especially in the states with high immigrant populations such as Texas, California, New York, and Florida (Cho & Larke, 2010). However, in a typical ESL classroom, the instruction has been delivered in English to students who have limited English competence, which often caused miscommunication (Cho & Larke, 2010). This trend continues to be a barrier for Latino students throughout the remainder of their education as it impedes their mastery of the English language.

Even for Latinos who begin in the U.S. educational system, as early as kindergarten, Latino students are scoring 5.5 points lower than Whites on mathematic assessments (Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005, p. 5). The gap worsens throughout elementary school and into secondary school, where the completion of three years of math by Latinos falls below the national average by 14 points, as only 42% complete three courses (p. 5). Not only was a deficit identified in the realm of mathematics, but

also a higher percentage of Latinos were enrolled in remedial English courses during their high school years than White students. This resulted in Latino students graduating from high school with less academic capital than their peers. While some have attributed the lag in math and English skills to the lower socioeconomic sectors that many Latinos inhabit, the fact remains that there is a 22% gap in the number of Latinos completing high school on time in comparison to their White peers (Fry, 2004, p. 1; Sólorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005, p. 281).

*Cultural capital.* In addition to a lack of academic capital, Latino families also had a lack of cultural capital when it came to their knowledge of the higher education system. Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, and Yeung (2007) found that 38.2% of the Hispanic college student population were first generation students (p. 11). Some parents of Latino students were simply not aware of what was involved in planning, preparing, or processing the proper paperwork for their child(ren) to attend postsecondary education. While studies have confirmed that most parents want their children to obtain a postsecondary degree and they encourage their children accordingly, they do not have the knowledge to be of much assistance in getting their children prepared to follow proper procedures to get into a postsecondary institution.

Nena Torrez (2004) conducted a survey of Latino parents in three different high schools in Southern California. The survey was used to determine what information was available for parents of Latino students that they could use to ensure that their children's eighth and ninth grade classes would prepare them for eventual entrance into a four-year college or university (p. 1). Through this survey Torrez was able to determine that most parents did not know what courses their children needed in grades 9-12 for college

entrance. “In fact, 30 percent stated they did not know whether a Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was an important factor in obtaining admission or financial aid” (p.2). However, 75% of the parents had a strong desire to see their child graduate from high school and then go on to college (p. 2).

Within the Latino culture the concept of family plays a central role and is far more expansive than the Anglo-Saxon view (Ortiz & Santos, 2009; Torres, 2004). Traditionally, Latinos value the connectedness of family and acknowledge the support that comes from the family unit, and in Spanish use the term *familialismo* (Torres, 2010). This family unit included not only the nuclear family, but in addition the extended family was comprised of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. The meaning of the term *familialismo* also included a moral responsibility to aid other family members who may be going through a rough time. Thus, upon immigrating to the U.S., family units were often comprised of a mix of the nuclear family and extended family, all within one household. While the family may not contain cultural capital, the support system is an important factor in Latino students’ success.

***Social capital.*** In addition to family support, the “social relationship from which an individual is potentially able to derive various types of institutional resources and support” was also important for Latinos aspiring to attend college (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, p. 116). Thus, social capital included “connecting students with gatekeepers in organization, role modeling, encouragement, advocacy (e.g., on behalf of a student), and feedback on how to navigate the educational system (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 268). A hindrance to Latino students was they generally had less structural access to institutional agents that have the ability to encourage students to attend



institutions of higher education (Nunez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, & Vazquez, 2013). As well, when Latino students were able to access an institutional agent, they received less encouragement to attend college in general or attend selective 4-year colleges (Fry, 2004). This lack of social capital combined with the lack of academic and cultural capital put Latino students at a great disadvantage when attempting to access higher education.

**Undocumented student persistence.** Undocumented college students come to higher education with not only the same stressors as other Latino and immigrant youth, but “they also face constant institutional and societal exclusion and rejection due to their undocumented status” (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). To access higher education, undocumented students have overcome the financial barriers of: 1) ineligibility for most scholarships; 2) inaccessibility to any federal financial aid including grants, loans, and work-study opportunities; and 3) inability to legally work in the U.S. As well, they faced barriers to obtaining drivers’ licenses and lived with the constant fear of deportation for themselves and their families. In spite of specific risk factors, which included elevated feelings of societal rejection, low parental education and working long hours at jobs that paid in cash, undocumented students were persisting (Perez, et. al., 2010). The following paragraphs examine the protective factors of supportive parents, participation in school activities, and the ability to stay below the radar.

Throughout the stories shared by undocumented students the theme of parental support comes to the surface (Lopez, 2010; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009; Perez, Cortes, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010; Perez, 2009). Most undocumented students recognized that their parents made great sacrifices to bring them

to the U.S., with the hope that their children would have a better future (Perez, Cortes, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). While the students found that opportunities were limited, they credited their work ethic to parents, who they often saw working multiple jobs to be able to make enough to survive. In a study by Gandara (1982) of successful Mexican American professionals, she found “that 93% of the professionals surveyed reported that the educational support they received from their parents during childhood and adolescence was the single most important factor affecting their high academic goals and expectations” (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). This further highlighted the importance of family within the Hispanic culture and the role that parents can have in the persistence of undocumented students.

Another theme that runs through the stories of undocumented youth is their involvement in school activities at the high school and collegiate level (Perez, Cortes, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). In contrast to civic engagement, Muñoz and Maldonado (2011) found that another factor that affected undocumented students’ ability to persist in college was their ability to stay ‘below the radar’ (p. 18). The students in the study had learned to stay invisible and silent through many academic debates about undocumented students, and, in some cases, had allowed themselves to be classified as international students to keep from raising suspicions about their documentation status. While this strategy allowed undocumented students to stay ‘below the radar’ and keep from drawing attention to them, it also silenced an important voice in the struggle of undocumented students everywhere. Until individuals are able to connect with the struggles of undocumented students, the movement towards equality will continue to be stalled.

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

Little empirical research on undocumented college students in higher education existed and was primarily limited to descriptive accounts of undocumented experiences and doctoral research projects (Albrecht, 2007; Burton, 2012; Feranchak, 2007; Garcia, 2011; Munsch, 2011; Villegas, 2006). However, over the last ten years there has been an increase in the availability of advocacy reports and research conducted by public interest organizations such as the Pew Hispanic Center and the National Immigration Law Center. In addition, law journals have presented research on the legal challenges undocumented students faced along with opinions on residency issues (Bruno, 2012; Connolly, 2005; Frum, 2007; Olivas, 2004; Olivas, 2005; Oliverez, 2006). Below, the most relevant research on undocumented students has been summarized.

Burton's (2012) dissertation may be the most recent literature regarding the experience of undocumented students in higher education. Through the use of qualitative data, Burton used Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Theory to analyze the multiple forms of subordination that Latino/a undocumented students experienced because of their race, language, socioeconomic background, gender, and immigration status. After interviewing four undocumented students, Burton concluded that the border crossing experience was a defining moment for the students. As well, throughout the school system the students were held back by the dominance of the English language and until they mastered the language, they were unable to successfully assimilate. Finally, due to the institutional and societal barriers the undocumented students in the study were made to feel like outcasts in the American society.

Munsch (2011) published a dissertation aimed at understanding undocumented

Latino students' experiences regarding the barriers they face and their sense of belonging on campus. In order to ground the qualitative study, the experiences of the Latino undocumented students were viewed through the lens of trust, social capital, and membership. While her study was conducted on a community college campus, the results mirror those found on university campuses. Four themes that emerged were barriers in life, distorted relationships, lack of support and fractured futures. The primary finding was that undocumented students overcame numerous barriers in order to access college and were unsure of what their futures held once they graduated. In addition, the students in this study stressed that their relationships had suffered due to their inability to trust others with the secret of their undocumented status.

Also in 2011, Garcia published a qualitative dissertation examining the experiences of nine undocumented students attending a public comprehensive institution in California. Garcia used a social capital frame to analyze the experiences of the students before and during matriculation. The major findings from this study included: institutional agents were instrumental and peer-based social capital was not only important for matriculation but also for further social capital development. In terms of institutional agents, Garcia found that during high school, the teachers and counselors that helped undocumented students lay out a plan to attend college were invaluable. Each of the students in the study gave examples of teachers and counselors who explained in-state tuition options and walked the students through the application process. The students also found supportive institutional agents at the postsecondary institutions they attended. Both faculty and staff members were able to assist the students in connecting to campus resources either through knowledge of support services such as tutoring or

additional scholarship opportunities. Garcia also found that relatives and friends provided important social capital to the students in the study who otherwise lacked the financial emotional and personal resources to attend college full-time. For many students this support came in the way of encouragement to attend college and in financial support, when available.

Albrecht (2007) also conducted research with undocumented Mexican undergraduate students in Texas. The focus of the Albrecht study was to examine the needs of undocumented Mexican undergraduate students for services once they matriculated to a selective, large, four-year institution in Texas. As well, Albrecht explored the perceptions held by university administrators at the same institution to determine the level of knowledge they had about the challenges and service needs of the undocumented student population. After conducting qualitative interviews with the participants, Albrecht used gap analysis technique to examine the difference between the students' reported needs and the university administrators' perceptions. From her research, seven themes emerged from the accounts provided by the undocumented students which included: struggling to succeed; feeling the pressure of being a role model; coping with frustration and uncertainty; managing life as a "hidden" member of society; missing out on opportunities; perceptions of self as compared to other students; and complications faced in utilizing campus services (p. 85). In regards to the theme struggling to succeed, the undocumented students in the Albrecht study demonstrated that they had worked hard throughout their educational studies to overcome all of the obstacles that were between them and their dreams. One of the obstacles that the students overcame was proving to others that as undocumented students they deserved a college

education, rather than viewing their college education as an entitlement. For some of the students in the study, they also had to prove to their family that their sacrifices to obtain a college education were worthwhile, while other students had very supportive family members. The second theme Albrecht found was students in the study felt the pressure of being a role model for their younger family members and for other undocumented students that were still in high school. Thus, for these students, they felt that they must succeed in the college environment in order to prove it was possible. However, even while being a role model, the students in the study felt frustrated that they were denied many of the opportunities that U.S. citizens were entitled to, which impacted them daily, such as a driver's license. For many students, the lack of identification played a major role in their ability to get a cell phone, rent an apartment, apply for credit cards, and to participate in everyday activities. As well, the students faced an uncertain future once they graduated from college, which weighed on them. Throughout their college experience the students reported that they were challenged to live life as a hidden member of society due to anti-immigrant sentiment and the need to protect their identity, which caused them to be invisible to campus administrators. While the students were not in agreement as to whether or not they wished campus administrators knew more about their challenges, the legal reality and lack of advocacy on campus was highlighted by the missed opportunities that the students reported. Such activities included the inability to pursue an internship, participate in study abroad opportunities due to re-entry issues, and the inability to participate in certain student organization activities. Albrecht also reported that the students struggled with their perceptions of self as compared to the other students. At the institution the students were attending, they were classified as

international students, even though the students felt that this unfairly categorized them. Even when compared to other Mexican-American students, the students felt they were outsiders due to their lack of documentation. This sense of being an outsider was further compounded by their first generation status. The final theme in Albrecht's research was that the students faced complications in utilizing campus services, as they were leery of revealing their undocumented status. While students felt comfortable utilizing the international office, financial aid office, career services, and advising services, the students rarely visited other offices on campus. In part, the lack of utilization was tied to the students' belief that the other offices were not aware of the unique challenges faced by undocumented students. This belief was confirmed through Albrecht's research with university administrators who reported having very little knowledge of the struggles and needs of the undocumented students.

In 2007, Feranchak also conducted a doctoral dissertation that examined the perspective of higher education leaders in 18 high immigration states to determine their views on providing educational benefits to undocumented students. Through a quantitative analysis, Feranchak found there were no significant differences in attitudinal means based on gender, professional level position, age group, years of experience, or the presence of in-state tuition benefits. However, there were differences found in attitudinal means based on ethnicity, political affiliation, institutional type, and among institutions that granted in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants.

Villegas conducted a master's thesis in 2006 that focused on undocumented Latino students' experiences and stressors. Through the study, Villegas found students: had difficulties coping with their undocumented status and that the students: 1) felt a

stigma attached to their undocumented status; 2) were very uncertain about their futures; 3) experienced financial difficulties; and 4) feared deportation from the U.S. In order to counteract the stressors, Villegas found that students found encouragement for their college studies from family members, campus peers to whom they disclosed their status, specific offices, and student areas on campus where they felt safe in spending their free time.

It should also be noted that three other books have been instrumental in framing the discussion around undocumented students. In 2009, Perez published a book that examined the stories of undocumented students at the high school, community college, and university level in addition to following up with college graduates. The lives portrayed in Perez's book have set the stage for much of the research that followed. Additionally, Lopez's 2010, book examining high achieving undocumented high school students' transition to college in North Carolina, helped to frame the experiences of students in a less than supportive state. Finally, the monograph edited by Price (2010) provided an overview of the issues for undocumented students pursuing a higher education and contained some practical suggestions for student affairs staff who work with this vulnerable population.

### **Summary**

This chapter has examined undocumented students from several different perspectives. Demographic information has been provided about this group of individuals to give context for the legal and policy debates that followed. Not only were national laws and policies examined, but also special attention was given to Texas laws and policies. The reality of the legal implications for undocumented students framed the



research that has examined persistence for not only Latino students, but undocumented Latino students as well. However, as the persistence sections show, the educational pipeline is severely hampering students as they attempt to access higher education, which has been highlighted in the studies that have been conducted. In the next chapter the research methodologies for this study will be explained including the research strategy, data collection procedures, student selection, data recording procedures, data analysis procedures, and strategies for validating findings.

### **CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of the study was to explore why undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree. As the literature review highlighted, the research on undocumented students experience in higher education is in its infancy. In part this may be due to the necessity for undocumented students to live in the shadows in order to avoid deportation. However, as the laws of the U.S. change through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, sponsored by President Obama, and the pending legislation known as the DREAM Act, the future may hold a time when these students can be open and honest about their lives. In the meantime, it is important for institutions of higher education to learn more about why undocumented Latino students enroll and how to support them in their persistence towards a degree. Throughout this chapter, the research methods used to examine the research questions will be explained.

#### **Introduction**

Each year between 65,000 and 80,000 undocumented students graduate from high school and approximately 49% will go on to enroll in some type of higher education by the time they turn 24 years old (Lopez, 2010; Passel & Cohn, 2009). In Texas alone, 9,062 students took advantage of Senate Bill 1528 in 2007, which allowed students to pay in-state tuition if they met the requirements; it should be noted that all of those students were not undocumented or Latino (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2008). However, even though more undocumented students are pursuing higher education, the research on undocumented students, particularly the factors that affect their persistence, is limited.

Thus the Grand Tour question of this research was: why have undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree? Through understanding why undocumented students accessed higher education, the ways in which these students perceived their college experience, and what factors led them to persist in pursuit of their degrees in higher education administrators may be better able to design strategies to support these students. In addition the following sub-questions were explored:

1. How do undocumented Latino students describe their interactions with the individuals who influenced them, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college?
2. What has the lived experience been like for undocumented Latino students attending a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution?
3. What driving forces did undocumented Latino students identify that aided in overcoming the barriers that were faced in the enrollment process and as enrolled college students?

### **Research Strategy**

It is appropriate to use qualitative research when a “problem or issue needs to be explored” (Creswell, 2007, p. 51). In this study, the issue of persistence of undocumented Latino students at a public four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution in Texas was explored using the phenomenological research tradition. The phenomenological approach was appropriate, as the problem was one in which, “it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Moustakas (1994) goes on to explain that phenomenology is

applicable to human science research as:

1. Phenomenology is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essence of phenomenon or experience is achieved.
2. Phenomenology seeks meanings from appearances and arrives at essences through intuition and reflection of conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts, judgments, and understandings (1994).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

**Site selection.** The site for this study was a public four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution in Texas, which was part of a system of universities that had campuses across the state. In order to protect the students attending the institution, Dream Valley University was chosen as the pseudonym. In the fall 2013, there were approximately 17,500 students enrolled in undergraduate studies and 2,400 students enrolled in graduate studies, bringing the total enrollment to over 20,000 students. The composition of the student body was 89.9% Hispanic, 3.2% White Non-Hispanic, 0.6% Black Non-Hispanic, 0.0% American Indian, 1.1% Asian, 2.1% International and 3.1% other ethnicity. As well, there were approximately 730 students that took advantage of Senate Bill 1528, which provided in-state tuition, although not all of the students were undocumented nor Latino. Over time Dream Valley University had been recognized as a premier Hispanic-Serving Institution, had been used for many research studies and was consistently ranked in the top five nationally for graduating large numbers of Hispanic students. Since few of the studies on undocumented students have taken place at four-year Hispanic-Serving Institutions, this was an ideal site.

**Student selection.** The participants in this study were undocumented Latino students who had matriculated in degree programs at Dream Valley University. In order to protect the students during the research study, permission to conduct the study was sought from Dream Valley University, who deferred to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which granted permission (Appendix A). As well, no one under the age of 18 was allowed to participate in the study.

During the fall of 2013, Dream Valley University hosted over a 125 student organizations on campus, one of which was dedicated to supporting and advocating for undocumented students. The pseudonym for this organization will be “Dreamers”. Many of the undocumented students had formed a support network through Dreamers and were open with each other about the barriers that they faced. For this study, a purposeful criterion sample was used in order to identify potential students. Creswell (2007) explained, “the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). To form the sample the criteria outlined that the students must have:

- Been 18 years of age or older (for consent purposes)
- Identified as undocumented
- Identified as Latino
- Enrolled at the four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution full-time and
- Had an academic standing of at least a junior.

In order to identify potential students, the researcher requested that the Dreamers student organization send out an invitation to participate in the study (Appendix B).

Three students responded through email or text, and the researcher responded via email

(Appendix C) with the screening survey (Appendix D) and consent form attached in English and Spanish (Appendix E). When an individual met the criteria, they were then selected to participate in the study (Appendix F). The fourth individual for the study was referred by one of the members of the Dreamers student organization and was also provided with the screening survey to ensure he met the criteria for the study before participating in interviews. All interviews took place between July of 2013 and March of 2014.

During the first interview the students were asked about the individuals who influenced their decision to attend college and all of the individuals were able to name at least two individuals who might be willing to be interviewed. At the end of the first interview the researcher asked the student to provide an invitation to participate in the study to the five individuals who influenced the student the most. By using the students as a conduit to deliver the invitations the researcher did not encroach upon the individuals need for privacy should they be undocumented themselves. The invitations were provided to the students electronically and in a hard copy, and in one case the student provided the researcher with the direct email for the influential individual. None of the individuals who influenced the students were willing to contact the researcher, even though the researcher followed up with the students several times. Although it is speculation, since many of the influential individuals were the parents of the students, they may have feared getting involved due to their undocumented status. While the intention had been to create a research question pertaining to the individuals who influenced the students to attend college, this portion of the research was unable to be completed.

In this study, language was not a barrier between the students and the interviewer. Based on state legislation, in order for the undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition under Senate Bill 1528, they must have lived in Texas for three years before graduating from high school and must have graduated from a state high school or received the equivalent of a high school diploma. Since all of the students had lived in Texas since they were 13 years of age or younger, they all had a basic understanding of the English language.

### **Data Recording Procedures**

In order to capture the lived experiences of the students a semi-structured interview was conducted after the students provided consent (Appendix G & H).

Seidman (2005) explained:

If the goal is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry. Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior (p. 11).

Since interviewing allows a glimpse into another person's life, it is imperative to create a relationship between the student and the researcher. Seidman (2005) further explained, "interviewing is both a research methodology and a social relationship that must be nurtured, sustained, and then ended gracefully" (p. 95). Acknowledging the positionality and privilege of the researcher, several strategies were used to aid in the relationship building. Although the site chosen for this study possessed characteristics that allowed the research to be meaningful, the researcher had also worked in the Dean of Students

division at Dream Valley University for over 10 years. Although the researcher had taken another position at a different higher education institution two years prior to this study, the students would have been freshman at the time, and would have been quite familiar with the researcher's name because of the involvement with student organizations. Of the students interviewed, only one had not previously heard of the researcher. Another strategy included using the Dreamers student organization to help recruit potential students. While only a small portion of the undocumented students at Dream Valley University belong to the Dreamers student organization, most of the undocumented students on campus knew a member of the organization. Since the members of Dreamers student organization often represent the concerns of the undocumented students to the administration, they have become trusted members of the community. Thus by having a trusted member of the community deliver an invitation to participate in the study, the researcher was able to be presented as trustworthy. Finally, the student organization office and counseling center were made aware of the study, so if they were asked, the research was deemed credible.

*Undocumented Latino students' interviews.* The students chose the locations and times of the interviews to aid in their sense of having control in the process and so that they felt safe in the space. During the interviews a digital audio recorder was used to capture the exact words of the students. As well, this allowed the researcher to participate actively in the interview so that additional questions could be posed in response to "informants' answers, the social contexts being discussed, and the degree of rapport established" (Hatch, 2002, p. 23).

Due to the sensitive information the students shared, the Institutional Research



Board at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln requested that only two interviews take place with the students in order to allow the researcher to collect the necessary data while having the least amount of contact with the students. Three of the students participated in two semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 22 minutes and 110 minutes. One student was unable to meet twice so one interview was conducted that lasted slightly over two hours. At least three days before the interview, the students were provided with a list of the questions that would be asked and a copy of the consent form to review. Before the first interview began, the consent form was given to the student again and consent was obtained verbally. In order to protect the students' identity the researcher transcribed the audio files. The transcriptions were provided to the student either via hardcopy or email, based on the students' preference, before the second interview so that the student could review it and make any necessary changes or additions.

Before the second interview, the student was once again given the consent form and the questions that would be asked at least three days prior to the interview. The location and time of the second interview was chosen by the student and following the interview, the audio files were transcribed and the transcripts were given to the student to review. After transcription and verification, the audio files were erased. In order to protect the students' identity all findings are presented using a pseudonym that was obtained through a random Hispanic name generator.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

To make meaning of the interviews, a thorough analysis of the data was conducted. The first stage involved the researcher composing field notes as soon as the interview had finished to document perceptions of the interaction between the researcher

and the student. Once the field notes were generated the researcher transcribed the audio recordings and presented them to the students for review. If the students made recommendations or corrections to the transcriptions, those edits were made. Due to the timing, the researcher was only working with one student at a time during the interview process. Thus as the researcher transcribed the data and points of interest arose, during each subsequent interview those themes were investigated further. After the data was collected and transcribed, the formal data analysis and coding of the transcripts began.

In Moustakas (1994) two methods are described to allow for the analysis of phenomenological data. For this research project the Van Kaam Method was used:

1. Listing and preliminary grouping
2. Reduction and elimination
3. Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents
4. Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application
5. Construct for each research participant a Textural-Structural Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120).

Thus the coding first identified significant statements that were made by the students. Those were then examined so that units of meaning or themes emerged and duplicate themes could be reduced. Once the themes were reduced they were then used to construct the essence of the experience. The themes are reported in Chapter V through the use of thick rich textural and structural descriptions. This process allowed the essence of the phenomenon to be discovered through the students' own words, which formed the answers to the research questions.

**Strategies for validating findings.** In order to make sure that the findings from this study are credible, several procedures were used to establish validity. Creswell and Miller (2000) defined validity “as how accurately the account represents participants’ realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them” (p. 1). Thus strategies used to establish credibility produce inferences drawn from the data, which creates validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Creswell and Miller (2000) outlined nine strategies that can be used to ensure validity in the study based upon the researcher’s viewpoint. One of the strategies that Creswell and Miller discussed is the constructivist viewpoint which:

Lies squarely in the interpretive tradition of qualitative research with flexible guidelines, a focus on theory that depends on the researcher’s view; learning about the experience within embedded, hidden networks, situations, and relationships; and making visible hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity (Creswell, Hanson, Clark-Plano, & Morales, 2007, p. 251).

Since this study was based on the constructivist viewpoint, the validity procedures used were disconfirming evidence and thick rich description.

The first validity procedure that was used in this study was disconfirming evidence. Once the data was gathered and the primary themes identified, the data was combed for evidence that was consistent with or disconfirmed the themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). While researchers often want to look for evidence that supports their findings, searching for evidence that disconfirms the themes acknowledges that reality is complex and different viewpoints exist. As well, in the reporting of the research, thick rich descriptions were used to allow the reader to believe “that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study” (p. 4). This required presenting

the findings so that the contexts of the words could be understood so the reader could determine if the findings were applicable to other settings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). While these methods assisted in creating validity and were aligned with the constructivist viewpoint, one other procedure was also used.

In order to ensure that the information from the interviews was an accurate portrayal of the undocumented students' experiences, a member check was conducted after each interview by providing the student with a copy of the transcript of the interview so the students could verify and include additional information. The transcript review occurred as soon as possible after the interview to ensure the topics discussed were still fresh in the students' minds to produce the most accurate results. Due to Institutional Review Board limitations the researcher was unable to contact the students to review the themes that were discovered during data analysis.

### **Researcher's Personal Bias & Knowledge**

One of the key assumptions of phenomenology is that the researchers "set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective towards the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). Thus, it was important to examine the personal bias and knowledge of the researcher before the study began. The researcher was raised in South Texas, which is an area of contradictions. Although the South Texas area has seen substantial growth, the area is still characterized as one of the poorest in the nation (Richardson & Resendiz, 2006). In addition, although this area has one of the highest rates of drug seizures in the nation, the violent crime rate is below the state and national averages (p. xii). The area is thriving, in part, because of the underground economy; however, the migration from Mexico has an "increasing strain on

the infrastructure, including transportation and communication systems, schools, housing, and health and social services” (Richardson & Resendiz, 2006, p. xiii). This has caused a mix of sentiments in the area regarding immigration ranging from openness to hostility.

The researcher had worked in student affairs for 13 years in Texas at two institutions, through which close bonds had been formed with a variety of students, including undocumented students. Both institutions had large numbers of undocumented students attending, in part due to the close proximity to the Texas/Mexico border. The first institution the researcher worked at was Dream Valley University, which became the site selected for this study. Shortly after graduating from Dream Valley University the researcher began employment in higher education working with student organizations and eventually took on a leadership role within student affairs. The institution the researcher moved to is a small state supported technical college which serves the local area offering certificates, associates of science, associates of applied science and the academic core. At this institution the researcher has been involved in enrollment management and increasing retention rates.

The high numbers of undocumented students had caused both institutions to struggle with many policy issues due to the legal complexities undocumented students face. At one institution a decision was made, since undocumented students are unable to legally work, those students would be prohibited from filling any leadership position on campus in which stipend or tuition assistance was provided. This policy effectively banned undocumented students from participating in the student government association, being a mentor on campus, or participating in several other student leadership positions, even as a volunteer. The impact on the students who were attempting to give back and

serve the institution in which they had great pride in was devastating. Situations such as this one, led the researcher to focus in on this vulnerable population.

Coming from a place of intersecting privileges (white, middle class, English as a first language, educated) the researcher began to use her voice to advocate for these students from a social justice perspective. Through the research process, there were times in which the researcher had to actively monitor the desire to intervene and advise the students regarding their academic paths. Bracketing also became important during the data analysis phase of the research to make sure the voice of the student was presented in an honest and truthful manner. Knowing student development theory espouses that persistence is often tied to involvement on campus, the researcher wanted to discover what aided undocumented students in persisting towards their goal of earning a degree. Through this research, higher education practitioners may be able to implement change on their campus to aid this subpopulation of students.

### **Summary**

This chapter began with an overview of the research questions and why the phenomenological approach was an appropriate research methodology. As well, the data collection procedures were outlined which addressed the site selection, student selection and the procedures that were used to record the data. Finally, the procedures used to analyze the data were presented with a focus on strategies for validating the findings and an explanation of the researchers stance. In the next chapter an in-depth look into the lives and personalities of the students will be used to frame the discussion of the data in Chapter V.

## **CHAPTER IV STUDENT PROFILES**

This chapter will focus on the experiences of four undocumented students attending Dream Valley University and is divided into two sections. To begin with, a general background of the students and their characteristics will be outlined in order to frame their similarities and differences. This overview then leads into an in-depth look at each student's family life, their educational pipeline and their current immigration status. During this in-depth look into the lives and personalities of the students, direct quotations from the students will be used to add a dimension of rich texture.

### **General Background**

As was stated in Chapter III, Dream Valley University is a Hispanic-Serving Institution located in South Texas. In the fall of 2013, Dream Valley University enrolled approximately 20,003 students of which more than 17,500 were pursuing their undergraduate degree. Overall, 89.8% of the student population was Hispanic, which has led to Dream Valley University being consistently recognized as one of the top Hispanic undergraduate and graduate degree-producing universities. Dream Valley University saw more than a 10% increase in the number of undocumented students attending during the fall of 2013, bringing the estimated number to over 730 students.

A total of four Dream Valley University students participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews between the summer of 2013 and the spring of 2014. The students in this study were all junior or senior undergraduate students from a variety of academic disciplines (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Dream Valley University Student Characteristics*

Name	Age	Gender	Country of Origin	Age at Arrival	Level	Major
Reynaldo	20	Male	Mexico	3	Junior	Communications-Journalism
Noe	20	Male	Mexico	13*	Junior	Civil Engineering
Tania	20	Female	Mexico	7	Junior	Environmental Science
Luis	22	Male	Honduras	12	Senior	Communication Studies

\*Noe was few months old the first time he was brought to the United States and 13 years old the last time.

As can be seen in Table 2 above, all of the students in this study met the criteria outlined in Chapter III. It should be noted that all of the students came to the U.S. before they reached 14 years of age, which the literature shows is significant (Passel & Cohn, 2009). All of the students entered the U.S. by crossing the Rio Grande River on foot, and in Noe's case by car in a subsequent crossing. At the time of the interviews Noe, Tania and Luis had all received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and Reynaldo was awaiting his Matricular Consular, an identification card issued by the Government of Mexico. Since Noe, Tania and Luis had their DACA, they were all working in order to earn money to support themselves. Noe worked off campus at a fast food chain while Tania and Luis both worked on campus. All of the students had performed well at the University and were planning on staying in the U.S. if they could find employment. Only Noe had considered moving back to Mexico if he was unable to find a job. Now that an overview has been presented, the information below presents an in-depth background on each of the students.



## **About the Students**

**Reynaldo.** At six feet tall Reynaldo has a strong presence in a room, but his brown eyes are as soft as his voice. After graduating from high school in 2011, Reynaldo started at Dream Valley University majoring in Communications with a specialization in television and film. He is now in his junior year and has turned 21 years old. When the interview began Reynaldo would hardly make eye contact and answered the questions very directly, but once he began to feel more comfortable, Reynaldo found his voice and even cracked a few smiles. During our first interview, I was struck that throughout his life, Reynaldo had made the most of whatever situation he found himself in and then almost seemed to stumble into the next opportunity without having a firm plan as to where to go next in life.

**Family life.** When asked about his family, Reynaldo is very quiet and the researcher perceived that his family had focused on their future rather than the past. Shortly before I arrived for the interview Reynaldo asked his mother when he had been brought to the U.S. so he could be prepared to answer the questions that had been provided to him. Although his life began in Mexico, Reynaldo is only vaguely aware that his parents completed either elementary or middle school and that some family members still reside there. Reynaldo was three years old when he was brought to the U.S. to begin a new life on a different side of the Rio Grande River. As the oldest of 11 children, Reynaldo was the first to complete high school and the only one to go to college. When asked what it feels like to be the oldest, Reynaldo responded, “well...that I’ve got to set the example,” and then laughed.

Since Reynaldo moves home for the summers, he was kind enough to invite me to his house for the interview. The frame house sat on a small lot with houses flanking both sides. Dirt was packed in the front yard from being trampled by small feet and in the back several chickens clattered in a coup. Inside the front door, the main living area was open into the kitchen and two threadbare couches sat facing each other. Off the main area there appeared to be two bedrooms with a bathroom in between them. Although the window units were only in the bedrooms, the house had been well designed to allow a breeze to blow straight through the middle of the house. During the first interview, the house was extremely quiet as all of the children had left for church, but during the second interview the house was bustling with activity. A brief afternoon rainstorm gave the children the opportunity to frolic in the puddles that had formed in the packed dirt, and there was joyous laughter filling the space around the house.

***Educational pipeline.*** When Reynaldo was little, his schooling began at Head Start since Spanish was the only language that he had ever known. From there, Reynaldo was placed into ESL classes in elementary school without any explanation as to why. Before transitioning to middle school, Reynaldo was in mainstream classes and excelled as a student. During middle school, Reynaldo became part of the Gear Up program, which aids low-income students by providing them with information and the motivation to attend college. In high school Reynaldo was very involved and participated in UIL and student organizations, spending most of his time at school. Reynaldo's extracurricular interest lead him to be prepared to take dual enrollment classes with a local community college during the academic year and at Dream Valley University over the summer.

Although Reynaldo thinks his parents expected him to go to college, Reynaldo was not as sure that he was going to make it there. Reynaldo explained: “Ah...well to be honest, once I found out...about like that I was undocumented...I was like, ah, I might not make it to college. But I was just like well, since I’m here, like I’m in high school, so I might as well make the most out of it.” Through the efforts of his Gear Up counselor, Reynaldo was able to apply and be accepted to Dream Valley University.

***Immigration status.*** During the summer between his freshman and sophomore year of high school, Reynaldo went with one of his friends and their mother to the Department of Motor Vehicles to apply for his driver’s license, and was unable to complete the application when asked for his social security number. When dropping Reynaldo off, the other mother asked Reynaldo’s mother for his social security number to finish the application, and Reynaldo found out that he did not have one. Reynaldo explained, “Like I had suspicions before...but...that’s like where I found out like officially. It was...it was...it was kind of heartbreaking.” Rather than get depressed, Reynaldo became more determined to make the most of his time in high school since he did not know if he would be able to go to college.

Currently Reynaldo has applied for his Matrícular Consular, an ID for Mexican Nationals who are not living in Mexico, however his paperwork has been sent for review. At this time, since Reynaldo is juggling school and filling the role as the president of the Dreamers student organization, he has not applied for Deferred Action or tried to change his immigration status in any other way. When asked what being an undocumented individual meant to him, Reynaldo replied, “Like I wouldn’t like really use it to describe

a person. To me, it's just like you can't do certain things that other people can. I'm...that's basically it."

**Noe.** It was late in the evening when Noe walked into the library and introduced himself. We settled into a table out of the way and Noe began to tell me about his upbringing in Mexico and the U.S. Noe is currently a 20 year old pursuing a Civil Engineering major and is looking forward to graduating in another year and half. In addition to attending school, Noe began working part time at a local fast food restaurant once he received his Deferred Action paperwork.

**Family life.** Born in Valle Hermoso, Tamaulipas, Noe along with his older sister, were brought to Dallas, Texas when he was only a few months old. The family made a life in Dallas, until Noe was six years old, and then, due to financial struggles, the family returned to Mexico to start a new life. However, once they were back in Mexico, Noe's parents found that they were still struggling to find enough work to support their family. Although it was a hard decision, Noe's father returned to the U.S. to look for construction work, leaving his family behind in Mexico, sending money as often as he could. During times in which there was not enough money, Noe's mother would take jobs cleaning houses to help support the family. From the first through the third grade Noe attended school in Mexico before his father reunited the family in South Texas. Although Noe was able to complete the fourth grade in Texas, his mother had an accident and was deported back to Mexico. Rather than keep the family apart again, Noe's father moved the children back to Mexico to be with their mother. When asked if it was stressful going back to Mexico after the accident Noe explained, "It was like we were already established here. Like we had a home, I mean friends and a school, we were in

extracurricular activities, like band or soccer. So we had to let go of everything again and start over there again, find a home over there.” For the next two years Noe’s father worked in both Mexico and the U.S. to provide enough money for the family. Thus Noe was able to attend the fifth, sixth, and seventh grade in Mexico before moving back to South Texas for the eighth grade. Since then, Noe has lived in Texas and attended school with his five siblings.

Although Noe has family on both sides of the border, keeping in touch has been difficult because of the distance. Due to their lack of documentation, his family cannot go back into Mexico to visit relatives nor go past the Border Patrol checkpoint to visit relatives in north Texas. Noe’s four younger siblings are all U.S. citizens, so as they get older they will be able to have the freedom to travel that the rest of the family does not.

***Educational pipeline.*** For Noe, schooling was a series of starts and stops between Mexico and the U.S., with ongoing sets of challenges. As Noe explained “it was a long process for all of us to understand like the school, and the difference of the schools.” One of the main challenges for Noe was learning to speak and write in both Spanish and English as he was moved back and forth between the two countries. When asked how school was different in Mexico than in the U.S., Noe explained:

I think here we have a lot of opportunities and more accessibility to a lot more things. The benefits I think, or the aids that we get here, they are not given over there. Like the scholarships and that stuff. It’s hard for a student to get one over there because of the low income that everybody has. And I think the classrooms they are pretty much different. The teaching is almost the same, I think. Um, I think the most important part is like the meals and the transportation that they

provide here, makes a lot of difference. That's why a lot of students drop out over there earlier because of the...I think it's harder to go to school and keep going because of the problems.

Once Noe exited ESL classes in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, he was able to excel and took technical concurrent enrollment classes dealing with computers.

*Immigration status.* Noe explained that when he was in fourth grade and they crossed the border to come back to the U.S. he knew, "I wasn't coming the right way because I was crossing the river, you know what I mean?" For Noe it was a scary time because he was unsure of what was going to happen and his mother was fearful and crying. However, the desire to reunite their family was stronger than the fear the family felt crossing the Rio Grande River. In addition, Noe explained the hope the family held for a better life in the U.S. "We didn't have any other options because of the way of living we had over there, and we knew more or less, or they knew more or less over here we could have a better chance succeeding, or at least living well the years that we are here." Each trip brought with it the hope for a better future.

In January of 2014, Noe received his Deferred Action paperwork, which has given him the ability to work so he can pay for his school expenses and provide some money for his family. However, Noe is worried about what will happen when the two years for his Deferred Action run out as he anticipates that he will have just finished his bachelor's degree. When asked what being an undocumented individual has meant to him, Noe explained:

I feel that it's a lot of barriers, I can't, like I do have the dreams or whatever, but I can't act on them. I can't like plan in the future, too much future, I just plan in the

near future. Like next month or next two months cause I can't plan in two years I will do this. That's why I haven't even started on the requirements for the graduate school. I don't even know what, which colleges there are. I know I want to, but it's like a big dream. I don't even know if I will legally be here. Even if I graduate, I don't know if I graduate from here being legal. As right now, so I think it stops me from doing a lot of things.

Even with the frustration that Noe feels, he is determined to finish his degree so that he can be a role model for his siblings and help support his family.

**Tania.** It took almost three months to be able to coordinate a time to meet with Tania for the interview, and even at that it was late in the evening when she had a few hours to spare. Tania has immersed herself in her college experience and is involved in numerous activities, student organizations, and has become a student leader on campus. When looking for students to interview, Tania was mentioned as a person I had to meet from every student. Although small in stature, Tania has a larger than life personality and her enthusiasm for life is contagious. Over the two hours that we talked, she poured out her autobiography and shared her passion for the immigration movement.

***Family life.*** Tania was the third of four children born to her mother and father in Vicente Durango, Durango, Mexico. By the time Tania was old enough to go to school, her father had disappeared and her two older sisters had dropped out of school to help raise the two youngest children. However, at 14 her second oldest sister immigrated to the U.S. leaving behind the three remaining children and their mother in Mexico. Since Tania's grandparents owned land in Mexico, their mother was given a house in which to

raise her family and Tania spoke warmly of a simpler life in Mexico growing up. Tania explained:

I never really saw the hardship I guess as a kid. I don't think you see how hard it is to like make ends meet and things like that. I think as far as people go, I think we were pretty well off, but I guess it wasn't enough.

Tania's mother cleaned houses in Mexico and attempted to open a restaurant but was never able to get it to come to fruition. Over the summer of 2001, Tania's mother moved the family to a border city where they stayed for several months before meeting up with the two men who would help her family cross the Rio Grande River into the U.S. Tania, who was eight at the time, shared:

And I remember, I was like what are we doing, we're going to get in the water, I've never been the water, I did not know how to swim. So I didn't know what we were going to do. And the man, he put me on his shoulders. And literally there was rocks, you could walk over the rocks to the other side. So, you know most people term people that cross the river *mojadas*, and I'm like, well I didn't get wet.

The journey that day left an impression on Tania as she remembers walking for a long period of time before a family along the path offered them water. While visiting with the family, Tania was shocked to find out that the family knew her older sister who had immigrated to the U.S. several times, using the same path each time she returned after being deported. Once they reached their destination, the family settled into life in the U.S. and her mother began making a living cleaning houses.



**Educational pipeline.** Tania and her brother grew up learning to take care of the school supplies her mother worked so hard to provide. To protect the children's books, Tania's mother would wrap them in plastic so they would not get wet when it rained. Her mother also stitched together sheets of paper from the papeleria to make notebooks, which they could not afford to buy. Even in the dire conditions, Tania was a smart student and did well in her studies.

The hardest thing about the transition to the U.S. for Tania was the communication barrier and not knowing what was expected of her as a student. Tania shared a poignant example:

I remember we had to, you had to do like the sign, the "R" or whatever, the hand sign to go to the restroom and I didn't know how to do it. And the teachers were just like this is how you blah, blah, blah, and I was like okay. But I didn't know how to do that, I didn't know how to speak English. So I when I would have to go to restroom they wouldn't let me go because I couldn't speak like English, or I couldn't do the sign or whatever.

Paired with her young age, the communication barrier left Tania feeling like no one was listening to her and made the transition even harder. However, once she was able to master the language, Tania began to excel in her classes and was able to graduate in the top 10% of her class with quite a few college hours through dual enrollment courses.

**Immigration status.** As early as fifth grade, Tania knew that she was being kept from going on school field trips because she did not have a social security number that would allow her to travel past the Border Patrol checkpoint. For Tania, it was not about missing the trip, she felt compelled to keep safe the family secret of being in the U.S.

illegally. Tania shared that once her friends began to get their driver's licenses the questions became more persistent.

So it became harder and harder and harder to like make up lies to my friends, right? To people that I call my friends, it was kinda hard, and mostly because you have to keep up with it. You know what I mean? You can't let anything slip off, cause it's like wait, what? You know cause you're afraid that people are going to give you out or whatever.

The fear of others finding out during high school was so great that only two friends knew about her status. However, for Tania, applying for and being granted Deferred Action has allowed her to be open about who she is and to connect more fully to the immigration movement which has become her passion. Thus when asked what being an undocumented individual means to Tania she explained:

But I think that being undocumented means being different. I mean obviously there are people that are like well there are bad people who are undocumented, and I totally agree with that, like I mean I know that. But I mean I'm a DREAMER, you know what I mean? I want more and more. And I mean I'm crazy with some of the things that I come up with, I want to this, I want to do that. I'm a go-getter. So I think being undocumented is awesome. I'm an undocu-bad-ass!

And with this perception, Tania has her dreams set on changing the world.

**Luis.** The first time you meet Luis you get to know an extremely energetic, entrepreneurial, fraternity leader who has his eye on graduating from college and starting the next chapter in his life. For the few individuals he entrusts with his life history, a

Lifetime movie comes to mind and you see the makings of a great American story. At barely 22 years old, Luis just earned his bachelor's in communication and has plans to earn his master's and start a non-profit organization to help individuals take advantage of the changing tide of immigration reform.

*Family life.* Luis was born to a 17-year-old mother in Honduras and shortly after his birth his parents immigrated to the U.S. leaving him behind with his grandmother, who also raised two of his cousins. Described as the Three Musketeers, one cousin is now 24, Luis is 22, and his younger cousin is 21. When speaking of his youth, Luis's eyes lit up and he stated:

Life over there, was you know for a kid, it was happy. You don't see a lot of violence; I didn't see a lot of violence until I started getting older. But in the beginning, it was all like, all I had to do was go to school, come home and sell fruit.

School only lasted half a day in Honduras, Luis had plenty of time to peddle fruit to his neighbors in the afternoons starting when he was seven. As he turned older and the economy worsened, Luis also added a trip to the nearby city, about a 20 minute bus ride, in the morning to sell handmade bread to the local business men before he went to school. At an early age Luis began to learn people skills and his ability to bring money into the house earned him a certain amount of respect. However, Luis explained that:

Like, my grandma would be like I was 2 dollars short sometimes. Like pesos, which is, peso's is like less than a quarter. Like she wouldn't smile, I don't know. I was a kid, I was 8 years old and she started hitting me, whatever. And then I wouldn't do good at school I would be get beat up.

This family violence was imprinted on Luis growing up and shaped his view of life in Honduras.

When he was 12, Luis's grandma helped him start the journey to the U.S.:

My grandma and I took a bus to Guatemala City. From Guatemala City we went to the Guatemala border, which was about half a day from there. And then we went, when were in Chiapas, which is the Mexico border from Guatemala, we crossed, we crossed illegally from that, from the border. We crossed in a float, in a big old 18-wheeler floating. That's how we, they make like six of them, and they make platforms on top and they just see people and they start running across the thing. And then they put you in a car and they drive you. You pass the checkpoint. And then, you don't need to say, you know you're just passing through the checkpoint; they've already paid the police office.

Once Luis and his grandmother reached Chiapas, they stayed at his aunt's house until they could find a coyote who would take Luis from Chiapas to Veracruz. Then from Veracruz he was passed off to another coyote that took him from Veracruz to Matamoros and then from Matamoros to the U.S. During the last part of the journey, Luis was molested and "from that point on the trip became a nightmare". The trip from Veracruz to the U.S. was supposed to cost his mother \$10,000, once the coyotes realized that Luis's birth certificate was from Honduras they extorted another \$5,000 from his mother to keep his paperwork from Honduras.

Luis was reunited with his mother; however, it was not a joyful housewarming.

From the beginning he explained:

My parents, she didn't even say welcome home, this is my house. No she's very strict. These are the rules of my house, you follow them, this is it. He's your stepdad. You listen to him, you follow him and you know the transition wasn't easy at all.

As well, Luis's mother stressed from day one that he was in the country illegally so he could not afford to mess up. Not one to back down from a challenge, Luis set a course to acculturate as quickly as possible and to become Americanized.

***Educational pipeline.*** In Honduras at the end of the school year in September the top students from all of the schools would gather in a parade through the town for the Guadale Honorario, in which Luis would always march. When he moved to the U.S. he kept this same focus on school his grandmother had instilled in him when she had pushed him to become a doctor. Although he started in ESL classes when he entered the seventh grade, by the time Luis reached the eighth grade he was already taking pre-advanced placement classes and looking for ways to better himself. Throughout high school Luis took dual enrollment classes at a local technical college and a university and graduated high school with over 60 college hours.

***Immigration status.*** From the first time that Luis met his mother his immigration status was clear he was in the country illegally and the stakes were high. While Luis was trying to assimilate to American ways and take advantage of opportunities to be involved in high school, his mother felt it was her duty to bring him back to reality by keeping his immigration status in the forefront of all of their conversations. Outside of the family though, Luis was very secretive about his immigration status and only shared it with school personnel who needed to know in order to advise him on the best course of action.

For Luis, one of most difficult things about lacking documentation to be in the country was changing his dream of becoming a doctor that his grandmother had embedded in him. Luis explained that being undocumented has meant:

Opportunities taken away from me. Um at the beginning of college I did okay and then when I started getting my grades back I wasn't able to travel. I couldn't get that, you know, exposure to traveling to different cities for different studies, like you know leadership conferences. I couldn't travel out of the city. I couldn't get those, I couldn't get trips and summer programs that I wanted to do. And a lot, a big reason why I couldn't, a big reason why I changed majors is because I knew I couldn't get into medical school.

The barrier of getting into medical school led Luis to reconsider his options and rather than waiting until people are sick, Luis wants to work on the front end in health education to raise awareness of how individuals can help themselves.

Luis has also found more doors opening for him since he received Deferred Action. Although Luis had been working in the restaurant business since he was in high school, having his paperwork has given him the ability to garner more respect in his jobs and to be able to take positions that will help him further his career, such as working for the university. Through it all, however, Luis's focus has been on giving back to others and changing the world each and every day.

## **Conclusion**

An understanding of the backgrounds of the students allows us to glimpse at the forces that have shaped their lives. Each of these student's families has played a key role in the way they view the world and their life experiences. However, once each of these

students enrolled in college they have taken control of their destiny and are achieving amazing things. The next chapter will examine the sub-research questions in order to answer the grand tour question, “why have undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree?”

## **CHAPTER V AGAINST ALL ODDS**

By understanding the background of the four students attending Dream Valley University, the data can be understood in context. This chapter is divided into three sections, which relate to the data regarding the research sub-questions:

1. How do undocumented Latino students describe their interactions with the individuals who influenced them, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college?
2. What has the lived experience been like for undocumented Latino students attending a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution?
3. What driving forces did undocumented Latino students identify that aided in overcoming the barriers that were faced in the enrollment process and as enrolled college students?

When possible, direct quotations were used to provide a rich description including the tone and language utilized by the students.

### **Decision to Attend College**

The decision to attend college was not made lightly by any of the students as it meant exposing their families' undocumented status, which they feared could lead to deportation. However, the desire to improve their situation and to chase after the American dream was greater than the risk it posed. In examining, "how do undocumented Latino students describe their interactions with the individuals who influenced them, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college?", the question was divided into two parts: who influenced the students and what



circumstances effected their decision to enroll in college, which will be addressed in order.

**Who influenced the students?** The answer to “how do undocumented Latino students describe their interactions with the individuals who influenced them,” brought forth a great deal of emotion from the students as they talked about the individuals who had believed in them. All of the students had family members who had been supportive of their dreams and friends that they competed against. As well, three of the students participated in a college readiness program that motivated students to attend college and helped them prepare to further their education.

*Parents.* The students’ families played a key role as the students talked about those who influenced them to go to college. Watching their parents struggle was a powerful motivator for these young people to want more for their lives. When Luis was asked what role his parents had played in his decision to attend college, he responded:

The biggest role. I saw my parents, when I saw my parents, when I see my parents, I see young, they’re 39 years old. I see young individuals who lost hope for, who lost hope to get educated because they have to work to feed us. And I didn’t want to be like that. I didn’t want, not that it’s bad, but I want to have a better future for them and for myself. So they played a role, they are a constant reminder of what my past is, that I want to be better.

Throughout high school and college Luis watched his parents struggle to feed four boys. Luis’s mother worked as a home health care provider and his stepfather as a construction worker, up until the past seven months when his stepfather was physically unable.

Watching his parents struggle drove Luis to want more from his life so he could help support his family.

This struggle was also echoed in Tania's story as she recounted her mother saving to pay for school supplies:

I mean even though school is free and things like that, uniforms aren't, school supplies aren't. So my mom would work very hard, like every summer she would take money for the next year. So I thought that we had like a five gallon jug or whatever and every day, every time she had time she would put in like a dollar or things like that. So I would see that thing fill up and then like school would come around empty. And that's just because it was just me and my brother at the time.

So I mean I would see how hard she would work so I would try harder in school. Even though Tania's mother made a career as a housekeeper, she would always push her children to study first rather than do household chores. Through this sacrifice, Tania witnessed her mother's support of her education, stating:

I think, well my mom has always been a big support. And although she's never demanded, oh you have to go to college, she did say like you know you have to get an education. Like it's, like it's a better life. I mean, at the end of the day that's why we're here, right, like that's why we're in the U.S.

While Tania's mother has struggled less in the U.S. than she did in Mexico, raising two children on her own has still been difficult. Tania has been able to feel the constant support of her mother, which not only pushed her to excel in school, but also caused her to want to better herself to show respect for what she had been given.

Although the students felt support from their parents, there was also an underlying theme of angst once the students began to apply for college. Noe was able to summarize this fear when he stated:

At first my Dad was very....you can say he was encouraging me to go to an upper level institution, but when the time was going, or nearby he was, nervous about the applications. What if they spot us or something...do you know what I mean?

This fear even led Noe into researching his college options in Mexico. However, through his research Noe realized that he knew even less about the higher education system in Mexico than he did in the U.S.

Even against the backdrop of this fear, the students still felt encouraged to seek out their dreams to see if college would make the difference for their families they believed it would. Their parents' message that education was important had become ingrained in the students and their academic achievements had placed college within reach. For three of the students, their siblings were also a motivating factor.

***Siblings.*** The desire to be a positive role model for the younger siblings was also a motivating factor for Reynaldo, Noe, and Luis when deciding whether or not to attend college. With ten brothers and sisters looking up to him, Reynaldo described how it felt to be the oldest:

Well...that I've got to set the example...[laughing]. Um, ya, well like I said, like I found out I was undocumented and then plus I'm the oldest, so it's like even, so I was like you know, I'm not going to give them an excuse to slack off. You know, if I can do it, you can do it. And well because it's like ten siblings you

know it's like, well if it were one or two, like maybe it, like maybe I could let you down maybe not.

Throughout the interview Reynaldo spoke of working with his younger siblings to help them find out what they are passionate about so that they can make the most of their high school experience. However, there was a tone of disappointment in Reynaldo's voice when he spoke of his sister who should be enrolling in college, but instead is getting married because she is pregnant. In the future Reynaldo hopes his sister will at least pursue a degree at the local community college, in order to become educated as she also lacks documentation to be in the U.S.

Along a similar line, Luis also spoke of being a role model to his younger brothers. When asked if his younger brothers played a role in his decision to attend college, Luis responded:

Definitely. I want them to; I want to be the role model. I want them to be that, I want them to be, my brother who didn't have anything, and then we have this. I want them to see that and then they're smart, that they themselves can be better than what we had, than what our family has forged for us. Because we just, if we don't strive to educate ourselves we're just going to stay in the same circle of poverty.

Luis has also spent considerable time with his younger siblings assisting them in school and helping them to find the right path for their interest, whether at the local technical college or at the university level. When speaking of his youngest brother who is five, Luis smiles and shares that he plans to pay for his educational expenses.

The playing field will be different for Reynaldo's and Luis's younger siblings though, as all but Reynaldo's sister are U.S. citizens. This is the same case for Noe, who explained when asked how being a role model made him feel:

I think it makes me feel good, but I think but more responsible on them. Give me a bigger responsibility on them because, well it's a big change from them to me. They are legally here. Just me and my older sister are not. So they all four are legally here so I think they have way more opportunities than I did had in that time that I came to college. So right now, if everything goes well that I am working and that my Dad is working, they have a lot of benefits that I didn't have at that time.

While the siblings that are U.S. citizens will not have to overcome the numerous barriers that their older siblings did, all of the students spoke about aiding their brothers and sisters in taking advantage of opportunities that they missed while in school. In many ways, the older siblings have taken on the role of an American parent to their siblings since they understand the education system.

*Extended family.* Although the majority of the conversation around family members included parents and siblings, Luis and Noe spoke about extended family members being an influence on their decision to attend college. Since his grandmother raised Luis from the time he was two until he was 12, his grandmother is the one he cites as having the greatest impact on his decision to attend college. Luis explained, "My grandmother had the biggest impact. You know she, higher education, she always pushed, pushed, pushed to get educated as much as I could." In addition to being an

advocate for education, Luis's grandmother also instilled in him the confidence that he could succeed in life:

And then she always told me that I, and she was like you're bright, she's like you're going to do better, you're going to do something great, you're going to do something great. So that mentality started just, people start treating you like that. You know you start telling someone they're going to do great, and then, not just that, she started telling me I was going to do great, she started giving me the tools.

When Luis came to the U.S. at age 12 his mother was very straightforward with him about the limitations due to his undocumented status. Rather than seeing his mother as encouraging he viewed her actions as keeping him grounded. Thus his grandmother has been a great inspiration in his life.

In addition to Luis's grandmother, Noe also spoke about the hope his cousin provided for him in reaching his educational dreams. Although his cousin moved to the U.S. before Noe, he saw his cousin as successful once he was able to enroll in Texas A&M University. Noe shared his view of his cousin:

So he was like a role model to me. I knew I couldn't, because of my time of being here I couldn't make it as far as he in high school, like to get a third place in school. But I knew at least I could go to college. And he was very encouraging for me. He always told me that I could, even if he knew that his parents or my parents maybe wouldn't think about it that way for me, so he was a very big encouragement for me I think.

Once Noe's cousin graduated from college, he was able to enlist in the Air Force and continues to encourage Noe to finish his degree.

Due to the immigration patterns of the families as they moved to the United States, only Noe has an uncle that lives in the immediate area. The rest of the students talked about family in north Texas, Nevada, California, New York and Illinois. Given that the students did not have extended family around them, they leaned heavily on their friends for support.

***Friends.*** Since friends are the family a person chooses for himself, all of the students chose a strong “family” to support them. During high school, all of them were very secretive about their status and only a few individuals knew they were undocumented. However, their friends were a major source of college information for these students as Luis explains:

Because I didn't grow up, I didn't grow up with, like you know my parents didn't go to college, so my parents didn't, my parents weren't the ones, oh you have to go college, you have to go to college, you have to go to college. I knew I wanted to go to college because my friends had the idea to go to college. So my friends always, I always knew their parents went to college. So their parents told them you are going to college, and they're like are you going to college? I was like what is college? So that's when I started finding out what college was. Some of my friends knew they want to go to their colleges since they were like in seventh grade. They're like; I'm like wow, that's so impressive.

Through his friends, Luis was able to gather information about the importance of entrance exams and an overview of the process. After high school, Luis fell into a depression as he faced the reality of his friends leaving for college, and he doubted his ability to enroll due to his undocumented status. One of his friends took it upon himself

to drive Luis to Dream Valley University and make sure he completed the admissions process.

Once the students were able to learn what college was about and what was needed to get in, they began to focus on surrounding themselves with the right people to help support them in their journey. Tania explained the role of her friends:

So they played a big role, and we were all concerned about where are we going to go from high school. It was, it wasn't anymore about are we going to go, it's like where are we going to go? What are we going to do? How are we going to do it? Like it was going to happen. So we all, we would apply together, sit there go through Apply Texas and like things like that.

As well, her friends became a source of competition for Tania. When her best friend scored higher than she did on the ACT, Tania took the exam again to make sure she had the highest score.

However, for Reynaldo, the process of finding supporting friends was a little harder to do in the neighborhood he grew up in:

Like the ones that lived near-by were like good people, but they were kinda a bad example for my brothers and sisters. And so I stopped hanging out with them as much. I would hang out with them at school but not at home. And then I met some other guys, like these guys are going to college and are going places, so those...and actually yesterday, they were here yesterday, I invited them over and we were just hanging out...And like one of them is an engineer, and the other one is an accountant, and another is a speech pathologist...and I was like wow I chose good!



Reynaldo found that by choosing good friends, they also became his support network in college. By keeping track of each other, Reynaldo and his support group of friends were able to make sure that they will all graduate in four years.

Their choice of friends became very important as all of the students shared stories when their friends pulled them through tough times. As well, the friendly competition eventually led all of the students along their path to finding a way to enroll in college. For three of the students, that path involved guidance from a college readiness program.

*College readiness programs.* An important piece in not only influencing the students to consider going to college but in helping them complete the admissions process was involvement in college readiness programs. Reynaldo and Tania participated in the Gear Up program at their local high school while Luis was involved in a pre-med program through a health science university. For Reynaldo, the exposure to the Gear Up program began in middle school and he explained that:

I think really the reason I really decided to go to college was because of the Gear Up program. They kept on pushing it on us, and hey guys come on think about it, the about the stuff you're going to do after high school.

Not only did Gear Up push the students, it also served as a mechanism for tracking the students through the application process, which for Reynaldo was key.

In Tania's case, while the message was important, the speakers that Gear Up exposed her to were inspiring. When asked who influenced her decision to attend college, Tania responded:

I think it was the Gear Up program, and I'm talking in general cause with them it was like the first time I had ever been in a college campus. The first time I had

ever even explored what a major was, what a minor was. And I think seeing people, they always had speakers, motivational speakers, and I remember seeing them and it's just like, oh they're somebody. They went to school, know what I mean, so I've got to get to school too. So I think, I guess in general it was Gear Up. Seeing teachers and professionals. I mean they didn't get there, I mean maybe some of them did, but I mean most of them had an education, you know what I mean? So I was like I need to get an education.

At the time, reinforcement of the impact a college degree would have on your life was an important message for Tania, since no one in her family had a college degree. As well, Gear Up exposed Tania to the wide range of options when it came to a college education.

Not only did Gear Up and the pre-med program provide motivation for the students to attend college, both programs also walked the students through how to enroll in college as undocumented students. The connection that Luis made with the coordinator for the pre-med program he was involved in helped him find his path. Luis explained:

And then she, I remember talking, when she took me in eighth grade to the trip in San Antonio, I told her, I told her, look this is my second year here, I don't have any documents, this is what I want to do, and she's like 'well let me look into that'. And then, when my junior senior year came about I was already, you know I was already settled, you know like what am I going to do? And I remember giving her a call...do you know anything, and she's like yes.

The willingness of the coordinator to find the path for Luis was echoed in the experience that Reynaldo and Tania had with their Gear Up mentors as well. All three of the

mentors found the answers for the students and walked them through the application process. While these individuals assisted the students with motivation and the how-to, the students were also successful because of their preparation and determination to succeed.

**Circumstances.** Along with the individuals supporting these students, there were also other factors influencing these students to attend college. In order to determine “the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college”, it was necessary to comb through the transcripts and focus on the factors that influenced the students’ belief that they were prepared for college. The drive that led the students to prepare themselves for the rigor of college academics was the same determination that pushed the students to further their education.

***English as a Second Language.*** When all of the students started their educational journey they were placed in a Head Start program or English as Second Language (ESL) classes to teach them English. Reynaldo was too young to understand what was occurring when he entered into the Head Start program in Pre-Kindergarten. For Tania, Luis, and Noe however, the desire to move into mainstream classes was a driving factor in their success. When asked about being in ESL classes Tania explained:

So I think I felt, maybe not exactly different, but I felt, I mean being placed in an ESL class when, you know what I mean, I was just like “no mas por que hablo Español”, I’m over here. And while it was a bad, I like I felt segregated I guess if you would say. I think maybe, I like the attention that we would get from the teachers it was more personalized. We had like five people so I mean we were

pretty good students, we would learn a lot. But I think, ya segregation, as weird as it sounds I guess.

Tania was in ESL classes from second grade until either fourth or fifth grade. While she became close with the students she was with during those years, Tania felt as if she was not being pushed to assimilate.

Although Luis did not use the word segregated, the experience of being in ESL classes also had a negative connotation when he started seventh grade. Luis described his transition:

So, um when I moved in there I started in the, I was a little chubbier than normal, so I started, I was made fun of. I was bullied a little bit. But it wasn't that, I didn't feel connect, I didn't feel that I belonged in that group of people. When I started in the Spanish classes, when I started in the low level classes as a beginner learner. I didn't feel like I belonged there. I never felt that I belong there. I always wanted to be, I wanted to learn more. I always wanted to, I wanted to participate in class, you know? I knew that school was going to be my way out of what my parents were going through.

It took two years in ESL classes before Luis was able to mainstream into regular classes. However, during his time in ESL Luis found that the new students were placed with the students who had already been there for a year, thus when balancing two needs, the more advanced students were held back. Had the system been different, Luis felt he would have exited sooner and been able to assimilate with his peers earlier.

Through Luis's and Tania's accounts, it was clear from the beginning the ESL classes were seen as something that was barring them from what they wanted to

accomplish. It should be noted that for Noe, the ESL classes were a way to get the help he needed:

Ya because we were, all the students were the same situation so you get to meet a lot of people that are like you. So you make like bonds with them and learn more. I think because the teacher also understand your situation and they help you more. Help you to find the ways that if you are by yourself, they try to look for other people that can help, even if the language is a barrier. In that situation, in that years. That is the best part, that you meet new people that are like you. And the teachers, I think they are prepared for it because they get the training. So they can talk to you the right way, with the patience that you need in that struggling time. And then there are classes were like less hard, because of that class if you are struggling in that class, if you are struggling, you can go and ask your teacher from the ESL and they could help explain it.

Noe was adamant that had he been placed in mainstream classes from the beginning he would not have done as well in high school as Spanish speakers surrounded him at home. To this day, Noe struggles with his English and this continues to be an area in which he is trying to improve.

While Tania was able to move out of ESL classes before she started middle school, both Noe and Luis were able to complete ESL classes before beginning high school. By mainstreaming into regular classes the students felt they were better able to assimilate to American culture and academics more easily. Once the students reached high school, their academic careers accelerated quickly.

*Academic preparation.* Not only did the four students in this study graduate with their high school diploma, they all had earned college credits as well. Part of what made this possible was their focus on high school academic courses. Noe was able to participate in concurrent enrollment with a local community college while in high school because his counselor guided him towards technical courses. Noe explained:

I took um; most of them were computer based. Like um, I think like as a secretary and something like that. I took a lot of those. The Spanish class that you take. So I took those. I didn't took like English AP or History, or math, I didn't.

In retrospect Noe shared he wished he had known about dual enrollment courses, as this would have advanced him further in his college career. Although Noe was eligible to graduate a year early, he chose to stay in high school another year to work on his English and study skills.

Reynaldo, Tania, and Luis all participated in dual enrollment courses with a local community college, a technical college that offers academics, Dream Valley University, and another university. For Reynaldo, his undocumented status was a motivating factor to take dual enrollment courses as he explained:

Ah...well to be honest, like once I found out...about like that I was undocumented... I was like, ah, I might not make it to college. But I was just like well, since I'm here, like I'm in high school, so I might as well make the most out of it. Like while I'm here so I can start taking dual enrollment classes, I took summer classes at Dream Valley University.

While in high school, Reynaldo's Gear Up counselor guided him into completing four college courses including College Algebra and Rhetoric & Composition I, which in addition to his ACT scores allowed him to qualify for a scholarship that has paid for his tuition the entire time he has been at Dream Valley University.

Tania also participated in dual enrollment courses while she was in high school and was able to complete Calculus, Rhetoric & Composition I, Rhetoric & Composition II, and Literature. In addition she took the CLEP test for her Spanish Literature and Spanish Language & Composition and was able to pass with a four. In recounting her college courses, Tania made the observation, "so I can say I'm equally bilingual."

Through participating in dual enrollment at a local technical college and another university, Luis was able to graduate from high school with approximately 60 college hours. Luis explained:

And I didn't want to be in the regular classroom, I started striving for AP classes and college classes. So by the time I graduated high school I came with about 60 college credits, out of high school. And my sophomore year I was already taking College Algebra and then college, I had taken AP physics, AP chemistry. So started taking all of those classes early on. Cause I never felt that I belonged there. I felt that I was just there, I was there to learn, get the most out of it but I'm not like those, I didn't feel like I was a regular student in the class.

By taking so many classes in high school, Luis was able to graduate from college in four years even after switching majors from pre-med to communications half way through his college career. As can be seen in the students' academic preparation, there was another factor that influenced their decision to attend college: their determination to succeed.

*Determination to succeed.* As the students talked about their academic preparation and the reasons they enrolled in concurrent/dual enrollment courses in high school, their determination to succeed was obvious. All of the students had a desire to improve their lives and were willing to do what it took to succeed. While for Reynaldo and Noe that determination came from a desire to get a better job, for Tania and Luis their determination was seated in a desire to accomplish something greater than themselves.

The question was posed to Reynaldo as to what he thought he was going to accomplish by getting a college degree. He responded:

Well you always hear, they always say that getting a job is going to be more difficult without a college degree. Where before it used to be high school, it was going to be difficult to get a job without a high school degree. So I kinda, it kinda like scared me or whatever. Once I have my proper documentation to get a job, I want to have also that, I don't want to wait until I get it and then go to college cause that's just...

Although he was not able to finish his thought, for Reynaldo the push was to be prepared to work when he finished college. During the interview Reynaldo spoke about his desire to continue his education if he is not able to legally work when he finishes college.

While Noe's reason was also focused on being prepared for employment, he has been focused on his dream since he was very little. Noe explained:

I know I have the, I don't know, the willingness to succeed. I'd like to see the difference of being without the degree and with the degree. I'd like to make my parents proud. Because my dad had the opportunity, as I said before, to graduate



or maybe start a career, but he was, he didn't have any goals. Future goals. And that has been my idea since I was very young, five years old, six years old, to get something, a degree. I don't want to be an employee, an unskilled employee, maybe like that you can say. So, that's it, I think.

For Noe, his father not finishing his degree at the community college in Mexico shaped the family's future as he watched his dad struggle in the construction industry. Since the family's struggles moved them back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico several times, Noe sought out a degree at Dream Valley University, in which he could find employment on either side of the border.

Although Tania knew in high school that she was smart and that would allow her to succeed in college, there was a deeper motivation within her. Tania explained:

What got me here, I guess, I guess it sounds very bad. But I guess it's like the hunger to succeed. Like the hunger. I know I wanted to be an engineer because I wanted to prove people wrong. Like I was like, I want to be a girl and I want to be an engineer. So I'm going to be a girl engineer, how about that? You know, so it's like, the hunger to succeed. The hunger to show people that you can do what people think that you can't do.

That hunger to succeed has pushed Tania to not only enroll in college, but to continue to question what her purpose is and what she can do to contribute to improve her community. While Tania eventually changed her major from engineering to environmental science, her will to succeed is still very much present in everything she does.

The determination to succeed was also mentioned by Luis, “You know, like I said I like enrolled because I wanted to, I felt like I had a greater purpose in life than just being limited to that. And the persistence became more like overcoming those challenges.” For Luis high school was a chance to grow and learn as much as possible before attending Dream Valley University, where he has focused on becoming a better man.

By examining the impact that being placed in ESL classes had, the academic preparation that these students undertook and their determination to succeed, it is clear that these factors were able to influence them to attend college. Equally important were the family members, friends, and college readiness personnel supporting the students in their journeys. Next the lived experiences of the students attending Dream Valley University will be discussed.

### **Lived Experiences**

Once the students were able to enroll in Dream Valley University they began to experience college life. The next section will focus on the themes relating to the question, “what has the lived experience been like for undocumented Latino students attending a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution?” All of the students began their journey with expectations of what college would be like, which included fears about their finances. This fear led three of the students to them find employment. While their employment cut into their free time, all of the students found time to be involved with student organizations while on campus. For one student, this involvement led to an incident of discrimination. However, the students’ connections to faculty and staff

caused them to feel supported through their journey. In the end though, they all still struggle with being an undocumented college student.

**Expectations.** After graduating from high school all of the students had from various sources, including movies, a vision of what college was going to be like. However, none of the students had a clear understanding of what would be expected of them. In the following paragraphs the students' expectations will be explored.

Although Reynaldo began to take college classes at Dream Valley University during the summer before his senior year, he described how his expectations compared to his experience:

Well it's true, there's that the film one where like it's so easy, they make it look so easy in movies and stuff. And then there's the, like where you hear like...what do you call it...commentaries or...like the infomercials there's like customers, what's that word called...testimonies, like people would hear that once you go to college you're going to have to be on the ball and stuff. So like you have two different perspectives on it, well is going to be like this or is it going to be like that. So when I went there first, during high school I was a bit scared, I was like oh man. I did everything. I wrote all the notes and stuff. And ya, but it was, I guess, high school helped me like transition. It wasn't such a big hardship or challenge.

Since Reynaldo had already experienced a college classroom during high school, his transition was much smoother than the others, who had taken their dual enrollment classes on their high school campuses. In many ways, Reynaldo explained that he found his college classes to be easier due to better textbooks.

The transition was much harder for Noe, as he failed to understand the scheduling of the classes. Noe described his issues with time management:

I don't know. I knew I had to work a lot. Like financially to get a job and that stuff. But I wasn't aware about the time management issues, that I told you before, that I've having trouble with that. Keeping up with my work because of my job or something else. I didn't, I knew I had to had more responsibilities, but not that much. Or how the classes were going to be here, I didn't knew how the schedules work and that stuff. So I thought I was going to come from 8 in the morning to 3, like high school and then leave. So that's what my expectations were, so when I came here, I had a lot of time, free time, that's what I thought. A lot of free time in between, so and I wasn't working. So I wasted a lot of time in my first semester and I got not as good grades as I wanted to, I wanted them.

For Noe, his participation in a migrant housing program became vital as he was paired with a mentor who was able to make his transition smoother. During the interview, Noe stressed that his first semester he was lacking even the basic knowledge of the importance of syllabus. Due to that lack of knowledge, he failed a course his first semester by not taking the online quizzes that were discussed in the syllabus.

While Reynaldo and Noe had expectations about the academic rigor of their courses, Tania's expectations mirror the traditional college student. Tania explained:

You know you think college and you think all of these crazy parties and all this stuff. I was expecting it, I guess to be like that. But I guess I kinda like, no. I've been on scholarships so I know that I can't, I can't mess up. My GPA can't go down, I can't afford college if that would happen. I would be gone. So I knew

that wasn't going to happen. But I had, I guess I had a view that oh you're going to go and be away from home, and do whatever you want. Your mom doesn't have to know where you go. Go to parties, things like that. And I think that was my view of college. Like, how, you know, you're going to go and get a degree but it's like, might as well have fun while you're doing it, right? That was, I guess that was my view of college as a teenager.

Once Tania started college, she quickly realized that the desire to go to parties was tempered by her need to keep her grades up. However, while Tania thought her relationship with her mother would change, in reality she still found herself sharing her daily activities with her mother.

While Luis was not sure as to what his expectations of college were, he has definitely seen the way that college has transformed his life. He explained:

College has met every expectation. I think college has just changed my life completely. You know it changed my life completely where it build me from a kid to a man... Now college is more, you have to define who you are, make yourself. What do you believe in, what are your rights? What do you believe in, what do you stand for? And then having that, having to stand for myself and having the ability to, the strength, having the ability to protect myself and protect others. And college gave me that power. So I feel that college changed the way that I think of family, the way I think of family, the way I think of other people, is definitely, giving me the ability to see the world is an equal opportunity.

For Luis, his college experience has far surpassed his expectations of what he would gain by completing his college degree. While Luis still wants to have a positive impact on his family, he has also found that he has grown through his time at Dream Valley University.

All of the students had an expectation of what college would be like, and all of them have found that the reality is slightly different. However, the students have shown they have the ability to succeed in the college environment, as they are either juniors or seniors. Throughout their time in college, finances have weighed heavily on their minds.

**Finances.** For most students paying for college is daunting, and without access to federal financial aid it was even more difficult for these students from Dream Valley University. Since Texas offers state financial aid for undocumented students and scholarships were available, the students were able to piece together a way to pay for their education. However, since several of the students received scholarships that were tied to their success in college, two of the students' plans have changed due to low grade point averages, which impacted their scholarships.

When the students started college they were not aware of how their finances would look at the end of the first semester. Noe discussed his concerns:

I don't know, well ya because when I, like a month before I was going to start my freshman year I didn't even knew how much was I going to get, how much they were charging in the school, I didn't even knew how much was I going to pay. So when I started and I finished my first semester I was very relieved about it.

That first semester was very stressful for Noe due to not being sure if would have enough money to pay for the semester. As well, the other students were equally confused about their finances.

Luis echoed the same sentiment when asked on how he planned for paying for his tuition when he started:

I didn't. I said I'm going to make it somehow. I didn't. I honestly did not. I, I didn't. I knew I was going to make it somehow and I wanted to work. So once I found out that I could, there was no stopping me or telling me I couldn't go. As soon as I said yes you can come into the University, I said I'm going to find the ways to make it there.

This blind optimism was presented in several of the students and they had the belief that they would be able to make their way.

The average tuition at Dream Valley University for 12 hours was \$2,600 in the fall of 2013. When Reynaldo entered the University he qualified for a competitive full tuition scholarship and a housing scholarship, which took care of his basic needs. In addition, Reynaldo qualifies for state aid he gets in a form of a disbursement. Reynaldo explained:

Well, my disbursement, once we get our disbursement I save that for the whole year. Whatever I get in the fall, even though I know I'm going to get some in the spring, it's not as much as in the fall so I save it up. And I only spend, cell phone bills and anything that I, books and that's pretty much it. Everything else is saved... Well, I have to, it's either that or I don't have any more money. So I work with a fixed budget. Whatever I get is what I have for the year.

The ability to be disciplined enough to save his money for expenses throughout the year is something few other students possess. However, since Reynaldo does not work, his disbursement is the only income that he has to survive off of for the year.

When Noe began college he received a migrant housing scholarship that allowed him to take care of his housing and food needs. Since that scholarship was only for a year, he now works to pay for his living expenses as his tuition is covered by state aid. For Noe, the ability to handle his expenses is a relief as he explained:

I kinda was worried about my parents because of my dad's job that maybe sometimes it's not that safe or secure for him. Because when it rains he doesn't have a job or something like that. But at least I knew I wasn't a burden anymore like that. Those feeling vanished away when I got the application TAFSA and everything done... So right now I kinda work more for me than for my parents. I do help them but it's more for me because of the necessity to pay my rent, my food and supplies. So it's for me.

Noe has found that his part-time job along with his financial aid has been enough to support him. However, due to missteps in their academic career, Tania and Luis have struggled more to pay their bills.

When Tania began to attend Dream Valley University she was able to pay for her education through state financial aid, university designated funding, a scholarship for high achieving students, a housing scholarship, and a scholarship for students whose parents make less than \$40,000 a year. After failing a class, she lost the scholarship for high achieving students, she still has a positive attitude regarding her finances:

Um, yes because um, well at first I was like on all scholarships so I didn't have to pay anything out of my pocket. But then, um since I had failed that class, right, whoops, some things got slashed out of my financial aid. So that was kinda hard I guess, but then it's, like even at that I still have it better than most students, you



know most students have to pay for college. And then most people who are undocumented have to pay for college, and as an undocumented student I really don't have to really worry about it. I mean maybe it's a couple hundred dollars a semester that I have to put in, but I guess it's not as demanding as if my mom had to pay for all of my college.

As Tania mentioned she is grateful that as an undocumented student, she has been able to attend college without incurring debt. In addition, her part-time jobs with the university over the last year have allowed her to help support herself.

Luis also found himself in a similar situation when he slacked off academically and his financial aid was reduced:

And Dream Valley University is not so expensive, so it's good to manage. I feel that 3,000 dollars, it's doable you know. Financial aid cost about, financial aid cost me about, they give me about 2,000 dollars, I mean tuition is 3,000 dollars. A 1,000 dollars, I can work. I mean I've got hands and feet so I can work. So I worked a lot of times, I worked and I got emergency loans out and I paid back.

So, because I did, I did slack off academically too, you know?

By being quick to take responsibility for the impact allowing his grades to fall had on his financial situation, Luis has found a way to work for the money he needs. However, Luis more than the others has struggled throughout college to have money for food, books, and clothing. He explained when asked if finances had affected his grades:

Oh yes, completely! Instead of me going into the class I want an A, I was thinking what grade do I need in this class to feed myself for the rest of the semester. How many times can I not come to this class so I can schedule at work,

you know? Let's say the class is on a Friday, okay can I maybe schedule every other week to work all day and skip this class? Or can I get an A in this class without purchasing the book because I didn't have money for the book. I feel so bad for not purchasing books. I feel my lack of success in the classes came from not having the books...But rather than, I have, I have money for my books, my classes are paid for, I have food covered, I can study. No, for me it's like I'm in class, how do I get books there? How do I feed myself through the semester? And how do I make it through that?

Luis shared that quite often he has gone without food so that he would have enough money to pay for his rent or other expenses. Following graduation, Luis wants to pursue a graduate degree, so he is also looking for ways to secure funding so he can afford to buy books and take care of his basics needs during the semester.

In spite of these difficulties, the students have stayed upbeat and found a way to make it on their own. Realistically the students admitted that their parents did not have the money to be able to help with more than a minimal amount of money. One of the things that eased some of the financial burden for Noe, Tania, and Luis has been the ability to work.

**Employment.** Starting from the time he was a boy, Luis began working in Honduras and learned how to hustle in order to assist in supporting his family. Once he moved to the U.S., his junior and senior year of high school, Luis was able to get a job at a local restaurant waiting tables. This experience led Luis to seek out a job as a waiter once he started at Dream Valley University. Luis knew from the day he was accepted to college that he would need to work, so he found another restaurant that was willing to

hire him even though he was undocumented. During his second semester of college, Luis was working 40 hours a week and taking a 15-hour load at the university. On his days off school, Luis would work 12 hour shifts, which soon allowed him to gain more responsibility:

And then I came into college, and then I got another job as a waiter at a, at another local restaurant. And then from then on I moved on to like assistant manager. So I was doing the schedules for the waitress, for the waitresses. I was, you know, making orders for the restaurant. Unloading, loading, I became, like the second, in my shift I was pretty much the guy to go to. My, the bosses were comfortable enough to leave me, and then you know, to leave me there and just take care of everything. So that was pretty interesting. I was interesting. At the same time I was already, I was going through college, and these people saw, hey he's going to college let's accommodate to his schedule. So they helped me a lot with my schedule.

Once Luis was able to get his social security number through Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals he began to work a variety of jobs on campus while keeping a position off campus at local fast food chains. For Luis DACA gave him the ability to:

Like take the worry off my shoulders and it gave me opportunity to work at *D's* and feed me. And not be able to be, although I was working at places that didn't require me documents, there were still people in there that would offend you. And people would demean you because they knew you were illegal. And I didn't want that anymore. I didn't want, that was just being treated worse. I would rather be hungry than someone be telling me, you know, you're illegal, you're

supposed to serve me, you're beneath me. People that had no education at all. People that didn't even complete high school. People that have, you know, are not exposed to any of this are insulting you that they think they're better than you just because they were able to scrub someone's butt and they get money. I mean you're doing the same job that I am but just on a person. And then people that were lower than you, like that you, I'm like man what, you shouldn't be like that. You should be like helping me better like yourself, you know? And then I didn't have to be exposed to that anymore, I don't have to be exposed to people demeaning me, and making me feel like bad and just because, you know, I didn't choose to be like this. I didn't choose to, you know, I didn't choose a lot of things in my life, you know? If I would have chosen, I would have chosen to, I don't know what I would have chosen, because I didn't have those opportunities, know what I'm saying?

Luis's circumstances required that he take any jobs he could find in order to succeed. However, DACA has given him the opportunity to work on campus and have the experiences to build his resume in a positive manner.

While Luis was working long before he got his DACA paperwork, Noe and Tania waited until they were able to work legally to take on part-time jobs. Once Noe was able to work, he began part-time at a local fast food restaurant, which has aided him in paying for his expenses and providing money for his family. Noe explained:

I buy my own food, I work part-time, I buy my stuff for my school and my supplies and that stuff. Because financial aid just covers a little bit less than for my tuition, so I pay part of my tuition for summer and for each semester, and

work for myself. And if I was without the Deferred Action I would be at home, struggling to get the money for the gas and coming here. And then not working, I would feel like a burden for my family. Because it's harder for them, because they can only, my Dad can only afford some stuff, and coming to college is not...

While Noe clarified that he does not have to give his family money, he feels it is his responsibility. In his view, being a male carries the responsibility of providing for the rest of the family members.

For Tania, finding a job was easy, as she had made numerous connections on campus. As soon as the staff knew she was looking for job they came to her assistance:

Um, when I got my Deferred Action, um I, I got a jobs even before I had my Deferred Action. People knew I was in the process of getting it and didn't have any doubt that oh like you're not going to get it. So I asked around on campus, I was like I need a job, do you know any openings. So I was able, they hired me for *T program* so I had a summer job. And then the day I got approved for my Deferred Action, Res Life sent me an email that they would like to have me on their team, so I had a job for August already. So ever since I got my Deferred Action I've been working and doing school.

Through the opportunity to work on campus, Tania has furthered her skills and been able to assist other students as well. In many ways she considers herself lucky to have found such great jobs on campus.

As can be seen through all of the students' stories, the ability to work has greatly impacted their college experiences. By having the means to pay for their unmet needs, they no longer feel like a burden on their parents. In addition, they are gaining valuable

skills that will assist them with finding employment once they graduate with their degrees.

**Involvement.** On top of their work schedules, the students found time to get involved in student organizations. While some have been involved more than others, all of the students have developed important leadership skills. As well, for several of the students, their involvement has led to an important network of support.

One of the least involved in student organizations has been Noe, as he has struggled to keep his grades up while also working. When asked if he had held any leadership positions while in college, Noe responded:

No not here, because of the time. Like I said I wasn't able. The first year, as I said I had a lot of time but I didn't get involved because of, I don't know. I didn't feel capable as of being in school and in an organization. And more with a leadership position. I wasn't, didn't thought that I was smart, I think. So maybe I thought that if I was in organization as a leadership position I would have failed my classes. Maybe, kinda like that. So that's why I didn't.

Even though Noe has not felt ready to hold a leadership position, he has been involved with the Dreamers organization and with an organization for Hispanic Engineers on campus. Both of these organizations have aided Noe in feeling connected to the campus.

Reynaldo's involvement has centered on the Dreamers organization and at the time of his interview, he was the President of the organization. Being involved in the Dreamers organization opened Reynaldo's eyes to the number of undocumented students attending Dream Valley University. Reynaldo explained, "There was like 600, there is 600 and some students there, I was like oh wow! You know it's like one those, oh like I

feel less...un-alienated, or something like that, so ya.” The sense of belonging that Reynaldo felt from knowing the size of the population has allowed him to be more comfortable about his status.

When on a trip with his pre-med college readiness program in high school, Luis learned about fraternities and set his sights on joining one as soon as he made it to college. For Luis, it was more about the connection to others than it was the social life that drew him to the fraternity life.

When I came to college, I said wait this is where fraternities happen, right? So I looked up and I looked at the fraternities and I wanted a family. I wanted a group of guys that were I belonged. That’s what I wanted, I want to belong. I wanted a sense where I was going to have belonging and at the same time I was going to have someone to support me, because I’ve never had that. I’ve never had a brother actually or a sister. I do have them but not a relationship like that.

Since Luis was unable to form a close relationship with his mother when he moved to the U.S., the fraternity became his family and his efforts in college were devoted to helping the organization grow its philanthropic mission.

Rather than only being part of one organization, Tania has participated in six organizations throughout her time in college ranging from professional organizations to the programming board for the university. However, for Tania her number one organization has been Dreamers:

And I was, like, I’ve been, for Dreamers I’ve been their Texas Dream Alliance representative, I’ve been their United We Dream representative, I’ve been their Vice President, I’ve been their President. Like Dreamers is my baby. You know

what I mean? It's been there, Dreamers is essentially what got me to where I am today. Through them I've had many opportunities to meet amazing people, make great things happen. Meet very influential people, like in politics and things like that. So it's been a, it's been a trip with Dreamers.

When Tania started at Dream Valley University she was unaware that other undocumented students had attended and she did not feel as if she belonged. At that time she was focused on her inability to go places because of her undocumented status. When her friend's sister invited her to a Dreamers meeting, Tania went and described the experience:

And then I was like, oh, there's more. There's more of me, you know what I mean? And when you are, you don't speak up, you feel alone. But then at that meeting I knew there was way more people. And even though it was maybe five of us there, like I knew there was probably even more. So then at the end *the president* is like, oh so like what do you think? I was like, oh I like it. She was like, are you going to come again? And I was like yes, and she was like why? And then I remember clearly, I remember saying to her, I was like because if I can make a difference then why not? I remember her, she was like oh I like that, I'll see you next time. And ever since then I was stuck with it. I can't even, I mean, I mean I could care less if you're undocumented or not, or whatever right? But it's just like I can't even tell you how many people I know that are undocumented because it's too many. It's just like, I mean I can't, you know what I mean? I think it feels like little by little that you're not alone and then also you find like a support system. Like cause nobody knows what it feels to be undocumented



unless you have been undocumented. And even at that our stories are not the same, we don't go through the same things. But we, we're like you know what, it sucks that we can't get a job. It sucks that we can't go here. It sucks we can't go there. So we know that, that part of the story. And then when it comes to like your support system, if anything would happen to you, it's like you have all those people that are willing to sign petitions for you, go knocking on doors, go calling ICE, whatever. So it's good to know that I'm not alone, and Dreamers did that for me.

Tania, Reynaldo, and Noe benefit from the support network within Dreamers while Luis was able to find the same support through his fraternity. For each of the students, the feeling of no longer being alone was critical in their growth. However, for Tania being involved in Dreamers meant exposing her undocumented status, which led to an incident of discrimination based on her undocumented status.

**Discrimination.** When DACA was announced, Dream Valley University hosted an event in the student union theater for the announcement. At the end of the event Tania was hugging a fellow student when a reporter for the local newspaper took a picture. The Saturday following the event the picture appeared on the front page of the paper with the title 'Dream On'. While Tania was shocked to see herself on the front page of the paper, things deteriorated when she went to her political science class the following week.

Tania described the class:

And when I went to class the first thing he asked, he's like did you all see the newspaper on Saturday? And my classmates were oblivious to it, right? And they're like oh what happened? They're like, oh about like Deferred Action, that

they would grant people, right? The ability to get a social security and be able to work. And then like one of my classmates just like, well that's messed up, cause like they don't belong here, go back to where you belong to. And I was scared because I was on the newspaper, and it was like what are they going to do. And then she was like, they're going to get financial aid and I don't know what. And I was like, first of all that's never going to happen. You should, don't even say that, cause that's not true. But then I felt like, if I would speak up, like I mean it's a whole class against me. So I was like, I don't think so. Like I'm not going to say anything. And my professor stayed looking at me. And he was like, does anybody have anything to add? I felt, you know like...I felt singled out. And maybe it wasn't, maybe he wasn't doing it in a bad intention, but I, but I felt like it if it were to be exposed. I mean, you know, I felt, like what do I do?

Although nothing happened following the class, the situation was traumatic for Tania as she explained:

I think the first time that I felt like, an outsider, or like to the point where like, I'm like what if something happens to me. What if somebody does something to me, it's when Deferred Action came out. I came out in the front of the newspaper.

However, through the support of the Dreamers organization and staff at the University, Tania was able to overcome her fears. To this day, Tania continues working to raise awareness about undocumented students.

When Reynaldo, Noe, and Luis were asked if they had faced discrimination, they all replied that they had not. Both Reynaldo and Noe thought, in part, the lack of discrimination stemmed from the racial composition of the college. Noe summed it up

when he stated, “Not really because of this campus. Like the area. I think if I were to be in like in the North or something, maybe. But not right now.” This lack of discrimination has allowed the students to form connections on campus that have acted as a support network for them.

**Connections.** Through their time on campus, the students have worked to make connections with those around them. While their involvement in student organizations has been a part of this, so have their interactions with faculty and staff. Neither Reynaldo nor Noe have interacted much with their faculty; however, Tania and Luis have formed relationships with key faculty.

**Faculty.** For Tania the connections with faculty began to form once she changed her major to Environmental Science:

But then when I switched over to Environmental Science, the Environmental Science program here is more small so then there is less people in class. So then you have more one-on-one with the professor. So the professors definitely know you. And they are super nice people too. So I like, I like going to class. I go into their office they already know my name. They’re like oh, Tania what’s up? And then we talk. Like they are also part of my, like I always ask what are the options going here, you know what I mean? Or things like that. So I ask for their input and into what I’m working on and things like that.

The mentoring relationship Tania describes is also one that Luis has been able to build with a few of his professors that are aware of his status. However, for Luis the importance has not only been in the mentoring, but in the feedback he has received. Luis

explained that three of his professors know about his undocumented status and went on to say:

Three of them know and then one of them, *Dr. S* was able to aid me to get an internship last year, and then the other two professors they're helping me develop my trainings, put my programs together, resume builders, interview skills, or what's next, what do you want to do, so they are my mentors, I feel. So I do interact with professors one-on-one...And then Luis, Luis, and it just feels so much better to be recognized by your name and not just student at the back of class. So that interaction is really important for my, for the success that I've had, definitely. The confidence that I have, because I have professors telling me, you're good, you're good. Then I'm doing something good.

This boost in confidence has continued to guide Luis in his pursuit of his higher education dreams. For the most part though, the students all had close connections with the staff members at Dream Valley University.

**Staff.** While Noe has not connected with any of his faculty members, he did connect with the migrant program staff during his first year. Through their support he was able to improve his study skills and find ways to be engaged in campus. Reynaldo, Tania and Luis all talked about the role that the student organization office has played in their development on campus. The office's most vocal supporter was Luis, who stated:

I feel I have, they built me, I feel that student organization office built me as a leader. So the staff members in there are like family to me. I've known them for four years, since I've been here. So I mean, that connection, the connection with some of them is important. But definitely knowing who they are and what their

roles are on campus, aids me to do my job better now. And then makes the campus more, the environment better. You know you're that, again you're Luis, they recognize you by your name. And you give meaning to the everyday that you go to campus. Because someone knows me, someone's paying attention that I'm here.

Luis followed up by saying that when he is out, he even gets emails from the student organization office making sure he is okay. The level of caring that the staff has shown has caused Luis to apply for a position within that office.

Not only has the student organization office been able to demonstrate that they care about the students, the Vice President for Student Affairs, *Dr. C*, has a relationship with Tania and Reynaldo due to their involvement in Gear Up, which she used to oversee. Tania explained:

Sometimes I have too many questions, sometimes not enough, sometimes I just go in to talk. *Ms. C* can tell you that, *Dr. C* cause people get mad when I call her *Ms. C*. I was like well that's how I know her. Ya, but ya, I guess too many people... I think on the part of maybe like university faculty and stuff, I guess like administrative faculty, I think they come to people that are undocumented. And I know they do it because they always ask for Dreamers input. Or personal input on how should we go about this, like what can we do for you, like who do you feel comfortable doing this, do you feel comfortable doing that, how can we make our services better? And that's something that I love about Dream Valley University, that I'm pretty sure I wouldn't get somewhere else. I think it influences our relationship ...

Through asking undocumented students for their input, the Vice President for Student Affairs has not only shown a personal interest in Tania, but also in other undocumented students. Reynaldo mentioned the support he received from the administration at Dream Valley University as well. However, when asked if Reynaldo's undocumented status had influenced his relationships with administrators he stated strongly:

I hope not. I hope that they don't, that they are not friends with me because they feel pity. That was one of my problems at the beginning being undocumented...like I don't want to be somebody's pity case. Like they are being friendly because they feel sorry for me. Come on, I'm more than that. Like I said last time, it doesn't describe who I am, it's not an adjective. It's just a status. You know, it just happens that I can't do certain things. So I rarely tell people, basically because of that, but other than that ya.

As Reynaldo pointed out, even when the staff is supportive, the students are still impacted by their views of being an undocumented student.

**Impact of being undocumented.** In considering the impact that being undocumented had on their college experience, both Reynaldo and Noe felt it was minimal. Reynaldo stated, "I don't tell really nobody, so nobody knows." However, both Tania and Luis have felt a significant impact due to their undocumented status.

All of the students in this study had dreams of going to a university that was located outside of the region in which they live. Leaving the South Texas region requires going through a Border Patrol checkpoint in which your documentation is reviewed to make sure you have a legal right to be in the U.S. While the students in this study had been able to pass the checkpoint during school field trips, they feared leaving the area to

attend another college. For Tania, the impact was devastating, as she explained:

...So I was like I want to go to Purdue. Purdue has been my dream since...I mean I have that thing, the letter of acceptance, I was like you're here, you're framed. Um and I think I looked at it, at the time when I got accepted and I knew I couldn't go because of my immigration status, I was willing to risk crossing the check point, but I mean it was my liberty at risk. It meant like going back to a place where I don't know anything. So, I hardly talk about this, so if I get emotional I'm sorry. So then, when that happened, I was pretty bummed. I remember being so mad at my mom. Because I was like why did you do this to me? Why are you doing this to us? Like, we have nothing. We didn't do anything, we have so much potential.

Tania was accepted to Purdue University, the University of Texas, and Texas A&M University; however, due to financial resources, she was unable to attend any of them. Luis was accepted to Baylor University and provided with a \$10,000 scholarship he was unable to claim due to his lack of a social security number. Reynaldo wanted to attend the University of Texas-San Antonio and Noe wanted to study architecture. They all felt forced to abandon their dreams and attend Dream Valley University.

Luis spoke about the vast number of opportunities he felt unable to obtain due to his undocumented status. When asked what his undocumented status meant in term of his college experience he stated:

What has it meant? It's meant opportunities taken away from me. Um at the beginning of college I did okay and then when I started getting my grades back I wasn't able to travel. I couldn't get that, you know, exposure to traveling to

different cities for different studies, like you know leadership conferences. I couldn't travel out of the city. I couldn't get those, I couldn't get trips to summer programs that I wanted to do. And a lot, a big reason why I couldn't, a big reason why I changed majors is because I knew I couldn't get into medical school... So being undocumented, opportunities were taken away from me because I couldn't go to different places, I couldn't do different things. Job opportunities as well. I could have started working earlier on my professional development, you know right out of, first year rather than my last year of college. I could have started getting hired as that. Because I feel like I was prepared to take an office aid position. Different that could have lead me to bigger roles. And I feel that I didn't get that until now. So opportunity to work professionally and definitely to explore my ideas as a student have been lacked of.

Even though the students felt they had missed out on opportunities, once three of them had received DACA and were able to transfer to another university, they stayed at Dream Valley University. For them, the connections they had made and the impact they were able to make was more important than attending their dream school. That connection was one of the driving forces that aided them in overcoming the barriers they faced.

### **Driving Forces**

The final sub-question of this study was "what driving forces did undocumented Latino students identify that aided in overcoming the barriers that were faced in the enrollment process and as enrolled college students?" While each student shared throughout their interviews how they managed to enroll in college and persist for at least two years, they talked about the barriers that made it difficult. Thus this section, will



begin with an examination of the barriers they faced in enrolling in college before delving into the forces that have allowed them to continue their enrollment at Dream Valley University.

**Barriers to attending college.** In order to understand how the students overcame the barriers in the enrollment process, it is helpful to examine some of the barriers the students faced. The initial barrier for the students in this study was questioning whether they would be allowed at an institution of higher education due to their lack of documentation. Once they were able to overcome that barrier then there was a lack of information about the admissions and financial aid process.

*Not sure if college was an option.* For Luis, even in 2010 there was still a question about whether or not undocumented students could attend college. Even if they could, Luis was unaware of where to find the information, as he explained:

You know, that's the, that's the, that's where I come in, where my lack of knowledge comes in. When I started first I didn't think, now I know that there is available opportunities for students to come, before I didn't know. Because it was still the stigma that if you're illegal, you know there is no help for you, no help for you. And my high school didn't have information available for us to ask. It wasn't until my senior year that I broke the silence and I was like, okay what do I have do?

For Luis though, once he broke the silence, the high school counselors were still unable to lay out a clear path so he understood the steps of being accepted to college as an undocumented student. Luis described the impact of this lack of information:

No, I didn't see a clear path. That's what I was, that's what I was questioning too.

I mean when I was in high school I didn't see a clear path to college. I knew I had to go to college, but I didn't see a clear path. Where like, okay I want to go college, what information do I have? I don't feel the information was available to me in my high school, so that's different. You know? That was a little bit different. Where being in 2010 and not knowing about college, it's like wow. So actually I didn't find out to college, I didn't find out how college was like until the last, the few, the two to three months before actual school started. So that's when I found out what like classes were, how *Dream Valley University*, so the two months before school started that's when I started signing up for school, signed up for classes, orientation, everything. So because I graduated and I didn't think I was going to go to college. I went to a deep depression right after graduation, where my best friend had to go and get me out of bed. Literally my best friend was leaving town and I was in my bed depressed because he was leaving and I was not leaving.

This lack of information almost caused Luis to miss out on the opportunity to become a college student. However, Luis's experience was not an isolated incident.

Even Reynaldo, who was connected to his Gear Up counselor, was unaware if he would be able to attend college. Reynaldo explained:

At first, one of the reasons that I didn't want to go to college was that I didn't know that undocumented people were allowed. I didn't know that they could go. I think it helped that you could, to know that, even though it was below the checkpoint I was still like I don't know if I can apply.

In Reynaldo's case, his Gear Up counselor intervened and assisted him in filling out the

admissions application to Dream Valley University. As Reynaldo was debating if he was going to college his senior year, his counselor was already facilitating the process for him to make sure he was accepted. This confusion carried over for many of the students into the admissions process.

*Admissions process.* For Tania, the struggle to find out information was also difficult. Although Tania had taken classes with the local community college as a dual enrollment student, when it came time to apply, she was told she could not be admitted due to her undocumented status. Thus in looking back over the application process, Tania responded it would have helped on the Apply Texas common application to have information for undocumented students:

I think maybe the fact that if you're undocumented you can apply for it. I don't know, in little tiny letters somewhere. I have no idea. I think you get discouraged by information that is not given to you. Or, especially when you're in a position where you can't fully freely ask because you're worried about whether your liberty...I think that would have been helpful. Because you don't want to ask questions that might put you in trouble. I mean as undocumented people you're like, 'okay lay low, don't let anybody see you, don't let anybody know.'

Even asking Tania's Gear Up counselor about the steps to apply was difficult, as she only had two friends that knew about her status. Finally, one of her friends convinced her to ask the Gear Up counselor for assistance and the application portion went smoother.

Once the application was taken care of, the students still had to conquer the financial aid process.

*Financial aid process.* While all of the high schools had financial aid nights to

assist the students with filling out their Free Application for Federal Student Aid, none of the high schools addressed how to fill out the Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA). The TASFA allows Texas residents who are not U.S. Citizens, permanent U.S. residents with an Alien Registration Card, conditional permanent U. S residents with a visa, or eligible noncitizens with an arrival/departure record to apply for state financial aid. Each of the students struggled with knowing how to fill it out, talking to their parents about the forms, and gathering the needed information.

For Noe the hardest part about applying for college was the financial aspect. Since Noe did not have a connection with someone on his high school campus to help him, he struggled to get the right information:

A lot of things. Maybe the FAFSA application information that I didn't know. A lot of um...like the requirements, sometimes I had to come and go and come a lot of times, and losing a lot of time and resources. Because they didn't know how to explain that well what I needed. I think that is a major issue, the FAFSA.

In Noe's case he ended up traveling back and forth to Dream Valley University to take paperwork as he found out what he needed. However, since he could not drive, Noe had to constantly rely on friends for help.

While Luis was able to understand what information was needed to fill out the documents, he found it very difficult to get his mother to understand the process. Luis described her hesitancy when it came to filling out paperwork:

My mom was, my mom was afraid of releasing my, my, my dad's immigration status and for us to be broken because of that. So she was always hesitant about the papers that I filled out and that I was always too careful. I was like hey I'm

going to fill out this paper, what's it about it. So, it was little bits of hesitant that wouldn't even matter during the normal day, but to them it's like, you know it can break our family apart. Just a simple mistake that I made could break our family apart. So I was always very careful in what type of papers I gave and so, she was always that to. It made it untrusting, that she was not trusting me. I know what I feel about it now, but to her she didn't know. So she was like I don't want you to fill out just any paper, so I would always have to be going to back to home show her this is what I'm going to fill out, this is what I'm going to do. Having to translate too was a big issue. And a lot of the time the concepts because of the way the words were put, I couldn't translate. So she was like what, what does this mean? And like when it come to the financial aid you have, if you do, if you show drugs to my mom, she's like you're doing drugs? No mom, it's just says that if you do drugs, if you get caught with drugs they'll take away your financial aid.

Although it required a lot of patience on Luis's part to explain the application process to his mother, he felt the extra time would be beneficial in making this process easier for his brothers when they applied for college. In many ways, Luis and his mother learned about the process at the same time.

Both Tania and Reynaldo had difficulty finding out about the income of their household. Tania explained the difficulties she had the first time she filled out the TASFA:

It was, different, it was hard. Well first of all we had to get all of our expenses together. Cause it's not like my mom files taxes, so don't tell the IRS that. So it

was, so we've never really been that type of people where like we need to keep track of everything. My mom, like my mom, I don't know, I guess we don't, you know what I mean? Like whatever. I mean she keeps her bills and stuff, but it's not like we go to the store and we save the receipt and then we accumulate like I guess how much we spent on this or how much money we spent on that. My mom has never been a big money person or like, oh we need to keep track of things like this. So I guess we never really looked at it. So when we started doing our, so when I had to do my financial aid, I was like okay, well we need to find every fricken receipt we have. Cause I was like we need to get it down and I need to calculate, and how much do we pay for it in a month and blah, blah, blah. So then, it was so long, like it took so many hour unfolding stuff and calculating and things like that. I mean because even though it's something that you notarize, I hate lying. Especially when you're not even documented, like, if you're undocumented you should not lie at all.

For Tania, even once she had her receipts and had figured out the household income and expenses she ran into further issues answering the questions. In seeking help, she also found rejection:

Especially, like the TASFA it tells you how to do it. But then sometimes you're like what do I include in here and what do I include, for like example my mom is a single mom. What do I do when it says that if you make more than \$6,000 you should be filing for taxes, blah, blah, blah. I'm just like, ah, my mom doesn't file her taxes. You know what I mean? Like it's just, I guess everything. I was just like I don't know. And then they're like well, I know A&M pulled this on me,

they're like we need a W-2 form. Or your mom can get it if she has her, like her, like her... the ITIN number, like she can get it if she has a passport and I don't know what. I'm just like, no. She doesn't have any of that, like and I don't know what the process is, it'll probably take a long time. So it was hard, cause they were, Texas A&M was like, if you don't have that, we can't give you financial aid.

Once Texas A&M informed Tania they were going to be unable to give her state financial aid she was worried the same would be true at all state universities. However, once she talked to her Gear Up counselor she was connected to Dream Valley University who assisted her with the process. When the information was collected, the students' parents still had fears.

***Parents concerns.*** The parents of the students in this study were concerned about the cost of college when their children wanted to take their education to the next level. Reynaldo put it simply when he asked if his parents had any concerns about him going to college:

Well, like I said, just money. Even I was like I don't think I'm going to go based upon the income of the house. So my mom didn't know they were paying until I told her; oh ya, I got the scholarship cause of the things I did in school and she was happy.

Though Reynaldo seemed to be able to satisfy his mother's concerns easily, Noe felt he was in difficult situation with his parents. Since Noe did not know all of the steps or the timeline of when he would learn information, he wished:

Maybe if I would have known somebody that already is in the process. I would

have been more secure about telling them the truth. Because sometimes I did tell them something that was value or that wasn't that much true. Like, yes mom, I already have the money and I didn't. You know what I mean? I was waiting for financial aid to answer my, or to continue my process. And sometimes it was on hold for a long time and I didn't knew, that stuff. If I would have known somebody that is already in the university that had my situation maybe I would have been more secure about it. And they would also.

While Noe felt that he needed to lie to his parents through the process as things were happening behind the scenes, he still felt supported in his decision. This support led him to be the one to reassure his parents it would be all right in the end.

Tania also felt supported by her mother during the process; however, her mother was worried about the affect her undocumented status would have on her chances of being accepted to a college. In retrospect Tania explained:

I think, I don't think she was worried about me applying for it. I think she was worried about me being disappointed, maybe not, not going somewhere. Maybe they were good things, I have no idea, but I know I wanted to go somewhere good. I'm just like, no, this is, you know. And I guess because my bar is up here and this is where I want to be at. So I'm just like, okay. But I guess maybe she was, I think it was more she didn't want to see me disappointed. So it's, but ya, I don't think she was worried or anything like that. Maybe for Deferred Action, but not for college.

However, as has been described when Tania was not able to go to Purdue, she did lash out at her mother out of frustration with the situation. Tania was able to turn that



frustration around though and seek a solution to her dreams to pursue her higher education.

Of all the parents, Luis's mother was the most concerned about his dreams of going to college. As she had always done, Luis's mother raised her concerns directly when she expressed:

They were, I feel that they were afraid that I was. My mom always told me this; she always put me in reality. My mom is like, I always daydream, I like to dream big and my mom, my mom saying is like, I have to bring him back to reality. So she would constantly tell me you're illegal, or remember that you're illegal. And it would hurt because I didn't want to remember that. I didn't want, I wanted to forget. That, to this day, there are days where I'm like I don't even think about my immigration status. Where to me, it wasn't a thing growing up; to me immigration status wasn't a thing growing up because I made myself believe I was one of these kids. So I grew up and I talked like them and I acted like them so, and then that topic never went our group. We never talked about immigration that was never present in our group of friends. So to me it was not present as well. It wasn't until I got home and I tell my mom I want to go to college, like you know you can't do that because you're illegal right? So my mom was get up, my mom always get something small, my mom was like get something fast so you can start working. My question is like what do I do once I get something small and I can't work because I'm illegal? I was like, I want to be in there for four years, kill time and in four years I can get my papers. That's my idea. So my parents was, they knew we didn't have money to go to college. So that was

the main big thing. My mom told me straight up, I don't have any money to help you, scholarships will be your thing.

After graduating from high school, Luis took his mother's concerns to heart and fell into a depression that summer as he watched his friends leaving for college. Due to one friend taking him to Dream Valley University to enroll, he was able to turn his depression around.

Once the students were able to make it through the barriers of the lack of information, the admissions application, the financial aid process and their parents' concerns, they were ready to enroll in college. The next barrier they had to overcome was disappointment in their college options.

***Dream Valley University.*** As has been mentioned, the students had visions of attending a dream university that was past the Border Patrol checkpoint. However, in the local area there was a technical college, a community college, and two universities for the students to choose from. Reynaldo, Noe, and Luis all gave similar answers to the question, why Dream Valley University:

- Reynaldo: It was really my only option. Well, I couldn't go past the checkpoint, or I didn't want to risk it. And I think from the *community college* and *Dream Valley University*, *Dream Valley University* was giving me a scholarship to go and stuff. Cause like I said last time I was, economically I wasn't able, I wasn't going to be able to, and it just happens that they were able to pay for it.
- Noe: Well, I choose *Dream Valley University* because I couldn't get out of the Valley, legally. So I was like stuck here. I want to study architecture, and

that's pretty much construction. And the major that was more...Closest to mine was civil engineering, that's why I choose this one...So it's mostly because of the permit or not being able to go legally.

- Luis: Um, I mean, it was the only option available to higher education that I wanted to pursue. I knew that I wanted to go, I knew I want to, I knew I wanted to go to college I didn't want to go to a two year university, I didn't want to, I wanted to go to a university. I didn't want to go to a two-year college, so due to my immigration status, I knew that *Dream Valley University* was my closet, my cheapest, and my only option to get educated.

While their answers were all similar, Tania struggled with the decision to attend Dream Valley University more than the rest of the students. Even the recruiters assisting Tania struggled with her options, as she explained:

I can't excel somewhere where I want to excel. So then, when it came to applying for financial aid, and seeing where I was going to go, I remember, and I remember this clearly, because it was the recruiter from Texas A&M, he's like 'you know what ,Tania, I know, we would love to have you at A&M, but you got accepted to Purdue University. Like I'll help you do your financial aid, like you need to go to Purdue.' He knew about my immigration status, and he's like 'we need to get you there.' And then I was like no, I can't go, and I don't know what. So eventually the decision came to come to *Dream Valley University*, there was like no other way I could go anywhere else. So *Dream Valley University* became my home, forcefully. But I think it was meant to be. I love *Dream Valley University*, it got me, it got me so many opportunities that I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have had, had

I went where I wanted to go.

In the end, Tania has found peace with her decision to attend Dream Valley University, as have the other students. The acceptance of their decision has allowed them to excel within the framework that they have been given.

While each of the students struggled with the decision to attend Dream Valley University, they have all excelled due to their determination to complete their college degree. As was discussed in examining the question, “how do undocumented Latino students describe their interactions with the individuals who influenced them, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college?”, these students were determined to succeed no matter what cards they had been dealt. A major factor in their determination was hope for a better future.

**Hope for a better future.** The students’ sheer determination to improve their situation led them to college. Along the way, they have developed a connection to Dream Valley University and have received support from a variety of individuals. As well, during their time in college, three of the students have applied for and been granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals which has changed their views of what the future holds.

***Connection to Dream Valley University.*** Although all of the students expressed that they ended up at Dream Valley University because they thought it was their only option, they have formed a connection with the university through involvement opportunities. For Reynaldo the connection formed because he is grateful that Dream Valley University gave him the opportunity to attend the college, as he still feels unsure if anyone else would have given him the chance or the scholarship. In Noe’s view, the

connection came through his involvement in a migrant program his first semester. While the migrant program connected him with a mentor who assisted him in making the academic transition, the more important piece was meeting other students to whom he could relate. When Noe answered the question what helped him feel connected, he stated, “the migrant program, I think. Most of my friends are, as I said, from the program. I think it has been a major part of my life right now.” Noe’s friends have been a huge support for him throughout his journey.

After asking Tania about her connection to Dream Valley University, she responded:

Like I feel, like I’m too spirited. Um, I love spirit shirts, I probably have one for like, I could like survive for a whole month without doing laundry. Um, but yes, I think, ya like I feel like this is my home. I mean I love it here.

While Tania is the most spirited, Luis focused on his connection to the other undocumented students on campus. Luis explained:

I’m very different from them, I feel. I, because the majority of them that I’ve met, are still very acculturated, so that, that’s a difference that we have. Um, but I feel very much connected because they are all successful. There’s not one that I’ve not met that are not successful. They’re successful in everything that they do and the passions. And then they could be better, but it has to do with the other things that come into place. What’s enabling them from not getting there? So I feel very much connected to them for the cause. And I feel when it comes the time, that we will come together and definitely change more, change the community. It’s changing too, it’s changing and changing, but I feel that the more and more

that all of us are accepting ourselves, we'll be more willing to grow and become better.

That desire to help his fellow undocumented students improve their situation has lead Luis to begin to share his story of being an undocumented student with others since he received DACA. Through doing so, it has deepened his connection with the campus, as he now feels even more accepted and validated.

***Immigration status.*** During their college journey each of the students has dealt with being an undocumented student. However, the ability to apply for DACA became a life changer for three of the students. Even though Reynaldo has not applied for DACA, he does plan on attempting to change his status down the road and he has taken the first step to obtain his Matrícula Consular.

For Noe, receiving his DACA not only gave him financial stability, but it has also allowed him to have a more normal college experience. Noe explained:

Right now I feel more confident about driving. I didn't even...before I couldn't even like take a car from my parents. They now lend it to me because I need work and stuff...Because I have traveled with my friends now, more than before. I've gotten out more. I've helped my family financially and myself. I've grown a lot with it, because it gives me that confidence that I didn't have before of going somewhere else. I cannot think about maybe getting a master's somewhere else in the future if it continues, you know?

The ability to travel, which Noe discussed, has also been a major factor for Luis, as he is working to save money to be able to fly to Chicago to meet his father for the first time.

Tania also spoke about the opportunities that DACA has given her when she stated:

Um, so I knew a whole bunch of doors were going to open. Like obviously it's not to go see my grandparents. I can't leave the country. But I mean I can get a job, I could earn more money to help my mom out. I could go somewhere if I wanted to. So, it, it has, I mean it's basically transformed my life. Like I've been on, maybe three or four trips since I got it.

One of the trips that Tania was able to go on was a trip with Gear Up to Washington D.C., where she was able to see the government in action. Trips of this nature can dramatically change the path of these students' lives. At the basic level though, DACA allowed these student to be free of fear as Luis described:

And you know, I just, I just feel that the DACA gave me that opportunity to be able to help others and help myself. And just, it was, it's just amazing to feel that you're free, finally. You're free to go to store. You're free to go and do whatever you want. You know, you no longer have to fear what didn't need to be feared. Going to buy a pair of shoes, you don't need to be fear, oh I'm going to go back home, you know. Going with your family to have a dinner, and then you get stopped, your Dad, you know? It just took away that. Something small like that, can change someone's life I feel. Now I'm free to go anywhere that I want.

In many ways that freedom has been even more important than the opportunity to take trips and to drive a car.

However, for these students the relief has only been temporary as they are aware that DACA only provides them with a two-year window of time. When Tania was asked if she worried about what happens after her two years expire, she replied:

What are we today, the 12<sup>th</sup>? So I got approved on April 22<sup>nd</sup> and I love the

number 22. I got approved on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, my birthday is on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, so I was like, yay. Yes, I worry. And people say you shouldn't worry, like it'll be fine, blah, blah, blah. And I'm just like, dude it's like two weeks before my graduation. Like not only do I have to worry about graduating, or like making through the semester. It's like well, you need to apply for Deferred Action again, or get a lawyer, or get married, or whatever because it's gonna expire. And I was like, um. It worries me, I count down. Sometimes I forget to count down. But I'm on a, I mean, it's time, I don't have forever. Like and I think when you get DACA you're like so excited, you're like yes! Let's go everywhere, let's do this, let's work. And then, like three months pass by, four...and I think it sinks in when six months have gone by, and you're like a year and half left of that freedom that you have. You know what I mean? So I'm just like it worries me. Like sometimes I think about, what am I going to do? Like, I'm going to be, hopefully, I'll be fresh out of college. I'm going to have to apply again for Deferred Action. Am I going to have to do that way way before it expires so then I can get it again. Or do I have to wait for it to expire and then apply. What if it expires and people come and find me and deport me. You know what I mean? It's just, it's a lot of thoughts. And I always tell my friends, and I'm just like I don't know it worries me. And sometimes it's what I think about at night. And they're like we'll get you married, she's like I have a cousin. So you know what I mean? But I'm just like, I don't know. It's, it's daunting, I guess, when it gets closer and closer and closer. My freedom is going to get taken away. So it's, I don't know. I don't even know what the reapplying process looks like. I don't



know if it's the same thing.

Since the interview took place, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office has outlined the steps to reapply for DACA; however, until a permanent solution is found these students know they could be deported. Luis discussed what it would be like to go back to Honduras:

And the funny thing is that, throughout my career, throughout my whole student career and everything nobody knew I was illegal. I never put that as; I never targeted, I never gave that label to myself. I never labeled myself as an illegal, cause I'm not an illegal. I'm an American and that's all I know. Because I knew that I had no coming back. Thousands of us, like thousands of hundreds of kids, students like us, we have no coming back because our families are here. You know we are strange to that culture, we are strange to the language, we are strange to everything. We don't even eat the same food as over there. We might look the same, but the ignorance of policy makers is huge. You know like, just study communication classes and you will know that although you look the same an individual's completely, radically different from someone else, you know from another country. So I put myself, sometimes I put myself in the shoes of living in Honduras, I'm like I feel strange. People would look at me strange. They would think, has that, our, you know, our normal conversations would be to them; you're better than me. You think you're better, you know? But because I haven't been growing in that culture, these people haven't been, haven't been brought up like that. So then what am I going to do in a country like that? I, I have too much education to be a country lower like that, what am I going to do?

So even though these students have a temporary relief, they still are worried about the future as they study for their college degrees. Throughout their time in college though, they have found valuable support.

***Support.*** Part of every college graduate's story involves those who have supported them along the way. Most individuals have a team that kept them from giving up and helped them across the finish line. The students in this study are no different, although Luis was the only one who admitted to wanting to give up on more than one occasion. Through Luis's faculty members and friends he was able to persist through graduation.

For Reynaldo, the individual who helped him get into college is the same person who is still helping him persist, his Gear Up mentor. Reynaldo shared that when his mentor is on campus, she will still invite him to lunch to see how he is doing. That constant support from someone who knows what it is like to be a college student has been a source of stability for Reynaldo. However, he is not the only one who credits his original influencer with still being in college. For Noe, his parents' support is still present "because they know how I struggle with school and time and that stuff, so they push me, just encourage me to continue." Although Noe has experienced the most academic difficulty, he is still on track to graduate on time.

In Tania's case, her support system has grown since she enrolled in college. She explained that she still has her number one fan:

I think my mom, I think even though she's not like, oh no you have to stay. I think at the end of the day it's like, I can't, the way I look at it, education is the way of paying my mom back for all of the sacrifices that she's made for me. So

it's her that keeps me going all the time. And I mean I definitely have support from other people. Like I have obviously Gear Up, like I we got you to college. You know what I mean? My friends also, I mean they're the ones that are like, you know here let me pick you up. But then it's like my mom in the end of the line.

By graduating from college, Tania believes it will show her mother that all of her sacrifices were worth the effort.

Although Luis cited his pre-med program coordinator and his brothers for influencing his decision to attend college, there has been a friend by his side the entire time. When his friend was ready to leave town to go to college, he stopped by Luis's house to say goodbye and ended up postponing his trip to take Luis to Dream Valley University to enroll. And when his friend transferred to Dream Valley University, the two have been there for each other. Luis described their friendship:

So yes, he's been there helping me, you know, like a peer. Not a professional help, because I've had professional help, you know? But like he's there for what I'm, he's been there for the reality of things. When I'm at school things change of course you know, I can't tell you definitely how my finances really are, because, it'll be ya. But he's known when I only had a dollar to eat, when we both had nothing to eat, when we were both finding quarters to eat, when we're, we know each other. I and feel that he's been persistent with the support that he has given. And then by accepting me when I told him I was not, that I was illegal also made a change in the way that I view people. So ya, he's been very persistent and very helpful. Being a friend.

That ongoing support and willingness to help each other has aided Luis in completing his college degree. However, as all of the examples show, each of the students had an army behind them encouraging the pursuit of what was most important to them, a college degree.

***Future plans.*** In order to wrap up the driving forces that have carried the students through their college experience, it is important to see what these students dream about for their future. Nearing the end of the undergraduate experience, all of the students are considering graduate studies and two of them have more detailed plans regarding what comes next.

When Reynaldo daydreams about his future he would like to be able to get a job in television or film, which corresponds with his major. Reynaldo's long-term goal is to get a graduate degree in psychology at a university, "past the checkpoint". When asked what his expectations are once he graduates with his degree, Reynaldo responded, "I hope to get a job." Although his plans are not clear yet in his mind, Reynaldo is not concerned about his legal status affecting his future.

Noe is the only one who has considered going back to Mexico if he is unable to find a good job once he graduates. In thinking about his documentation status, Noe explained:

If I see a near possibility of fixing my situation, I think I will stay. Because of my parents and I will help them pay the house or whatever. But if I don't feel like I will fix near, anytime soon or whatever, I think I will leave to Mexico and work over there. So that's a very, that's my like my last resort I think. Because I don't even know over there, you know what I mean? The place.

In addition, if Noe was forced to choose between working a construction job in the U.S. or an engineering job in Mexico, he stated:

I'll take the engineering job. Because of the experience that I would maybe get. I'm pretty sure that with a good job over there I'll be able to live, maybe as, not with luxuries, but at least with the more professional life. Like grow professionally, get a good job, and maybe get the life from here, over there. You know what I mean? I think I will be able to grow more professionally over there than here, if I stay working as a helper of an engineer, something like that. You know what I mean? I think that because of my willing to be someone else, or someone important, I will leave, if I don't find the engineering job that I'm looking for after graduation.

Noe would prefer to stay in the U.S., but he has considered his options carefully so that he is prepared for what the future may bring. While Noe has planned for the possibility that DACA may not continue, Luis and Tania are focused on a future in which they can legally work as they both have plans to change the world.

Luis is torn between working student affairs and becoming a community organizer once he finishes his master's degree, although he is leaning towards a community organizer. Envisioning the future, Luis explained:

Um and I feel that within the next couple of months, at the end of graduation, I should be decided if I'm going to continue on with a student affairs path for the next two years or if I'm going move myself to become a community organizer. So that's where I'm standing right now. And then it's, to be honest, it feels more like community organizer is going to be the most prominent one to go to because

of the fact that immigration reform is happening now. It's going to happen within the next two years. People are going to start getting their documents and from that point to the point that they are going to get their documents, that's going to be a critical point to where we can save people from deporting. Because if you give them freedom they are going to start doing dumb things, it's bound to happen. Bound to happen. Not dumb things but like you have the risk of people like going out and, you know you have this 30, 40-years-olds who have never gone out to club dancing or. So those things like that will be educating the people on the laws, the policies that come, and the responsibilities that come as part of this. Although they may have been living in the United States for so long they might think that they know the laws, but it's completely different once you have those papers on you. The pressure is so much bigger; it's twice as much. I feel. So the free, you need to prepare these people for this change.

While Luis has plans of changing the world, for the time being he is focused on getting his master's. In the future he hopes he can get a PhD from Harvard so he can expose himself to the diversity the world has to offer.

Whereas Luis has his whole future mapped out, Tania is focused on the opportunities yet to come. When asked to describe the future that she daydreams about, Tania responded:

I guess one word that comes to mind is, honestly I mean, it's bright. I honestly, in, I, and it should worry me cause I don't know exactly where I'm going to be, you know. But at the same time, I'm a hard worker and I like taking opportunities. So I don't doubt that I'm going to have a good job. I don't doubt

that, like you know, I'm not, that I'm going to be stuck in the same, I'm going to go somewhere. And I know that. But it's just, I guess it's just sitting down and being like what do you really want to do. I love helping people out, and making a difference. And I guess I would want to change the world someday.

Although Tania has not figured out the pieces yet, she is on the way to changing the world through her involvement in immigration issues. As she moves forward, she has expressed the desire to stay grounded in where she came from to be able to help others.

In working with the students, all of their futures look bright as they use their dreams to motivate them to stay on track and finish their college degree. Through the support of those around them, they have overcome many barriers and have been able to survive difficult times. As well, they are all making steps forward to improve what is yet to come.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter the data has been presented that answered the three research sub-questions:

1. How do undocumented Latino students describe their interactions with the individuals who influenced them, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college?
2. What has the lived experience been like for undocumented Latino students attending a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution?
3. What driving forces did undocumented Latino students identify that aided in overcoming the barriers that were faced in the enrollment process and as enrolled college students?

In total six themes emerged when analyzing who and what influenced the students to enroll in college including: family, friends, college readiness programs, English as a Second Language programs, academic preparation and the determination to succeed. Once the students were enrolled, they began to have lived experiences as they proceeded through their college journey, which started with expectation about college and proceeded to finances, employment, involvement, discrimination, connections to faculty/staff and the impact of being undocumented. Finally, in order to examine the driving forces that aided the students in their persistence, the barriers to enrolling in college included: not sure if college was an option, the admissions process, the financial aid process, parents' concerns, and Dream Valley University as an only option were explored. In conclusion the students' hope for a better future was outlined through the connection to Dream Valley University, their immigration status, the support they received and their future plans. In the following chapter, the findings from this study will be presented.



## **CHAPTER VI MAKING SENSE OF THE DATA**

The purpose of this study was to answer the question: why have undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree? In order to further frame the question, three sub-research questions guided the exploration of this topic:

1. How do undocumented Latino students describe their interactions with the individuals who influenced them, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college?
2. What has the lived experience been like for undocumented Latino students attending a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution?
3. What driving forces did undocumented Latino students identify that aided in overcoming the barriers that were faced in the enrollment process and as enrolled college students?

To answer these questions, four students were recruited from Dream Valley University through an email request sent by the Dreamers student organization and by referral of the Dreamers members. Three of the students participated in two interviews, which lasted about an hour each and were held at locations chosen by the students including: a house, an apartment, the University library, and a Starbucks. One of the students chose to only be interviewed once for slightly more than two hours at her apartment. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the Van Kaam's phenomenological method.

The researcher found 15 themes that related the grand tour and sub-research questions. However, when compared against the Intersectionality of Tinto's Student Integration Model & Latino Persistence research (Figure 1), three findings emerged. In

order to understand these findings, the answers to the research questions will be explored. Once the data has been explained, it will be compared against the literature and the findings will be presented. Finally the implications of the research will be addressed.

### **Answers to the Research Questions**

To guide the research, the following three sub-questions framed the interview inquiries (Appendix H & I). This section will present each question and the data analyzed in Chapter V will be summarized. Since student quotes were utilized heavily in Chapter V, direct quotes will be minimized in this section.

**Research sub-question 1:** How do undocumented Latino students describe their interactions with the individuals who influenced them, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college? This question got at the heart of who and what motivated the students to attend college. As well, it brought forth a range of emotions for the students as they reflected upon the influences and circumstances, which allowed them to persist in their educational journey. To answer this question, it was important to break it into two pieces and examine who influenced the students to enroll followed by the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college.

**Family.** In retrospect, all of the students answered their parents had been a motivating factor when deciding to pursue a college degree, which is supported by the research (Lopez, 2010; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009; Perez, Cortes, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010; Perez, 2009). One of the contributing factors for the students was watching the struggles their parents had endured and wanting a better life for themselves. Although all of their parents worked at minimum wage jobs, they wanted their children to focus on their education and insisted the students attend to academic

matters first. The only parent not supportive of her child furthering his education was Luis's mother, in part because she did not believe he was able to attend a university due to his undocumented status. Luis's mother and the rest of the parents also feared the risk of disclosing their families' status in the abundance of documents the students completed for admissions and financial aid. Finally, there was a general concern about how the students would fund their education, since the families barely had enough to survive. It is important to note that there was a lack of academic capital in all of the families, as the parents had minimal knowledge in how to support their children in the American education system, which mirrors the findings of Gandara (1982) and Torrez (2004).

Aside from their parents, Reynaldo, Noe, and Luis had younger siblings, which served as a strong motivating factor, as they were all the oldest males in the family. Aligned with their culture, as the oldest male they all felt a responsibility to the family to aid those who came behind them and their parents referred to as *familialismo* (Torres, 2010). Each of the students talked about being a role model for their younger siblings and taking the time to guide them through the education system, a concept which is also found in Albrecht's (2007) research. For Reynaldo, that meant helping his siblings choose a path early on so they would take the right dual enrollment courses in high school. However, Luis was more worried about making sure his brothers chose the right college for their needs and skills. Noe's biggest concern was making sure his brothers stepped up to the plate and pursued profitable majors down the road so they could support their families. In many ways, since the students had struggled through the education system on their own, with no guidance from their parents, they had become the

family expert. This led each of them to take on the role of the Americanized parent and assume some of the roles a traditional parent would in the raising of their siblings.

For Luis and Noe, their extended family also played a role in their decision to attend college. As was mentioned earlier, Luis did not have a supportive relationship with his mother when he moved to the U.S., and in his mind his grandmother who raised him until he was 12 holds that place in his heart. His grandmother's encouragement and belief that Noe could succeed, even when living in his meager surroundings in Honduras, pushed him to excel. While Noe did not have an issue with supportive parents, his cousin served as a role model, proving to him that college was obtainable.

***Friends.*** When examining the relationships that pushed these students to apply for college, their friends played a vital role. For the students, their primary friends were U.S. citizens and very few, if any, knew the students were undocumented. Since the students had made it a point to hide their undocumented status, when the conversations about who was going to what college began, they absorbed the information and then chimed in. While there was a doubt in their mind regarding their eligibility to apply, they did not share their concerns with their friends. Thus, several of the students began to compete against their friends in terms of ACT/SAT scores and applying to top name colleges. Due to this competition, Luis was accepted to Baylor University and Tania was accepted to the University of Texas, Texas A&M University, and Purdue in addition to Dream Valley University. When reality set in for Luis and Tania, they were rightfully disappointed, but their friends made sure they continued their education locally. The “hidden status” that was discussed by the students at Dream Valley University is also echoed in the findings from Albrecht (2007), Munch (2011), and Price (2010).

*College readiness programs.* In part, due to the lack of academic capital at home, three of the students took full advantage of college readiness programs that were offered in their junior high and high schools. Luis got involved in a pre-med program with a health science center when he was transitioning from junior high to high school. This program gave him the opportunity to attend summer programs with the health science school and get an in-depth look at what it would be like to be a medical student. In addition, through this program he was able to work with the program coordinator, who assisted him in finding out what the steps would be to enroll as an undocumented student. In Luis's case, his mother's discouragement was more powerful than the messages he received about his ability to enroll, so he almost missed the opportunity to attend college.

Tania and Reynaldo had a different outcome through the Gear Up program. Throughout junior high into high school they both received positive messages about the importance of a college degree and the difference it could make in their lives. As well, once they shared their undocumented status with their coordinator they were able to get positive reinforcements about their ability to attend college. Their Gear Up coordinators also assisted them with navigating ways to take placement tests and complete their college applications without a social security number. For Reynaldo, his Gear Up coordinator also guided him to take the right dual enrollment courses that led him to qualify for a full-ride scholarship at Dream Valley University. This assistance was key for Reynaldo and Tania in enrolling in higher education.

While Nunez et al (2013) found that Latino students had less structural access to institutional agents, Noe is the only student that was impacted by the lack of access. The findings of this study more closely match the findings of Garcia (2011) who found that

institutional agents were as important as peer based social capital in aiding undocumented students. In part, this finding may be correlated with the national push to assist low-income students with realizing that higher education is also within their reach.

*English as a Second Language.* Even with all of the support the students received, they would not have enrolled in college without additional influencing factors. One of the factors that influenced the students was their lack of knowledge of the English language when it was time to enter the school system. For Reynaldo the transition was easier, as at four years of age he was placed in a Head Start program, which was able to help him gain the English skills he needed before it impacted his schooling. However, for Tania, Noe, and Luis, the transition was much more noticeable as they were segregated from the other students and placed in different classrooms.

Although Tania was placed into ESL classes in elementary school, the experience was still traumatic for her as she struggled with adapting to the classroom. Even simple things such as asking to go to the restroom were troublesome for her and she spent several months lost in the day-to-day activities in the classroom. Luis also faced this struggle, as there was only a single classroom for the placement of ESL students regardless of the amount of time they spent in the U.S. Thus students who were almost ready to transition to mainstream classrooms stayed in the same room as students who had never spoken a word of English. Both Tania and Luis felt this contributed to their struggle in adapting to the classroom and impeded their ability to transition to a mainstream classroom sooner. This finding was echoed in Burton's (2012) dissertation as the students in her study were also held back by the dominance of the English language until they were able to master the language.

For Noe, the experience of ESL classes was less frustrating as he had transitioned back and forth from Mexico to the U.S. several times. Each time he transitioned, Noe once again had to relearn the methods of the school he attended and become proficient in the language. However, the ability to meet other students who were also struggling with English gave Noe a sense of belonging. In the end, the ability to learn the English language as quickly as possible was key for these students being able to take advantage of concurrent/dual enrollment classes in high school.

*Academic preparation.* Once the students learned English, they were ready to excel in high school and all of the students were able to take advantage of concurrent/dual enrollment courses. Noe was the only student who was guided towards Career and Technical Education concurrent enrollment courses with a local community college in alignment with Fry's (2004) findings. During high school, Noe took computer and other classes aligned with a certificate in business. In retrospect, Noe wished he had taken courses that would have better prepared him to pursue civil engineering, such as how to read blueprints in addition to college preparation courses. However, the experience made him more confident in his ability to succeed when he enrolled in Dream Valley University.

Reynaldo, Tania, and Luis all took academic dual enrollment courses while in high school, thereby reducing the number of classes they needed to take once they enrolled in Dream Valley University. While Reynaldo and Tania both took approximately 12 hours of college coursework, Luis took almost 60 hours. This experience proved invaluable for the students as it built up their confidence that they were smart enough to succeed in college.

The findings regarding academic preparation directly counter the findings from Swail, Cabrera, Lee and Williams (2005) that Latino students are not as prepared as their White peers in mathematics. Tania, Luis, and Reynaldo had all completed their college algebra course before leaving high school and Noe took college algebra his first semester. These students have also proceeded through their English courses with minimal struggles. The struggle that some undocumented students have demonstrated regarding a lack of academic capital was not evident in this study (Sólorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005).

***Determination to succeed.*** As their resolve to transition out of ESL classes into mainstream classes, and the pursuit of college credit while still in high school shows, these students were determined to succeed. Each of these students knew their parents had moved to the U.S. to provide the family with increased opportunities for success, and the students quickly saw that success was tied to education. Thus, they were all determined to learn as much as possible. In addition, they wanted to find ways to contribute to their families, which meant they needed the education to get a well-paying job. Finally, the desire was present in all of the students to change the world through their actions, whether that change was motivating their siblings or raising awareness about immigration issues on a large scale.

**Research sub-question 2:** What has the lived experience been like for undocumented Latino students attending a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution? Once the students were able to enroll at Dream Valley University, they have been faced with juggling the many responsibilities associated with being a college student, including financing their education, working, and being involved in campus. Through their time on



campus they have found support from their faculty/staff and for the most part have not felt discriminated against due to their status. However, an underlying theme that continued to surface were the ways in which their experiences were limited by their lack of documentation.

***Expectations.*** When exploring the expectations the students had about what college life would be like, it became clear overall their expectations were minimal due to lack of knowledge about what college entailed. While Reynaldo and Tania's expectations had been influenced by the movies they had watched, they soon found out college was very different. Noe spoke of being lost his first semester as he was used to being in class from 8am-3pm in high school and not knowing what do with all of his "free time". This lack of knowledge caused him to struggle at the end of first semester and he learned that studying would take up the majority of the time he was not in class. After being in college for two years, they all wish they would have been more informed about what college would be like and how to succeed in the college classroom, which could have been gained through increased cultural capital (Torrez, 2004).

***Finances.*** Another indicator of the lack of knowledge that the students possessed was revealed in their plans for paying for college. When they began, all of the students only had a marginal idea about how their tuition bill would be paid or how they were going to survive that first semester. This was also echoed in Villegas's (2006) study. The lack of knowledge caused stress for the students, which was countered by a belief it would all work out. In reality, all of the students had the necessary financial support their first semester through a combination of state financial aid, scholarships, and grants, so their out-of-pocket expenses were minimal to nil. For the most part, the only students

who have not had their tuition covered have been Luis and Tania, due to issues with their grades, from which they have recovered. Overall, only Luis had struggled to have the necessities such as books, food, and the clothing to attend school. By working, Luis has found a way to make it through his four years of college.

***Employment.*** Since the cost of education has skyrocketed, very few students are able to attend college without working in today's society. However, before three of the students received DACA, they were not able to legally find employment. Luis is the only student who managed to work even before he received his social security number, at two local restaurants, which were known to hire undocumented workers. During high school and his first two years of college, Luis waited tables and eventually moved into an entry-level managerial position due to his willingness to work whatever hours assigned, as well as his solid work ethic. Luis explained that during his first two years of class he would often plan what classes could be missed without affecting his grades too much in order to schedule extra hours at work.

Through DACA, Luis, Noe, and Tania were all given the ability to legally hold a job and it made a significant impact on their lives. Since Noe has been able to work at a local fast food restaurant, he has been able to support himself and provide some money to help support his family. This has taken a burden off of his shoulders, because Noe knew it was strain on his family to provide financial assistance. Both Luis and Tania have found employment on campus, which has allowed them to have positions that are supportive of their class schedules while helping them build leadership skills. Although Luis still has a side job off campus in addition to his campus employment, his schedule has been more flexible so that he is able to attend all of his classes.

***Involvement.*** Before the students began working, with the exception of Luis, all of them found a place they belonged on campus through student organizations or campus life. Noe's primary connection has been through the migrant program on campus, where he easily relates to the other students, even though he has only picked crops in the local area. However, since he traveled back and forth to Mexico several times, the students have a shared background that includes being uprooted often. Additionally, Noe has participated in the Dreamers organization at times. The Dreamers organization has served as the primary connection point to the campus for both Reynaldo and Tania where they both have held leadership roles. Tania explained that had it not been for the Dreamers organization, she would not have grown comfortable in her own skin as an undocumented person and been able to engage with the campus. While Luis has not been involved in the Dreamers organization, his fraternity gave him a sense of belonging he had been missing since he came to the U.S. For all of these students, their involvement on campus is the reason they feel so connected to the campus.

The students in this study all became involved on campus during their first semester, which supports the importance Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) place on involvement (p. 426). Additionally, the student's initial singular points of involvement echo Tinto's (1993) statement that individuals only need to find one sub-community in which belong to aid in their connection with the institution. While Noe found that connection through the migrant program, Luis found it in his fraternity, and Tania and Reynaldo were involved in Dreamers.

***Discrimination.*** The students reported they had only faced one incident where they felt discriminated against due to their undocumented status. For the most part, all of

the students attribute the lack of discrimination to the racial composition of the university and of the area. Since the region is primarily comprised of Hispanics, the students' undocumented status becomes an invisible minority status to the rest of the world until they choose to share it.

***Connections.*** The students' connections to their faculty members have been very similar to those from any other group of students. Reynaldo and Noe stated their faculty had been helpful but were unable to elaborate further. Since Tania switched majors, she has been in smaller classes allowing her to form a closer connection with a few of her faculty. Luis is the only one who has had significant interactions with his faculty and he frequently goes to three of them for support. For Luis, the connections with his faculty have provided him validation that he is on the right track and pursuing the right major.

With the exception of Noe, the students expressed much closer connections with the staff members and administration on campus. Since Reynaldo, Tania and Luis have all be involved in student organizations, they all cited a connection with the student organization office and the staff members. In addition, Reynaldo and Tania talked about the support the Dreamers organization, and its members, have received from the Vice President of Student Affairs and the President of Dream Valley University. The administration of the university has been actively involved in improving the experience for the undocumented students on campus and has followed up with the students both as a group and personally. This ability to have input on policies and procedures on campus was key in aiding the students' connection to the campus.

It should be noted that while the connection the students had with the offices on campus was echoed in Villegas's (2006) study, the connection with the administration is

unique. In Albrecht's (2007) research, the students reported that very few of the offices at the four-year selective university in Texas were aware of the distinct needs of undocumented students. This was evidenced in the students being labeled as international students. As well, Albrecht found that the administration was lacking in knowledge about the needs of the undocumented students on the campus, or even that they existed. The finding of the students perceiving the administration as supportive is only found in this study.

***Impact of being undocumented.*** As an undocumented student, the options of where the students could attend college were severely limited. In many ways, these students have been trapped geographically between the Rio Grande River and the series of checkpoints that are on all roads leading out of South Texas. For Tania and Luis this broke their hearts when they realized they could not attend their dream universities. However, they have all made the most of attending Dream Valley University and have been as involved as possible. Before DACA, their options were greatly limited as to how they could interact with the campus. They were not allowed to work on campus, could not participate in field trips that were outside the area, and their funding was limited. While DACA has remedied their ability to be able to work on campus and travel more freely in the U.S., the students are still banned from taking advantage of study abroad trips and federal financial aid which was also mentioned in Albrecht's (2007) study. Thus, there are still problems, which remind the students they are different from their peers with whom they have grown up.

**Research sub-question 3:** What driving forces did undocumented Latino students identify that aided in overcoming the barriers that were faced in the enrollment

process and as enrolled college students? In considering this question, it became important to discuss the barriers the students stated they had to overcome in becoming college students in the first place. After examining those factors, it became clear the single answer to how the students had overcome the barriers was their hope for a better future. This section will describe the barriers and then look at the factors that aided in that hope.

*Barriers to attending college.* The first barrier the students had to overcome in this study was the lack of knowledge about whether they could attend college as an undocumented college student, which was also seen in studies by Lopez (2010) and Perez (2009). While Luis's mother was the most vocal about her concerns that he would not be admitted, the others all harbored the same fears. To make matters worse, they received mixed messages about their ability to attend college. Although the Gear Up counselors were letting the students know they could go to college, both Tania and Luis were told the college they were interested in would not admit undocumented students.

This struggle with finding the right information also carried over into the admissions process. Since many of the universities require ACT or SAT scores, the students were unsure of how to sign up for the tests since the registration asks for a social security number. It was not until they spoke up and asked a counselor that they were able to learn they could use their high school student identification number instead of a social security number to register and take the test. These types of issues continued as they filled out college applications, as these forms were not designed to encourage students without a social security number to apply.

While the admissions process only caused difficulties for a brief time until they found solutions, applying for financial aid proved to be a bigger issue. All of their local high schools hosted financial aid nights where the students could receive assistance filling out their FAFSA, but during those nights state aid applications were not discussed. This left the students at a disadvantage for receiving assistance from professionals. Thus when they began to fill out the state aid application, many of the students struggled with how to answer the questions and how to gather documents most simply did not have. As well, since different universities had different requirements, students were able to obtain state aid at Dream Valley University while being denied at some of the other institutions they wanted to attend.

Due to the complexities of the financial aid process, their parents' concerns were also raised on two fronts. Since financial aid documents required a considerable amount of information regarding the household, all of the families feared exposing their illegal status to the state. The lack of firm answers failed to alleviate the concern that even after completing all of the documents that the family would still be unable to afford the cost of higher education.

Finally, as has been mentioned before, Dream Valley University was the backup choice for all of the students in this study. They all had dreams of studying at a university outside of the South Texas area and they felt trapped by their surroundings. Thus in the beginning, they all wanted to be someplace else other than Dream Valley University.

***Hope for a better future.*** Even after facing the barriers listed above, along with others, the students had a belief that if they finished their undergraduate degree it would

be worth the obstacles they had to overcome. As was mentioned earlier, all of the students were determined to persevere, which is a continuing theme throughout this study. During the interviews several additional themes emerged that also spoke to the students' ability to succeed.

Through their involvement on campus, all of the students were able to form a connection with Dream Valley University. While they faced a rough first semester, as the students acclimated and found other students with whom they could relate they began to come out of their shells and make real connections. All of the students have now shared their undocumented status with others and found acceptance in who they are as a person. Even though three of the students are now eligible to transfer, all of the students feel that Dream Valley University is their alma mater and they are excited to graduate from the college. This finding highlights Tinto's belief shared in 1975, "other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion" (p. 96).

While in college, three of the students have been able to apply for and receive Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which has changed their lives. The change in their immigration status, has allowed the students to become more involved on campus without feeling they are placing themselves in jeopardy. Luis explained that until he received DACA he only shared his status with individuals on campus who had a need to know, such as the financial aid staff. Even his best friend was not aware of his status. This freedom to be honest about their lives has allowed these students to live more openly and honestly. However, they are all keenly aware that the clock is ticking and



their two years are slipping away. While Luis will graduate with his DACA in place for another year, both Noe and Tania's will expire weeks before they graduate from college, leaving questions about what comes next.

Another important piece has been the support the students have received while in college from those who care about them. While they all admit there has been a team behind them, each of them was able to name a special person who has been there from high school into college. Both Noe and Tania talked about their parent(s) ongoing support of their dreams and motivation when they were struggling. For Reynaldo, he has still maintained a close relationship with his Gear Up counselor who continues to check up on him. Lastly, for Luis the support has come from the friend who picked him up off the floor and made sure he applied for college before leaving for his university. Since his friend transferred to Dream Valley University a semester later, they have been each other's support during their journey. Villegas's (2006) study also confirms the importance of this support network.

The final reason why the students have succeeded in college has been their belief in what the future holds once they graduate college. As with most college students, their visions are still somewhat murky but they all have faith they will be able to find employment, which contradicts findings by Albrecht (2007), Munsch (2011) and Villegas (2006). At this time, Noe is the only one who has considered going to work in Mexico if he is unable to find a job in his field so he can better financially assist his family. Since Luis is the closest to graduating, he has already made plans to begin graduate school and is considering where he wants to work while pursuing his master's. However, as Tania

stated, the future looks bright for all of the students as they pursue their educational goals.

### **Limitations**

As discussed in Chapter I, there were four limitations with this study. The first limitation was in regards to the rapidly changing legal, political, and societal opinion regarding immigration into the U.S. Secondly, this study was conducted with four students at a unique institution in South Texas. Due to the political climate of Texas and the high percentage of Latino students at Dream Valley University, the findings from this study may not be applicable to undocumented students at other institutions.

At this time in the history of the U.S. the climate regarding undocumented individuals, particularly those who were brought into the country as children is rapidly changing. During the design of this study, President Obama announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals executive order and the first application was made public on August 15, 2012. This executive order has changed the landscape for undocumented individuals and had an impact on the findings of this study. As the country moves towards an overhaul of immigration policies, many of the issues discussed by the students may no longer be relevant.

While the federal landscape has shifted, the policies in Texas regarding access to higher education for undocumented students have been fairly stable. Texas was a forerunner in offering undocumented students access to higher education at resident tuition rates and in making state financial aid available to this population. Thus, some of the findings from this study will not be applicable in other states. For example, the students in this study all had the right to attend any public institution in the state;

however, they would not be allowed to attend a state university in Alabama or South Carolina.

In addition to the favorable state climate, Dream Valley University is a Hispanic-Serving Institution with almost 90% Hispanic enrollment. Due to the high numbers of Hispanic students attending the university, undocumented students are easily able to blend in and are assumed to be U.S. citizens. As well, in the fall of 2013 over 730 undocumented students were attending Dream Valley University. Through a combination of all of these factors, Dream Valley University has a unique composition that eases the burden of being an undocumented student on the campus. Students on other campuses may have very different experiences.

Finally this study was limited to four students who all migrated to the U.S. before the age of 14. Although the sample represented students from Mexico and Honduras, the undocumented population is much broader than these two subcultures. In addition, the sample was comprised of three male students and only one female student who were all traditional college students who enrolled directly following high school. As well, since this study focused on juniors and seniors, the experience of freshmen and sophomores could be quite different. Finally it must be noted that the students in this study were exceptionally talented and driven, which is unique. Thus extreme caution must be used in generalizing these findings to other settings.

### **Conceptual Framework**

As discussed in Chapter I, the conceptual framework for this study was based on Tinto's Student Integration Model overlaid with research findings on Latinos students' persistence. Figure 3: Intersectionality of Tinto's Student Integration Model and Latino

persistence is represented below to guide the discussion of data in comparison to the literature.

### Intersectionality of Tinto's Student Integration Model & Latino Persistence

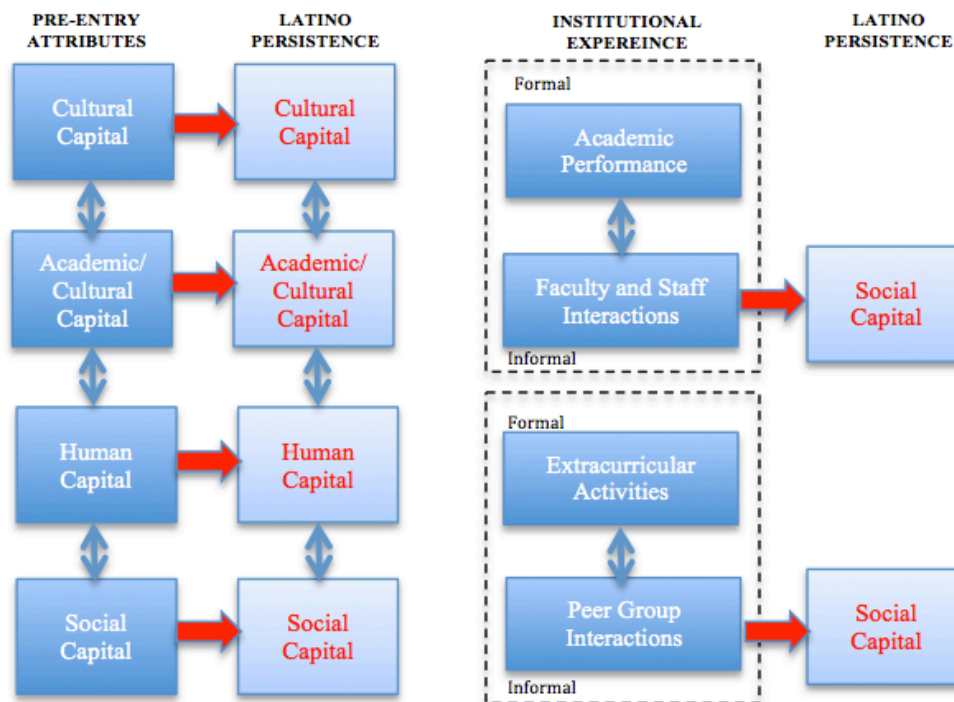


Figure 3. Intersectionality of Tinto's Student Integration Model and Latino Persistence. Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the cause and cures of student attrition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

**Pre-entry attributes.** Tinto's Student Integration Model examined the characteristics students brought to college with them which are called pre-entry attributes. These pre-entry attributes are comprised of the student's family background, skills/abilities, and prior schooling. When these items are discussed in the persistence literature about Latinos, they are framed as academic capital (Sólorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005). When examining the data from this study, all of the students were lacking a family background or cultural capital that would have aided them in being successful in college. Not only were the students' parents

unaware of what was needed to get into college, in some cases such as Luis's, the students were given the wrong information about their ability to enroll. As well, this lack of cultural capital in the family led Reynaldo, Noe, and Luis to take on the role of a parent in the family when it came to preparing their siblings to succeed in high school and college. As was mentioned before, this finding echoes the work of Ortiz and Santos (2009), Torres (2004) and Torrez (2004).

While the students were lacking in cultural capital, they began to make gains when it came to their skills and abilities or human capital. When viewing the struggle these students had faced, you would initially think they were not given the opportunity to hone their skills and abilities through extracurricular activities. However, these students were able to build their skills and abilities via their everyday experiences. Through their travels and enrolling in a foreign school they all learned how to survive in a challenging environment and succeed. As well, they gained the ability to be flexible, as they navigated through the barriers that have been placed in their way. Finally they learned how to persevere in the face of adversity and disappointment. These life lessons have all added to their human capital and made these students more resilient. The literature has not delved into an exploration of the human capital that Latino students possess.

In addition to the human capital that the students obtained, before entering college their prior schooling or academic capital was a source of strength for these students. As described before, the students were all successful enough to take concurrent/dual enrollment courses in high school. This opportunity not only built up their academic skills but also their self-confidence. Thus when the students enrolled in college, they already knew they could succeed. The level of human capital that these students

demonstrated contradicts much of the literature regarding the academic capital of Latino students as they are rarely portrayed as high achieving successful students (Fry, 2004; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005).

Tinto went on to postulate that the pre-entry attributes interacted with the students' intentions and goals/institutional commitments with some influence from external commitments, which set the stage for the institutional experience. All of the students began their journey with the intention of receiving their bachelor's degree and were committed to their goal. However, in the beginning, the institutional commitment from the students in this study was weak as they all had intentions of going elsewhere.

Before the students began their academic career they had mixed strengths and weaknesses, which would impact their decision to stay. While their cultural capital was low, they had greater strengths in human and academic capital. As well, their intentions were strong; however, their institutional commitment was weak. For this group of students the institutional experience was going to be a deciding factor in whether or not they stayed in college.

**Institutional experiences.** Within Tinto's institutional experiences, academic and social systems are at play, which led to integration on both levels. In examining the academic system there are also two components: academic performance and faculty/staff interactions. When the students in this study started college, for the most part, their academic performance was rocky as they acclimated to the rigor of college courses. Discussing their performance in their English courses, all of the students felt writing was somewhat difficult, but the other components of those courses had gone well. However, when discussing their math classes both Tania and Noe struggled to succeed, while both

Reynaldo and Luis had already completed their college math before enrolling. As well, Luis shared that during his junior year he considered dropping out of school due to academic difficulties brought on by partying too much. When Luis realized he was failing all of his classes, he was able to develop a plan to salvage two of them. Setting aside these instances, however, the students had fared well in their academics and maintained satisfactory grade point averages. The other studies examining undocumented students in college have not yet focused on the students' academic experiences.

In part, their academic success can be tied to their interactions with faculty and staff members on campus. On the whole, while the students had been able to navigate the academic systems, they were more connected to staff members. These positive interactions with staff members helped to leverage the students' social capital through meaningful connections. According to Tinto (1993) the two tenets of the social system are extra-curricular activities and peer group interactions. In the findings it was discussed that the students' involvement in student organizations helped to form their connection with the university. This outlet also allowed for the students to make friends, which positively impacted their social capital as well. Each of the students was able to talk about how their friends had assisted them and provided support during their academic journey.

**Integration.** Through the positive experiences both academically and socially the students were able to integrate into the Dream Valley University community. This is demonstrated through the students' commitment to the institution and their unwillingness to transfer. As well, this integration has further reinforced the students' intentions of

obtaining their degree and has assisted in framing the students' goals. All of the factors have aided the students in their persistence at Dream Valley University, which is supported by Tinto's (1993) model.

### **Findings**

Through an analysis of the experiences of the students in this study against Tinto's Student Integration Model and the research on Latino student persistence, we can begin to answer the grand tour question of, "why have undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degrees?" While there were many themes that emerged from an analysis of the data, Tinto's model help brings focus to the results.

The data relating to Tinto's pre-entry attributes was discussed through the first sub-research question which resulted in six themes including: family (parents, siblings, and extended family), friends, college readiness programs, English as a Second Language programs, academic preparation, and determination to succeed. When viewed through the Intersectionality Model, those themes fit within family background/cultural capital (family), skills/abilities/human capital (friends, determination to succeed, college readiness programs), and prior schooling/academic capital (college readiness programs, English as a Second Language, academic preparation). This overlay lends to the first finding: the undocumented students were able to enroll in an institution of higher education by leveraging the capital they possessed.

The next focus in Tinto's model examines the commitment of the students through their intentions, goals, and institutional/external commitments. This aligns to the third sub-research question, which produced two main themes with nine subthemes which



where barriers to attending college (not sure if college was an option, admissions process, financial aid process, parents' concerns, Dream Valley University) and hope for a better future (connection to Dream Valley University, immigration status, support, future plans). While Tinto's model does not directly speak to barriers in the enrollment process, those barriers have a direct impact on the institutional commitment. The data shows that the students' institutional commitment was severely weakened by the time they enrolled in Dream Valley University. However, the students' hope for a better future intersected with their intentions and goals, which were strong enough to overcome the weakened institutional commitment. This led to the second finding: the determination of the undocumented students was so great, it allowed them overcome the obstacles in their way.

Finally, Tinto's model examines the institutional experience of the students, which relates to sub-research question two, which had seven themes attached to it including: expectations, finances, employment, involvement, discrimination, connections to faculty/staff, and impact of being undocumented. Although Tinto's model was divided in the academic and social systems, the students' responses were primarily focused on the environment that impacted their interactions with the systems. As was found in a critique of Tinto's model from Valentine (1971) and de Anda (1984), the students in this study were unable to leave their culture and background at the door, as it impacted their ability to fund their education. However, the third finding is directly related to the systems in Tinto's model: the undocumented students persisted because the university community provided support.

## **Research Implications**

In retrospect, this dissertation study was small in scope as it relied upon the experiences of four undocumented students attending a public four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution located in Texas. Due to location and to administration's beliefs regarding supporting undocumented students, the students attending Dream Valley University had a unique experience compared to a student attending a predominately white university in which there are very few undocumented students. Thus this study is not wholly applicable to other undocumented students attending institutions within the state or nation. As well, the students were able to blend into the general student population easily and were willing to identify themselves as undocumented students for the purpose of this study. The experience of a student who completely hides their status may be significantly different. Finally, there are aspects of this study that were confined due to Institutional Review Board concerns that could have aided in obtaining richer data. If it had been possible, a third interview with the students would have allowed for member checking of the themes, which would have aided to the validity of the findings. As well, the ability to contact the influential individuals personally rather than passing an invitation through the students might have prompted them to participate in the study.

As stated in Chapter I under Conceptual Framework this study sought to not only compare the findings with Tinto's Student Integration Model but also with the forms of capital that have been found to be relevant to Latino student persistence. Since the purpose of this research was focused on undocumented student persistence it was important to begin with Tinto's model that has guided much of the research on student persistence over the last 30 years. As well, since Latino student persistence has not

generally been discussed using Tinto's model, focusing on the forms of capital that influenced Latino students' persistence was equally important. Thus the conceptual framework shown in Figure 3 allowed for a visual representation of these two distinct sets of research that, when combined, allow for a deeper understanding of the findings of this study which are unique in the current research landscape.

When reviewing the findings of this study, the basic tenets of student persistence outlined by Tinto (1975, 1987) appear to be applicable to undocumented Latino students when overlaid with the forms of capital often discussed regarding Latinos. As mentioned in Chapter II, there have been several critiques of Tinto's Student Persistence Theory as it applies to minorities. Valentine (1971) suggested that Tinto expected students to separate from their home environment to attend higher education. For a majority of students, the higher education environment is often familiar; however, for minority students, the environment may be very different. Since Dream Valley University was located no more than an hour away from the students' homes, Valentine's observations were not applicable. In addition, de Anda (1984) and Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) spoke to the importance of socialization that includes the ethnic culture as a key factor for minorities. Another critique of Tinto's model regarding minority students was the belief that students needed to assimilate to the dominant culture in higher education (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). The ethnic composition of Dream Valley University negated the need for students to bridge multiple cultures or assimilate to the dominant culture. While in the case the critiques of Tinto's theory were found to not be relevant, this topic should be explored further for undocumented students that are not attending an institution of

higher education so close to their home and without such a high ethnic composition of Hispanics.

This study also examined the literature regarding Latino students' persistence through the use of multiple forms of capital. It should be noted again that the findings of this study relating to academic capital were far different than many publications on the subject. Most literature presents Latinos as having deficit regarding academic capital (Cho & Larke, 2010; Fry, 2004; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005) this was not the case in this study and has only been briefly touched upon in Lopez (2010) and Perez (2009). The prevalence of high achieving students in this study and in others suggests that more research is needed in regards to portion of the Latino population that is soaring above their peers. This could be pivotal research in creating a stronger educational pipeline for Latino students. However, the findings of this study in regards to cultural capital echoed previous findings (Ortiz & Santos, 2009; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Torres, 2010; Torres, 2004; Torrez, 2004).

Given the context in which this study occurred, it would be helpful to begin to gather the lived experiences of undocumented students across a variety of institutional types and locations. At this time, most of the research on undocumented Latino students has been conducted in states in which there is pro-immigrant legislation. As well, a larger sample of students with diverse backgrounds would add to the dialogue. All of the students in this study immigrated to the U.S. before 14 years of age, yet the research shows very different educational outcomes for those who migrate after the age of 14. In addition, all of the students in this study crossed the border illegally; however, there are

students who have expired visas who may have a different story to tell. These stories should be sought out during further research to highlight variety in the background of undocumented students.

Finally, the changing legal climate will continue to drive the need for updated data collection. The stories of the students in this study who had received DACA were very different from the one who had not pursued changing his immigration status. As well, if the Dream Act passes, the entire landscape for undocumented students could change. These changes will bring about new opportunities and new pitfalls for this population.

### **Implications for Practice**

While this research has led to many other areas that need to be further explored, implications for practice can be carefully extracted when taking into account the uniqueness of the site in this study. Since the findings were the culmination of the research, they will be used as the springboard for examining potential implications for those in higher education.

The first finding of this study was undocumented students were able to enroll in an institution of higher education by leveraging the capital they possessed. As discussed earlier, much of the literature focused on Latino students and undocumented students has highlighted the struggles these students have faced. In many ways, this had led practitioners to view this population from a deficit perspective; however, as the students in this study demonstrated, they have the ability to overcome a myriad of obstacles. Across the board, all of the students in this study were held back in their English as a Second Language classes. In order to have more academically prepared students,

institutions of higher education should be willing to work with our P-16 partners in order to improve the teaching strategies used with this vulnerable population. The sooner these students are able to gain mastery of the English language, the stronger their chance of success. In addition, institutions of higher education need to advocate for continued funding of college readiness programs, as three of the students in this study credited a college readiness program as a primary reason they enrolled in higher education. Finally, institutions of higher education need to help students understand the capital they possess and how to leverage it to be successful in higher education. While most of the students struggled their first semester in college, there were interventions that could have lessened the impact of the lack of knowledge about how college worked. Those same interventions would likely prove beneficial for all first generation college students.

By examining the barriers to attending college and the hope for a better future, the second finding emerged. The determination of the undocumented student was so great it allowed them to overcome obstacles in their way. Institutions of higher education have worked for years to remove barriers to attending college; however, due to the myriad of laws, policies, and institutional decisions regarding undocumented students, these students often are not able to access the traditional routes of applying institutions of higher education. Several of the students in this study spoke of being given conflicting and incorrect information by both high school counselors and representatives of different colleges and universities. The lack of clear, concise, and relevant information almost prevented the students from attending college. One of the difficulties for the high school counselors is the varied ways in which institutions of higher education treat undocumented students. The more uniform the process, the better the information will be

able to be disseminated. However, for an effort to be made to unify the process, institutions have to be willing to publish the information prominently, where it can be located by undocumented students. One of the students in this study stated she would have read the fine print if she would have been able to find it. As well, the students hoped for a better future, which was positively impacted by the availability of DACA. It was interesting to note that although Dream Valley University provided support for undocumented students, it was the Dreamers organization that took on the brunt of the work on educating the community about DACA. If institutions of higher education were willing to provide information for students regarding the application process and the renewal process, they would be able to impact their students' lives in ways that immeasurable.

The final finding was the undocumented students persisted because the university community provided support. A common theme during the interviews revolved around the administrative support Dream Valley University showed to its undocumented students. By focusing on the needs of this special population of students, the students were able to form a bond with a university they initially did not want to attend. The students have become great supporters of the mission of the institution and will be vocal alumni. As with other populations that institutions of higher education have focused on over time, this population also deserves attention and empathy for the struggles they bring with them into the collegiate environment.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this dissertation was to answer the question, "why have undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in pursuit of their

four-year degree?” Through interviewing four students between July of 2013 and March of 2014 data was gathered which related to three sub-research questions. The primary intention was to provide the reader with a glimpse into the lived experiences of these students as they have navigated their way through their college journey. However, the data collected supported the previous findings from Tinto regarding persistence in general and most of the research on Latino student persistence.

Three sub-research questions were used to frame this study:

1. How do undocumented Latino students describe their interactions with the individuals who influenced them, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college?
2. What has the lived experience been like for undocumented Latino students attending a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution?
3. What driving forces did undocumented Latino students identify that aided in overcoming the barriers that were faced in the enrollment process and as enrolled college students?

In response to the first research sub-question the students responded that family, friends, and college readiness programs prompted them to apply to the university. However, the circumstances supporting that decision included their involvement in English as Second Language programs, their academic preparation and their determination to succeed.

Regarding the second research sub-questions the themes that emerged encompass: their expectation of what college would be like, the impact of the financial struggles, the ability to be employed, their involvement on campus, an incident of discrimination, the connections to faculty and staff, and finally the ongoing impact of being an



undocumented college student. Finally the third research sub-question only led to two themes, which focused on the barriers the students had faced in attending college and their hope for a better future. Through a comparison of the themes against Tinto's Theory of Student Departure and Latino capital theories, three findings emerged: (a) undocumented students were able to enroll in an institution of higher education by leveraging the capital they possessed, (b) the determination of the undocumented students was so great, it allowed them to overcome the obstacles in their way, (c) the undocumented students persisted because the university community provided support.

Throughout this study Reynaldo, Noe, Tania, and Luis became more than just research subjects who could provide insight to answer a research question. They were able to tell their story in a moving and compelling way that demonstrates progress is still needed to assist undocumented students in completing their educational journey. In the end, these students are not only trying to better their lives, they are the source of hope for their families.

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## Appendix A

April 8, 2014

Angela Stuart-Carruthers  
Department of Educational Administration

Brent Cejda  
Department of Educational Administration  
141C TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20130613435FB

Project ID: 13435

Project Title: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Undocumented Latino Students to Enroll in and Persist at a Four-Year Public Hispanic-Serving Institution in Texas

Dear Angela:

This is to officially notify you of the approval of your project's Continuing Review by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the committee's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the subjects in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46).

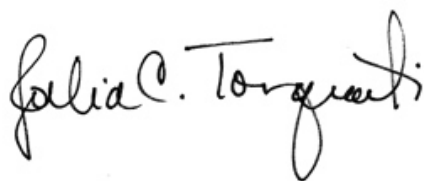
We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- \* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

It is the responsibility of the principal investigator to provide the Board with a review and update of the research project each year the project is in effect. This approval is valid until 04/23/2014.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 472-6965.

Sincerely,



Julia Torquati, Ph.D.  
Chair for the IRB

## **Appendix B**

### **Recruitment Email/Letter for Students**

Dear [name]:

I am a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and am conducting a research study as part of my dissertation. The focus of my dissertation is to answer the question: why have Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree? I asked the Dream student organization to send this email on my behalf to inquire if you would be interested in participating in my research study. In order to qualify for this study I am seeking individuals who: are at least 18 years old, are enrolled at the University full-time, have an academic standing of at least a junior, and identify as Latino. If you identify with the previous criteria I would like for you to answer a few short questions so that I may identify students who have different stories to tell. If you are selected, I would like to interview you twice to learn about your experiences as a Latino student in college. Each interview will last between two and three hours and will be audio taped. During the first interview I will ask you questions about your home country; to describe your transition to the United States; about your schooling; and about the individuals that influenced your decision to go to college. At the second interview I will ask you questions about barriers you have faced in the application process, and in staying enrolled at Dream Valley University, and how you have overcome them.

If you are interested in participating please contact me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx (cell phone) or email me at [christine.stuart.carruthers@gmail.com](mailto:christine.stuart.carruthers@gmail.com).

During this process there is a risk that some of the questions may make you feel uncomfortable. You are free to decline to answer any question that you choose.

If you have any questions, please let me know.

*Christine*

Christine Stuart-Carruthers  
Doctoral student at the University of Lincoln-Nebraska  
[Christine.stuart.carruthers@gmail.com](mailto:Christine.stuart.carruthers@gmail.com)  
(xxx) xxx-xxxx

## Appendix C

### Screening Email/Letter for Students

Dear [Name],

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the screening portion of my study. The focus of my dissertation is to answer the question: why have Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree? In order to qualify for this study I am seeking individuals who: are at least 18 years old, are enrolled at the University full-time, have an academic standing of at least a junior, and identify as Latino. If you identify with the previous criteria I would like for you to answer a few short questions so that I may identify students who have different stories to tell. I have attached a consent form, which explains my study. Please read it first and if you have any questions, please contact me so that we can discuss your concerns. If you agree to participate, please answer the questions, attached, to the best of your ability. If any of the questions make you feel uncomfortable, you may skip that question and move on to the next one.

Thank you for your time, and please feel free to contact me at anytime. Once I receive your answers, I will be in contact within the next three weeks to let you know if you have been selected to participate in my study.

Sincerely,

*Christine*

Christine Stuart-Carruthers  
Doctoral student at the University of Lincoln-Nebraska  
[Christine.stuart.carruthers@gmail.com](mailto:Christine.stuart.carruthers@gmail.com)  
(xxx) xxx-xxxx



## Appendix D Screening Survey

In order to qualify for this study I am seeking individuals who: are at least 18 years old, are enrolled at the University full-time, have an academic standing of at least a junior, identify as Latino, and identify as an undocumented student. If you identify with the previous criteria I would like for you to answer the few short questions below so that I may identify students who have different stories to tell. If any of the questions make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them and can skip to the next question. If you choose not to proceed with participating in this study you are free to withdraw at any time. Please do not place your name on this form as you will only be identified through the phone number you provide below to protect your confidentiality.

1. Do you identify as a male or female?
2. When did you start attending the University?
3. What is your current academic standing (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate student)?
4. What is your current grade point average (GPA)?
5. Are you involved in any student organizations on campus? If so, how many? Do you hold any leadership positions in any of the student organizations?
6. Are you employed? If so, part time or full time? On or off campus?
7. How old were you when you came to the United States?
8. How did you enter the United States? On a visa? Illegally?
9. What is your current immigration status? Do you have a pending immigration case? Have you filed for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals?
10. What are your plans once you graduate from the University? Will you stay in the United States or will you return to your home country?
11. What is the best phone number to contact you at?

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. I appreciate your cooperation and will be in contact within the next three weeks.

Sincerely,

*Christine*

Christine Stuart-Carruthers  
Doctoral student at the University of Lincoln-Nebraska  
[Christine.stuart.carruthers@gmail.com](mailto:Christine.stuart.carruthers@gmail.com)  
(xxx) xxx-xxxx

## **Appendix E**

### **Informed Consent Screening Student**

#### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

**Title:** A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Latino Students to Enroll In and Persist at a Four-Year Public Hispanic-Serving Institution in Texas

#### **Purpose:**

This research project will aim to explore the reasons that Latino students enroll in and persist at a four-year public Hispanic-Serving Institution in Texas. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. You are invited to participate in this study because you: are enrolled at the University of Texas-Pan American full-time, you have an academic standing of at least a junior, and you identify as Latino.

#### **Procedures:**

At this time you will be asked to fill out a short survey that inquires about your standing at the University of Texas-Pan American, when and how you entered the United States, and your current documentation status. Should you be chosen to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews over a three-week span that will be audiotaped. Both interviews will last approximately two to three hours and will take place at the location of your choosing. You will also be asked to read the transcripts from each interview and make any corrections or additions you feel are relevant.

#### **Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant and you will not be compensated for participating in this study. It is anticipated that this research may be able to aid other Latino students that attend college, as recommendations for university practice will be included in the findings of this research study.

#### **Risks and/or Discomforts:**

During the interview process there is a risk that some of the questions may make you feel uncomfortable. You are free to decline to answer any question that you choose. In addition I will use a pseudonym in all of transcripts and reporting of the data to protect your identity.

#### **Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's home and will only be seen by the investigator, the secondary investigator, the transcriptionist, and the research auditor during the study. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported through the use of the pseudonym.

#### **Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

#### **Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the University of Texas-Pan American, or the Minority Affairs Council or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By answering the attached questions it certifies that you have decided to participate in this research study after having read and understood the information presented. This consent form is yours to keep.

**Name and Phone number of investigator(s)**

Christine Stuart-Carruthers, MEd, Principal Investigator Cell phone (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Richard Hoover, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator Office (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Brent Cejda, PhD., Secondary Investigator Office (xxx) xxx-xxxx

## FORMA DE CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO

**Título:** Un Estudio Fenomológico de las Experiencias Vividas de Estudiantes Latinos de Matricularse en y Persistir en una Institución Pública de Cuatro Años que Sirve al Hispano en Texas

### **Propósito:**

Este proyecto de investigación tratará de explorar las razones que los estudiantes Latinos se inscriban en y persistan una Institución pública de cuatro años que sirve al Hispano en Texas. Usted debe ser 18 años de edad o más para participar. Usted está invitado a participar en este estudio porque usted: están matriculados en la Universidad de Texas Pan-América tiempo completo, tiene una posición académica de por lo menos un junior, y se identifica como Latino.

### **Procedimientos:**

En este tiempo se le pedirá que llene una breve encuesta que pregunta de su posición en la Universidad de Texas Pan-América, cuando y cómo entró en los Estados Unidos, y su estado de la documentación corriente. Si es elegido para participar en el estudio, se le pedirá participar en dos entrevistas durante un período de tres semanas que será audio grabó. Ambas entrevistas durarán aproximadamente dos a tres horas y llevará a cabo en el lugar de su elección. También se le pedirá leer las transcripciones de cada entrevista y hacer cualquier corrección o adiciones que siente son relevantes.

### **Beneficios:**

No hay beneficios directos a usted como un participante en la investigación, y no será compensado por participar en este estudio. Se espera que esta investigación pueda ser capaz de ayudar a otros estudiantes Latinos que asisten a la universidad, ya que las recomendaciones para la práctica universitaria se incluirán en las conclusiones de este estudio de investigación.

### **Riesgos y/o Incomodidades:**

Durante el proceso de la entrevista hay un riesgo que algunas preguntas le puedan hacer sentirse incómodo. Usted es libre de negarse a responder cualquier pregunta que usted elija. Además, utilizaré un seudónimo en todas las transcripciones y reporte de los datos para proteger su identidad.

### **Confidencialidad:**

Cualquier información obtenida en este estudio que podría identificarlo se mantendrá estrictamente confidencial. Los datos se almacenarán en un gabinete cerrado con llave en la casa del investigador y sólo serán vistos por el investigador, el investigador secundario, el transcriptor y el auditor de investigación durante el estudio. La información obtenida en este estudio puede ser publicada en revistas científicas o presentada en reuniones científicas, pero los datos se comunicarán a través del uso del seudónimo.

### **Oportunidad de Hacer Preguntas:**

Usted puede hacer cualquier pregunta acerca de esta investigación y tener respuestas de preguntas antes de consentir en participar en o durante el estudio. O puede comunicarse con el investigador(es) en los siguientes números de teléfono. Por favor póngase en contacto con la Junta de Revisión Institucional Universidad de Nebraska-Lincoln al número (402) 472-6965 para expresar preocupaciones sobre la investigación o si tiene alguna pregunta sobre sus derechos como un participante de investigación.

### **Libertad de Retirarse:**

La participación en este estudio es voluntaria. Usted puede negarse a participar o retirar en cualquier momento sin dañar su relación con los investigadores, la Universidad de Nebraska-Lincoln, la Universidad

de Texas Pan-América, el Consejo de Asuntos de Minorías o de cualquier otra manera recibir una penalidad o pérdida de beneficios a las cuales por otra parte tiene derecho.

**Consentimiento, Derecho a Recibir Copia:**

Usted voluntariamente está tomando una decisión si desea o no participar en este estudio de investigación. Su consentimiento verbal certifica que usted haya decidido participar en este estudio de investigación después de haber leído y entendido la información presentada. Esta forma de consentimiento es suya para mantener.

**Nombre y Número de Teléfono de Investigador(es):**

Christine Stuart-Carruthers, MEd, Investigador Principal Celular (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Richard Hoover, Ph.D., Investigador Secundario Oficina (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Brent Cejda, Ph.D., Investigador Secundario Oficina (xxx) xxx-xxxx

**Appendix F**  
**Participant Email/Letter for Students**

Dear [name]:

Thank you for completing the screening survey. You have been selected to participate in my dissertation focused on: why have Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree? I would like to interview you twice to learn about your experiences as a Latino student in college. Each interview will last between two and three hours and will be audiotaped. During the first interview I will ask you questions about your home country; to describe your transition to the United States, including when you found out that you lacked documentation to be in the United States; about your schooling; and about the individuals that influenced your decision to go to college. At the second interview I will ask you questions about barriers you have faced in the application process, and in staying enrolled at the University, and how you have overcome them.

During this process there is a risk that some of the questions may make you feel uncomfortable. You are free to decline to answer any question that you choose. In addition, revealing your undocumented status to anyone may pose a risk, however you will only be identified through the use of pseudonym, which will be used throughout the data collection.

If you have any questions, please let me know. Please contact me at your earliest convenience so that we may set up a time to meet for the first interview.

*Christine*

Christine Stuart-Carruthers  
Doctoral student at the University of Lincoln-Nebraska  
[Christine.stuart.carruthers@gmail.com](mailto:Christine.stuart.carruthers@gmail.com)  
(xxx) xxx-xxxx

## **Appendix G**

### **Informed Consent Student**

#### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

**Title:** A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Latino Students to Enroll In and Persist at a Four-Year Public Hispanic-Serving Institution in Texas

#### **Purpose:**

This research project will aim to explore the reasons that Latino students enroll in and persist at a four-year public Hispanic-Serving Institution in Texas. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. You are invited to participate in this study because you: are enrolled at the University of Texas-Pan American full-time, you have an academic standing of at least a junior, and you identify as Latino.

#### **Procedures:**

You will be asked to participate in two interviews over a three-week span that will be audiotaped. Before each interview you will be provided with the interview questions to review. During the first interview I will ask you questions about your home country; to describe your transition to the United States; about your schooling; and about the individuals that influenced your decision to go to college. At the end of the first interview I will ask you to provide a flyer to those individual that influenced your decision to go to college to invite them to participate in an interview about their relationship with you. During the second interview I will ask you questions about barriers you have faced in the application process, and in staying enrolled at this university, and how you have overcome them. Both interviews will last approximately two to three hours and will take place at the location of your choosing. You will also be asked to read the transcripts from each interview and make any corrections or additions you feel are relevant.

#### **Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant and you will not be compensated for participating in this study. It is anticipated that this research may be able to aid other Latino students that attend college, as recommendations for university practice will be included in the findings of this research study.

#### **Risks and/or Discomforts:**

During the interview process there is a risk that some of the questions may make you feel uncomfortable. You are free to decline to answer any question that you choose. In addition, I will use a pseudonym in all of transcripts and reporting of the data to protect your identity.

#### **Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's home and will only be seen by the investigator, the secondary investigator, the transcriptionist, and the research auditor during the study. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported through the use of the pseudonym.

#### **Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers below.

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**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the University of Texas-Pan American, or the Minority Affairs Council or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your verbal consent certifies that you have decided to participate in this research study after having read and understood the information presented. This consent form is yours to keep.

**Name and Phone number of investigator(s)**

Christine Stuart-Carruthers, MEd, Principal Investigator Cell phone (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Richard Hoover, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator Office (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Brent Cejda, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator Office (xxx) xxx-xxxx



## FORMA DE CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO

**Título:** Un Estudio Fenomológico de las Experiencias Vividas de Estudiantes Latinos de Matricularse en y Persistir en una Institución Pública de Cuatro Años que Sirve al Hispano en Texas

### **Propósito:**

Este proyecto de investigación tratará de explorar las razones que los estudiantes Latinos se inscriban en y persistan una Institución pública de cuatro años que sirve al Hispano en Texas. Usted debe ser 18 años de edad o más para participar. Usted está invitado a participar en este estudio porque usted: están matriculados en la Universidad de Texas Pan-América tiempo completo, tiene una posición académica de por lo menos un junior, y se identifica como Latino.

### **Procedimientos:**

Se le pedirá participar en dos entrevistas durante un período de tres semanas que será audio grabado. Antes de cada entrevista se le proporcionará con preguntas de la entrevista para revisar. Durante la primera entrevista le hare preguntas sobre su país de origen; describir su transición a los Estados Unidos; sobre su educación; y sobre las personas que influyeron en su decisión de ir a la universidad. Al final de la primera entrevista le pediré que usted proporcione un folleto a las personas que influyeron en su decisión de ir a la universidad para invitarlos a participar en una entrevista con respecto a su relación con usted. Durante la segunda entrevista le haré preguntas sobre barreras las que se han enfrentado en el proceso de solicitud, y en permanecer matriculado en la universidad, y cómo se han superado. Ambas entrevistas durarán aproximadamente dos a tres horas y llevará a cabo en el lugar de su elección. También se le pedirá leer las transcripciones de cada entrevista y hacer cualquier corrección o adiciones que siente son relevantes.

### **Beneficios:**

No hay beneficios directos a usted como un participante en la investigación, y no será compensado por participar en este estudio. Se espera que esta investigación pueda ser capaz de ayudar a otros estudiantes Latinos que asisten a la universidad, ya que las recomendaciones para la práctica universitaria se incluirán en las conclusiones de este estudio de investigación.

### **Riesgos y/o Incomodidades:**

Durante el proceso de la entrevista hay un riesgo que algunas preguntas le puedan hacer sentirse incómodo. Usted es libre de negarse a responder cualquier pregunta que usted elija. Además, utilizaré un seudónimo en todas las transcripciones y reporte de los datos para proteger su identidad.

### **Confidencialidad:**

Cualquier información obtenida en este estudio que podría identificarlo se mantendrá estrictamente confidencial. Los datos se almacenarán en un gabinete cerrado con llave en la casa del investigador y sólo serán vistos por el investigador, el investigador secundario, el transcriptor y el auditor de investigación durante el estudio. La información obtenida en este estudio puede ser publicada en revistas científicas o presentada en reuniones científicas, pero los datos se comunicarán a través del uso del seudónimo.

### **Oportunidad de Hacer Preguntas:**

Usted puede hacer cualquier pregunta acerca de esta investigación y tener respuestas de preguntas antes de consentir en participar en o durante el estudio. O puede comunicarse con el investigador(es) en los siguientes números de teléfono. Por favor póngase en contacto con la Junta de Revisión Institucional Universidad de Nebraska-Lincoln al número (402) 472-6965 para expresar preocupaciones sobre la investigación o si tiene alguna pregunta sobre sus derechos como un participante de investigación.

**Libertad de Retirarse:**

La participación en este estudio es voluntaria. Usted puede negarse a participar o retirar en cualquier momento sin dañar su relación con los investigadores, la Universidad de Nebraska-Lincoln, la Universidad de Texas Pan-América, el Consejo de Asuntos de Minorías o de cualquier otra manera recibir una penalidad o pérdida de beneficios a las cuales por otra parte tiene derecho.

**Consentimiento, Derecho a Recibir Copia:**

Usted voluntariamente está tomando una decisión si desea o no participar en este estudio de investigación. Su consentimiento verbal certifica que usted haya decidido participar en este estudio de investigación después de haber leído y entendido la información presentada. Esta forma de consentimiento es suya para mantener.

**Nombre y Número de Teléfono de Investigador(es):**

Christine Stuart-Carruthers, MEd, Investigador Principal Celular (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Richard Hoover, Ph.D., Investigador Secundario Oficina (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Brent Cejda, Ph.D., Investigador Secundario Oficina (xxx) xxx-xxxx

## Appendix H Interview Protocol for Students

### First Interview with Student

#### *Preamble*

I would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I am a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and am conducting this interview as part of my dissertation. The focus of my dissertation is to answer the question: why have undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree? I expect that this interview will last between two and three hours and we will need to meet a second time for approximately two to three hours. Both interviews will be audiotaped. During the first interview I will ask you questions about your home country; to describe your transition to the United States, including when you found out that you lacked documentation to be in the United States; about your schooling; and about the individuals that influenced your decision to go to college. At the end of this interview I will ask you to pass along a flyer to invite individuals that influenced your decision to go to college to participate in an interview about your relationship with them. During the second interview I will ask you questions about barriers you have faced in the application process, and in staying enrolled at this university, and how you have overcome them. At this time I would like to review the informed consent form with you. [Review informed consent form, give student a copy, and obtain verbal consent]. Do you have any questions before we get started?

#### *Background*

1. Can you please start by telling me about yourself?
  - a. Prompt: Where were you born?
  - b. Prompt: How old are you?
  - c. Prompt: Do you have any brothers and/or sisters?
  - d. Prompt: Are you married?
  - e. Prompt: Do you have any children?
  - f. Prompt: When did you come to the United States?
  - g. Prompt: Is this the first college that you have attended?
    - i. Prompt: Where did you attend before? (If applicable)
    - ii. Prompt: Did you graduate from there? (If applicable)
  - h. Prompt: What year are you in school (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior)?
  - i. Prompt: Do you attend school full-time or part-time?
  - j. Prompt: What is your major?
  - k. Prompt: Are you working? If so do you work part-time or full-time?
2. Would you please describe your family and background in terms of educational attainment and socioeconomic standing?
  - a. Prompt: What's the highest grade your parents completed?
    - i. Prompt: Did your parents attend and/or graduate from college? (If applicable)
    - ii. Prompt: Where did they attend college? (If applicable)

- iii. Prompt: What did your parents major in? (If applicable)
  - b. Prompt: What's the highest grade that your brothers and/or sisters completed? (If applicable)
    - i. Prompt: Did your siblings attend and/or graduate from college? (If applicable)
    - ii. Prompt: Where did they attend college? (If applicable)
    - iii. Prompt: What did your sibling major in? (If applicable)
  - c. Prompt: What kind of jobs do your parents have?
  - d. Prompt: Do any of your other family members work?
    - i. Prompt: What kind of jobs do they have? (If applicable)
- 3. Would you please describe what life was like in your home country?
  - a. Prompt: Please describe the school you attended in your home country?
  - b. Prompt: Would you please describe your connections to family and friends in your home country?
  - c. Prompt: What kinds of jobs did your parents have in your home country?
  - d. Prompt: Were other members of your family working in your home country?
    - i. Prompt: What kinds of jobs did they have? (If applicable)
- 4. Would you please describe what you remember about coming to the United States?
  - a. Prompt: When did you move to the United States?
  - b. Prompt: Can you please describe your journey to the United States?
  - c. Prompt: What do you remember about the transition from the country you were born in to United States?
- 5. Would you please tell me about your connections to family and friends who live in the United States?
  - a. Prompt: Are your connections to family and friends in the United States different than the connections that you had in your home country?
  - b. Prompt: Do you still have connections to family and friends who do not live in the United States?
    - i. How do you keep in contact with those who do not live in the United States?
- 6. Please tell me about when you realized that you lacked documentation to be in the United States?
  - a. Prompt: When did you find out about your lack of documentation?
  - b. Prompt: How did you find out about your lack of documentation?
  - c. Prompt: How did you feel when you learned that you were "undocumented"?
  - d. Prompt: How did the realization impact you?
    - i. Prompt: Did it affect your performance in school?
    - ii. Prompt: Did it affect your relationships with others?
  - e. Prompt: What does being an undocumented individual mean to you?
- 7. What is your current immigration status?
  - a. Do you have a pending immigration case?
  - b. Do you anticipate changing your status in the near future?

8. Would you please describe your schooling in the United States?
  - a. Prompt: What were the differences between your schooling in the country you were born in and the United States?
  - b. Prompt: Please tell me what you remember about your first year of attending school in the United States?
  - c. Prompt: Were you ever placed in ESL or bilingual classes in the United States?
    - i. Prompt: What effect do you believe being placed in these classes had on you?
  - d. Prompt: Please tell me about your family's educational expectations?
  - e. Prompt: Please tell me about your personal educational expectations?

*Decision to Attend College*

9. Please describe what impact your schooling had on your decision to attend college?
  - a. Do you believe your schooling prepared you to succeed in college?
    - i. How well did you feel prepared for your math classes?
      1. Prompt: How many math classes did you take in high school?
      2. Prompt: What was the highest-level math class you took while in high school?
      3. Prompt: In what ways did you feel unprepared or what did you find challenging in math classes? (If applicable)
    - ii. How well did you feel prepared for your English classes?
      1. Prompt: How many English classes did you take in high school?
      2. Prompt: What was the highest-level English class you took while in high school?
      3. Prompt: In what ways did you feel unprepared or what did you find challenging in English classes? (If applicable)
    - iii. What kind of grades did you make in high school?
  - b. Did you believe that you had the knowledge, skills, and abilities to succeed in college?
    - i. What did you believe your greatest strengths were before enrolling in college?
    - ii. What were your concerns before starting your college classes?
10. Please describe the individuals that influenced your decision to attend college?
  - a. Would you please explain what impact your family had on your decision to attend college?
    - i. What role did your parents play in your decision to attend college?
      1. Prompt: When did your parents start talking to you about attending college?
      2. Prompt: What types of messages did you receive from your parents about college?
        - a. That you were academically able?
        - b. That they would assist you financially?
        - c. That going to college was important?

3. Were they able to help you navigate the process to enroll in this university? If so, how? (If applicable)
  - ii. What role did your brother(s)/sister(s) play in your decision to attend college? (If applicable)
    1. Prompt: What did they tell you about college?
    2. Do you believe by attending college you are a role model to your brothers/sisters or other family members?
      - a. Prompt: How does that make you feel?
    3. Were they able to help you navigate the process to enroll in this university? If so, how? (If applicable)
  - iii. What role did your extended family play in your decision to attend college?
    1. Prompt: Aunts/uncles, grandparents, cousins, other family members?
    2. Were they able to help you navigate the process to enroll in this university? If so, how? (If applicable)
  - b. Can you explain what impact your friends had on your decision to attend college?
    - i. Prompt: Are they also attending this university?
    - ii. Prompt: Were they able to help you navigate the process to enroll in this university? If so, how? (If applicable)
  - c. Did anyone else influence your decision to attend college?
    - i. Prompt: High school teachers/counselors?
      1. Were they able to help you navigate the process to enroll in this university? If so, how? (If applicable)
    - ii. Prompt: College admissions counselors?
      1. Were they able to help you navigate the process to enroll in this university? If so, how? (If applicable)
    - iii. Prompt: Community members?
      1. Prompt: Church members, coaches, etc.
      2. Were they able to help you navigate the process to enroll in this university? If so, how? (If applicable)
11. Describe the message that you received from the individuals that influenced your decision to go to college?
    - a. Prompt: Did they tell you that you were academically prepared?
    - b. Prompt: Did they tell you that there was financial assistance available?
    - c. Prompt: What did these individuals believe about the importance of your undocumented status relative to you attending college?
  12. Describe the actions that the individuals that influenced your decision took to aid you in enrolling in college?
    - a. Prompt: help picking out classes in high school, filling out college applications, discussion of financial options?
  13. Describe the individuals who had the greatest impact on your decision to attend college and why?
  14. Would it be possible to talk to the individuals who influenced you the most?

- a. Prompt: Would you be willing to provide those individuals this flyer to invite them to participate in my study?
  - b. Prompt: Do they speak English?
15. Is there anything else that you would like tell me that I did not ask you about today?

### *Closing*

I would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with me today and for sharing this information. I appreciate your honest and openness about your life. I know that often after we speak to someone we think of other things that we wanted to tell him or her about. I'd like to provide you with this journal so that if anything else comes to mind, you can write your thoughts down. In addition, before we meet next time, I will provide you with a transcription of our conversation so that you can review it and make any additions or corrections. What would be the best way to get the transcript to you? When you like to meet again?

### **Second Interview with Student**

#### *Preamble*

I would like thank you for meeting with me again so that I can ask you a few more questions. During this interview I will focus on your experience with this university in terms of the enrollment process and what it is has been like to be a college student. In order to understand your experience better I will ask you about the barriers that you have faced along the way and how you have overcome. Before we start, do you have any questions about the consent form reviewed last time? As a reminder, this interview will also be audiotaped. Are you ready to start?

1. Is there anything that came to mind since our last interview that you wanted to share?
2. Were you able to review the transcript from our last meeting? Where there any sections you wanted to add more information to or that you thought were not accurately captured?

#### *Initial Goals and Expectations*

3. Would you please explain why you choose to attend this university?
  - a. Prompt: Is this the only college that you have attended? (If applicable)
    - i. Prompt: Where did you attend before? (If applicable)
    - ii. Prompt: What was your decision for leaving your other institution and transferring to this university? (If applicable)
  - b. Prompt: What were some of the characteristics of this college that attracted you?
    - i. Prompt: Was it the location?
    - ii. Prompt: Was it the size?
    - iii. Prompt: Was it that there are a lot of Latino students?
    - iv. Prompt: Did you know that other undocumented students had attended here before you?
4. What were your expectations of what college life would be like?

- a. Prompt: How closely has your college experience met your expectations?
- b. Prompt: What are ways in which your experience has not met your expectations?
5. What were your initial goals when you applied to this university?
  - a. Prompt: What did you think you would gain by completing a college degree?
  - b. Prompt: Have your goals changed since you've been in college?
6. What are your expectations after graduation?
  - a. Prompt: What kind of job do you think you will start at?
  - b. Prompt: Where you might live?
  - c. Prompt: What are your long-term career goals?
  - d. Prompt: Do you think you will go on to graduate school?
  - e. Prompt: How do you picture what your life will be like?
7. Looking back on the college application process, were there things that would have been helpful for you to have known to make the process go smoother?
  - a. Prompt: Navigating the application process?
    - i. If so, how did you overcome it?
  - b. Prompt: Taking the entrance exam?
    - i. If so, how did you overcome it?
  - c. Prompt: Filling out the state aid application or scholarship application forms?
    - i. If so, how did you overcome it?
  - d. Prompt: Parental concerns?
    - i. If so, how did you overcome them?
8. What responsibilities other than being a student were you juggling when you first enrolled in classes?
  - a. Prompt: Family, work, significant others?
  - b. Prompt: Have those responsibilities changed over time? (If applicable)
  - c. Prompt: What impact do those responsibilities have on your role as a student? (If applicable)
    - i. Prompt: Do they affect your grades?
    - ii. Prompt: Limit the amount of time you have to study?
    - iii. Prompt: Effect your ability to be involved on campus?
9. How did you plan on paying for your tuition?
  - a. Prompt: Are you paying in-state tuition?
  - b. Prompt: Are you receiving state financial aid?
  - c. Prompt: Are you receiving any scholarships?
  - d. Prompt: Has your plan for paying for school changed since you enrolled?

### *College Experience*

10. Tell me about your experiences as an undocumented student here at the University?
  - a. Prompt: What's a typical day/week/semester like?
11. Would you describe the barriers that you have faced in attending this university?
  - a. Prompt: Would you describe any sort of financial barriers you might have experienced?
    - i. Prompt: Are you working?



- ii. Prompt: How many hours a week?
    - iii. Prompt: Do you have to manage conflicts with your work schedule and your class schedule?
    - iv. How have you overcome this barrier? (If applicable)
  - b. Prompt: Would you describe any family responsibilities conflict with you being a college student?
    - i. Prompt: Are you taking care of younger siblings?
    - ii. Prompt: Are you married?
    - iii. Prompt: Do you have any children?
    - iv. Prompt: Do you care for any elderly relatives?
    - v. Prompt: Do you have to work to contribute financially to the family?
    - vi. How have you overcome this barrier? (If applicable)
  - c. Prompt: Do you wish you had more time to spend on campus?
    - i. Prompt: How much time do you spend on campus and for what purposes?
    - ii. How have you overcome this barrier? (If applicable)
  - d. Prompt: Have you been able to manage your schoolwork?
    - i. How have you overcome this barrier? (If applicable)
  - e. Have you faced discrimination on campus?
    - i. Prompt: Do you believe it was because of your undocumented status?
    - ii. How have you overcome this barrier? (If applicable)
  - f. Has there been a time in which you wanted to stop attending college?
    - i. Prompt: What influenced your decision to persist?
  - g. Are you still as committed to obtaining a college degree as when you started?
- 12. Please describe your academic experience at this university?
  - a. Do you interact with faculty members?
    - i. Prompt: In what context?
    - ii. Prompt: Have they been supportive of your educational goals? If so, how?
  - b. Do you interact with staff members?
    - i. Prompt: In what context?
    - ii. Prompt: Have they been supportive of your educational goals? If so, how?
  - c. Are any of the faculty or staff aware of your undocumented status?
    - i. Prompt: In what way?
    - ii. Prompt: Do you believe this has influenced their relationship with you in anyway?
    - iii. Prompt: Can you describe how they have reacted to your status?
- 13. Describe your social experience at this university?
  - a. Have you made friends?
    - i. Prompt: How did you meet your friends?
  - b. Have you joined a student organization?
    - i. Prompt: Have you held any leadership positions?

- c. Are any of your peers aware of your undocumented status?
  - i. Prompt: In what way?
  - ii. Prompt: Do you believe this has influenced their relationship with you in anyway
  - iii. Prompt: Can you describe how they have reacted to your status?
- 14. Has your legal status influenced your behavior in college? If so, how?
- 15. Describe the individuals who had the greatest impact on your decision to persist in college and why?
  - a. Prompt: Is there anything that those individuals have done to assist you?
- 16. Do you feel connected to the university?
  - a. What has aided in that connection?
  - b. What has detracted from that connection?
- 17. Is there anything else you think I should know about why you enrolled at this university and what has helped you to persist?

### *Closing*

I would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with me again today and for sharing this information. Throughout this process you have been incredibly open and honest and I appreciate your time. I would like to provide you with a transcript of today's conversation again and get your feedback. What would be the best way to get the transcript to you and how would you like to return it to me? Thank you very much once again and it has been a pleasure.

## **Appendix I**

### **Linked to Interview Questions**

Grand Tour Question: Why have undocumented Latino students enrolled and persisted against the odds in the pursuit of their four-year college degree?

Research sub-questions:

- How do undocumented Latino students describe their interactions with the individuals who influenced them, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to enroll in college?
  - Questions: 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
  - Second Interview with Student
    - Questions: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
- What has the lived experience been like for undocumented Latino students attending a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution?
  - Second Interview with Student
    - Questions: 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
- What driving forces did undocumented Latino students identify that aided in overcoming the barriers that were faced in the enrollment process and as enrolled college students?
  - Second Interview with Student
    - Questions: 7, 8, 9, 11, 15, 17

**Epilogue**

“Unless someone like you cares an awful lot,

Nothing is going to get better. It’s not!”

Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax*