Effectively Serving AB 540 and Undocumented Students at a Hispanic Serving Institution

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Abstract
This mixed-methods study examined the experiences of undocumented students at a 4-year Hispanic Serving Institution. Barriers identified by these students included a lack of resources and minimal career opportunities after graduation. Faculty and staff perceived this historically underserved population as exhibiting high levels of optimism and resilience relative to educational endeavors and challenges related to students’ undocumented status. Study findings include student, faculty, and staff recommendations for improving undocumented student experiences at a specific Hispanic Serving Institution.

Resumen
Este estudio de métodos mixtos examinó las experiencias de estudiantes indocumentados en una institución universitaria de servicio a hispanos (IUSH). Las barreras identificadas por estos estudiantes incluyen falta de recursos y oportunidades mínimas de carreras después de graduarse. Profesores y administradores perciben esta población de representación baja histórica con altos niveles de optimismo y resistencia relativa a los esfuerzos educacionales y retos relacionados al estado de indocumentado. Hallazgos incluyen recomendaciones para estudiantes, profesores y administradores para mejorar las experiencias de estudiantes indocumentados en una IUSH específica.

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Keywords
undocumented students, AB 540, Hispanic Serving Institution, higher education, resilience

Introduction
This study aimed to explore the educational experiences of Assembly Bill (AB) 540 and undocumented students at a Hispanic Serving Regional University in Southern California. For the purposes of this article, the institution will be referred to as Beacon University. During the time of the study, the climate of the campus community and state was engaged in dialogue and activism specific to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the California Dream Act (AB 130 and AB 131). As a result, this study sought to understand the barriers, psychological resilience, and educational motivation of undocumented students. In addition, participants of this study were asked to provide recommendations to better support undocumented students at Beacon University.

Before the start of the study, as of March 2008, there were an estimated 11.9 million undocumented individuals in the United States (Passel & Cohn, 2009), of which 76% were Hispanic (59% from Mexico, 11% from Central America, and 6% other). Passel and Cohn (2009) also found that half (49%) of unauthorized immigrants between the ages of 18 and 24 years, who had graduated high school, were now attending or had previously attended college. Thus, the research indicated a disparity in the amount of Hispanic undocumented students going on to attend college.

A primary barrier involves students being unaware of their undocumented status prior to applying for college or jobs (Chavez, Soriano, & Oliverez, 2007), and an institutional obstacle includes lack of institutional funds available for services to undocumented students (Diaz-Strong, Gomez, Luna-Duarte, & Meiners, 2011). Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2010) studied undocumented students, and the following quote from their study highlights the student’s struggles and resilience:

You work ten times as hard as, maybe someone who take it for granted because they were born in this country, or somebody who is a legal resident and doesn’t know exactly what that means and what power they have. (p. 35)

A review of the literature found that undocumented students face institutional and societal exclusion as a result of their unlawful status (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009), limited financial resources (Oliverez, Chavez, Soriano, & Tierney, 2006), and lack of understanding from staff, faculty, and students regarding their needs to achieve equity within the institution (Huber & Malagon, 2007). As the experiences of undocumented students are not all identical and vary according to state and national legislation, it becomes increasingly important to conduct studies at different types of institutions.
Since the completion of the study showcased in this article, there have been many additions to the California state legislation with the potential to change the landscape and experiences of undocumented students in the state. The first is the California Dream Act passed in 2012 and was enforced beginning January 1, 2013. Composed of two House Bills (HB 130 and HB 131), it gave AB 540 students an opportunity to apply for and receive state financial aid and private scholarships (HB 130, 2012; HB 131, 2012). Even more recently in October of 2013, Senate Bill (SB) 141 allowed children, U.S. citizens, and California residents of deported or voluntarily departed parents the ability to pay in state tuition should they return to California to obtain public postsecondary education (SB 141, 2013). Finally, the latest piece of legislation is California HB 60, which allows undocumented individuals the opportunity to obtain a California driver’s license and identification (HB 60, 2013). Although not directly connected to education, HB 60 removes a daily stressor for many students who in the past have taken the risk of being pulled over and not only missing the class but also potentially being deported.

Literature Review

In 2001, California state legislature declared that long-term residents of California (regardless of their citizenship status) would have the ability to pay in-state fees at California public colleges and universities (Abrego, 2008). This declaration known as AB 540 (2002) was enacted in 2002 and requires individuals to have attended high school in California for 3 or more years, graduated from a California high school or received an equivalent certification, and registered or currently be attending a higher education institution in California on or after the 2001-2002 academic year. Those individuals with no lawful immigration status must also file an affidavit with their higher education institution stating that they will apply for legal residency as soon as the opportunity is presented to them (Day, 2007). Consequently, undocumented students in California who qualify for the AB 540 affidavit are commonly referred to as AB 540 students. As stated by the National Conference of State Legislatures (2013), there are currently 16 other states that have similar laws allowing undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates at public post-secondary institutions.

Like other historically underrepresented student populations, there were many obstacles these undocumented students navigated to get to college. This kind of consideration can enable all institutions to provide educational equity for this marginalized and vulnerable population. Equity in education is vital especially for underserved groups and communities who have historically lacked robust access to the core elements of a quality education, and has also been found to have significantly greater success in reducing achievement gaps.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that not all undocumented students are AB 540 eligible. Consequently, when we refer to this population of students in California, we find it is important to be inclusive when talking about undocumented and AB 540 students. This distinction is important when considering the availability of resources or differences in barriers that the difference in status implies. Although AB
540 does not give qualifying students the ability to apply for financial aid, the California Dream Act (i.e., HB 130 and HB 131) does allow these students to apply for various forms of financial assistance. As the Educators for Fair Consideration explained, AB 130 went into effect on January 1, 2012, allowing qualifying AB 540 students to apply for scholarships funded through individual departments, private donors, and/or alumni contributions at California public colleges and universities (Chan, 2011). In addition, AB 131 was enacted on January 1, 2013, and it allows qualifying AB 540 students to apply for the Board of Governors fee waiver and other forms of state administered financial aid programs such as Cal Grants, contingent upon the availability of remaining funds after their California legal resident counterparts have been funded.

**Barriers and Obstacles**

To understand how to effectively serve this unique student population within a higher education institution, it is important to understand the barriers and struggles that these students commonly encounter. Undocumented students commonly face institutional and societal exclusion along with rejection as a direct result of their status (Perez et al., 2009). Many undocumented high school students become aware of their status during the process of applying to college and/or while applying for a job (Chavez et al., 2007). Although many undocumented students are admitted to 4-year universities, they chose to attend community college due to their limited financial resources (Oliverez et al., 2006). Few private scholarships exist for undocumented students and rarely cover all of their undergraduate studies (Chavez et al., 2007). Perez (2010) suggested that counselors retrieve information on private and non-governmental scholarships from community organizations such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), the National Council of La Raza, and Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, and disseminate this information through scholarship resources on their campuses. It was also suggested that universities partner both internally and externally to increase private and institutional funds for undocumented students (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011).

In addition to the need for financial assistance, Huber and Malagon (2007) suggested that higher education institutions adapt social justice principles as a way for faculty, staff, and students to recognize that the social and academic needs of undocumented students must also be met in an attempt to achieve equity within higher education institutions. Specific legislative action enacted in California has made pursuing higher education more accessible for undocumented students despite pertinent challenges and obstacles that they often encounter. Without an understanding of the policies and laws that directly affect this student population, college and university leaders may not be able to meaningfully respond to societal issues related to these policies.

**Resilience and Motivation**

Undocumented students frequently demonstrate high levels of resiliency in motivation to overcome barriers and obstacles to their education (Perez et al., 2009). Perez and
colleagues (2009) also found that resilient undocumented students face risk factors such as having a large family size and more employment hours; however, they also exhibit high levels of personal and environmental protective factors such as being bilingual, exhibiting coping behaviors, growing up with both parents, and participating in extracurricular or volunteer activities. More specifically, having a higher grade point average (GPA), more school awards, and taking more honors or advanced placement (AP) courses positively affect undergraduate, undocumented, students’ resiliency (Perez et al., 2009). Similarly, Pérez and Rodríguez (2011) found that non-traditional encouragement, such as familial support through listening and understanding, goal setting, and motivation, fueled undocumented undergraduate students’ resiliency. Undocumented students also noted that mentorship through college counselors and professors helped them to be resilient through their educational struggles (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011).

Another study also noted the importance of having a strong support network through parents, faculty or college counselors, peers, and civic engagement (Perez et al., 2010). This, in turn, implied that college or university faculty and staff should be adequately informed about AB 540 resources, establish multicultural support programs and services, participate in or establish fundraising opportunities for scholarships, expand college outreach, and revamp health services for AB 540 students (Perez et al., 2010). These improvements would help undocumented college students have higher levels of achievement and success in college through heightened awareness and opportunity.

**Theoretical Framework**

Although there is an increasing amount of research being conducted on the undocumented student population in the United States, there are few theories that can be used to holistically describe or predict their experiences in higher education. As a result, we used a combination of theories that have been used to describe other marginalized populations. We consider Yosso’s (2005) model of Community Cultural Wealth. Yosso’s (2005) model is one that introduces a shift in the perspective in which non-dominant populations are perceived. Instead of looking at these traditionally marginalized communities through a deficit lens by comparing them with the dominant culture and identifying characteristics that they may lack, Yosso (2005) identified the characteristics that are a source of wealth, or assets, to these populations. Although this model is based on a sample of Latino students, it introduces different forms of wealth that marginalized populations possess and how they are differentially valued by dominant society. In her study, Yosso (2006) identified six forms of Community Cultural Wealth: (a) aspirational, (b) familial, (c) linguistic, (d) navigational, (e) resistant, and (f) social.

In addition to considering the community and culture, among undocumented students, it is also important to consider the impact of the institutions in which they participate. The conjunction of their status and other identities may result in other forms of racism or discrimination. For these reasons, it is important for us to also consider
Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) as we look at the higher education institutions in which students function. Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), commonly referred to as CRT, was born out of Critical Legal Studies in the 1970s by a group of scholars, students, and activists concerned about the stalled progress following in the civil rights era. An important component of CRT is that it does not only look at individuals but also at institutions, and by association the dominant culture that gives them power, and their impact on communities of color and oppressed groups. Because institutions, like higher education, are based on dominant norms, they also inherently marginalize underrepresented groups. Furthermore, given that our study is based on describing how a particular institution serves this population of students, it is important to be aware of these systemic influences as well.

Method

Data collection began in spring of 2011 and continued through fall 2011. In regard to this study, it is important to consider that AB 130 and AB 131 had not been enacted when data were collected. Data collection was based on a mixed-methodology approach, which included faculty and staff focus groups along with a student survey and interviews. This methodological approach was selected to explore, in more detail, the qualitative findings collected, and also to find quotes to support results from the survey data.

Measures

Data collection methods included survey, interviews, and focus groups. The survey assessed the needs of the undocumented and AB 540 student population on campus and solicited recommendations for improving their experiences at the university. Surveys were submitted anonymously; however, within it, students were given the option to participate in a confidential, face-to-face, voice-recorded interview. The survey consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions in the form of Likert-type scales.

The interviews explored students’ K-12 educational experiences as well as the challenges, support, and obstacles they encountered while pursuing a baccalaureate degree. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions with follow-up questions varying from participant to participant.

The questions on focus group protocol aimed to understand faculty and staff perspectives on the campus climate of Beacon University toward students who are AB 540 or undocumented. Staff and faculty were also asked to share their recommendations to better support students who are undocumented at Beacon University.

Procedures

Initially students were recruited to participate in study with the assistance of on-campus organizations known to be supporters of undocumented students and thereafter through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was imperative to recruitment of this study given that the college systems did not track the number of AB 540 students
enrolled at these institutions. These students are also not easily identified with the risks associated with students disclosing their legal status publicly. Recruitment for student interviews was done by adding a final question on the survey that asked students to provide contact information if they would like to share their story. Students who indicated that they were AB 540 eligible and open to a follow-up interview were then later contacted to schedule further interviews.

The student surveys were distributed online through Qualtrics while a paper-based version of this questionnaire was created and distributed to the targeted demographic through the campus Women’s Center and Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) office. These locations were chosen based on the AB 540 and Undocumented Student at Beacon University Report that listed both of these locations as potential offices that could be utilized as clearinghouses for undocumented students.

Faculty and staff were initially identified by the researchers as having visible interactions with AB 540 and undocumented students and thereafter through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was utilized because researchers were not familiar with all faculty and staff who served as supporters for undocumented students as a formalized support network. Unfortunately, at the time, there were no institutionalized support systems for faculty and staff, rather there were hubs for support.

A sample of faculty and staff from the university were invited to participate in one of two focus groups conducted in the summer of 2011. All participants were invited to partake in a focus group via their Beacon University employee email. The two separate focus groups were facilitated by one principle investigator while notes were taken by three research assistants. Each focus group was voice recorded with consent from participants and transcribed for analysis.

**Analyses**

Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program was utilized to analyze descriptive frequencies for the student survey responses. Student interviews and faculty/staff focus group data were transcribed and then analyzed using an open coding system (ATLAS.ti). This study utilized an inductive approach and building theory from the ground up based on data collected from interviews and focus groups (Creswell, 1998). Using the grounded theory design, the interviews and focus groups were first coded according to anticipated themes that were shown in the literature, and were then recoded using emerging themes from the transcriptions. Specific quotes from participant response were utilized to highlight relevant themes in the findings.

**Participants**

Participants of this study included current AB 540 and undocumented undergraduate students at the university in the spring, summer, and early fall of 2011. All participants reported being of Mexican descent and were representative of different academic majors. The total sample size of 55 participants was 73% females and 27% males. The mean age of the sample was 21 years. More than 50% of participants reported arriving
to the United States before the age of 5 years, 30% between the ages of 6 and 10 years, and 18% between the ages of 11 and 15 years. Ninety-two percent of participants reported that immigrating to the United States was a parental decision. All students currently reside in Southern California with 6% residing in San Bernardino County, 15% from Riverside County, 27% from Los Angeles County, and 53% in Orange County. It is important to note that this representation is unique considering most studies regarding California undocumented students have been conducted in Northern California and Los Angeles County. Fourteen students from the sample also participated in confidential, voice-recorded one-on-one interviews which were conducted separately from the faculty and staff focus groups.

The two focus groups were conducted with faculty and staff from various on-campus departments. A total of 13 faculty and staff participated. Seven staff members agreed to participate in the first focus group after being identified as having visible interaction with AB 540 and undocumented students on campus. The second focus group included two faculty and four staff members who were recruited through snowball sampling and considered specialist on issues that students who are undocumented face at the university. None of the focus group participants reported being undocumented students while in college. No other demographic information was collected regarding the staff members and faculty.

**Results**

This study aimed to explore the experiences of AB 540 and undocumented students at Beacon University. This study was conducted during a time of visible student activism for educational equity for AB 540 and undocumented students. Student survey and interviews results as well as staff and faculty focus group themes are presented in this section.

**Student Survey Results**

When students who are undocumented were asked about their educational goals, they reported high-academic aspirations. However, when students were asked what degree they actually expected to obtain, results showed that of the 80% who aspired to obtain a Law degree, PhD, MD, or EdD, only 29% actually expected to obtain them. More specifically, 43% believed they would complete a master’s degree and 26% believed they would complete a bachelor’s degree. These findings demonstrated incongruence between students’ academic aspirations and expectations as a direct result of their status.

*Perceptions.* Students were initially surveyed on their perceptions of the university based on their undocumented legal status. Eighty percent of the participants reported that college life had been difficult for them. In addition, 67% of participants believed that the university would help them reach their educational goals; however, only 53% believed that the university would help them achieve their career goals. Moreover,
only 33% of participants believed that university administrators were aware of the challenges faced by their undocumented status. Forty-five percent of participants reported not being aware of the resources available to AB 540 and undocumented students on campus. Students were also asked to identify the resources and services available on campus that they tended to avoid or would not consider using as a direct result of their undocumented status. Nearly 80% of students reported never visiting the federal work study program office followed by 70% never using the financial aid office. More than 50% of participants also reported not using services offered by the career center, housing and residence life, the center for internships and community engagement, or the international education and exchange office. In addition, 30% of students reported not being comfortable with approaching the university police as a direct result of their undocumented status.

Aside from coping strategies, 45% of students reported wanting to continue their undergraduate studies and eventually apply to post-baccalaureate degree programs. The remaining 55% reported that they would need to work after graduation, and before attending graduate school, to save money to fund their future educational endeavors.

**Student Interview Results**

**Resiliency.** Participants reported numerous reasons for their parents deciding to move to the United States including better educational opportunities, escape from death threats and abusive relationships, medical assistance for health issues, and new beginnings after experiencing a death in the family.

Yosso (2005) describes aspirational capital as the ability to maintain hope despite economic and social hardships. Students reported being motivated to succeed academically despite their struggles. When students were questioned about what motivated them to pursue higher education, eight of the 14 students stated having been motivated by their high school counselors and also their own undocumented legal status and consequential struggles while six out of 14 students reported being motivated by their parents. In addition, one student discussed the motivation for pursuing higher education was to become financially stable. The student stated,

Seeing my parents and myself come up basically from nothing. The only thing that really belonged to me was my baby blanket.

When students were asked about their struggles while attending college, participants in the interviews reported that paying for college as their biggest obstacle. This was followed by issues with transportation, obtaining a job, as well as not being able to obtain an internship without request of a background check and social security number. More specifically, students reported that their parents had paid for their tuition out of pocket and as a result had a feeling of indebtedness to them. This was further noted with responses such as, “It really gave me motivation and that thought of ‘I need to get here so that I can provide for my parents’ because they have provided for me thus far.”
Students were asked about the coping strategies they used to overcome obstacles and the stress of being an undocumented or an AB 540 student. All participants responded with a sense of optimism and described that they attempted to focus on the future, their career and life objectives, and the well-being of their parents and family. All participants displayed hopefulness that federal policies would change in their favor so that their status would not be a barrier in obtaining a higher education degree.

Aside from coping strategies, about half of the students reported wanting to continue their undergraduate studies and eventually apply to post-baccalaureate degree programs. The remaining half reported that they would need to work before attending graduate school after graduation to save money to fund their future educational endeavors.

**Internal conflict.** Another notable theme in the interviews was the internal conflict that students experienced with their social identities as a result of their status in a new environment. Discussions related to their struggles demonstrated the significant impact that their undocumented status had not only on their academic experiences but also on their personal identity development. For many, this resulted from not being aware of the limitations of their undocumented status until junior and senior year in high school. This time usually aligned with student seeking job opportunities, scholarships, and/or a driver’s license that requires proof of U.S. citizenship.

Students were encouraged to share about their experiences in higher education, and future goals and aspirations. All participants described themselves as high-achieving students and demonstrated high levels of involvement in both university- and community-based organizations. Their involvement and engagement was related to students reported attempts to ban the use of the term *illegal immigrants* on campus as they felt that this was a form of discrimination toward students belonging to the undocumented and AB 540 student population. They described that no human should be labeled as “illegal.” This is further supported by the student survey results in which 64% of students reported feeling discriminated against on campus in regard to not only their undocumented legal status but also their race.

**Recommendations.** Participants were given the opportunity to share recommendations to improve the universities’ efforts in effectively serving AB 540 and undocumented students’ needs. Students suggested that their university should offer a compiled list of scholarships for AB 540 and undocumented students upon submitting their AB 540 Affidavit. Additional suggestions included having opportunities for on-campus student employment, a resource website that is frequently updated with current information, and increased internship opportunities that do not require students to provide a social security number. Moreover, students suggested providing additional academic advisement specifically for AB 540 and undocumented students. Students suggested that “AB540 Safe Zone” workshops be implemented in all departments of the university to increase awareness of their experiences and struggles. The most significant recommendation given by students involved the development of a “Dream Resource Center” that could serve as a “one-stop shop” for students, which would give them access to information and resources specific to their needs.
Faculty and Staff Focus Group Results

Faculty and staff focus group findings revealed that there is limited accessibility and availability of information, resources, mentors, and services for undocumented students. Moreover, it was apparent that there is scarce information for faculty and staff to support students who are undocumented and or AB 540. Two central themes emerged from the faculty and staff focus groups: (a) need for training programs and (b) institutionalizing the campus network.

Participants discussed the necessity of training programs for faculty and staff. Most felt that although some undocumented students on campus were comfortable disclosing their legal status on campus, other students were not. Students who were more comfortable with their status were perceived to be empowered through their involvement in student organizations and connections with certain offices on campus (i.e., EOP office). However, many students were still in need of advisement and assistance from faculty and staff who are trained and competent in areas and issues related to undocumented student’s needs. One participant commented on the students varying levels of comfort in regard to their legal status:

I’ve had students who are family members where one is more outgoing and activist oriented with what the school’s doing, challenging the system, and willing to go out and talk about it. Whereas the other student, in the [same] family, they are just kind of sliding by, had some information, but maybe not as open about their status.

Specifically, it was noted by most focus group participants that students were in dire need of support services that were not necessarily academically related. Faculty and staff attested that students who were undocumented generally excelled in their courses. One participant discussed that students were usually challenged to persist through college as a result of limited financial resources and career opportunities. Services such as advisement on future career opportunities, scholarships, and intern-ship opportunities were discussed as central to undocumented student needs at the university. Although some participants felt they could somewhat direct students to appropriate offices for resources, most participants discussed this as a challenge. One participant elaborated that issues related to undocumented students are often overlooked and said, “They [staff] are too busy trying to make it through the day with whatever tasks they have and so maybe that’s one of the last things they think about.”

Another emergent theme was the idea of formalizing an informal network that exists at this university. All faculty and staff articulated that there are certain “hubs” on campus where most undocumented students feel comfortable and safe. These hubs offer peer-support and advisement as well as interactions with particular staff who know about their status, identify as allies, and help them overcome obstacles. One participant discussed a support hub to be the EOP office, and stated,

I think that EOP has always been the hub for support because I think it’s natural to go to a program that was created on Civil Rights, and so I think the underground network has always been really strong and I think it was probably even stronger “back in the day.”
However, because these hubs exist, information that can be used to assist other undocumented students is not widely distributed. For this reason, several participants spoke about formalizing this existing network so that faculty, staff, and students can easily access information and services that are offered through specific individuals and offices. One participant stated,

There are sporadic resources. You just have to go on an egg hunt and find them . . . there has to be a one-stop shop, you know, that the students can identify . . . They can access and they know where they can go to receive, who is receptive to them, who understands, who can provide services where it’s just not, “well let’s see who I can send you to. Let’s see who what we can do.”

An additional participant commented,

Sometimes it’s sad to [have] staff members tell them [undocumented students], you know what, go to a peer and, you know, they’ll be able to provide you with a lot more information. Where, you know, they are coming to me and I should be able to provide them that info.

Despite the positive outcomes that a formal network could have for students, several participants noted that formalizing this network would limit assistance they could provide students because of restrictions that may be imposed on them as a result. Several participants believed the informal network should remain in place due to the following: It has been successful, greater rules and regulations come with institutionalization, and the fear that the values of the current network will be lost with this institutionalization.

Moreover, participants stated that even if a network would be proposed, it may not be supported by administrators. One participant stated,

as an institution, we are not doing a good job of serving AB540 students. I think there are services that are dispersed to people that have the knowledge or not necessarily formalized in a network, the support mechanisms are not there.

**Discussion**

The results of this study revealed findings parallel to those by Perez (2010) who stated that undocumented students exhibit high levels of academic achievement, psychological resilience, perseverance, and optimism. These themes were evident in both the survey and interview findings. All students coped with their present circumstances by means of optimism and hoping that one day their situations would change for the better, a characteristic of the previously highlighted aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). Students reported that their academics were still worth pursuing despite the fact that they would not be able to use their degrees as a result of not possessing social security numbers.

Part of this commitment to education is informed by the students’ understanding of deeply rooted inequity and discrimination in higher education and society. Students
exhibit an abundance of aspirational capital when they continue toward undergraduate degree completion and often advanced degrees regardless of their pre-college, college, and post-college barriers. Students demonstrated advocacy for higher education and believed in the importance of education and obtaining post-baccalaureate degrees. Regarding identity development, most students noticed that their undocumented status began to affect them in high school.

Although students demonstrated high-educational aspirations, they did not believe they would be able to pay for more years of higher education. Financial difficulties were a recurrent theme in both the surveys and interview findings and were reportedly the greatest obstacle for students’ persistence and aspiration. Other struggles included a limited amount of resources such as scholarship availability and barriers in obtaining internship opportunities that did not require a background check.

**Limitations**

It is important to understand the sensitivity surrounding students’ disclosure of their undocumented legal status including fear of deportation and discrimination. This sensitivity may have led to resistance from student participation and may explain the small sample of participants (N = 55). Moreover, at the time of this study, there was formal tracking system for AB 540 and undocumented students at the university to protect students’ identities and legal safety. However, as student’s personal stories and struggles are increasingly being valued and validated for progress in policy and legislative affairs, it is possible that student’s willingness to participate in research similar to this may increase.

An additional limitation included a lack of diverse ethnic and racial representation. All participants reported being of Mexican descent despite efforts to reach additional undocumented students from various racial and ethnic populations. These circumstances may reveal differences in the undocumented and AB 540 experience in relation to race. The intersection of identity and legal status may differ among immigrants from various countries.

**Future Directions**

This study revealed that more than 50% of the participants entered the United States before the age of 5 years because of a parental decision. In addition, 50% did not become aware of their status until they were junior/seniors in high school. However, this study did not further inquire or analyze student’s experiences to see how they affected their identity development as an immigrant who may not necessarily connect with an immigrant identity. Further research can be done to understand the identity development of undocumented students from various ethnic and racial communities at Beacon University and nationwide.

Recently, legislative and executive policies have been instituted to support students who are undocumented, and therefore additional research is needed to understand policy implications. Specifically, policies have addressed financial needs as well as
student’s ability to work and obtain a driver’s license through DACA; however, these are not long-term solutions for students and are contingent on constantly evolving federal policies that are not permanent.

**Implications**

Study findings revealed the importance for university administrators, faculty, and staff to understand and have knowledge of AB 540, DACA, and undocumented students’ struggles to better assist them in navigating the higher education system especially when they are operating under an informal structure. Students, faculty, and staff were aware of the limited resources available to students and recommended establishing a “Dream Resource Center.”

It is evident that there is a need to enhance current programs and services that address undocumented students’ needs appropriately. AB 540 allows students to pay in-state tuition in California public colleges and universities; however, students continued to have financial struggles. After the study was conducted, AB 131 was enacted on January 1, 2013, giving eligible AB 540 and undocumented students access to California funded financial resources such as the Board of Governor’s fee waiver and California grants. Moreover, DACA has also been enacted giving qualifying individuals a social security number, a 2-year work permit, and protection from deportation. Qualifying students may now obtain part-time jobs and also obtain work in their degree-obtained-related fields. These recent changes in policy will directly affect undocumented student experiences; however, an overall encompassing solution has yet to be implemented that provides access to more stable financial resources and a pathway to citizenship. Nonetheless, this groundbreaking legislation highlights the importance of preparing our institutions to appropriately support this population of students, especially as the possibility for a path to citizenship increases. The study highlights the specific areas in which undocumented and AB 540 students are seeking support including increased awareness of existing resources, financial aid, career readiness, advocacy to eliminate the use of “illegal” immigrant, and a resource center.

Findings from this and similar studies can influence the development of all encompassing policies that consider educational equity and immigration reform. Assessing a campus climate in regard to undocumented student needs and experiences can, in itself, increase awareness and urge college personnel and students to take action on changes that need to occur. As legislation evolves, it is expected that future research will reveal the impact of these policies in higher education institutions and systems.

It is important to note that several changes occurred in support of undocumented students on campus throughout the dissemination phase of the study findings. Following the reenactment of the AB 540 Task Force, the first annual, statewide, AB 540 Conference was hosted at Beacon University in September 2012. The conference planners invited educators from the community, organizations, administrators, and allies to attend several workshops that focused on better serving and understanding students as well as an interpretation of policies that affect students. In addition, after
many years of work, Beacon University developed and opened a Resource Center to support students who are undocumented in the spring of 2014, which further reinforced the importance of this research.

**Conclusion**

Despite mentioned limitations, results from this study may be generalizable to undocumented students on other similar campuses. Our findings support prior findings that undocumented students have high patterns of civic engagement through participation in both campus and community organizations (Perez et al., 2010). Despite their undocumented legal status and challenges in paying tuition, students overcome these obstacles by working multiple jobs, having family support, and scholarships exhibiting high levels of Community Cultural Wealth, aspirational capital specifically highlighted here. However, students are still not being serviced appropriately and often fear using services on campus as a result of their status.

Regardless of state and federal judicial policies that are not in full support of undocumented students gaining access to higher education resources, campuses should individually strive to support students and help them ease the obstacles they encounter. Institutions can decrease students’ concerns for their own safety while on campus and decrease fear when it comes to approaching facilities such as campus career centers, university police, and the center for internships and community engagement. Finally, higher education institutions can act as agents for social change by striving for justice and equity in educational access and support for undocumented students.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study was funded through a Mission and Goals and Faculty Development Center grant at California State University, Fullerton.

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