# A HERMENEUTIC EXPLORATION OF THE MEANING OF SCHOOL COUNSELING FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS ATTEMPTING TO RECEIVE EQUITABLE COLLEGE ACCESS

by

Victoria Lauren Landi

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Name and degree, Committee Chair

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## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examines what school counseling means to undocumented students attempting equitable college access. Critical Race Theory is the theoretical basis guiding this study. Much literature on undocumented youth and educational attainment suggests undocumented youth are not receiving an equitable public education and continue falling further into society's margins. However, research has not yet captured how undocumented youth experience college access from their school counselors. The gap in the research elucidates the research questions that drove this study regarding how undocumented students explain the meaning of equitable college access from their interactions with school counselors and how undocumented youth describe the helpfulness of their school counselors in achieving college access. A qualitative design created a platform for participants to use their experiences in educational research by employing semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data. Eight participants, ages 18-28, engaged in the research process, which included interviews regarding their experiences as undocumented students in high school attempting to receive equitable college access and member checking. Qualitative data was transcribed, coded, and organized into categories and themes in response to the two research questions. Six themes resulted from the process of data analysis. The findings indicate that undocumented students view school counselors as positive people in the school building striving to help students achieve academic success, yet encounter several obstacles that interfere with equitable service delivery. These findings contribute to the ongoing research aiming to understand how undocumented youth experience educational attainment and contribute to the profession and research on school counseling.


*Keywords:* undocumented youth, equity, school counseling, college access

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my son, Colin, and my future daughter, Caroline. As you grow up, I hope this research inspires you to pursue your education and care deeply about helping and advocating for others. I love you both so much.

**Acknowledgements**

I want to acknowledge the following individuals for making a profound impact on my dissertation journey: my very patient chair, Todd Shultz, my husband, Jeremy Landi, my mom, Janie Domico, and my participants.

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## List of Tables

## List of Abbreviations

Advanced Placement (AP)

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)

American College Test (ACT)

American School Counseling Association (ASCA)

Coronavirus- 19 (COVID-19)

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)

English as a Second Language (ESL)

English Language Learner (ELL)

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

Free Application For Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)

National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)

Social Security number (SSN)

United States of America (USA or US)

Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)

Verified International Stay Approval (VISA)

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Overview

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explores what school counseling means for undocumented students attempting to receive equitable college access. This chapter presents a general overview of the current educational realities for undocumented youth and elucidates how this phenomenological study fits within the broader frame of the research. First, the theoretical lens of the researcher is defined and explained. The problem statement, purpose statement, the significance of the research, and research questions articulate and clarify the purpose and importance of the study. Next, an overview of the research plan is provided. Key terms are defined and specified for how they relate to this research. Lastly, the chapter ends with a summary.

## Background

### Historical Background

Undocumented youth are among the most marginalized students in public schools and continue to fall further into the margins without access to equitable educational opportunities (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; Groce & Johnson, 2021; Nienhusser, 2013; Passel & Cohn, 2009). This population often refers to young children who immigrate to the United States at a young age, before they are old enough to choose between immigrating illegally and staying in their own country (Gonzales, 2016; Plyer v. Doe, 1982). These students often attend public schools, speak English, and identify as American (Gonzales, 2016; López & López, 2010; Plyer v. Doe, 1982). Undocumented youth have no practical way to change their legal status (Groce & Johnson, 2021; Gonzales, 2016). Undocumented youth often live in tight financial circumstances or poverty (Bjorklund, 2018; Gonzales, 2016; Irlbeck et al., 2014) and face daily

socio-emotional stressors regarding their legal status (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Benuto et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2010; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Kam & Merolla, 2018; Kleyn et al., 2018; Nienhusser, 2013; Pérez et al., 2010; Sibley & Brabeck, 2017; Terriquez, 2014; Torres-Olave et al., 2020). Once these students become 18, they face several obstacles interfering with their ability to get a job, pursue higher education, and escape poverty (Chen et al., 2010; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Nienhusser, 2013).

**Social Background**

Access to equitable education opportunities is necessary for students to overcome their circumstances; however, statistical data shows undocumented youth consistently attain lower levels of education than their documented peers (Bjorklund, 2018; Gonzales et al., 2013; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Zong & Batalova, 2019). For example, only 5-10 percent of undocumented high school graduates pursue higher education (Gonzales et al., 2013). The low levels of educational attainment are a direct result of the institutional barriers undocumented students encounter in their pursuit of higher education (Gonzales, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995; López & López, 2010). Undocumented youth need educators to help navigate and support them through the process (Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales, 2010; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011; López & López, 2010; Nienhusser, 2013; Pérez et al., 2010).

Scholars have begun to examine how undocumented youth experience all aspects of college access to better understand the low levels of educational attainment (Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales, 2010; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011; López & López, 2010; Nienhusser, 2013; Pérez et al., 2010). Research has identified several systemic obstacles, including laws prohibiting their access to state colleges and universities (Bjorklund, 2018; Conger & Chellman, 2013; IIRIRA; Peña, 2019) and limitations of school

personnel to serve the undocumented youth and provide helpful college information effectively (Gonzales, 2016; Pérez & Rodriguez, 2011). There is a great need for more research on all aspects of the experiences of undocumented youth in public education (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Nienhusser, 2013).

Professional school counselors are positioned in schools to help all students succeed (ASCAa). The ethical guidelines for school counselors include assisting undocumented students in removing barriers impeding their education access and encouraging academic persistence (ASCA, 2019c; Chen et al., 2010; Mainzer, 2013; Murillo, 2017). School counselors have the skills to help all students develop resiliency skills and work through problems in their academic success (Crawford & Valle, 2016). Unfortunately, there is a lack of research on the school counselor's work with undocumented youth (Crawford & Valle, 2016). As a result, some scholars suggest there is insufficient research for counselors to successfully work with the undocumented population (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016).

**Theoretical Background**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the theoretical basis for this qualitative phenomenological study. CRT is a foundation for empirical research to understand the disparities in school achievement among marginalized populations (Braun et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011). CRT believes that implications from previous discriminatory laws affect the opportunities and academic success of students of color today (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011). Educational researchers must consider how systemic inequalities create disparities in academic achievement among marginalized

populations (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Careful attention to racial inequality is necessary to understand the current achievement gap (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Derrick Bell, a critical legal scholar, is credited as the founding father of CRT (Lang, 2020; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017). Bell originally applied his ideas to the field of critical legal studies to prove that the judicial system is not always equitable for people of color (Bell, 1972; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The foundation of CRT was to understand disparities between Blacks and Whites following the civil rights movements (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017). Since its inception, it has expanded to incorporate the experiences of diverse racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States, such as the Latino/a community, Native Americans, and Asian communities (Yosso & Solorzano, 2007).

CRT is commonly used in educational research to challenge the notion that public education is equitable for all (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Zamudio et al., 2011). The low academic achievement among marginalized groups is a result of systemic inequities rather than a deficit in ability (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In addition, CRT is commonly used as a conceptual lens to understand the experiences of undocumented populations (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo, 2019; Macías, 2017). The goal of CRT is to expose the realities of oppressed people to create a better understanding and a more just society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

CRT facilitates a platform for marginalized populations to share their experiences and foster social change through a shared language (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Leonardo, 2005; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Individuals who have experienced oppression have the right to use their experimental knowledge to inform better practices (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005;

Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Taylor, 2006; Zamudio et al., 2011). Allowing undocumented youth to use their lived experiences to inform research is particularly important because the vast majority of research on the population is by researchers who are not themselves undocumented and do not have firsthand experience (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020). Utilizing CRT as a theoretical lens for the proposed research study is a conscious move toward creating a proper understanding of the school experience among undocumented populations (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

**Research Gap**

The undocumented population makes up a large portion of students in public schools (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Zong et al., 2019). Unfortunately, this population continues to achieve educational attainment at lower rates than the general student population (Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales et al., 2013; Zong & Batalova, 2019). As a result, scholars have begun examining how undocumented youth experience all aspects of college access to address their low educational attainment (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Gonzales, 2016; Nienhusser, 2013).

A review of the literature indicates the undocumented population encounters many institutional barriers to accessing college, and the future of their ability to work in the United States is uncertain (Benenson, 2021; Bernal-Arevalo et al., 2021; Barrera, 2019; Department of Homeland Security v. Regents of the University of California, 2020). Scholars such as Roberto Gonzales and Kenny Nienhusser indicate the need for guidance from school personnel for undocumented students to learn about college and find resources to make college attainable (Gonzales, 2016; Nienhusser, 2013). Gonzales (2016), Sanchez Gonzalez et al. (2019), and Lad and Braganza (2012) warn the undocumented population is going unnoticed by educators and are not building trustworthy relationships with school personnel. Other findings suggest educators

perpetuate hurtful racial biases and microaggressions while working with undocumented youth (Gonzales, 2016; Pérez Huber and Cueva, 2012). Further qualitative studies conclude that educators deliver unhelpful or incorrect information to undocumented students (Lad & Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011) and are not able to help students overcome the legal barriers (Crawford & Valle, 2016). Research continuously suggests that the undocumented population is not receiving enough real help to access higher education (Lad & Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011).

Currently, efforts to increase undocumented students' college access are at risk of being undermined by a lack of research necessary for counselors to successfully work with the undocumented population (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016). No previous studies capture what school counseling means for undocumented students attempting to access equitable college access. This study fulfills the present gap by utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological design to examine lived experiences to better understand how undocumented youth experience college access. A qualitative design creates the opportunity for previously undocumented youth to contribute to the field of school counseling by sharing their experiences in the ongoing quest to understand how undocumented youth experience college access.

**Situation to Self**

My initial interest in this topic stems from my work as a school counselor. While working at a high school, a student came to the school counseling office for help with his college applications. This student was a high-achieving student and aspired to be a Pre-Medicine student at the local University. This student had a 4.0-grade point average, participated in many school activities, and had a kind personality. Despite his impressive resume, he was unsure if college

was possible. He discovered his undocumented status was a massive obstacle to his postsecondary aspirations by completing the FAFSA and college application. Even though he had DACA status, he could not receive in-state tuition or take out any federal loan to attend a university.

The lack of aid created a massive financial obstacle. This student came to the school counseling office looking for help. He educated all five experienced school counselors on the challenges he faced. All counselors questioned how they could help him. Everyone diligently researched various options and could never find a viable solution to help this student.

This experience fostered my interest in helping undocumented students achieve college access. I have worked in two different regions of the United States as a school counselor, including a bilingual charter school near the United States and Mexico border. I have attended several trainings and conferences, such as the 2016 Conference at San Diego State University on Supporting Undocumented Students, presented by the Center for Excellence in School Counseling and Leadership. I continue to educate myself on ways to help undocumented youth. Through my learning and experience, I have become familiar with this phenomenon and the lack of support for undocumented youth.

I have a different racial and ethnic background than the proposed study participants. However, I have experienced living outside of the United States, working in Honduras and Southeast Asia as a teacher. I speak Spanish and have experience working with students and families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. My experiences have taught me to trust the experimental knowledge of others. I believe those who have experienced the phenomenon are the experts, and their knowledge must be the center of research.

My work and research experience has taught me that many other school counselors and I need more research to inform our practices when working with undocumented youth and college access. My research gives a platform to previous undocumented students to speak for themselves and uses their experiences to better inform the field of school counseling. I hope my research fosters more understanding across the field of school counseling and benefits students.

**Problem Statement**

Hermeneutic phenomenological research aims to uncover meaning and produce an analysis of a phenomenon (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1990). A lack of significant research undermines efforts to help the undocumented population and presents a detriment to educational equity (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016). This qualitative study examines what has been left out of the literature and is designed provide more resources for school personnel working with undocumented youth. No prior research explains how undocumented students explain the meaning of equitable college access from their interactions with their school counselors. This study does not attempt to solve a problem, yet aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to help undocumented youth achieve college access by providing an analysis of what school counseling means for undocumented students.

**Purpose Statement**

This phenomenological study aims to examine what school counseling means to undocumented youth who attempt to receive equitable college access from their school counselors. The proposed qualitative study creates a platform for previously undocumented high school students to use their experimental knowledge to create a thorough and detailed description of the phenomenon. In addition, this study contributes to the ongoing research by examining how

undocumented youth experience college access. Finally, the overall purpose of studying this phenomenon is to make higher education more accessible for undocumented youth.

## Significance of Study

Appropriate public education is needed to equip undocumented youth with skills to prosper, overcome hardships, and ensure this population does not fall further into the margins (Gonzales, 2016). However, research evaluating the academic success of undocumented youth in public schools suggests schools are failing to meet the needs of undocumented students (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo, 2021; Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales et al., 2013; Passel & Cohn, 2019; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Zong & Batalova, 2019). The existing studies examining the school experience of undocumented students indicate students have to overcome several social-emotional, economic, and legal barriers to achieve educational attainment (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012). These include educators perpetuating systemic racism through microaggressions (Gonzales, 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012), inability to build a trusting relationship (Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales, 2016; Lad &Braganza, 2012), educators' lack of knowledge and failure to provide accurate information and resources (Lad & Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). In addition, students of color are less likely to be placed on rigorous academic tracks, attend underfunded schools (Braun et al., 2006; Milner 2012) and experience more academic self-doubt (Cherng et al. 2021; Darling-Hammond, 2004; McCardle, 2020). Further research is needed to understand how undocumented students experience all aspects of educational attainment and college access (Gonzales, 2016).

This study is significant because it creates a platform for participants to use their experiences to contribute to educational research. The qualitative design allows participants to contribute to the ongoing quest for understanding how undocumented students experience educational attainment and college access. In addition, the results of this study will aid in school counselors' multicultural awareness and professional practice. Finally, this research is needed because the current lack of research undermines the efforts of school personnel to help undocumented youth (Gonzales, 2016). More research will contribute to creating practical strategies for assisting the undocumented population in education (Gonzales, 2016; Lad &Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser, 2013).

## Research Questions

The proposed hermeneutic phenomenological study examines undocumented students' experiences accessing their school counselors for equitable college access. Open-ended questions provide hermeneutic significance by revealing meaning through sharing lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Laverty, 2003). The following Central Research Questions are the basis of this study:

- How do undocumented students explain the meaning of equitable college access from their interactions with their school counselors?
- How do undocumented students describe the helpfulness of their school counselors for achieving college access?

## Research Plan

A hermeneutic phenomenological design was employed in this qualitative study. This design allowed the researcher to examine the lived experiences of previously undocumented high school students and created a platform for previous students to share their experiences (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews provided hermeneutic significance by revealing meaning through discussing experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Laverty, 2003; Seidmen, 2019; Yardley et al., 2021). Participants included previously undocumented high school students who attempted to receive equitable college access from their school counselors. The participants served as co-researchers by sharing their lived experiences with the researcher's interest in understanding its meaning (Gall, 2007; Seidmen, 2019; Yardley et al., 2021).

Previous studies on undocumented youth have utilized qualitative and quantitative designs. Quantitative studies present the realities of the low educational attainment of undocumented youth, such as Zong et al. (2019) and Gleeson and Gonzales (2012). A qualitative design is most appropriate because it allows the researcher to examine the causes contributing to the alarming statistical data provided by quantitative studies. Various current pieces of literature on undocumented youth employ qualitative designs to understand better the educational realities of undocumented youth (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2012; López & López, 2010; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). In addition, a qualitative design adheres to Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales' (2020) recommendations for researching the undocumented population because it allows students to speak for themselves to contribute to educational research.

## Definitions

This section defines and explains central terms and concepts used throughout the proposal.

1. *African American* – An American having origins of African, usually Black African ancestry (Saad, 2020; US Census, 2020). May also be referred to, or prefer the term Black (Saad, 2020; US Census, 2020).

2. *Black* – A social construct used to classify people perceived as dark-skinned compared to other populations (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Harris, 1993; Stein, 2005; Yosso & Solorzano, 2007). This term refers to people with a vast range of skin pigmentation (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017) with various cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Agyemang et al., 2005). In some instances, throughout history, the term *Black* may refer to anyone who does not identify as *White* (Agyemang et al., 2005; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017).

3. *College Access* – This concept refers to all services related to obtaining higher education, including but not limited to (a) exposure to and preparation for college and career opportunities (b) support for navigating the financial aid process to ensure higher education is an affordable reality (c) supporting students' rights to choose from a wide array of options when they leave secondary education (d) creating long term academic goals (e) Conversations between school personnel and students related to higher education

4. *Equity in education* – This concept refers to the notion that every student is entitled to equal opportunities for success in school, requiring awareness of various students' specific challenges and obstacles and providing additional resources and supports to help students overcome barriers impeding academic success (Povall & Smedley, 2019). Equity may include individuals receiving support and resources needed to be successful, even if that means people receive different levels of resources (Krauth, 2021).

5. *Hispanic* – This term refers to a diverse ethnic group of people who descend from Spain (Blakemore, 2022; Lopez et al., 2021). The term is not a race, but many who identify as Hispanic consider it to be part of their racial identity (López & López, 2010).

7. Race – A social construct that categorizes individuals based mainly on observable physical features, such as skin color and ancestry (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; Delgado & Stefanic,

2017; Harris, 1993). There is no scientific basis for race or racial categories (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017).

8. *Systemic racism* – Refers to policies and systems in society that originate to favors members of the dominant racial or ethnic group, or have a neutral effect on their life experiences, while discriminating against or harming members of other groups. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; Merrian-Webster, 2022; Krauth, 2021).

9. *Latino/a* – Refers to people who descend from Latin America. The term Latino/a is sometimes preferred rather than *Latinx* (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2021). The term is not a race; however, many who identify as Latinx, Latino, Latina, or Latin often consider it part of their racial identity (Chang et al., 2011; López & López, 2010; Wang, 2021)

10. Latinx – a general neutral term refers to a person of Latin American heritage (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2021; Reyes, 2016). Often used in the literature as an alternative to Latino(a) or Latin ( Noe-Bustamante et al., 2021; Reyes, 2016). The term is not a race; however, many who identify as Latinx, Latino, Latina, or Latin often consider it part of their racial identity (Chang et al., 2011; López & López, 2010; Wang, 2021).

11. *Microaggression* – Collection of verbal, non-verbal, and environmental insults to communicate derogatory or negative messages to target and discriminate against a marginalized group (Nienhusser et al., 2016).

12. *People of color/Person of color* – People of color encompasses an ethnically and racially group of nonwhite individuals who have often not had access to power or voting rights throughout the history of the U. S., such as African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders (Alvarez & Neville, 2016; Jackson, 2006).

13. School Counselor - certified professionals with a minimum of a master's degree in school counseling adhering to the most updated American School Counselor National Model, including the American School Counselor Ethical Standards (ASCA, 2019a; Studer, 2015). The role of a school counselor includes providing equitable educational access and being an advocate for all students (ASCA, 2019a; Studer, 2015).

14. *Undocumented* – This is a term to describe the legal status of a individual who lacks proper authorization to be in the United States. This includes all foreign-born non-citizens who are not legal residents of the USA. This term often describes residents who entered the United States without inspection or were admitted temporarily and stayed past the date they were required to leave (Department of Homeland Security, 2021; Muñoz, 2013). This term "unauthorized" is sometimes used throughout the research to describe this population (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Zong & Batalova, 2019)

15. *Undocumented Youth* - This term refers to an individual or group of individuals under the age of 18 who is does not have legal authorization to reside in the USA (Gonzales, 2016; Groce & Johnson, 2021; Muñoz, 2013; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2021). May also be referred to as unauthorized youth throughout the literature (Crawford and Valle, 2016; Zong & Batalova, 2019).

12. *White and or whiteness* - This term is a social construct used loosely to identify fair-skinned, non-Hispanic individuals (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 1995). Who can identify as "White" in the United States is malleable and has changed throughout history in the United States (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017).

## Summary

Chapter one presents an overview of the current reality of undocumented youth and educational access. Critical Race Theory and its application to academic research were introduced. Next, the research gap, situation to self, and significance of the study were explained. Previous studies have failed to capture what school counseling means for undocumented youth attempting to receive equitable college access. The central research questions used to explore this phenomenon were presented to address limitations from previous studies. Finally, a problem statement and overview of how a hermeneutic phenomenological method will be employed for ethical research are included. Lastly, the central terms and concepts used throughout the study are defined to foster a clear understanding.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Overview

This chapter compares and describes current literature on undocumented youth accessing higher education, Critical Race Theory, and professional school counseling. Previous research provides background on the research on inequities in educational opportunities for marginalized populations, and specifically on how undocumented youth experience college access in the United States (Abrego, 2014; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Gilversleeve & Ranero, 2010; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). A review of prior research clarifies the gap that prompts this phenomenological study. Finally, this chapter elucidates how this phenomenological study fits within the broader field of research attempting to help undocumented youth access higher education.

The research process included reviewing scholarly publications, primarily from 2010 to 2021. Various publications on Critical Race Theory (CRT), undocumented youth and higher education, and professional school counseling provide context to the current educational reality of undocumented youth. Previous case studies and phenomenological studies provide qualitative data aid in understanding the experiences of undocumented youth (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales, 2010; Lad & Braganza, 2012; López & López, 2010; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019). Statistical data presents a perspective of the low educational attainment and marginalization of undocumented youth in the United States (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Zong et al., 2019). Keywords and phrases that guided the search for publications included but were not limited to sc*hool counselors, college access, undocumented youth, Critical Race Theory, and inequalities in education*

The review is organized thematically with headings and subheadings of the relevant topics. All studies pertain to students currently or previously enrolled in a public school in the US and educators working within US public schools. For this study, undocumented youth is defined as individuals under 18 born outside the United States or its territories and are not legal residents. This definition includes youth transferred illegally into the US and those who entered the country legally and without authorization to extend their visas after a specific time limit (Groce & Johnson, 2021; US Department of Homeland Security, 2021). The term "undocumented" may also be referred to as unauthorized (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Zong & Batalova, 2019). Research on school counselors is limited to certified school counselors adhering to the most updated American School Counselor National Model, including the American School Counselor Ethical Standards (ASCA, 2019a; ASCA, 2019b; ASCA, 2019c).

CRT provides the theoretical framework for this study. This framework is commonly used in educational research to understand disparities in student achievement (Braun et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011). CRT challenges the notion that public education is equitable for all (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Zamudio et al., 2011) and believes the low academic achievement among marginalized populations is a direct result of systemic inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT began to understand the persistent inequality between Blacks and Whites following the civil rights movement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Since CRT's inception, it has expanded to understand the experiences of diverse racial and ethnic minority groups, including the undocumented population (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo, 2019; Cho & Westley, 2000; Lopez & Lopez, 2010; Macías, 2017; Yosso & Solorzano, 2007). As a result,

CRT is a common theoretical framework for qualitative studies on the undocumented population (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo, 2019; Macías, 2017; Lopez & Lopez, 2010).

An overview of the history of CRT and its application to educational research is presented to provide the reader with an understanding of CRT and why this theoretical lens is a conscious move towards creating a proper understanding of undocumented populations (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). For purposes of this study, *whiteness* refers to a social construct used to identify fair-skinned, non-Hispanic individuals who have been members of the dominant group of US society throughout US history (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 1995). People of color encompasses an ethnically and racially group of nonwhite individuals who have often not had access to power or voting rights throughout the history of the U. S., such as African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Pacific Islanders (Alvarez & Neville, 2016; Jackson, 2006).

Part two of this literature review provides a context of undocumented youth, the school counseling profession, and the obstacles undocumented youth encounter accessing higher education. Descriptions and comparisons of previous qualitative research elucidate how this qualitative study contributes to the current academic dialog of understanding how undocumented youth experience all areas of college access. The low educational attainment of undocumented youth has led to research on understanding the experiences of undocumented youth (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Nienhusser, 2013). Previous qualitative studies suggest undocumented students are not building strong relationships with school staff (Gonzales, 2011; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2013; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019) and not only that, many students share experiences of educators perpetuating microaggressions and racial biases (Gonzales, 2016; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012; Nienhusser et al. 2016). Other studies suggest

educators are unprepared to address the needs of undocumented students and deliver inappropriate and unhelpful advice on the college admissions process (Deslonde & Becerra, 2018; Enyioha, 2019; Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2013; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019). Undocumented youth are among the most marginalized students in public schools and continue to fall further into the margins without access to equitable educational opportunities (Gonzales, 2016; Nienhusser, 2013).

Undocumented youth's persistent low educational attainment warrants further research on how undocumented youth experience all aspects of college access (Nienhusser, 2013). Professional school counselors are ethically obligated to help students remove barriers impeding their education access and encourage academic persistence in schools regardless of their legal status (ASCA, 2019c; Mainzer, 2013). Despite this obligation, existing literature fails to address what equitable college access means for undocumented students through their interactions with school counselors.

## Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the basis of this phenomenological study. CRT examines the role of race and systemic racism throughout United States society through laws and regulations perpetuating social disparities between dominant and marginalized groups (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). CRT challenges the idea that public education is equitable for all students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and the idea that all students receive equal opportunity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Villalpando, 2004; Yosso et al., 2009). CRT is a widespread theoretical lens for studies on the patterns of exclusion among marginalized groups, such as the undocumented population. CRT

provides a shared language as a tool for understanding systems of oppression. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) Attempts to understand the low educational attainment among the undocumented population indicate various systemic inequities in public education (Gonzales, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2012; López & López, 2010; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). This study will utilize CRT as the theoretical basis to examine what school counseling means to undocumented students for college access. The following section provides the history of CRT and an overview of CRT in educational research.

## History of Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (1989) is an ever-evolving concept with influences from Critical Theory, Legal Realism, and Critical Legal Studies (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Gordon, 2009; Lang, 2020; Onwuachi-Willig, 2009; White, 1986; Yosso, 2005). The earliest influences of Critical Race Theory originate from the philosophical ideas in Critical Theory (Gordon, 2009; Onwuachi-Willig, 2009). Critical Theory's emphasis on social problems resulting from structures in society and recognition of inequalities in social class and societal hierarchies heavily influenced CRT (Gordon, 2009; Yosso, 2005). In addition, Legal Realism was influential to the foundation of CRT because it emphasized the social biases of judges, including racial preferences, in crucial judicial decisions (White, 1986). Finally, the previous conceptions of societal inequalities influenced Critical Legal Theory in the 1970s (White, 1986). Critical Legal Theory believes social factors create unethical biases in the legal system and aspire to create a legal system that is equally accessible to all people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; White, 1986).

Derrick Bell, a critical legal scholar, is credited as the founding father of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Lang, 2020). Bell originally applied his ideas to the field of critical legal studies to prove that the judicial system is not always equitable for People of Color

(Bell, 1972; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). His philosophical writings of interest convergence following *Brown vs. the Board of Education* were instrumental in the foundation of CRT (Ansell, 2019; Bell, 1980; Yosso, 2002). Bell (1980) hypothesized that *Brown vs. Board of Education* passed to benefit White elites rather than conscious efforts to help the people of color. People of color had been litigating equal rights in education for years before *Brown v. Board of Education* (Bell, 1980; Bell, 1986). However, the government was not showing signs of granting people of color civil rights until 1954, when the Supreme Court unexpectedly ruled in favor of Brown in *Brown v. Board of Education* (Brown v Board of Education, 1953; Bell, 1980; Bell, 1986).

Bell (1980) noted that this was the same time several African American soldiers returned home from fighting in the Korean War (Bell, 1980; Bell, 1986). Bell hypothesized that these men would unlikely return home and accept menial labor and social vilification after being in situations where they did not encounter racial segregation (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Therefore, mass domestic unrest was possible if these soldiers did not receive equal rights. Therefore, civil rights were necessary for domestic security (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017). Bell (1980) also hypothesized that granting people of color civil rights was necessary to gain allies in the Cold War. The USA needed the alliances of third-world countries in the Cold War (Bell, 1980). In addition, advancing people of color would help improve the country's image globally (Bell, 1980).

Bell's (1980) audacity in writing this hypothesis was viewed as cynical at the time. It did not gain ground until historian Mary Dudziak validated the idea after an extensive analysis of archives from the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of State (Dudziak, 2011; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017). Dudziak discovered secret memos and cables outlining the United

States' interest in improving the global vision of the nation (Dudziak, 2011). This finding validated Bell's (1980) work and gained public interest in Critical Legal Theory (Delgado, 2009; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004).

CRT progressed during the 1970s and 1980s as advancement for people of color stalled following the civil rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s (Cho & Westley, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Early scholars noted how the conditions for people of color in the United States had not changed sufficiently following the civil rights movement (Cho & Westley, 2000). As a result, early theorists attempted to understand why people of color continued to encounter oppression following the Civil Rights movement by examining how race and racism shape social and legal structures in the United States of America (Cho & Westley, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gordon, 2009; Yosso, 2005). CRT's emphasis on systemic racism and racial inequalities distinguished it from its previous influences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). As a result, CRT provides an analytical framework for understanding how race and racism create inequalities for people of color in U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Several scholars were instrumental in creating CRT such as Richard Delgado, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Patricia Williams (Ansell, 2019; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Yosso, 2002). Kimberlé Crenshaw led the first annual CRT conference in 1989 (Cho & Westley, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Onwuachi-Willig, 2009). Nearly 25 prominent CRT theorists attended the first conference to unify previous CRT works of the 1970s and 1980s to create a foundation for the Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Prominent CRT theorists, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Neil Gotanda, view the 1989

conference as the origin of CRT (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Onwuachi-Willig, 2009).

Following the conference, CRT became influential in research studies and books such as Patricia Williams' *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* and Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom* (Bell, 1993; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Williams, 1991). Bell (1993) discussed the permanence of embedded racism in American society in his book. In contrast, Williams employed counter-storytelling to convey the pain experienced by the inescapable presence of racial injustices in society. Both became bestselling books in the USA and brought awareness to the permanence of racism in U.S. society (Bell, 1993; Williams, 1991).

CRT has significantly evolved since its inception. It is now used as a theoretical lens for understanding the experiences of diverse racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States., such as the Latino/a community, Native Americans, and Asian communities (Yosso & Solorzano, 2007). The Theory has expanded to educational research and is a standard conceptual tool for examining inequities among marginalized groups in public education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). CRT in education argues that public education is not equal for all students and commonly replicates society's racial inequalities (Irizarry, 2011; Irizarry, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Leonardo, 2005; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Taylor, 2006). CRT facilitates a platform for marginalized populations to share their lived experiences and foster social change through a shared language (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Leonardo, 2005; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

## CRT in Education

CRT was first applied to education in 1995 to examine, theorize, and understand how forms of oppression manifest in the educational experiences of people of color (Irizarry, 2011; Irizarry, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Leonardo, 2005; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Taylor, 2006; Zamudio et al., 2011). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) utilized CRT as a framework to challenge the idea of public education being equitable for all students. Since Ladson-Billings and Tate's original application, CRT has been used to examine several inequalities among people of color in public education (Dixson, 2018; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Harper, 2012; Irizarry, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Milner, 2012; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Taylor, 2006; Yosso, 2005; Yosso et al., 2009). CRT works in education to eliminate racial oppression, end all forms of oppression, and create an equitable school system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

CRT has been used as a foundation for empirical research to understand the disparities in school achievement among marginalized populations (Braun et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011). CRT believes that implications from previous discriminatory laws affect the opportunities and academic success of students of color today (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011). Ladson- Billings and Tate (2006) advise educational researchers to consider how systemic inequalities create disparities in academic achievement among marginalized populations. Scholars have validated Ladson-Billings and Tate's (2006) through decades of research utilizing a CRT lens. The low educational attainment among people of color directly results from systemic inequalities in the school system rather than a deficit in student ability (Grissom & Redding, 2016; Harper, 2012; Izarry, 2012; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014).

CRT in education includes a variety of research; such as McIntosh et al. (2020) and Reardon et al. (2021) examinations of how institutional inequalities such as current and previous discriminatory laws hinder students of color's access to higher education. Other research examines how educators' biases toward students of color result in students of color experiencing academic self-doubt and placement on less rigorous educational tracks than their White peers (Cherng et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond, 2004; McCardle, 2020). Braun et al. (2006) and Milner (2012) conducted evaluations of school funding to illustrate disproportions in educational funding resulting in students of color having less access to resources such as qualified teachers and school counselors. These findings confirm Ladson- Billings and Tate's (2006) assertion that the low academic achievement among nonwhites is a direct result of systemic inequalities in the school system rather than a deficit of student ability (Cherng et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Harper, 2012; McCardle, 2020). Therefore, researchers must consider the role of race when attempting to understand disparities in student achievement among nonwhite populations (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011).

CRT is a proven effective tool for examining the lived experiences of undocumented populations. Macías (2017) utilized a CRT lens to examine how Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) influenced college access for undocumented students in Ohio. Seventeen diverse DACA recipients participated in semi-structured interviews. Despite being granted in-state tuition under DACA, participants indicated several limitations as being excluded from several scholarships. Participants shared going to great lengths to inform university staff about DACA, not only for themselves but also to improve admissions for fellow DACA college applicants. Even after explaining DACA to college officials, some participants experienced

discrimination from college officials once they disclosed they were undocumented. Overall, the findings of this study illustrate that DACA significantly improves college access by making college more affordable for undocumented students but does not eliminate all barriers encountered by undocumented students (Macías, 2017).

Barrera (2019) used CRT in a phenomenological study to voice undocumented students navigating higher education under the current immigration political climate. Five undocumented college students participated in three in-depth thirty-minute interviews. An interpretation was applied to the interviews to construct the meaning of participants' lived experiences in higher education. All participants shared feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress during their experience in higher education and were able to find emotional support from support on campus and with family. When asked about the support they received before enrolling in higher education, all participants shared they received misinformation or a lack of resources during the process. The five participants demonstrated resiliency and shared examples of overcoming barriers to educational access (Barrera, 2019).

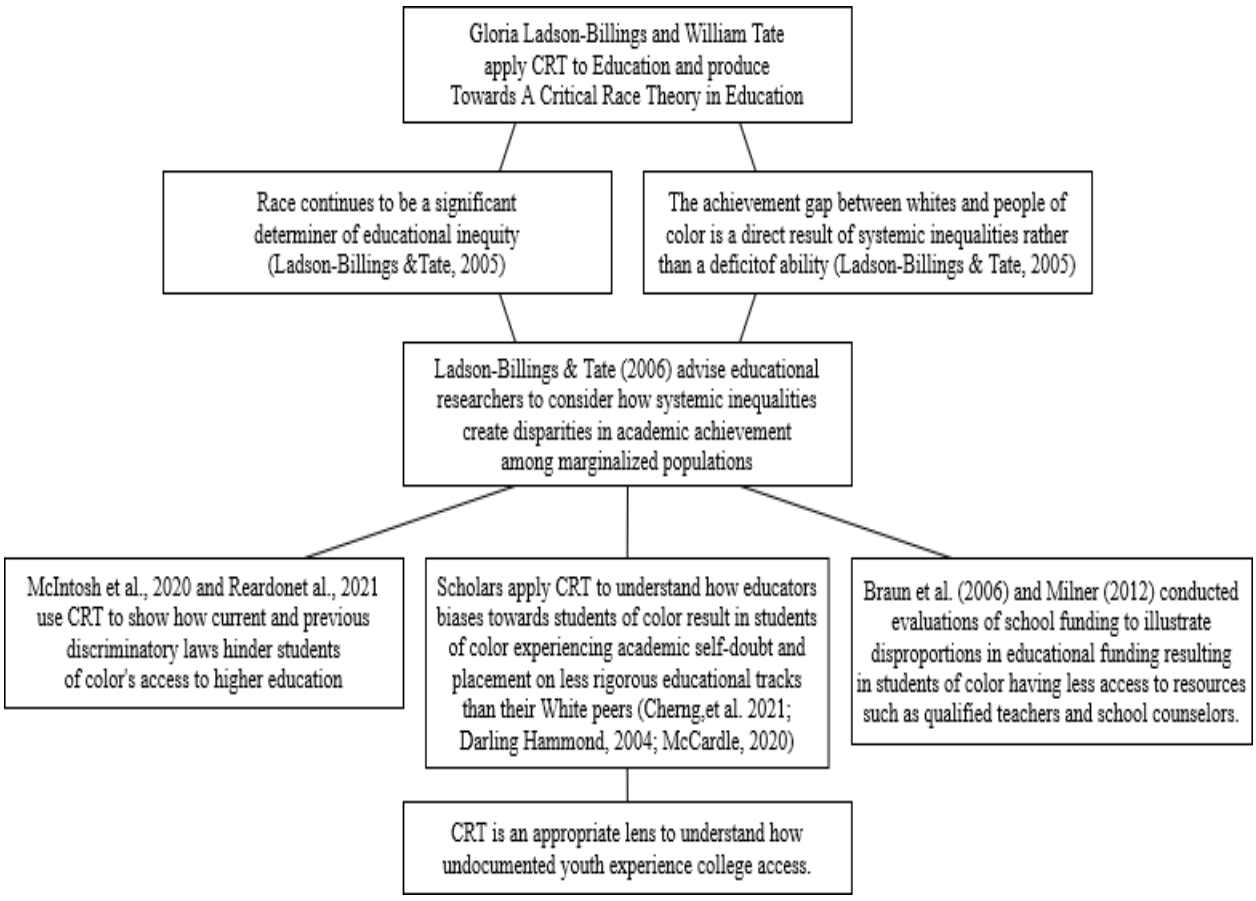
Bernal-Arevalo (2019) applied a CRT lens to examine the lived experiences of fourteen school counselors serving undocumented youth. Semi-structured interviews were used to understand how school counselors make higher education accessible for undocumented students. All counselors in the study recognized the importance of addressing undocumented students' unique challenges with college access. Approximately half of the school counselors claimed to have resources for undocumented students. However, when inquired further, Bernal-Arevalo (2019) discovered none of these resources were tailored or appropriate for the undocumented population and instead were resources for immigrants or Hispanic students. These results infer that school counselors may not distinguish undocumented students' unique obstacles to college

access. In addition, several counselors reported not receiving training in working with undocumented students (Bernal-Arevalo, 2019).

Decades of research employing CRT to examine how marginalized populations encounter limitations in the public school system indicate several inequalities in the school system (Irizarry, 2011; Irizarry, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Leonardo, 2005; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Taylor, 2006; Zamudio et al., 2011). Careful attention to racial disparities is necessary to understand the opportunity gap between whites and people of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT has proven to be an appropriate tool for examining how the undocumented population experiences public school and higher education access (Bernal-Arevalo, 2019; Barrera, 2019; Macías, 2017). It is a suitable tool for understanding inequities in education (Ladson-Billings &Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011). Utilizing CRT as a theoretical lens for the proposed research study is a conscious move towards creating a proper understanding of the school experience among undocumented populations (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The chart below illustrates fundamental research for CRT foundation in education.

**Figure 1**

*Critical Race Theory in Education*




*Note:* This figure illustrates Critical Race Theory in Educational Research.

**Counterstories**

Using personal narratives as qualitative data is a critical component of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This concept, referred to as counterstorytelling, is utilized to expose, analyze, and challenge society's ideas on racial equality by providing an opportunity for marginalized populations to share their lived experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Personal narratives give marginalized populations a platform to share their experiences of oppression (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Taylor, 2006; Zamudio et al., 2011). The experiential knowledge of the participants is valid and the best tool for understanding racial oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Personal narratives often

challenge conventional beliefs that US society is equitable for all people (Epoch Education, 2020; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The use of storytelling bridges a gap of understanding between those oppressed and those seeking to understand better and serve diverse populations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Using counterstories in educational research supports efforts to create educational equity by exposing, theorizing, and validating the lived experiences of marginalized populations (Love, 2004; Yosso, 2013). Stories reveal how historical patterns of institutional neglect negatively affect the academic achievement of nonwhite populations (Yosso, 2013). The use of stories humanizes the daunting statistical data on students' poor academic success by exposing the inequities in students' educational experiences (Love, 2004; Yosso, 2013).

Love (2004) utilized CRT's concept of counterstories to examine the achievement gap among Whites and nonwhites by exposing the educational experiences of those who were commonly performing poorly in public school to challenge the widespread belief that education is equitable for all. By employing counterstories, Love (2004) exposed the experiences, events, and barriers of students of color to challenge the misconception that students of color are inferior to Whites. Love's (2004) analysis of counterstories uncovers the inequities in educational opportunity leading to gaps in achievement rather than a deficit in student ability.

Felix and Ramirez (2020) examined equity-oriented reforms in community colleges through counterstories. Shared experiences were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the equity reforms for the Latinx population. The participants shared experiences that revealed how the efforts were only short-term solutions and insufficient to address systemic racial issues resulting in educational inequity. The participants suggested professional developments were needed to promote an understanding of equity on campus. The researchers concluded racial inequality in

policies, practices, and programs must be acknowledged and addressed for equity among Latinx students.

Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales (2020) suggested all research conducted with undocumented populations must utilize a method that creates a platform for participants to share their unique perspectives. Allowing undocumented youth the opportunity to "speak for themselves" is the most ethical method for researching the population (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020). Allowing undocumented youth to use their experimental knowledge as a legitimate and appropriate tool for understanding is particularly important because the vast majority of research on the population is by researchers who are not themselves undocumented and do not have firsthand experience (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020). CRT's use of counterstories for qualitative data is appropriate for the proposed phenomenological study. CRT credits participants' experiences as the most legitimate and appropriate tool for understanding inequalities among the population studied (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT's employment of counterstories is consistent with Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales's (2020) suggestions for researchers working with undocumented youth.

Using stories to expose the lived experience of individuals from marginalized populations for qualitative research is a valuable method for facilitating an understanding of inequities in student achievement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). This qualitative study utilizes CRT's concept of counterstories by creating a platform for participants to share their lived experiences through semi-structured interviews. Using counterstories allowed the researcher to strengthen their understanding and gain insight into their own biases during the process (Miller et al., 2020; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) and followed ethical guidelines for conducting research with the undocumented population (Abrego

& Negrón-Gonzales, 2020). As a result, Participants' stories are used to expose and analyze the experiences of undocumented youth's attempts to receive equitable college access from their school counselors in response to the gap in the literature.

## Related Literature

### Undocumented Youth

Undocumented youth represent a diverse group of an estimated 2.1 million individuals residing and attending schools in the USA (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Zong et al., 2019). The population includes individuals under 18 who were born outside the United States or its territories and are not legal residents of the United States. In addition, the undocumented youth population includes those who were transferred illegally into the United States, those who entered the United States without inspection, and those who were admitted temporarily and stayed past their VISA expiration (Groce & Johnson, 2021; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2021). Undocumented youth often enter the United States without consent and have limited opportunities to legalize their status, work, and obtain higher education (Groce & Johnson, 2021; Gonzales, 2016).

Undocumented youth attend K-12 U.S. public schools and often are unaware of their legal status until their teenage years (Gonzales, 2010, 2016). This population often identifies as Americans yet encounters several economic, legal, and socio-emotional circumstances that affect all life areas (Abrego & Menjívar, 2016; Bernal-Arevalo, 2021; Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2016). The obstacles youth encounter often include living in tight financial circumstances or poverty (Bjorklund, 2018), facing socio-emotional stressors such as fear of deportation for themselves and family members (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Benuto et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2010; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Kam & Merolla, 2018; Kleyn et al., 2018; Nienhusser, 2013;

Pérez et al., 2010; Sibley & Brabeck, 2017; Terriquez, 2014; Torres-Olave et al., 2020), lacking healthcare and access to social services (Abrego, 2014; Gonzales, 2016), and accessing higher education due to laws and policies (Bjorklund, 2018; Lad & Braganza, 2012; López & López, 2010; Gonzales, 2010; Nienhusser, 2013; Pérez et al., 2010). In addition to the listed external factors, undocumented youth encounter systemic inequities in public school, such as experiencing biases and bullying from their peers (Gonzales, 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012). Therefore, equitable public education is needed to equip undocumented youth with the skills to prosper, overcome hardships, contribute to US society and ensure this population does not fall further into the margins (Gonzales, 2016).

Undocumented youth have rights and protections allowing access to K-12 education in the USA (Plyer v. Doe, 1982). However, their educational rights do not continue past twelfth grade, and students encounter a multitude of institutional barriers that impede their access to higher education (Bjorklund, 2018; Gonzales, 2010; Lad & Braganza, 2012; López & López, 2010; Nienhusser, 2013; Pérez et al., 2010). In addition, research evaluating the academic success of undocumented youth in public schools suggests schools are failing to meet the needs of undocumented students, particularly in the areas of higher education (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo, 2021; Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales et al., 2013; Passel & Cohn, 2019; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Zong & Batalova, 2019).

Zong and Batalova (2019) conducted a study utilizing data from the US Census, American Community Survey, and the Migration Policy Institute to estimate that 78 percent of undocumented students of graduation age graduated high school in 2019. Gonzales (2016) conducted a case study following the lives of 150 undocumented youth coming of age in America and concluded many youths lose their academic aspirations and sometimes drop out of

school when they discover the many barriers in their way to accessing high education. This finding justifies the findings of Gonzales et al. (2013) and the United States Department of Education (2015) that 5-10% of undocumented students who graduate from US high schools pursue some form of higher education. The low enrollment of undocumented students in higher education warrants an evaluation of how undocumented students experience all areas of college access (Nienhusser, 2013).

Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales (2020) noted there is inadequate research on undocumented students achieving academic success because the phenomenon went unnoticed by scholars until the late 2000s. However, the existing studies examining the school experience of undocumented students indicate several inequities students have to overcome to achieve school success and the external social-emotional, economic, and legal barriers (Crawford and Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales, 2016; Lad &Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012). These include educators perpetuating systemic racism through microaggressions (Gonzales, 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012), inability to build a trusting relationship (Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales, 2016; Lad &Braganza, 2012), educators' lack of knowledge and failure to provide accurate information and resources (Lad & Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). There is also research suggesting that the school system creates inequalities in undocumented student's access to counselors by creating an environment that is not conducive to undocumented students seeking help from school counselors (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). Examples of this include high ratios of students to counselors in states with large undocumented populations (Gonzales, 2016), school environments that are perceived as unwelcoming or unsafe (Gonzales, 2016; Lad & Braganza,

2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016), and high incidences of bullying among undocumented students from peers and educators (Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019).

The previous studies examine how undocumented youth experience college access yet fails to capture the specific lived experiences of accessing school counselors for equitable college access. This study fills the gap in the literature by creating a platform for previously undocumented individuals to share their experiences of attempting to receive equitable college access from their school counselors. In addition, this qualitative study will contribute to the current academic dialog of undocumented students achieving postsecondary success and educational achievement.

## Professional School Counseling

The profession of school counseling in the United States dates back to the late 1800s and early 1900s (Gysbers, 2010; Schimmel, 2008). In the beginning, the service of school counselors was primarily to provide vocational guidance to high school students (Gysbers, 2010). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the position evolved to include a broad focus on helping students overcome all obstacles impeding their school success (Gysbers, 2010). The American School Counselor Association was founded in 1952 (Gysbers, 2010). Shortly after the ASCA was established, many educators noticed the school counselor role was ambiguous (Gysbers, 2010). The ambiguity led many states to create models to clarify the responsibilities and focus of the position (Gysbers, 2010). During the 1980s and 1990s, several states formed their school counseling models, laying the groundwork for the first ASCA National Model (Gysbers, 2010).

Campbell and Dahir (1997) recognized the need for school counselors to have databased goals and rationale to advocate for their effectiveness following other standards-based

educational reforms during the 1990s. As a result, Campbell and Dahir (1997) created the National Standards for School Counselors. These standards challenge school counselors to ensure their services serve all students and contribute to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps in schools (ASCA, 2019; Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Hatch & Chen- Hayes, 2008; Studer, 2015). Campbell and Dahir's (1997) work and several other scholars in school counseling, such as Dr. Trisha Hatch and Dr. Judy Bowers, laid the foundation for the 2003 ASCA National Model (Gysbers, 2010; Bowers & Hatch, 2005).

The ASCA National Model was first published in 2003 and is now in its fourth edition (ASCA, 2019a). The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model defines the foundation, management, and delivery systems, for school counselors and provides accountability for aligning the work of school counselors with the expectations of 21st-century schools (ASCA, 2019a; Studer, 2015). Since its inception, the model has ensured accountability for school counselors in fulfilling their ethical obligation to ensure equity in educational access (ASCA, 2019a; ASCA, 2019b; ASCA, 2019c; Gysbers, 2010; Hatch & Chen- Hayes, 2008; Mainzer, 2013).

**School Counselors Work with Undocumented Youth**

The American School Counseling Association, along with the ASCA National Model, has continued to evolve and provide clarity on the roles and responsibilities of the profession (ASCA, 2019a). The most recent version of the ASCA National Model was published in 2019. This version clearly states the School Counselors' role in working with undocumented students in their 2019 model (ASCA, 2019a; ASCA, 2019c). This position states:

> School counselors promote equal opportunity, a safe and nurturing environment, and respect for all individuals regardless of citizenship status, including undocumented

> students and students with undocumented family members, understanding that this population faces a unique set of stressors. School counselors work to eliminate barriers that impede student development and achievement and are committed to the academic, career and social/emotional development of all students School counselors demonstrate their belief that all students can learn by advocating for an education system that provides optimal learning environments for all students. (ASCA, 2016, pg 1; ASCA, 2019c)

In addition, The ASCA ethical code, ASCA National Model, and ASCA Mindsets emphasize counselors' promoting equity in their work (ASCA, 2019a: ASCA, 2019b). School counselors' role is to advocate for systemic change and help remove any barriers to students achieving academic success, including success in obtaining higher education (ASCA, 2019a; Mainzer, 2013; Studer, 2015). This role creates significant responsibility for school counselors working with undocumented students. Counselors must be cognizant of undocumented populations' unique challenges to ensure equitable and appropriate services (ASCA, 2019c; Mainzer, 2013).

School Counselors must be prepared to help undocumented students achieve academic success and overcome difficulties that hinder their college aspirations (ASCA, 2016; Chen et al., 2010; Mainzer, 2013; Murillo, 2017). School counselors have the skills to help all students develop resiliency skills and work through problems in their academic success (Crawford & Valle, 2016). In addition, previous research suggests counselors should be helpful personnel for undocumented students navigating the school environment (Bernal-Arevalo et al., 2021; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2009; 2010).

Crawford and Valle (2016) conducted an embedded case study with school counselors from two school districts along the US-Mexico border. This study aimed to examine counselors'

perceptions of the challenges encountered when working with undocumented youth and the strategies used to help students strive to promote persistence in school. Both school districts have a large undocumented population, an estimated 90 percent. Semi-structured interviews, observations, and analyses of the counselor's notes were used as sources to triangulate the data. Most school counselors grew up in the community, and all, except one, identified as Latinx. The results revealed that counselors know legal barriers impeding college access but are unsure how to help. The legal policies and barriers restricting undocumented youth's access to resources were out of control and greatly limited their services. School counselors must be familiar with the legal obstacles and skills to help students overcome institutional barriers to serve the undocumented population (Crawford & Valle, 2016).

Despite the ASCA guidelines on working with undocumented populations, efforts to increase undocumented students' college access are at risk of being undermined by a lack of research necessary for counselors to successfully work with the undocumented population (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016). Research examining educators' effectiveness in helping the undocumented population with college access indicates school counselors are not knowledgeable of laws and policies (Bernal-Arevalo, 2019; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011) and are not sure how to help students overcome policies (Crawford & Valle, 2016), and deliver inaccurate college-related information to the undocumented population (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). Conclusions of previous qualitative studies suggest educators need more training working specifically with undocumented students (Crawford & Valle, 2016). No current research examines how undocumented youth experience college access from their school counselors.

## Legal Barriers to Educational Access

Undocumented students are granted the right to a free public K-12 education in the United States (Plyer v. Doe, 1982). However, the rights and protections of undocumented youth end once a student completes high school, creating limited opportunities for undocumented youth to continue their education (Gonzales, 2016; López & López, 2010). Postsecondary opportunities vary greatly depending on the state in which students graduate and pursue higher education (Enyioha, 2019). Navigating the legalities of higher education access for undocumented youth is complicated. Students often need support maneuvering and understanding the legal barriers impeding their access (Lauby, 2017; Niehaus & Kumpiene, 2014; Sibley & Brabeck, 2017; Torres-Olave et al., 2020). School Counselors must be prepared to help students and their families through the college application process and discuss any fear or uncertainties that arise (ASCA, 2019c).

The laws and policies around undocumented students' access to public higher education vary significantly across the United States (Enyioha, 2019). There is currently no federal law dictating how individual states should handle the admissions of undocumented students into colleges (Enyioha, 2019; Groce & Johnson, 2021). Instead, each state has the authority to prohibit, limit, or permit undocumented students to pursue postsecondary education (Enyioha, 2019; Groce & Johnson, 2021; Liu, 2021). Currently, 21 states and the District of Columbia have found ways to bypass federal law and permit in-state tuition for undocumented students (Liu, 2021; National Council of State Legislatures, 2019; Peña, 2019). For example, Alabama and South Carolina prohibit undocumented students from applying to and attending public colleges and universities within their states (Asgari, 2020; Kim & Díaz, 2013; Liu, 2021; Olivas, 2009; Peña, 2019). Georgia also places restrictive policies on the enrollment of undocumented students by prohibiting them from attending more competitive colleges and universities, such as the

University of Georgia and Georgia Institute of Technology (Cruz, 2013; Georgia Board of Regents, 2010). Educators need to understand the variance in access since students may attempt to attend postsecondary education in a state different from where they attended high school.

In-state tuition is closer to equity in college access but does not fully remedy the vast financial inequalities and obstacles undocumented students encounter (Asgari, 2020; Conger & Chellman, 2013). Undocumented students cannot access Title IV federal financial aid such as grants, student loans, and work-study, which traditionally help low-income students afford higher education (Bjorklund, 2018; Conger & Chellman, 2013). Without a social security number, students cannot complete the Free Application For Student Aid (FAFSA) (Bjorklund, 2018; Peña, 2019) and, in many cases, cannot seek funding from their countries of birth or through programs dedicated to international students (Asgari, 2020; Bjorklund, 2018). These states base their in-state tuition rates on the state where a student attends high school and graduates rather than state residency to comply with federal law. (Liu, 2021; Nienhusser, 2013). Undocumented students residing in states with laws prohibiting their access to in-state tuition pay approximately 1.4 times more in tuition each academic year (Asgari, 2020). The inability to pay high costs and prohibitory financial aid policies are the most cited reasons for undocumented students not pursuing higher education (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2011; López & López, 2010; Nienhusser, 2013).

Throughout the past decade, there has been political turmoil regarding the rights of undocumented populations in the United States (Barrera, 2019; Benenson, 2021; Breuninger, 2021; Department of Homeland Security v. Regents of the University of California, 2020). Federal laws and state policies are subject to change in the coming years (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo, 2021). All educators working with undocumented youth must stay informed of laws

and policies affecting their students to serve the population effectively (ASCA, 2019c). The uncertainties of laws and policies affecting students' educational rights may hinder students' academic aspirations and create fear when applying to higher education (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo, 2021).

**Plyer vs. Doe**

The rights and protections of undocumented students in public K-12 education date back to the 1982 Supreme Court case, *Plyer vs. Doe* (Plyer v. Doe, 1982). The 1982 case was in response to a municipal school district requiring students to pay tuition if they could not prove their citizenship. By a 5-4 vote, the Supreme Court decided that undocumented students have the right to attend K-12 public education (López & López, 2010). Those in favor of Plyer argued that denying undocumented youth public education would take an immeasurable toll on the child's social, economic, intellectual, and psychological wellbeing (Gonzales, 2016; López & López, 2010) and could create a permanent underclass in the United States. Therefore, denying a student the right to education creates a lifetime of hardship and violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment (Drachman, 2006; López & López, 2010; Olivas, 2005). Furthermore, public education maintains the fabric of American society and is fundamental in sustaining political and cultural heritage (Plyer v. Doe, 1982; López & López, 2010).

The outcome of Plyer *vs. Doe* is significant to current debates on the rights of undocumented youth because this legislation recognizes undocumented youth as a vulnerable population in the United States by the Supreme Court (López & López, 2010). The arguments presented in Plyer's defense have been used to advocate for further legislation on undocumented youth's educational rights (Plyer v. Doe, 1982; López & López, 2010). This legislation creates

protections and prohibits discriminating against the undocumented population in K-12 schools but fails to address access to higher education (Gonzales, 2016; López & López, 2010; Peña, 2019). Over the past forty years, changes in the United States job market and economy have made higher education essential for achieving upward mobility and escaping poverty (Abel & Deitz, 2014; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016). Denying undocumented students access to higher education leaves them with few options to obtain citizenship, break the cycle of poverty, and contribute to society (Abel & Deitz, 2014; Ibarra & Sherman, 2012; López & López, 2010). Various contemporary debates in favor of undocumented youth receiving access to in-state tuition policies cite this Supreme Court case (Gilversleeve & Hernandez, 2012; López & López, 2010).

**Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act**

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) was passed in 1996 and enacted in 1997. This legislation attempts to prohibit undocumented youth from benefiting from in-state education benefits (Oliverez et al., 2006). IIRIRA prohibits states from providing higher education benefits to students who are not legal United States citizens based on in-state residency unless all citizens of the United States are eligible for those benefits despite state residency (IIRIRA). Currently, 21 states and the District of Columbia have found ways to bypass this motion and grant in-state tuition to undocumented populations (Gilversleeve & Hernandez, 2012; National Immigration Law Center, 2021). However, states have successfully circumvented IIRIRA by creating tuition equity laws to base in-state tuition on the state where a student attended high school rather than residency and immigration status (National Immigration Law Center, 2021; Nienhusser, 2013).

States that do not grant in-state tuition for undocumented students state IIRIRA for the reason (Gilversleeve & Hernandez, 2012; López & López, 2010). Allowing undocumented students access to in-state tuition presents various legal challenges due to IIRIRA. All immigration law is federal law, and states must ensure their policies and regulations regarding undocumented students comply with national legislation (López & López, 2010). In-state tuition for undocumented students could become more restrictive in future years due to the existing legal challenges (Barrera, 2019; López & López, 2010).

**Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals**

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) refers to legislation enacted by the Obama Administration in 2012 to protect undocumented immigrants who arrived in the USA as children from deportation (Gámez et al., 2017; Muñoz, 2013; National Immigration Law Center, 2021; Shelton, 2014). This legislation allows eligible undocumented youth to apply for permanent protection against deportation and temporary work permits (Gámez et al., 2017; Muñoz, 2013; Shelton, 2014). To be considered for DACA status, one must meet the Department of Homeland Security's DACA qualifications, which include continuously residing in the United States from June 15, 2000, to the present, graduating from high school or being enrolled in school, and not being convicted of a felony or misdemeanor (National Immigration Law Center, 2021).

DACA protections are temporary, and recipients must reapply every two years (Bennenson, 2021; National Immigration Law Center, 2021; Lopez & Krogstad, 2017). In addition, DACA status does not grant in-state tuition for students nor allows students to apply for government financial aid (Gonzales et al., 2014; Lopez & Krogstad, 2017). Nevertheless, DACA is helpful for undocumented students because it grants students a work permit so students can

earn money to fund their education, creates greater confidence in students by helping them integrate into American society, and removes the fear of deportation (Gonzales et al., 2014; Gonzales, 2016; Murillo, 2017; Young, 2014). In addition, DACA grants protection from deportation and the right to work in the United States to approximately 800,000 recipients (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017).

The inclusions and rights permitted by DACA allow youth to integrate further into American society (Gonzales et al., 2014; Gonzales, 2016; Murillo, 2017; Young, 2014). For example, a study by Young (2014) surveyed over 3,000 DACA recipients on DACA status's impact on their lives. The participants reported positive outcomes of the DACA Program. Examples of the positive effect include 64% of respondents felt a greater sense of belonging in the United States, 35% being more involved in their communities, and 64% reporting less fear of their immigration status. Gonzales et al.'s (2014) study on the effectiveness of DACA among youth is similar to Young's (2014) findings. Gonzales (2014) interviewed 408 beneficiaries about their experience with DACA. Overall, many beneficiaries reported higher earnings in their careers, greater confidence, and greater financial independence. However, Gonzales et al. (2014) noted the experience was vastly different for students who lived in states where they could receive in-state tuition compared to students in states such as Georgia, where they encountered several legal barriers to enrolling in postsecondary education.

DACA recipients face several uncertainties regarding the future of the program. Since its inception, it has faced several legal challenges (Benenson, 2021). In June 2020, the Supreme Court voted to uphold the DACA program in the Department of Homeland Security v. Regents of the University of California (Department of Homeland Security v. Regents of the University of California, 2020). Upon this passage, individuals with DACA can apply to renew their status.

Still, new applicants will not be considered (Department of Homeland Security v. Regents of the University of California, 2020). In January 2021, President Biden issued an executive order reinstating DACA. Following this order, a federal judge, Andrew Hanen, ruled that the program violated the law and canceled President Biden's executive order (Breuninger, 2021). As a result, DACA and the future of this legislation are unknown and current recipients of this program are uncertain of their future (Benenson, 2021).

Bernal-Arevalo et al. (2021) conducted a phenomenological study by interviewing school counselors to examine work with the undocumented population. School counselors reported students experiencing discomfort applying to college and for financial aid due to the uncertainties of the future of DACA and the safety of their families. Barrera (2019) concluded undocumented students were uncertain if persisting in college was worth their time and money because of the uncertainties in the future of the DACA program. Students in Crawford & Valle's (2016) case study shared discomfort in completing college applications, particularly in areas that ask about their family members.

There are no guarantees that the information students choose to reveal in their college application is kept safe and confidential (López & López, 2010). In addition, the future of initiatives to help undocumented youth receive education and work permits in the United States, such as DACA, is uncertain (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo, 2021). Therefore, educators working with undocumented students must be cognizant of laws and policies impeding undocumented students' college access and understand how the uncertainty of procedures such as in-state tuition for undocumented students and DACA creates fear in students (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo, 2021; Gonzales, 2016).

**Limitations of School Personnel**

The lack of strong, helpful relationships between undocumented students and school personnel contributes to the underachievement of undocumented youth (Gonzales, 2016; Lauby, 2017). Previous literature emphasizes the need for students to build relationships with school personnel to assist undocumented students' transition to college (Lauby, 2017; Niehaus & Kumpiene, 2014; Sibley & Brabeck, 2017; Torres-Olave et al., 2020). Other research suggests school personnel are not as beneficial to undocumented students as their documented peers regarding college access (Gonzales, 2011; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019).

Previous studies evaluate the accuracy of college information undocumented students receive, examine the ability of educators to build trusting relationships with undocumented students, and examine how students experience microaggressions (Gonzales, 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012). Other studies evaluate educators' cultural competence, including their understanding of barriers undocumented students encounter accessing higher education (Deslonde & Becerra, 2018; Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales, 2011; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019). Undocumented students who leave school before graduation rarely have significant relationships with counselors or other school personnel (Gonzales, 2016).

**Microaggressions**

Microaggressions are common verbal, nonverbal, and environmental insults (Nienhusser et al., 2016; Sue, 2010). The perpetrator intentionally or unintentionally communicates hostile, derogatory, or harmful messages to target persons based solely on their marginalized group membership (Nienhusser et al., 2016; Sue, 2010). Microaggressions are a form of systemic racism that creates a hostile school environment for students of color and students from minority ethnic groups (Nienhusser et al., 2016; Starck et al., 2020). Examinations of students'

experiences in public education with educators perpetuating microaggressions are well documented in literature among critical race theorists (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2020; Starck et al., 2020). Findings of these studies have found teachers' attitudes towards students from racial and ethnic minority groups can be problematic for building strong, trusting relationships with students of color, and educators commonly perpetuate common biases and stereotypes (Ladon-Billings, 2005; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2020; Starck et al., 2020). In addition, the microaggressions undocumented students experience from educators negatively affect college access by creating academic self-doubt and hostile relationships between students and school staff (Nienhusser et al., 2016).

Nienhusser et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study to investigate microaggressions undocumented students encounter during college choice. This study involved 15 undocumented youth participating in semi-structured interviews. This study shows that microaggressions among educators impede students' trust in educators. Every participant in this study identified several forms of microaggressions during their college choice process. Nine themes emerged: discriminatory financial aid policies, restricted college choice information, constrained life opportunities, denial of college opportunities, insensitive behaviors, insensitive college choice processes, narrowed college expectations, fear of coming out, and undocumented immigrant blindness. Overall, this study concluded that educational institutions must better meet the needs of undocumented students and college access (Nienhusser et al., 2016).

Educators in Nienhusser et al.'s (2016) study commonly perpetrated microaggressions while discussing college funding with students. Discriminatory financial aid policies affecting undocumented students create an educational environment where students commonly encounter microaggressions during their college choice process. In addition, discriminatory policies and

legal barriers to college access create a high school environment where educators normally and unintentionally deliver microaggressions by educating students on their educational rights to college access beyond grades K-12. Participants described their educators as "well-meaning," but restrictive policies made their efforts to help undocumented students inequitable (Nienhusser et al., 2016).

Experiencing microaggressions in schools may also significantly affect students' academic confidence (Gonzales, 2016; Pérez Huber and Cueva, 2012). Pérez Huber and Cueva (2012) examined how undocumented K-12 Latinas and Chicanas experience microaggressions in public K–12 education. This study concluded that Latina students often experienced feelings of academic self-doubt and inferiority after experiencing microaggressions from educators. These feelings later took a toll on their college choice process resulting in some participants not applying to competitive universities they were qualified to attend (Pérez Huber and Cueva, 2012).

Students' testimonies in Gonzales's (2016) case study following 150 undocumented Latinx students over 12 years are consistent with results from Pérez Huber and Cueva's (2012) study and Nienhusser et al. (2016) conclusions. Participants in Gonzales's study perceived their educators to have biases toward their race or ethnicity, which affected their ability to succeed and took a toll on their self-image as a student (Gonzales, 2016). Students gave examples of teachers contributing to a stigmatized environment by joking about illegal immigrants and portraying them with negative stereotypes. One participant even recalled his school mentor referring to immigrants as "wetbacks." Other students in the study describe working hard to earn respect from educators and peers and worried if they exposed their legal status, they would be rejected by many people (Gonzales, 2016). Some participants describe self-advocating to stay in their

school and academic tracks when school counselors attempted to place them on less rigorous educational plans (Gonzales, 2016). Several students described feeling as if they were unwanted and undeserving by how they were treated in public schools (Gonzales, 2016).

**Student and Educator Relationships**

Strong relationships between students and educators positively affect students' academic achievement and college access (Gonzales, 2016; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019; Lad & Braganza, 2012). However, inferences from qualitative studies indicate undocumented students do not build strong connections with school personnel (Gonzales, 2009, 2016) and are overlooked by educators (Gonzales, 2016). In addition, several undocumented students perceive negative relationships with school officials (Gonzales, 2009, 2011, 2016). The lack of solid relationships with undocumented students and school personnel contributes to the achievement and opportunity gap between documented and undocumented students (Gonzales, 2016).

Gonzales (2016) examined common themes among students who did not complete high school in his 2016 case study, which followed 150 undocumented students over 12 years. A common occurrence among those who did not complete high school was the lack of relationships with school personnel. Most participants could not name one helpful teacher or counselor and described feeling unsupported and alone in their educational journeys. The absence of trusting relationships between undocumented students and educators is detrimental to college access and academic success and warrants further research (Gonzales, 2016).

Sanchez Gonzalez et al. (2019) studied variables that increase college enrollment by surveying 307 Latinx students. The results indicated students who have relationships with educators are more likely to enroll in higher education. In addition, students indicated that these relationships positively influence a student’s college and career goals. The results further

concluded that relationships with school personnel are helpful for students learning about college admissions and the benefits of a college as a lifelong investment (Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019). These results are consistent with previous studies examining how relationships with school personnel positively improve student college access (Deslonde & Becerra, 2018; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019).

Research suggests fear of deportation often leads students to avoid confiding in school personnel (Gonzales, 2011; Lad &Braganza, 2012) and fully participating in school (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Lad &Braganza, 2012). Lad and Braganza (2012) interviewed 13 previously undocumented students and revealed that many shared that they feared the school staff. These findings are consistent with Gonzales' (2016) and Crawford & Valle's (2016) results regarding fear of participating in school activities or interactions with educators where their immigration status could be exposed (Gonzales, 2016; Crawford & Valle, 2016). Fear of deportation, or fear of exposing the immigration status of a family member, is one of the most recognized stressors for undocumented students (Dougherty et al., 2010; López & López, 2010; Suarez-Orozco, 2010). Many undocumented students constantly fear deportation of themselves or a family member (Dougherty et al., 2010; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Storlie & Jach, 2012). Crawford & Valle (2016) predicted students might believe confiding with a school counselor could put them or their families at risk.

School personnel are responsible for creating a safe, inclusive environment and must be aware of their biases and impact on all students. Educators' attitudes and prejudices towards students highly affect how students perceive trustworthiness (Gonzales, 2016). Educators working with undocumented students must be perceived as trustworthy to build a supportive relationship with undocumented students (Gonzales, 2016). School counselors, among other

school personnel, must be aware of how undocumented students might perceive them and be willing to work through their own biases that may affect attitudes, prejudices, and overall relationships with undocumented students (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2012). Educators and counselors must ensure that their practices create a safe place for undocumented students and their families to serve all students effectively (ASCA, 2019a; ASCA, 2019c).

**Educators' Competence**

When working with undocumented students, educators' competence is critical for protecting students and their families' safety (López & López, 2010). Furthermore, understanding is needed to build trust (Gonzales, 2011) and deliver accurate and appropriate college information (Lad & Braganza, 2012). Unfortunately, previous research indicates educators do not receive adequate training to work with the undocumented population's specific challenges and cultural differences (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2012). In addition, research shows educators often deliver inaccurate college information to undocumented students (Lad & Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). These warrant further examination of educators' competence with the undocumented population.

There are limited opportunities for the undocumented population to receive real help and accurate information about college access from educators (Gonzales, 2011; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). Pérez and Rodriguez (2011) conducted a qualitative study interviewing 15 Latinx students who were undocumented to understand familial and institutional support factors Latinx undocumented students used for college access. Students participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Students had mixed responses in response to the helpfulness of school personnel. Several respondents said school personnel motivated them to pursue higher education

but received incorrect information on financing their education (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). One student in the study had to pay an exorbitant fee because their counselor was unaware of information on in-state tuition for undocumented students (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). Overall, students expressed a need for more knowledge among educators working with the undocumented population (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011).

Following the Pérez and Rodríguez (2011) study, Lad and Braganza (2012) employed a qualitative methodology, including open-ended questionnaires and interviews, to examine obstacles undocumented students encounter that impact their school success. Thirteen individuals who participated in the studies were undocumented during their high school years. Nine participants engaged in 5 open-ended interviews, and three chose not to be interviewed but consented to participate in the study by answering the questionnaire. In addition, Lad & Braganza (2012) surveyed educators, including school counselors, about their training and experiences working with undocumented populations through an open-ended questionnaire.

Lad and Braganza's (2012) study emerged with a theme of inadequate resources, similar to Pérez & Rodríguez's study. This study indicated that they needed more accurate information about college access during their K-12 education. Participants described not being aware of support services, such as school counseling, being available to them and believed the system was unfair and limited their academic opportunities. The students in the study who continued their education beyond high school describe being lucky to have found someone to help them maneuver the system (Lad & Braganza, 2012).

The educators in Lad and Braganza's (2012) study indicated they did not receive any training on how to help undocumented students with their educational challenges precisely. Participants in the study noted it would have been helpful for their families to have someone in

the school building to advocate and help maneuver the school system. Participants described school personnel as “doing their best with little knowledge of their obstacles.” One educator described the lack of training as a human rights issue. Following this study, Lad and Braganza (2012) recommend mandatory professional development for school personnel regarding current policies concerning undocumented students and their families (Lad & Braganza, 2012).

Lad and Braganza (2012) and Pérez and Rodríguez (2011) shared similar outcomes to Nienhusser et al., (2016) study. A theme of restricted college information evolved in Nienhusser et al.'s (2016) phenomenological study on microaggressions undocumented youth encounter. All 13 participants described college information as scarce and not having enough information for their college choice. Participants describe their school counselors as unhelpful, leaving them feeling lost in the college choice process. One student told of having to educate their school counselor on the legal limitations they encountered accessing college after the counselor asked for their social security number. Several students shared frustrations with the amount of inaccurate and inconsistent information from school counselors, representing a significant knowledge gap in college access for undocumented students. Overall, students described feeling uncared for by the scarcity of helpful and accurate college information available to them (Nienhusser et al., 2013).

A study by Bernal-Arevalo (2019) indicates that school counselors may not distinguish the unique challenges undocumented students encounter in college access compared to other immigrant populations. For example, approximately half of the school counselors claimed to have resources for undocumented students. However, when inquired further, Bernal-Arevalo (2019) discovered none of these resources were tailored or appropriate for the undocumented population and instead were resources for immigrants or Hispanic students. These results infer

that school counselors may not distinguish undocumented students' unique obstacles to college access. In addition, several counselors reported not receiving training in working with undocumented students (Bernal-Arevalo, 2019).

The previous qualitative studies examine the effectiveness of educators delivering college access for undocumented students (Lad & Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). In addition, the previous studies suggest the role of the educator is critical for protecting students' safety (Lopez & Lopez, 2010) and building trust (Gonzales, 2016). These studies examine the educators, including school counselors, who work with undocumented students but do not specifically examine school counselors. School counselors have an ethical obligation to deliver equitable services to the undocumented population (ASCA, 2019c; Mainzer, 2013) and are suggested to be primed with the skills to help undocumented students overcome challenges and build resiliency for school persistence (Crawford & Valle, 2016). However, the previous studies evaluating educators' competence suggest educators are falling short of delivering helpful college resources (Gonzales, 2011; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). Educators need more training to help the undocumented population (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011; Lad & Brganza, 2012). These findings warrant examining what equitable college counseling means for undocumented students through their interactions with school counselors. The proposed qualitative study will help educators better understand how undocumented youth experience accessing higher education through school counselors.

## Summary

The undocumented population encompasses a growing population of students in the United States public school system (Zong et al., 2019; Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012). Qualitative research suggests undocumented youth encounters institutional barriers interfering with their

academic success and access to higher education (Abrego, 2014; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Gilversleeve & Ranero, 2010; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). Professional school counselors are ethically obligated to help students remove barriers impeding their education access and encourage academic persistence in schools (ASCA, 2019b; ASCA, 2019c). CRT provides a conceptual lens for understanding how the racial history in U.S. public schools creates systemic inequities for marginalized populations (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). CRT is an appropriate tool for examining how the undocumented population experiences public school and higher education (Bernal-Arevalo, 2019; Barrera Macías, 2017). In addition, it is a suitable tool for understanding inequities in education by creating a platform for undocumented students to use their lived experiences to contribute to research (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011).

Previous qualitative research exemplifies the variety of institutional barriers, such as legal barriers and limitations of school personnel interfering with undocumented students' access to higher education (Abrego, 2014; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Gilversleeve & Ranero, 2010; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). The existing research suggests educators are unable to build strong relationships with undocumented youth (Gonzales, 2016; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019; Lad & Braganza, 2012), perpetuate hurtful racial biases and microaggressions during the college access process (Gonzales, 2016; Pérez Huber and Cueva, 2012), deliver unhelpful or incorrect information to students (Lad & Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011), and are not able to help students overcome the legal barriers and uncertainties affecting college access (Crawford & Valle, 2016). Research has not yet examined how undocumented students experience school counselors. This research design fills the gap in the literature by utilizing a CRT lens to create a platform for undocumented

students to share their lived experiences attempting to receive equitable college access from their school counselors. The proposed study will contribute to the existing research on improving college access for undocumented youth by thoroughly analyzing students' lived experiences with their school counselors. This phenomenological study will provide professionals with a better understanding of what school counseling means for undocumented students attempting to access higher education.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

## Overview

A qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design was applied to examine how undocumented students explain the meaning of equitable college access from their interactions with their school counselors. A hermeneutic phenomenological design created a platform for individuals to share their lived experiences for educational research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustaka, 1994; van Manen, 1990). The lack of substantial research regarding the phenomenon of undocumented students accessing their school counselors for college access contributes to the various educational inequities encountered by the undocumented population (Chen et al., 2010; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales, 2016; Pérez & Rodriguez, 2011). More research is needed to better understand professionals working with undocumented students to alleviate further educational and societal marginalization (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2021; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016). A qualitative phenomenological design is significant because it creates a platform for individuals who have experienced the phenomenon to use their stories to contribute to the existing research on undocumented youth and college access.

The existing research on undocumented youth and college access suggests students encounter many institutional barriers to accessing college (Abrego, 2014; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Gilversleeve & Ranero, 2010; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). Barriers include significant legal obstacles and uncertainties regarding their rights to attend universities and afford higher education (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo et al., 2021). Additionally, qualitative research suggests educators are ineffective in helping students overcome the barriers and may present another inequity in college access for undocumented students (Gonzales, 2016; Pérez Huber and Cueva, 2012; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019; Lad &

Braganza, 2012). Examples include studies suggesting educators cannot build strong relationships with undocumented youth (Gonzales, 2016; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019; Lad & Braganza, 2012). Other studies suggest students experience microaggressions from educators while attempting to access college information (Gonzales, 2016; Pérez Huber and Cueva, 2012). Additionally, there is evidence that the information students receive is often inaccurate or unhelpful (Lad & Braganza, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011).

This qualitative phenomenological study responds to the current gap in the literature by creating a platform for individuals to share their lived experiences of attempting to receive equitable college access from their interactions with their school counselors. A qualitative design is consistent with previous studies capturing the educational experiences of undocumented youth (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2012; López & López, 2010; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). In addition, the design is conducive to Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales' (2020) recommendations for conducting research with undocumented youth because it creates a platform for participants to share their unique perspectives. Participants' stories conceptualize the phenomenon, contribute to the existing research, and provide an understanding for professionals on how undocumented students experience college access through their school counselors.

This methods section covers an overview and history of hermeneutic phenomenological designs in qualitative research. Following the introduction is the researcher's rationale for choosing hermeneutic phenomenology as the preferred methodology. Next is a description of the participants' qualifications and proposed recruitment methods. The following section presents the research questions and a detailed sample of interview questions, procedures, data collection, and data analysis. All ethical considerations, including the role of the researcher, are presented. The

chapter concludes with a description of how the research will create a detailed narrative to represent the data findings and explains how trustworthiness is incorporated into the research process. This chapter presents a thorough method for qualitative research and justifies why the chosen methodology is best to examine the given phenomenon.

## Phenomenology as a Qualitative Design

Phenomenological qualitative research examines how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990; Smith et al., 2022). Phenomenologists believe knowledge is embedded within human lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, understanding the human experience cannot be reduced to quantified statistics (Byrne, 2001; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Thus, qualitative analysis is needed to entirely understand the world (Hall, 1996; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology strives to uncover the meaning through examinations of commonalities from individuals' lived experiences through methods such as interviews and observations (Byrne, 2001; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants' shared experiences are the primary source of knowledge in phenomenological qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology allows participants to use their lived experiences to contribute to a shared understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustaka, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenology in qualitative research has a philosophical foundation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Edmund Husserl is considered the father of phenomenology (Husserl & Welton, 2013). The work of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Marleau-Ponty heavily influenced the outcome of Husserl (Husserl & Welton, 2013). Husserl (1913) proclaimed an individual's lived experience of a phenomenon must have similar features to others who experienced the phenomenon (Husserl & Welton, 2013). Identifying the shared segments of individuals'

experiences can develop a generalizable description representing the phenomenon's true nature (Husserl & Welton, 2013). The initial work of phenomenology began as a kind of descriptive psychology (Husserl & Welton, 2013). Husserl (1913) described phenomenology as an authentic design because it allows the researcher to acquire an unbiased view of the world and discover interconnections. Since phenomenology's inception, it has been utilized in qualitative research across disciplines, including medical science, education, and technology, and has proven to be a valuable methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Hermeneutic phenomenology and transcendental phenomenology are the main approaches to phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Both methods utilize philosophical assumptions about experiences to organize and analyze phenomenological data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transcendental phenomenology focuses on the raw descriptions of participants' experiences without interpretation from the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustaka, 1994). The researcher assumes an unbiased role and solely uses the participants' experiences to understand the phenomenon. No prior definitions, expectations, assumptions, or hypotheses influence a transcendental phenomenological study (Neubauer et al., 2019). Transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to neutralize their biases and preconceptions not to affect the study (Neubauer et al., 2019; Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Hermeneutic phenomenology examines the meaning of one's presence through interpretations (Laverty, 2003). Interpretations are applied to participants' narratives to describe the phenomenon accurately (van Manen, 1990). An interpretation of a text is needed to achieve a meaningful understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that a researcher cannot wholly eliminate their preconceptions (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutic phenomenologists accept the influence a researcher's experience

and preconceptions have on the research analysis (Moran, 2008). Rather than bracketing off the researcher's subjective experience, the researcher's impact is recognized (Laverty, 2003; Moran, 2008). There can be advantages of the researcher's role (Moran, 2008). A benefit includes the researcher using their previous education and experiences to be valuable to inquiry to the research. Researchers must openly admit their preconceptions since their subjectivity heavily influences the analysis (Moran, 2008).

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach is conducive to Critical Race Theory's concept of counterstorytelling. Hermeneutic phenomenology uses the subjective experiences of individuals to uncover the meaning of lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The shared experiences are discovered through semi-structured interviews with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview questions prompt participants to share their authentic lived experiences (Fowler, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Yardley et al., 2021) and influence the topic and data (Yardley et al., 2021). This methodology is consistent with CRT's use of counterstories. Both methods use lived experiences and narratives to elucidate participants' lived experiences and later create a greater sense of meaning (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). Another similarity is the assumption that participants' experimental knowledge is the most valid form for understanding the phenomenon (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Hermeneutic phenomenology uses the stories of multiple individuals to uncover a universal essence (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Hermeneutic phenomenological research was chosen as the methodology for the presented research. This design fulfilled the purpose of the study, to uncover an essential structure of phenomena that resonates with many individuals (Jones et al., 2014). The research focused on participants' lived experiences with an interpretation of the researcher. The findings of this research include an in-depth description of the lived experiences of undocumented youth

by defining, conveying, and exposing a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). In addition, a hermeneutic phenomenological design allowed the researcher to examine participants' experiences in-depth and sensitively and follow Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales' (2020) recommendations on ethically researching undocumented youth.

## Research Questions

The hermeneutic phenomenological study examined undocumented students' experiences accessing their school counselors for equitable college access. Open-ended questions provide hermeneutic significance by revealing meaning through sharing lived experiences. The following central research questions are the basis of this study:

- How do undocumented students explain the meaning of equitable college access from their interactions with their school counselors?
- How do undocumented students describe the helpfulness of their school counselors for achieving college access?

## Setting

This hermeneutic phenomenological study took place through virtual video conferencing. The participants included young adults who were undocumented during their high school years and attended public schools in the USA between 2012 and 2022. Participants engaged in interviews at a convenience time and in their chosen location. Virtual interviews were utilized in place of face-to-face interviews to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission (Boland et al., 2021). In addition, virtual interviewing allowed the researcher to engage with participants in various geographical locations.

Virtual technology is commonly used across various disciplines to conduct research and has become increasingly popular since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Boland et al., 2021).

Virtual interviews are the safest qualitative research method and include additional advantages, such as being cost-effective and convenient (Archibald et al., 2019; Boland et al., 2021). In addition, other research suggests participants often prefer a videoconference instead of a face-to-face interview because of the convenience and flexibility it allows (Horrell et al., 2015).

The researcher utilized Zoom as the platform for video conferencing. Zoom is a secure platform that allows researchers to record and store interviews without third-party software (Archibald et al., 2019). This secure video conferencing platform has several features to enhance communication equitably and securely (Archibald et al., 2019; Boland et al., 2021). The platform includes user-specific authentication, real-time encryption of meetings, and the ability to back up recordings to an online remote server network (Archibald et al., 2019). Zoom is an equitable form of videoconferencing because it is free to use and can work on multiple types of devices (Boland et al., 2021). Each Zoom meeting included a password to ensure privacy. In addition, Zoom is a popular videoconferencing method used worldwide (Boland et al., 2021), so participants were familiar with the technology.

Various minor issues are associated with videoconferencing for qualitative research (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Weller, 2017). For example, previous studies indicate that some participants encounter dropped calls, pauses, poor audio or video quality, and the inability to read social cues due to poor connectivity (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Weller, 2017). In this study, participants were informed about the risks and what to do if they encountered a technical difficulty before the videoconference (Boland et al., 2021).

The researcher reviewed the importance of confidentiality and a private location at the start of each interview. Participants were asked to find a place where they would not be overheard or interrupted during the interview (Boland et al., 2021). All participants were familiar

with the videoconferencing platform, and no technical errors or interruptions occurred during any interviews. All participants had their video cameras turned on to enable the researcher to see and respond to non-verbal cues, an important aspect of qualitative data gathering (Boland et al., 2021).

## Participants

Eight participants participated in the research study. The sample size eight is consistent with recommendations from Creswell and Poth (2018) and Morse (1994) for the number of participants for a phenomenological study. All participants received invitations (Appendix A), including details and criteria for participating in the research, in their emails, and with a consent form (Appendix B). Completing the consent form ensured they met the requirements and were ready to participate. Criterion sampling was used to ensure participants met predetermined conditions for the study (Patton, 2015). One participant did not meet the requirements because of his age and was not invited to participate. Participants were compensated for their time with a fifty-dollar Amazon gift card.

Criteria for participating in this study included:

- Participants must self-identify as being undocumented during their high school years
- Participants must be 18 years of age or older
- Participants must have attended a US public high school between 2012 and 2022
- Participants must be willing and available to partake in recorded Zoom interviews with their video camera turned on.
- Participants must consent to allow their interview to be recorded for later review by the researcher.
- Participants must be able to complete all interviews in English.

- Participants must have access to a computer and internet environment with minimal distractions.

Participants included six males and two females. Four participants immigrated to the US from Mexico. Other countries represented include India, Guatemala, and Panama. All participants attended the same high school for four years, except for one who transferred to an independent studies program during his senior year. The age at which participants immigrated to the USA varied from ages 1 to 13. All participants speak fluent English. One participant was part of his high school English Language Learner program. Others all tested out of the program before beginning high school. Most participants mentioned that their parents do not speak English.

The researcher found participants by convenience sampling (Lavrakas, 2008). This sampling method included recruiting participants from networks of mutual friends and colleagues through word of mouth (Lavrakas, 2008). The researcher recruited three participants through snowball sampling t (Goodman, 1961). In this method, the researcher asked participants to invite future subjects among their acquaintances (Browne, 2005; Goodman, 1961; Morgan, 2008). This method was appropriate because of the topic's sensitivity (Browne, 2005; Morgan, 2008). Members of the undocumented population are often closely connected (Gonzales, 2016), making snowball sampling a suitable method for recruitment (Morgan, 2008). To protect privacy, participants had to obtain permission from others before providing the researcher with their names and contact information. In addition, participants did not receive any incentive for recruiting participants to the study.

## Ethical Considerations

Anticipated and emergent ethical issues were carefully considered in the design and execution of this research study. Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) thoroughly reviewed and approved this research study. The IRB at Liberty University consists of a committee of faculty members from various Liberty departments and one non-university member (Liberty University, 2022). The review of the IRB served to ensure all ethical considerations were in place and that benefits of the research outweighed any potential risks. In addition, the IRB ensured consent was appropriately obtained, and safeguards were in place as needed.

The consent form included details about their rights to leave the research study and their right to refuse to answer any questions during the interview. Participants were reminded of these rights at the beginning of each interview. During this time, participants were encouraged to ask questions about the research process. Two forms of obtaining consent maximized the understanding among participants. First, before the research process began, every participant gave written and verbal consent to participate in the process and be recorded. Participants were notified when the recording commenced and ended. All participants completed the research process, including an interview and member checking.

The identities of participants were protected during all aspects of the research process. Participants' first and last names were required to confirm consent. The researcher is the only one with access to participants' legal names. Other than the participant's name, no additional personal information was required to participate in the research study. The participants' identities are kept confidential, and participants' names are replaced with pseudonyms. Five participants chose their pseudonyms, and three asked for a name to be assigned to them. All participants agreed to their pseudonyms during the member-checking process.

This research design adheres to Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales (2020) and Cabrera and Garcia's (2016) suggestions for ethical implications for researching undocumented immigrant communities. In both publications, the consequences of failing to share the results of their findings are discussed. Cabrera and Garcia (2016) recommend findings be accessible to the community and used for advocacy work. Following this suggestion, all participants will be contacted through email once the research is complete. Participants will receive a copy of the publication through email. The findings will also be used for advocacy work when possible.

Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales (2020) recommend researchers should not claim to give undocumented students a "voice." Instead, researchers should provide a platform for undocumented students to speak for themselves. The research design follows this suggestion and allows previous students to share their lived experiences to inform educators. In addition, all participants partook in member checking. This step allowed participants to review their interview transcripts and add or omit pieces to ensure the data accurately represents their experience.

More research is needed to understand how undocumented youth experience all elements of college access. Ensuring participants are at minimum risks and fully understand and consent to the study is essential for ethical research. The researcher followed all ethical guidelines found to research the undocumented population and all of Liberty University’s IRB suggestions to execute an honest and safe research study.

## The Researcher's Role

The researcher's role in hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative research inevitably influences the study (Yardley et al., 2021). This influence includes the production of knowledge in ways such as formulating questions and choosing an analysis. While there are various ways to minimize the researcher's influence, the benefits of the researcher's perspective often outweigh

ultimately minimizing the researcher's influence (Yardley, 1997; Yardley et al., 2021). It is beneficial for qualitative researchers to maximize the benefits of engaging actively with participants in a study (Yardley et al., 2015). Attempting to eliminate the influence removes various benefits of qualitative research. These benefits include disclosure of the subjective experiences during interviews and insightful analysis of hidden meanings of interviews (Yardley, 1997; Yardley, 2000). It is most beneficial to acknowledge the researcher's role and how the researcher may influence the findings rather than ultimately reducing the researcher's role (Yardley et al., 2015).

The data analysis process is greatly influenced by the researcher's background, thinking, and creativity (Saldaña, 2021). This influence includes the researcher's demographic attributes, including gender, socioeconomic class, and occupation (Saldaña, 2021). For these purposes, the researcher must describe their interests and background on the proposed research topic. Therefore, the researcher's interest and experience is thoroughly articulated in the following section for the reader's consideration.

**Researcher's Interest**

My personal experience as a school counselor working with immigrant youth populations triggered my interest in the current phenomenon. In 2014, a student came to the school counselor's office for help with his college applications. This student was a high achieving student and aspired to be a Pre-Med student at the local University. This student had over a 4.0-grade point average, participated in many school activities, and had a kind personality. Despite his impressive resume, he was unsure if college was possible for him. He discovered his undocumented status was a huge obstacle to fulfilling his postsecondary aspirations by attempting to complete the FAFSA and college application. Even though he had DACA status,

he could not receive in-state tuition or take out any federal loan to attend University. These legal barriers created obstacles that made him want to give up on pursuing his academic aspirations. He came to the school counseling office looking for help. He educated all five experienced school counselors on the obstacles he was facing and left all counselors questioning how they could help him. The team of counselors diligently researched various options and could never find a viable solution to help this student.

This dilemma fostered my interest in the experiences of undocumented students trying to receive help from their school counselors. My interest in this topic continued through my experiences working as a school counselor in Tennessee and California. Through these work experiences, I attended several conferences and training on the importance of delivering equitable counseling. Still, I noticed many counselors struggled with knowing how to help the undocumented population with college access. I attended a 2016 Conference at San Diego State University on Supporting Undocumented Students presented by the Center for Excellence in School Counseling and Leadership. At the conference, I heard several counselors and educators from across the US voice their concern that undocumented students are not being treated equitably in schools. I hope my research gives a platform to students to share their experiences with their counselors to create a better understanding of what school counseling means for undocumented students attempting to receive equitable college access and create greater awareness and understanding of the phenomenon.

## Procedure

This section provides a brief outline of the procedures used for conducting this qualitative study. The procedures follow Creswell and Poth's (2018) design, which is heavily based on the works of Moustakas (1994) work along with recommendations from other qualitative researchers

such as Saldaña (2021), and Yardley et al. (2021). The procedure for executing this study took approximately six months.

The first step in the research process was obtaining Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. This step aimed to ensure ethical research at minimum risk to participants. The IRB process took approximately six weeks. Following approval, I begin recruiting participants for my study. I recruited and interviewed participants throughout a six-week timeline. Participants were recruited through word of mouth, snowballing, and advertising on a social media page for undocumented students. All participants completed two forms of consent, written and verbal, before the start of each interview.

Following consent, participants scheduled zoom interviews at a time convenient for the researcher and participant. The researcher manually transcribed each interview as promptly as possible and returned it to each participant for member checking. Member checking was utilized to maximize credibility and trustworthiness (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data analysis process began after completing all interviews and member checking.

An intensive data analysis was undertaken to explore patterns across the eight datasets. The researcher followed the recommendations of Saldaña (2021) and Creswell and Poth (2018) for coding the qualitative data. The process began with horizonalization and was followed by identifying codes, patterns, and categories among the data sets. Following the identification of categories, the core themes were identified and named (Saldaña, 2021). Next, the researcher followed the recommendation of Moustakas (1994) and removed any themes that were not "expressed explicitly" or "compatible" with each research participant. Finally, all themes were tested to ensure they met this requirement.

Two rounds of peer review took place once the core themes were developed. During this process, two category names were identified to contain biases from the researcher. After discussion, these were changed to names that better described the data set. Finally, the process concluded with producing a written analysis of the phenomenon. This analysis provided examples from each research participant, including direct quotes of how they experienced each theme in the phenomenon (Becho Sullivan & Bhattacharya, 2017; Moustakas, 1994).

## Data Collection

Each participant engaged in a one-on-one videoconferencing interview for purposes of data collection. Due to the sensitivity of this topic and population, a focus group did not occur. The interviews were recorded for review, transcription, and coding. Participants scheduled their interviews through email with the researcher at a convenient time. All participants were asked about their familiarity with zoom before the interview. Every participant ensured they were familiar with the technology and did not need technological guidance before the interview. Participants were given the researcher's cell phone number to call in case of a technical error or unexpected event.

### Interviews

All interviews took place between May and June 2022. I manually transcribed each interview within 72 hours of the interview. Participants were emailed a transcript of their interview within two weeks to complete the member-checking process. Each interview was semi-structured and involved open-ended questions followed by probing when needed to gather more detail (Roulston, 2010; Seidmen, 2019). The questions prompted participants to share their authentic lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Seidmen, 2019; Yardley et al., 2015). Using open-ended questions allowed participants to influence the topic and data (Yardley et al., 2015).

In addition, the interviewing process allowed the researcher to understand individuals' circumstances and served as a valuable tool for understanding the meaning behind an individual's behavior (Seidmen, 2019).

Each participant answered up to 20 questions, including four related central research questions and questions used to build rapport (Appendix C). All questions were intended to elicit thorough responses from participants. The interview questions were designed to provide comprehensive and complete detail of participants, and their relation to the phenomenon is essential (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Most participants were eager to share their experiences and did not need additional probing to uncover qualitative significance.

All participants' responses were recorded, transcribed, and stored securely on the researcher's password-protected computer. In addition, the transcriptions were printed from the researcher's printer for data analysis. Copies of the prints will be stored in a locked desk drawer and will be disposed of after three years. In addition, all recordings of the interviews will be erased after three years.

## Data Analysis

The process of data analysis followed recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2018) based on the work of Moustaka's (1994) approach. This method has systemic steps for data analysis, including guidelines from assembling textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon. In addition, recommendations from Saldaña (2021) and Yardley et al. (2021) are incorporated to increase the quality of the analysis.

### Member checking

Member checking is the best way to ensure all transcripts accurately reflect the interview (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants in the study are the only ones who

can reasonably determine the study's credibility (Ali & Yusof, 2011; Birt et al., 2016). Member checking allows participants to play a critical role by asking participants to review how the data analysis properly represents their experience (Ali & Yusof, 2011; Birt et al., 2016). Member checking is considered the most critical technique for establishing credibility in qualitative research (Ali & Yusof, 2011; Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Member checking took place within two weeks following the interviews. None of the participants had anything they wanted to omit from their transcripts. Two participants added information to their responses because they did not believe they thoroughly answered the question during the interview and remembered more details about their experience following the interview. Participants were also emailed a brief description of themselves to ensure this accurately represented their character. All participants were asked to choose their pseudonyms. Three participants requested that I decided it for them and approved the name representing their experience. During the member checking process, several participants expressed gratitude for being part of the research process and appreciation for this research being conducted.

**Coding**

An intensive data analysis was undertaken to explore patterns across the eight datasets. I followed the recommendations of Saldaña (2021) and Creswell and Poth (2018) for horizonaliation. This step took place once all interviews and member checking were complete. This step included reviewing the qualitative data several times and highlighting the comments relevant to the research questions in yellow. During this process, I looked for statements describing school counselors' meaning and helpfulness. The highlighted statements became significant statements if they held meaning that could be relevant in response to the research questions. This process took approximately two weeks.

Next, I went back through the data and listed every significant statement from the transcriptions of the interviews relevant to the topic and assigned an equal value. I followed Saldaña's (2021) advice to use hard copy printouts rather than a computer monitor to give the researcher more control over the work. I read the datasets several times to identify significant statements and highlighted the comments relevant to the research questions in yellow. This process took approximately two weeks.

Once the process of horizonalization had been thoroughly accomplished, I uploaded all highlighted statements to a new document on the computer for the next step of reduction and elimination. This step included assigning codes to the sets of data. I created a chart with all the significant statements on a column on the right and a place to create a code on the left. The chart served organizational purposes for coding. The coding goals were to condense, not reduce, the data to reflect the meaning of each qualitative datum (Saldaña, 2021). Codes were used for symbol systems of condensed meaning. I assigned In Vivo codes heavily throughout the coding process. I chose to use In Vivo coding because it honors the participants' voices and culturally relevant terms (Saldaña, 2021). In Vivo codes are put in quotes to show that it comes from the participant and use their exact words (Saldaña, 2021).

I worked on assigning codes to my sets of significant statements over several weeks. First, I reorganized my codes in various ways, such as alphabetizing them to help identify patterns. Through this process, I recognized that some of my codes did not correctly represent the qualitative data. When this occurred, I renamed the code to better label the data. If the highlighted statement did not contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it or was not possible to label it was removed (Becho Sullivan & Bhattacharya, 2017; Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

Over different incidences of reading over the codes, I began to identify patterns. Patterns are composed of codes that look and feel alike (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They are repetitive, regular, or consistent occurrences of action that appear more in the data (Saldaña, 2021). A code must have occurred in at least three incidences to become a pattern (Saldaña, 2021). I identified approximately fifty patterns within my data sets. Following the development of patterns, I began identifying categories within my data sets. I uploaded the patterns to a separate word document to identify categories. I reviewed the data and selected patterns that responded to the two research questions to identify categories. I labeled all categories with a word or short phrase that assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and evocative attribute to the data and described a segment of the data. Finally, I developed and uploaded several categories to a separate word document.

Following the creation of categories, I began identifying core themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kasten, 2022; Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Themes are the final outcome of categorization and coding (Saldaña, 2021). For identification of themes, I found patterns within the assigned categories. I followed the recommendation of Moustakas (1994) and removed any themes that were not “expressed explicitly” or “compatible” with each research participant. All themes were tested to ensure they met this requirement. During this process, six themes were disregarded. These themes were: financial hardships, discovering what undocumented means, self-determination, reliance on social media for college guidance, and familial support. Some of the themes, which were, eliminated, overlap with other themes that every participant explicitly expressed. The themes, which each participant explicitly expressed, became core themes of the phenomenon (Becho Sullivan & Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell &

Poth, 2018; Kasten, 2022; Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Theme names are well thought out and strive to be informative, concise, and catchy (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

**Peer Review**

Two rounds of peer review were conducted to help identify biases in the data analysis process and strengthen fidelity and validity in the data analysis process. First, two professionals familiar with empirical research reviewed the data. The first individual was a 32-year-old female who holds a Master's degree in Public Health and works in a position where she commonly conducts and reviews quantitative health research. She is from an Italian background and resides in the Northeast region of the United States. Next, this individual identified a category that was biased based on my experience as a school counselor. The category name "counselors overworked," was decided that "large workloads" better fit the codes in the category.

The second individual to review the data sets was a 34-year-old female with a Ph.D. in Child and Family studies. This individual immigrated to the US from Latin America as a teenager. Since she has lived in various regions of the US. This colleague identified a category originally called "Cultural Unfamiliarity." This name seemed to be heavily influenced by research bias. After discussion, it was renamed ignorance because several codes implied that the counselor was unaware of issues surrounding undocumented students rather than not understanding the student's culture. Both colleagues took approximately an hour to conduct a peer review and were not compensated for their time.

**Composite Description**

The goal of phenomenology is to define the world around it, "to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (Creswell, 2009, p. 58). Therefore, the final step of the data analysis process consisted of constructing textural and

structural descriptions of the themes of the phenomenon. This step included providing examples from each research participant, including direct quotes of how they experienced each theme (Becho Sullivan & Bhattacharya, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). In this step, I describe each quote to explain "what" happened with the participant's experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each description of the theme begins with a chart showing the codes and categories making up the theme.

The creation of the description followed the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2018) based on the work of Moustaka's (1994) approach. The composite description synthesizes each participant's experience (Becho Sullivan & Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data analysis's structural and textural descriptions are merged to describe the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This description describes the shared experiences to inform readers about what school counseling means to undocumented students attempting to access equitable college access.

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research covers techniques to prove that the study's findings are significant and notable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). This study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) approach is based on methodological arguments and techniques and is commonly used to judge the validity and reliability of qualitative research (Green, 2000; Nowell et al., 2017).

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria are organized into four concepts: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These concepts are similar to quantitative assessment criteria of validity and reliability but better suit the methods and objectives of

qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concepts are defined and followed by a description of how they are utilized in this qualitative study (Nowell et al., 2017).

**Credibility**

Credibility examines the degree to which the research findings represent plausible information from the participants' original data to describe the participants' experience (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Member checking is the most critical technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants all had the opportunity to review the transcripts and make changes if needed. Participants also had the opportunity to add additional information to their transcripts if they felt like they did not get a chance to articulate their thoughts during interviews fully. Member checking allows participants to play a critical role by asking participants to review how the data analysis properly represents their experience (Hay & Singh, 2012).

**Transferability**

Transferability is the ability for the study results to be transferred to other settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). To achieve transferability, the researcher includes detailed descriptions of context through thick reports so that other researchers can determine if the results are transferable (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study consists of a thorough explanation of the researcher's interest, background, and theoretical perspective applied to the study. In addition, the research provides textural and structural descriptions of the phenomena for each research participant during phenomenological reduction (Becho Sullivan & Bhattacharya, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). The detailed illustrations allow the reader to determine if the findings are transferable to their research or educational setting (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

**Dependability**

Dependability is essential in qualitative research because it measures the ability of the results to be repeatable and consistent (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). To achieve dependability, the researcher accounted for the ever-changing context of research (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). To acquire dependable results, the researcher reported and described any changes in the setting and how these changes affected the study. In addition, all specific ways of data gathering, analysis, and interpretation are described. Interviews are subjective, and people rarely produce the same responses when asked in different contexts (Yardley et al., 2021). Therefore, a thorough description of the context of the study is needed to achieve dependable results (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The sample size of eight participants is suitable for attaining consistent results (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morse, 1994). Qualitative research examines the subtle interactive processes occurring in particular contexts rather than generalizing a population trend. Therefore, a smaller carefully selected pool of participants is appropriate (Yardley et al., 2021).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the data and interpretations of the findings derived from the data are not merely the researcher's imagination (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability occurs after establishing credibility, transferability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, qualitative research assumes the researcher brings a unique perspective to the study (Laverty, 2003; Moran, 2008). Therefore, all research findings must be grounded in the data to prove authentic findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

Koch (1994) recommended that researchers include rationales for their theoretical and methodological decisions throughout the study to achieve confirmability. Chapter Two thoroughly explains how Critical Race Theory is grounded in research and why it is an appropriate theoretical lens for this phenomenological study (Braun et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011). Chapter Three describes how a hermeneutic phenomenological study is the best design to fill the existing research gap and how the data analysis methods and trustworthiness are grounded in the literature (Moustakas, 1994; Laverty, 2003; Seidmen, 2019; Yardley et al., 2021). The thorough descriptions show how the researcher's decisions for this phenomenological study are grounded in data (Koch, 1994; Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

Since researchers bring their perspectives to the analysis, they must be self-aware and consider how their worldview affects the research (Laverty, 2003; Moran, 2008). To achieve confirmability, the researcher kept a reflective journal regarding personal values and interests throughout the data collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, the researcher recorded any sensitive topics or potential ethical issues that might affect the data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This concept, known as reflexivity, is designed for qualitative researchers to examine their background and position to see how these influence the research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research commonly uses reflexivity to achieve confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Summary

This chapter validated the methodology for the proposed research study. The history and use of Phenomenology are described to provide the reader with an overview of the background of the methodology and how it fits the goals of the researcher. The research questions were

stated. The virtual setting for the research study is presented and justified. Ethical considerations are discussed and grounded in research. A description of participants, including qualifications to participate in the research study, is provided. The procedure is thoroughly outlined. The data collection process is explained, and the process of data analysis is thoroughly explained and includes the process of creating a composite description of the phenomenon. Lastly, efforts to increase trustworthiness are presented.

# CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The study aimed to examine and describe what school counseling means to undocumented students attempting to receive equitable college access. This chapter describes the participants and presents the themes derived from data analysis. A section describing the data analysis process follows a description of the participants. Six tables illustrate how themes, categories, and thematic statements were derived from various codes in response to the two research questions. Following each table is a description of the theme with direct quotes from each participant to expose how each participant experienced the theme. This section ends with a summary.

## Participants

Participants' legal names are replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities and uphold confidentiality. Eight participants aged 18-28 shared their experiences over a semi-structured interview. Table 2 shows an overview of the participants' demographics

**Table 2**

*Description of Participants*

| Participant | Age | Native Country | State of High School | State's Policies Affecting Access to Higher Education | High School Setting | Highest Level of Education |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Luna | 19 | Mexico | Louisiana | No in-state tuition or financial aid | Rural | High school degree |
| Astrid | 21 | Mexico | California | In-state tuition rates and financial aid | Suburban | Some college |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ajay | 25 | India | Tennessee | No in-state tuition or financial aid | Suburban | Bachelor's degree |
| Citlati | 22 | Guatemala | Texas | In-state rates and financial aid | Suburban | High school degree |
| Herik | 26 | Panama | Tennessee | No in-state tuition or financial aid | Rural | Bachelor's degree |
| Talia | 18 | Mexico | Maryland | Access to in-state rates and financial aid | Suburban | High school degree |
| Edward | 28 | Mexico | Tennessee | No in-state tuition or financial aid | Suburban | High school degree |
| David | 25 | Mexico | Tennessee | No in-state tuition or financial aid | Urban | Bachelor's degree |

Participants included six males and two females. Five participants immigrated to the US from Mexico. Other countries represented include India, Guatemala, and Panama. All participants attended the same high school for four years, except for one who transferred to an independent studies program during his senior year. The age at which participants immigrated to the USA varied from ages 1 to 13. All participants speak fluent English. One participant was part of his high school English Language Learner program. Others all tested out of the program before beginning high school. Six participants mentioned that their parents do not speak English.

No questions about participants' immigration status were asked, but each participant shared their status because it highly affected their experience. Out of the eight participants, four currently have DACA status. Only two of the four had DACA status during high school because

they were unaware of how to apply to the program. Three of the younger participants have not been able to receive DACA status because of limitations in the program since they became eligible. One participant had DACA status in high school and is now a U.S. Citizen. Another participant never had DACA status but received a permit to work in the USA. All participants describe their status as heavily affecting their college and career aspirations.

Five participants attended high school in a state that does not allow students to access in-state tuition or financial aid. Three participants attended high school in states allowing access to resources such as in-state tuition and financial support. Unfortunately, all three students did not know about these opportunities in high school and missed the chance to receive equitable tuition and state-based financial aid.

A detailed personal description of each participant and their experience attempting to access equitable college access follows.

**Luna**

Luna is a talented, hardworking, and empathetic recent high school graduate. He immigrated to the USA from Mexico when he was one and a half and has lived in Louisiana for most of his life. Luna attended high school in a rural area of Louisiana, a state that does not provide in-state tuition or financial aid for undocumented students. He waited a year to enroll in college following high school because he lacked the resources to apply for and receive assistance during high school. During this time, college was a dream but seemed infeasible. However, thanks to organizations supporting undocumented students, Luna has received guidance and scholarships and is attending college in the fall.

Luna attributes his ambition and compassion to his family. Over his life, he has seen the hard work and sacrifices they have made for him and his sister. When Luna was in 8th grade, a

flood hit his community, and his family lost almost everything. Unlike others in their town, they could not receive any support from the government. He recalls watching his parents cry and then watching them work endlessly to rebuild their home. Today, their dedication and resiliency are paying off, and Luna is happy to see where they are just five years after the flood. Luna describes this experience as a strong bonding experience for his family, which taught them to rely intensely on one another.

Luna has always wanted to work in engineering. However, due to his status, he finds it hard to see himself in lots of positions. He commonly wonders if he will ever be able to get that job, if it is worth it to put hours into an internship, and if he can he even get an internship. He recognizes it is common for people to worry about their futures, but it is a lot more stressful when you have to overcome not having a social security number.

Over the four years of Luna's high school experience, the DACA program encountered lots of instability. Unfortunately, Luna did not receive DACA because of the program's suspension. The political climate created lots of distress for Luna, and he wondered if going to college was even worth it. Luna's counselor had never heard of DACA and was oblivious to the news heavily affecting her student. Luna decided to get through high school and figure out his next steps.

Luna believes in the importance of community and surrounding oneself with others like him. "It is important to have a community around you that understands and knows what you are dealing with." He enjoys spending time with others who share experiences and have a similar drive. Over the past year, he has found lots of support in online communities. He has found groups catering to undocumented students helpful because everyone is experiencing the same

thing, such as not having DACA and trying to get into college. These groups have helped show Luna that college is possible, and he has earned a scholarship through thedream.us.

Luna wants to be the most successful person he can be. He is excited to start college in the fall and attributes his motivation to his family. He describes them as the "backbone" and accredits them for encouraging and motivating him to achieve. He acknowledges that his parents have always had to work twice as hard as other parents and wants to do whatever he can to pay them back.

**Astrid**

Astrid appreciates the arts and is particularly interested in interior and architectural design. He attended a traditional public school in a suburban area of California. He lived in this area from when he emigrated from Mexico at age six until he turned 18. He transferred to an independent studies program upon turning 18 and found this type of learning met his educational needs better than his traditional public school. In addition, the independent studies program provided a lot of individualized, one-on-one instruction, which Astrid found beneficial during his last year of high school.

Astrid joined the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program during his first year of high school to boost his college readiness because of his desire to attend college. He describes his high school self as hardworking but quiet around his peers. He shares that he did not socialize with many people in his high school because he felt ostracized by the general high school population by being a member of the LGBT community. However, he enrolled in honors courses and participated in class because he understood the importance of his voice being represented in the class.

Astrid is currently employed and hopes to return to college soon to pursue his passions. He is passionate about interior and architectural design. Astrid always knew he wanted to do something in the Arts and discovered his interest in interior and architectural design during college. Astrid wishes there was a more significant emphasis on developing one's passions rather than placing so much weight on the core subjects in high school. He believes if the education system changed, students would be more successful.

**Ajay**

Ajay immigrated to the USA with his family from India in middle school. Ajay's family values education and always knew he would attend college. Ajay did not speak English when he entered US schools and built strong relationships with the ESL teachers. He also befriended many Hispanic students in his same classes learning English.

Ajay attended school in a suburban area of Tennessee, a state that does not offer in-state tuition to undocumented students nor allows undocumented students to get a driver's license. As Ajay learned English, he soon realized he did not have the same opportunities as his peers, as many were getting their driver's licenses and driving to parties. As a result, he realized his path to college would be different from his peers, but that did not affect his academic ambition in high school. Despite the challenges, he knew he was not alone.

Ajay shared that pursuing higher education in his culture is the norm, even if you do not have the financial means. He received encouragement from others in the community, and other families loaned his parents money to cover tuition. However, he acknowledges that his situation was unique to other undocumented students. Many of his undocumented peers lost hope and did not come from families that valued higher education as he did. He feels genuinely bad when he

runs into other undocumented students from his high school because they did not receive any support or encouragement and are often in the same positions as they were in high school.

Ajay graduated with a degree in finance. After graduation, Ajay watched his peers obtain careers and continue to grow in their fields. Feeling defeated because of his immigration status, Ajay worked at a hotel within walking distance of his home. Around 2-3 years after graduation, he received a work permit and got a job at FedEx. Due to his work and internship limitations, he was behind and unprepared for the job he had studied for. He worked at FedEx for approximately six months and landed a job at a tax auditing company. This job was not exactly what he wanted, but it allowed him to gain valuable experience. He worked for this company for two years before recently landing a career as a financial analyst. He is proud of where he is now and considers it a significant achievement.

Ajay is now where he aspired to be, but his path to getting there was not straightforward due to limitations in his documentation status. He believes counselors can help undocumented students by encouraging them to pursue education and instilling hope for their futures. He recommends counselors collaborate more with the ESL teachers since they are the ones who often have a strong rapport with the undocumented population and see their students daily.

**Citlati**

Citlati is talented and loyal to her family. Her family immigrated to the USA when she was a toddler from Guatemala. She attended high school in an affluent suburban area of Texas. The high school has a strong reputation for academics in the city. She is thankful that she could attend her high school and describes her experience as very positive.

During Citlati's first year of high school, her father moved to Oklahoma. She has not spoken to him since and lived with her mom and older brother until her junior year when her

mother was deported. She continued to live with her older brother until she finished high school. They were penniless during this period. Her brother worked endless hours to pay rent. Citlati occasionally babysat to help with expenses, but her brother wanted her to focus on her studies and dance career.

Citlati was a member of the dance team at her high school. The school counselor was the sponsor of the dance team, so she had a close relationship with her. Her counselor and other parents told her she was talented early on and could get a dance scholarship to college. For this reason, she heavily focused on her dance. Academics were important to her as well, and she felt pressured to do well knew her family moved to the neighborhood for her to succeed in school.

Following high school, dance went from a hobby to a great source of stress. Citlati auditioned for several gigs but often spent more money on transportation, makeup, and outfits than she made. During this time, she developed an eating disorder and could not get professional help because of her financial situation and lack of health insurance. She continued to see her brother work endlessly to support them and realized she had to do something else.

Citlati researched other career opportunities and discovered a high demand for nannies due to school COVID-19 school closures. She picked up a few nannying jobs and made decent money doing this. She shortly realized that she enjoyed caring for children and helping families. She has continued to nanny for the past two years and currently has a stable position caring for a set of twins during the day. Citlati is content with her current career and is thankful she discovered her passion for working with children.

**Herik**

Herik is ambitious, self-motivated, and compassionate about helping others. As a child, Herik had big dreams and aspired to become a doctor or an engineer. His family, particularly his

father, always encouraged education. He immigrated to the USA from Panama in middle school and was a high-achieving 6th and 7th-grade student. He attended high school in a rural area of Tennessee, about an hour away from a large city. As he became older, he soon discovered that he was undocumented and gradually became aware of the barriers this created to achieving his goals and dreams. As a result, he felt hopeless throughout high school and lost interest in school. He underperformed and wishes someone had instilled more hope in him by showing him there are ways to navigate higher education and obtain a job.

Shortly after high school, Herik's father encouraged him to take classes at the local community college. Herik felt defeated while working a job at a pizza joint and started to see his peers achieve. He recognized he was not fulfilling his potential. He followed his father's guidance and enrolled in remedial courses at a community college.

Initially, it was challenging for Herik to balance being a student and working full time. The first two years were tough, and he had to master time management. However, after he adjusted to the challenges, he began to excel. His childhood love for education and personal satisfaction from achieving in school returned. He earned his Associate degree and cultivated a love of learning. While in community college, he applied for and received DACA status. Obtaining DACA status was life changing for Herik.

With DACA status and an Associate's degree, Herik spent endless hours researching and visiting colleges across the state. He was determined to find an institution with a program for DACA recipients to attend. Through a friend, he found out about the YMCA Latino Achiever program. In this program, he learned about a university in a neighboring state that granted in-state tuition to DACA recipients from the state where he resided. Upon learning about this

program, he enrolled and graduated two years later with a Bachelor's degree. During his time at the university, he excelled in academics and internships.

Today Herik works as a finance manager for a healthcare company and recently received a promotion. Herik recognizes the importance of having guidance in high school and spends his free time volunteering at high schools and speaking to youth. He is passionate about helping students like him find pathways to higher education and a career and instilling hope in future generations.

**Talia**

Talia is a responsible, intelligent, aspiring engineer. She attributes these characteristics to being the oldest child and the first to be bilingual in her family. Last month, she graduated high school and will be attending community college in the fall. During her high school experience, she took several honors and AP classes and conducted a biology-based research project her senior year. She was accepted to highly competitive universities, but due to the high cost of tuition as an undocumented student, these universities are not practical options for her right now.

When Talia was two, she immigrated to the USA from Mexico and resided in Maryland for most of her life. She attended a large magnet school in a suburban area outside Washington, DC. She describes her high school as racially diverse, progressive, and college focused. Most students at her high school took advanced courses and either enrolled in the dual enrollment program with a community college or completed an intensive research project. In addition, the school emphasized internships, and many students volunteered as interns in places such as NASA and the FDA.

**Edward**

Edward is a successful software engineer. He attended school in a suburban town in Tennessee. Growing up, Edward was eager to succeed. He has always known he wants to work with computers. His educators commonly spoke of and encouraged attending college after high school. However, he did not believe attending college was feasible from an early age. He recognized he faced many barriers to attending college since he did not have papers to live in the USA and understood college was expensive.

Following high school, Edward got a job waiting tables at a Mexican food restaurant. He felt discouraged and knew he was not fulfilling his potential while working in this position. During this time, he received DACA status, which was ultimately a life-changing experience for him. With hope, he began researching ways to attend college with DACA status and shortly realized it was still costly and DACA did not qualify him for in-state tuition benefits. Due to these high costs of higher education, Edward got a job at a call center and chose to gain more experience before furthering his education.

Edward worked diligently at the call center and got promoted to testing software. He worked with several software developers and became interested in their work. He began researching how he could become a software engineer. To his surprise, he realized he could become a software engineer without a college degree if he attended a coding boot camp. He explored coding and boot camps through YouTube and found videos made by other DACA recipients explaining how boot camps were a feasible track to a secure career. Edward felt motivated by the stories of other DACA recipients attending coding boot camps and decided to follow their mentorship and enroll in a coding boot camp.

Today, Edward works as a software engineer for a major insurance company. He is thankful he followed the advice of other DACA recipients on YouTube and is proud he pursued

his passion for working with computers. He describes software engineering is a great career for him.

**David**

David is a passionate 25-year-old male who works to help others achieve their college and career aspirations. He currently works as an enrollment counselor at a private university and is particularly passionate about helping the Latinx community. David is an only child and grew up in a single-family household with his mom. His family emigrated from Mexico, and he attended high school in a medium-sized city in Tennessee. His mother attended college in Mexico and provided moral support throughout his education. He had a positive high school experience and is proud to have been surrounded by a strong support system.

David graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry. During college, he discovered his true passion is working with students, particularly Latinx students, through his experience as a student ambassador. After college, he landed a full-time job as a college and career coach in his hometown. In 2021, he got a job as an enrollment counselor job at his Alma Mater. He serves as the coordinator for the recruitment officer and point of contact for any students who may be undocumented. He is passionate about what he does and is happy to give back to the university that gave him so much.

David is still in contact with his school counselor. She attended his graduation and continues to work as an advocate for the undocumented population. Recently, she put together professional development for counselors in the region to learn about opportunities for undocumented students. David and a few other students participated in a panel to share their stories.

David married his college sweetheart and recently became a United States citizen. He plans to begin a Master's program in Educational Leadership or School Counseling soon. He is grateful for all the guidance and encouragement he's received and understands not all students receive the amount of support and advocacy that he received. He hopes a Master's degree will open up more opportunities for him to make a positive impact and serve as a student role model.

## The Data Analysis Process

All interviews were conducted between May and June 2022. I manually transcribed each interview within 72 hours of the interview. Participants were emailed a transcript of their interview within two weeks to complete the member-checking process. None of the participants had anything they wanted to omit from their transcripts. Two participants added information to their responses because they did not believe they thoroughly answered the question during the interview and remembered more details about their experience following the interview. Participants were also emailed a brief description of themselves to ensure this accurately represented their character. All participants were asked to choose their pseudonyms. Three participants requested that I decided it for them and approved the name describing their experience. During the member checking process, several participants expressed gratitude for being part of the research process and appreciation for this research being conducted.

An intensive data analysis was undertaken to explore patterns across the eight datasets. Recommendations of Saldaña (2021) and Creswell and Poth (2018) for horizonalization were followed. This step took place once all interviews and member checking were complete. Horizonalization included reviewing the qualitative data several times and highlighting the comments relevant to the research questions in yellow. During this process, I looked for statements describing school counselors' meaning and helpfulness. The highlighted statements

became significant statements if they held meaning that could be relevant in response to the research questions. This process took approximately two weeks.

Next, I went back through the data and listed every significant statement from the transcriptions of the interviews relevant to the topic and assigned an equal value following Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation for horizonalization. I followed Saldaña's (2021) advice to use hard copy printouts rather than a computer monitor to give the researcher more control over the work. I read the datasets several times to identify significant statements and highlighted the comments relevant to the research questions in yellow. This process took approximately two weeks.

Once the process of horizonalization had been thoroughly accomplished, I uploaded all highlighted statements to a new document on the computer for the next step of reduction and elimination. This step included assigning codes to the sets of data. I created a chart with all the significant statements on a column on the right and a place to create a code on the left. The chart served organizational purposes for coding. The goals of coding were to condense, not reduce, the data to reflect the meaning of each qualitative datum (Saldaña, 2021). Codes were used for symbol systems of condensed meaning. I assigned In Vivo codes heavily throughout the coding process. I chose to use In Vivo coding because it honors the participants' voices and culturally relevant terms (Saldaña, 2021). In Vivo codes are put in quotes to show that it comes from the participant and is the use of their exact words (Saldaña, 2021).

I worked on assigning codes to my sets of significant statements over several weeks. First, I reorganized my codes in various ways, such as alphabetizing them to help identify patterns. Through this process, I recognized that some of my codes did not correctly represent the qualitative data. When this occurred, I renamed the code to better label the data. If the

highlighted statement did not contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it or was not possible to label, it was removed (Becho Sullivan & Bhattacharya, 2017; Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

Over different incidences of reading over the codes, I began to identify patterns. Patterns are composed of codes that look and feel alike (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They are repetitive, regular, or consistent occurrences of action/data that appear more in the data (Saldaña, 2021). A code must have occurred in at least three incidences to become a pattern (Saldaña, 2021). I identified approximately fifty patterns within my data sets. Following the development of patterns, I began identifying categories within my data sets. I uploaded the patterns to a separate word document to identify categories. For identification of categories, I reviewed the data and selected patterns that responded to the two research questions. Next, I labeled all categories with a word or short phrase that assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and evocative attribute to the data and described a segment of the data. Finally, I developed and uploaded several categories to a separate word document.

Following the creation of categories, I began identifying core themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kasten, 2022; Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Themes are the final outcome of categorization and coding (Saldaña, 2021). For this to happen, I identified patterns within the assigned categories. Next, I followed the recommendation of Moustakas (1994) and removed any themes that were not “expressed explicitly” or “compatible” with each research participant. All themes were tested to ensure they met this requirement. During this process, six themes were disregarded. These themes were: Financial Hardships, Discovering What Undocumented Really Means, Self Determination, Reliance on Social Media for College Guidance, and Familial Support. Some eliminated themes overlap with other themes that every participant explicitly

expressed. The themes, which each participant explicitly expressed, became core themes of the phenomenon (Becho Sullivan & Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kasten, 2022; Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Theme names are well thought out and strive to be informative, concise, and catchy (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The final step of the data analysis process consisted of constructing textural and structural descriptions of the themes of the phenomenon. This step included providing examples from each research participant, including direct quotes of how they experienced each theme. (Becho Sullivan & Bhattacharya, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). In this step, I describe each quote to explain "what" happened with the participant's experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each description of the theme begins with a chart showing the codes and categories making up the theme.

## Results

This section shares the themes derived from data analysis. The themes are divided by research questions. All themes related to Research Question 1 are presented in Tables 3-4. Tables 5-8 represent the themes, codes, and categories related to Research Question 2. The description of themes follows the presentation of the tables. The descriptions include direct quotes from participants along with a description of the context.

### Research Question 1

The first research question asks: How do undocumented students explain the meaning of equitable college access from their interactions with their school counselors? Two themes from the data analysis process answer this research question. The first theme is "Positive Personnel," meaning undocumented students view school counselors as positive people in the school building striving to help students achieve academic success. The second theme, "Not the

Counselor's Fault," builds upon the first theme. Most students do not believe they received equitable college access from their school counselor. However, they still have positive views of their school counselors and do not blame them for failing to deliver equitable college access. The following themes are methodically described through the following charts and explanations.

**Table 3**

*Theme 1: Positive Personnel*

Thematic Statement: School counselors are viewed as positive personnel in the school striving to help students achieve academic success.

| Category | Codes | |
|---|---|---|
| Trustworthy | **“**knew I could tell her” | “always felt supported” |
| | “knew me” | “someone I could trust” |
| | “I felt comfortable” | “only one who knew” |
| | “put all my trust in her” | “only teacher I could talk to” |
| Good Intentions | “meant well” | “all positive interactions” |
| | “truly cared for me” | “really tried to help” |
| | ”she really tried” | “tried to relate” |
| | “did not make me feel bad” | |
| Approachable | “visited counselor quite a bit” | “adult friend” |
| | “unlike other adults” | “easy to talk to” |
| | “never uncomfortable” | “pleasant and calm” |
| | “made me feel welcome” | |
| Kindhearted | “very nice woman” | “very empathetic” |
| | “made me laugh” | “nice to everyone” |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | “counselors were good” | “caring” |
| | “A good sport” | “my person” |
| | “supportive” | |
| Influential | “students looked up to” | “very encouraging” |
| | “helped me feel important” | “she encouraged me” |
| | “changed my life” | “a positive impact’ |

All participants expressed positive characteristics of their school counselor’s character and motive to help students. Often, the school counselor was the only one in the school who knew that students were undocumented and were described as being trustworthy in confidential matters, such as their immigration status. In addition, several participants mentioned how their counselors helped students in their school through challenging times and seemed to care for students. These qualities seem to distinguish counselors from other educators in the school; therefore, undocumented students often view counselors as approachable. The counseling experience varied widely among participants, yet all shared their counselors were kindhearted individuals as often influential and encouraging in their academic experience.

David was especially fond of his school counselor and began his interview by expressing his gratitude towards his school counselor:

> I am grateful to have had such a support system in so many ways and to have my school counselors that were really advocating for my success and really truly cared for me. I feel very fortunate that she really was one of the people who truly changed my life.

Throughout the interview, David spoke highly of the character of his school counselor and described how she went above and beyond to ensure he received equitable college access. When asked about what it meant to access the counselor, David expressed:

> In terms of support, I always felt really supported by Beverly and the rest of the counseling staff. I felt like I was in there all the time, especially my senior year. I was in there just trying to look for her. It was always very encouraging that she would go to fight for me, and always, even when I felt bad about it and felt like doors were closing, she would always be very encouraging. It felt like I was being heard and being supported by her. It really felt like it was truly someone I could trust. Looking back at it, I poured all of my trust into Beverly and just hoped that she would be my hero to get me through it. I felt like she was my person.

David's experience was exceptional. His counselor provided endless support and encouragement, and he accredits his counselor's dedication to where he is today. When he discussed his counselor's positive influence on his experience, he sighed relief and expressed how thankful he was to have had her in his life. Other participants did not receive as much support or encouragement as David, yet still shared several positive traits of their counselor. Luna, for example, spoke highly of his counselor's character throughout the interview, even though she fell short of helping him access higher education. For example, in response to a question regarding what it meant to access your school counselor, Luna described:

> My interactions with the school counselor were all positive. She was a very nice woman. She was never being mean, like, “Oh this Mexican kid he doesn’t have any papers. I am not going to help him.” Like I said, she just did not have the awareness or resources that I ended up having. Instead of her counseling me, I had to counsel myself.

Later in the interview, Luna was asked how helpful the counselor was in answering his questions. Earlier in the interview, Luna had already expressed that his counselor was not very helpful, yet following this question, he responded:

> She was very empathetic. She was not a person who would go out of their way to treat me differently. She would just say, "I do not have the information to give you to help you." She helped a lot of other students at my school.

Over the past year, Luna has connected with online communities and discovered resources for undocumented students. He found one that is particularly helpful and has had them contact his counselor with resources so she will be able to help students in the future. When Luna was asked about his experiences accessing higher education information, Luna shared:

> I can tell you that the way I am attending college is through the https://thedream.us/ and they asked for my counselors' name, and they are sending her information about their organization because they are probably the biggest group that helps undocumented students. This will help my counselor help students who can't go the traditional route, and you can lead them to our organization so that they can go down

Despite Luna not receiving any help from his school counselor, he believes she will be able to help undocumented students with the right resources. He smiled when sharing her character and believed his experience did not undermine her potential to help others. He respects his counselor and does not have hostile feelings toward her.

Ajay did not have a close relationship with his school counselor but has fond memories of her. He describes her as a "good sport" and says she made several efforts to help students. When asked what memories arise when he thinks of school counseling, Ajay described:

> Oh, Mrs. Krauss, she was a good sport. She would always come on the announcements and tell us all about FAFSA and sports and try. She really tried to make college interesting. She popped up a lot. I think during junior and senior year, when you really try to think about college and she was always in our classes talking and in assemblies. All that stuff for everybody at that time.

Ajay was one of the oldest participants in the research study. Throughout the interview, he struggled to remember educators and his high school experience details. He seemed calm about his whole high school experience but shared a smirk when describing his counselor as a "good sport." Despite the amount of time passed since high school, all of his memories of his counselor are noble, and she left the impression on him as someone who attempted to help students.

Talia expressed many frustrations with the lack of practical help from her school counselor, but continued to share that she was kind and trustworthy and helped her with a few things. She was the only adult in the school Talia felt comfortable discussing her immigration status with. When Talia was asked why she interacted with her school counselor, she described:

> I was really involved with my school counselor during the college application experience. She was also a first-generation college student and tried to help students get to college. I talked to her a lot over the four years because I always needed help fixing my schedule. And all that, and eventually, I needed help getting fee waivers for the SAT and getting recommendation letters and also getting and trying to figure out what my options were as an undocumented student. There were not that many options, but I at least wanted to try and talk to her about it. She was the only one in the school who knew I was undocumented. I did not want that getting out, but I knew I could tell her. I did not feel

> comfortable telling the counselor over email because it goes through the school server and everyone can see those emails. I preferred to do it in private, and also, they wanted to talk with us so I made an appointment, and it was pretty easy to tell her about it but she did not understand what it meant, so I had to explain it to her.

Throughout the interview, Talia described how her counselor was relatable and tried to connect with her. Some of the commonalities they shared were being from low socioeconomic backgrounds, being first-generation college students, and being from ethnic minority backgrounds. Talia seemed more hostile about her overall experience than other participants, yet when asked questions about her counselor, her demeanor changed, and she seemed pleased with her counselor's personality and intent.

Astrid described feeling compelled to seek guidance from his school counselor because of his calm demeanor, which distinguished him from other educators in the school. When Astrid was asked what accessing his counselor meant, he described his experiences:

> I mean it was definitely not a really bad experience um I actually, throughout high school, I visited my school counselor quite a bit. I would talk to my counselors and be like, "look I am not really understanding." To see how they could help me find better. He always tried and was helpful to an extent. I kept going to see him because I needed help and he was pleasant and very calm and patient, unlike some of the other teachers. I don't know, he was busy, but I kept going back to him. He seemed to try more than other teachers, and yea, not a bad experience. He was really kind.

Citlati described her school counselor as personable and one of the few adults in her school who knew her. Like Astrid and Talia's experience, she described her school counselor's character as distinguishing her from other educators in the school. She portrayed her as

welcoming and someone she visits frequently. Citlati was asked to share her experiences accessing the school counselor. She described:

> I talked to her almost every day of high school. I saw her after school at dance and would stop by her office whenever I got the chance. She made me feel welcome, almost like a big sister, but not quite. I felt like I could talk to her about any gossip going on at school. She was the only teacher who I ever really talked to. She encouraged me to make smart choices and not be mean to other girls and stuff. She was nice to everyone so that was I guess a positive impact she had on me. I wanted to be like her, and she made being nice cool.

Like Ajay, Edward and Herik did not have strong relationships with their school counselors. Despite this, throughout the interview, they both mentioned that their school counselors were compassionate people working to help students. Edward recalled that he wishes he had asked them for more help because he does believe they could have helped him. When asked about how the counselor made him feel. Edward shared:

> Oh no, my counselors were good. We had all positive interactions and peaceful planning. They helped other people, and it was never uncomfortable. I told them I wanted to work in computers and they said "Hey, you should take these computer classes." They did not make me feel bad. Like I said, I should have asked them for help, but I did not at that time.

Herik also stood up for his counselors' caring demeanor and motive to help students at the end of his interview when he was asked if there were anything he would like school counselors to know about his experience. Herik expressed:

> So I guess one thing that really helped, I would like to mention, in high school is a very vulnerable time. A deviation can happen in the good direction or the other direction. So I feel like good early on guidance is crucial starting freshman or sophomore year because then if you become convoluted with all the influence in school, a lot of my friends weren't into academics, and that completely shut me off to academics. Our counselors were caring, and helped students who were academic students but I was not in a place to receive help from them. But our counselors, they were beneficial for those students who cared. They were really nice people.

Herik and Edward both recognized their counselors were caring personnel and, in retrospect, wish they had utilized their counselor's services further. All participants shared positive experiences with their counselor and spoke highly of their character. Most participants remembered their counselor's names and specific details of their interactions. Throughout the interviews, it was common for participants to grin while discussing their counselor. Two participants, David and Luna, remain in contact with their counselors and serve as a resource for helping other undocumented students.

Throughout all the interviews, all participants shared ways their counselors fell short of delivering equitable college access. However, while discussing areas where their counselors did not provide equitable college access, every participant was sure to mention that they are not hostile towards their counselors nor blame them for falling short. These comments led to the second theme, "Not the Fault of the Counselor," in response to the first research question regarding how undocumented students explain the meaning of equitable college access from their interactions with their school counselors.

**Table 4**

*Theme 2: Not the Fault of the Counselor*

Thematic Statement: Undocumented students do not believe it is the fault of their school counselors for failing to deliver equitable services.

| Category | Codes | |
|---|---|---|
| Self-blame | "I didn't tell them" | "I did not ask her" |
| | "I felt ashamed" | "I was not in a place |
| | "Part of that was my | to receive help" |
| | fault" | |
| Large workloads | "she was always in a | "a lot to keep up |
| | rush" | with" |
| | "a lot for counselors | " |
| | to know" | |
| Subcategory: Student | "so many students" | "too many students" |
| to Counselor ratios | "work with a lot of | "student to counselor |
| | students" | ratios are crazy!" |
| Larger injustice | "it's the system" | "every one was |
| | "the problem is the | white" |
| | state" | "culture wall in the |
| | | middle" |
| Empathy | "not resentful towards | "my situation was |
| | her" | unprecedented" |
| | "don't blame them" | "she seemed so |

"I sympathize with stressed"

school counselors"

Participants' experiences with their counselors' regarding the equity of services offered significantly varied. While discussing lived experiences, all participants spoke highly of their counselors' character and did not blame them for any injustices they may have experienced. Several participants blame the education system, rather than their specific counselor, for not receiving equitable college access. Other participants did not expect their counselors to have the multicultural background to understand what they were going through and therefore excused their counselors' ignorance. Some participants share that they believe counselors are overworked and, therefore, cannot meet the needs of each student.

Edward does not blame his counselors because he believes he should have asked them for more direct help. He assumes his counselors never knew about his status and wishes he had asked for more assistance. After high school, he met other undocumented students who received support from their school counselors. Following Edwards's reflection on how he felt excluded from the resources his counselors offered, Edward shared:

> I think it goes back to the fact that they did not know. They said you can get scholarships but all the scholarships they had needed a social security number like the state scholarship. They all say, "Hey, where's your SSN?" I never told my counselors, so they would not know. They could not help because they did not know.

Herik's school counselor also did not know about his immigration status. Herik believes that counselors should help students regardless and need to assume some students are undocumented. Herik also believes counselors have too many students to serve everyone equitably. He described:

> The problem is the counselors have so many students, so they cannot dedicate their time to everyone. By default, every student had access to a counselor, but I never knew what to go in and talk to a counselor about, and I sort of felt ashamed. Do I go in there and say, "hey, I do not have papers" What can you do for me? It is such a defeating thing to go in there and express. Counselors should not wait for students to confide in them. I feel like its not the counselor's fault, but possibly the school could create awareness by letting the counselors know, "hey, we do have a population of students who could be undocumented. You need to have the resources for them. I am sure they knew that. Our ESL program was big, but there was no effort at saying, "hey, you can do it. I had none of that knowledge. None, whatsoever."

Ajay does not think school counselors should not be blamed for falling short of college resources for undocumented students. Like Herik and Edward, Ajay's counselor did not know about his immigration status. Ajay did not feel comfortable sharing this with his counselor and is thankful he was not singled out due to his immigration status. Ajay thinks counselors could help undocumented students best by referring them to outside organizations or sharing the information with the ESL teachers since they often have strong relationships with undocumented students. Ajay considers counselors are overworked and cannot keep up with all the news affecting undocumented students. Ajay described:

> Oh, and I would say, counselors, I do want to sympathize with the fact they work with a lot of students. And it is a lot to keep up with the changing laws and universities changing their policies. So it would be wrong to set the expectation that a counselor has all the knowledge to help an undocumented student find their way, but what they could do is become aware of the affiliated with the groups that do help minority groups. Come in

> contact with them, get to know them the best best best they can do is put a student in contact with them. That is primarily what these organizations do. They keep up with the changing laws and policies around DACA. They work with universities, and can help students figure out the best way to finance college and the curriculum. These groups research everything and can help. It is a lot for counselors to know everything there is about being undocumented and DACA, but coming in contact and building good relationships with these affiliate groups is a huge help. A huge huge help. They can also give the information to the ESL teachers because they saw us every day. They were who I felt most comfortable with.

Unlike Herik, Edward, and Ajay, Astrid confided in his counselor about his DACA status but consistently had to remind him of their previous conversations. Even though his counselor knew about his status, it was never discussed in conversations around college. David believes it is a problem in the traditional school system and, like Ajay, empathized with the amount of work his school counselor had rather than blaming him for falling short. Following a question about the helpfulness of his school counselors, Astrid described:

> Thinking about it logically, it is definitely really hard when you have so many students you have to talk to. I understand it is what it is. It is not their fault they have too many students. I guess it is like the education system. The districts determine how they work for the ratios. For students to teachers and students to counselors, but it is ridiculous how many students they have coming in for different purposes whether it is to change classes or whatever it may be. I definitely don't hold it too hard like, uh, they didn't help me, but it wasn't worth it. I definitely don't blame them; I just think traditional school just isn't catered towards undocumented students. I think in general traditional high school falls

> short to DACA students. It's not just the counselors. It is not by any means their fault; it is just the system and the way it all works out.

Luna also confided in his counselor about his immigration status because his counselor directly asked him why he did not put a social security number on a form. Even though he shared this personal information, she did not fully understand what undocumented meant. Her lack of knowledge resulted in Luna not receiving help from his school counselor. Despite her lack of support, Luna does not blame her for not knowing how to help him. Instead, he excuses her ignorance and blames the lack of diversity in their community for her inexperience. When asked about cultural differences between himself and the counselor, Luna explained:

> She was white, although that is not a bad thing, but she was white, and most of the school was white as well. It was a very white area. Just the cultural makeup of the community made it less likely to have the resources she needed to interact with a student like me because, usually you know, she would just interact with any other traditional kid. She would say, "I really want to help you, but I just don't know how." I don't know how to deal with this. I do not blame her. I understand there is that culture wall in the middle. Maybe she just did not have that awareness; they never taught her, "Hey, you are going to have to deal with a student like this." She just had the understanding that every student she would deal with is going to be the exact same, but that is not how it is.

Luna attributed her incompetence to the cultural differences and the homogeneous demographic makeup of the town where they reside. Most of the other students in his school were white and could follow the traditional college path. As a result, she did not have experience interacting with culturally different students. Luna hopes his school counselor will benefit from additional resources and impact other undocumented students.

Talia has experiences similar to Astrid and Luna. Talia set up a meeting with her counselor to share her immigration status in hopes her counselor would be able to help her overcome the barriers. Talia's counselor told her she understood but continued to forget about the limitations this presented for her. Talia described feeling frustrated and disappointed, yet still forgives her for falling short. Instead, she blames the political systems for creating barriers to her college access. Talia shared:

> I am not resentful towards her I just wish someone had given her the resources. She had so many resources and not one thing for undocumented students. She was helpful for some of the process and made sure I did it right. I think the problem is the state and our governor. It is a blue state, and we have a red mayor. They make it hard for people of color.

In addition, Talia recognized and understood that her school counselor was busy. When asked to describe what accessing the counselor meant, she mentioned how busy her counselor was. Talia expressed:

> She was always in a rush. She would talk to me but be like, "oh, I have a meeting in 30 minutes." So I would like, okay, let's skip all the information and go to the important stuff. She had a lot of work.

Although Talia's counselor was very busy, Talia recognized she was still helpful with practical tasks like getting an SAT waiver, signing up for courses, and helping her get enroll in the dual enrollment program. She also wrote her letters of recommendation and helped her decide to attend community college. In addition, she provided several resources for other students, but none of these were relevant to Talia.

Citlati attended a high school in an affluent suburb. Like Luna, she supposes the demographic makeup of her community limited her counselor's knowledge and understanding of low-income students. Even though Citlati had a very close relationship with her school counselor, she did not expect her to have provided information regarding undocumented, low-income students. In addition, she is pleased that her counselor did not bring it up because she thinks it would have been uncomfortable. Citlati:

> Most people in our school did not have problems going to college. They applied, and their parents paid. I told Mrs. Smith I was going to pursue my dance career, and she encouraged it. She did not ask me about college because she probably knew it was not an option for me. I like how she just encouraged me and let me be me. I just wish the information had been somewhere. I already felt stressed and different around my friends because they only talked about college. I did not ask her or anyone else and just tried avoiding the subject.

Citlati's counselor knew she was undocumented because it came up during her junior year when the dance team discussed attending a completion in Florida. She is unsure why her counselor never asked her if she needed help. She assumed there was no feasible way to attend higher education during high school. Like Edward, she does not think it is her counselor's fault because she never directly asked her for help.

David had an extremely positive experience with his school counselors. He imagines he was the first undocumented student his counselor worked with and accounts for her errors due to her lack of experience. He understood that his situation was unprecedented and willing to be patient and learn alongside his counselor. While everything he shared about his counselor was positive, he did mention that she could not relate to the emotional toll that being undocumented

took on him. He wishes his counselor could have paired him up with a mentor but was not surprised that she could not find one for him. Following the question on any cultural differences encountered which influenced his experiences with his school counselor, David mentioned:

> She never put me in contact with anyone who had been through the same process I went through because there were not that many at the time. I felt like I could and I couldn't talk to my school counselor about the emotional toll being undocumented had. Sometimes I would anyways, Beverly was always really supportive, but it was hard for her to fully relate to the type of process I was going through. I was the first student who had ever gone through this, and my situation was so different than anyone else's. She listened, but did not always know what to say because she could not relate, but I didn't really expect her to. My situation was unprecedented.

David revealed the emotional toll being undocumented took on him during the undocumented process. David attempted to discuss these feelings with his school counselor but could tell she struggled to relate and did not expect her to be able to. Like David, all participants mentioned having educational doubts, which were not shared with their school counselor and heavily influenced their college access.

Equitable college access from interactions with school counselors is described by participants in this study as having to do with a more significant injustice. Participants view their counselors as hardworking, caring, and empathetic but believe external factors affect their delivery of equitable college access. For example, several participants emphasized the amount of work their counselors had and described them as looking stressed, always in a hurry, and having so many students needing help. Still, none of the participants spoke negatively about their

counselor and believed the lack of adequate college services to have to do with factors out of the counselors' control.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question asks: How do undocumented students describe the helpfulness of their school counselors in achieving college access? Four themes were derived from data analysis to answer this research question. The first theme, "Educational Doubts," describes how the barriers undocumented students encounter accessing higher education results in educational doubts, which are often unaddressed or unnoticed by counselors and highly affect undocumented students' college decision-making. The second theme is "Exclusion," meaning undocumented students are often left out of school initiatives, activities, and guidance their school counselors deliver. The third theme, "Inaccurate Guidance," follows the theme of exclusion. This theme was derived from several incidences where undocumented students were given misleading or improper instructions on accessing higher education and financial aid. Finally, the fourth theme, "Unaware Counselors," follows the previous themes illustrating counselors' ignorance. This theme is made up of statements indicating counselors are unaware of undocumented students' barriers and, therefore, cannot adequately help undocumented students access higher education. The following themes are described below through charts and thorough descriptions of how each participant experienced the phenomena.

**Table 5**

*Theme 3: Educational Doubts*

Thematic Statement: Undocumented students experience educational doubts that interfere with the helpfulness of their school counselors.

| Category | Codes |
|---|---|

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Fear | “worried about college” | “not worth the risk” |
| | “did not want my status getting out there” | “it’s all a little iffy” |
| | | “uncomfortable pursing college” |
| Unobtainable | “very limited after high school” | “not even an option” |
| | “a lot of limitations” | “not be able to get a job” |
| | “I can’t work” | “still can’t work |
| | | “not qualified for” |
| Defeatism | “there was no way” | “did not even try” |
| | “I was failing” | “gave up” |
| Despair | “I had no hope” | “no life” |
| | “they just lost hope” | no future |
| | “I did not see the point” | “all doors were closing” |
| Cynicism | negative self talk | “hard to see self ” |
| | “talked myself out of my future” | “most things are unrealistic” |
| Uncertainty | “does it really make sense?” | “can I even have these dreams?” |
| | “can I even get this job?” | “should prioritize work?” |
| | “did not see a point” | “can I ask for that?” |
| | “can I even get an internship? | |
| | “can I even have these dreams?” | |

All participants shared times when they seriously doubted the value of pursuing higher education, including questioning their potential and the importance of a college degree because of their immigration status. Participants disclosed that these doubts took a heavy toll on their mental health and sometimes on their school performance. Most participants could not confide with adults about their fears and anxieties and kept these feelings to themselves. Citlati, Luna, Talia, and David shared that they attempted to discuss their fears with their counselors, but their counselors were unable to relate and alleviate their apprehensions. Herik, Ajay, and Edward mentioned feeling hopelessness when they discovered the barriers to higher education and kept these feelings to themselves.

When Herik was asked about his postsecondary goals in high school, he became saddened about the hopelessness he had experienced. Herik explained:

> In Panama, as a child, I had all sorts of dreams like becoming a doctor, engineer, my parents pushed academics. Academic performance above anything else. I was a straight-A student in Panama. When I entered high school, I realized I had a lot of limitations. The majority was that even if I got through college, I would not be able to get a job. I had been talking to myself. Telling myself, "hey, you won't be able to go to college, and if you are it is going to be insanely expensive and you can't afford it." I would read articles and forums and just reading how expensive it gets even if you make it. I did do some research. Just simple Google searches like "Do you need a social security number to go to college?" I would read articles and forums and just reading how expensive it gets. I talked myself out of my future. This was all in my personal guidance.

Herik was asked to share more about how academic motives changed as he learned about the barriers. Herik shared:

> It started gradually, but I noticed more and more barriers as I progressed gradually throughout school. Online, and as I matured, the majority of my friends were Hispanics. All were in similar boats. They came to the conclusion that we don't know about college. I went from a very smart student in Panama, and even here, 6th grade was good, 7th grade was good, I was in the honor roll. In high school I noticed I was going to be very very limited after high school, so my performance in school was so by 9th grade, I stopped caring about my school and all. Around 16 is when you can start working, and does it really make sense to spend all the money or start working? You know, education programs and all. I did not see a point. But like I told you, I had no hope. My grades were so low and I did not care. Just a lot of limitations.

Edward also discovered the high cost of college tuition through personal Internet searches. When Edward found the limitations, he concluded that he did not need to worry about college because it was not an option. Even when teachers encouraged him, he doubted their guidance and believed they only encouraged him because they did not know about the limitations he encountered. Like several students, Edward kept quiet. Edward described:

> I think it is, um. You know the teachers. Every teacher I had, you know, told me college. You know, I am pretty sure everybody talked about college. So there are two barriers. The first is not having papers, and the second is financial. Because you don't have papers, you don't qualify for in-state tuition. I try to look into going to a community college on my own. Even with that, I called them myself and asked them how much it was going to be and it was outrageous.

Edward was asked to tell more about how he felt discovering these barriers. Edward explained:

> I did not need to worry. It was always told to us the next step after high school is college. Just go to college, but knowing at the time I was undocumented, because of that, it was almost like, okay I do not need to worry about college because it was not even an option. I told myself, "Hey, you graduate here and work at the Mexican place. They don't know because you don't belong here."

Similar to Edward and Herik, Luna also describes feeling discouraged by the lack of resources he was given in high school. The educational doubts Luna experienced resulted in him not attending college directly after high school despite having ambition, wonderful test scores, and a strong GPA. Luna explained:

> I, unfortunately, felt uncomfortable pursuing college because I did not have a social security number or an ability to see myself anywhere in the future. I just kind of went in a corner and decided, "I will graduate high school," and then figure out things after that. If someone tells me I can't do that, it really taxes on me. I spent a year; I did not even try to go to college because I received so many roadblocks in school. I did not know what resources to look to.

When asked about his postsecondary goals in high school, Luna expressed more educational doubts. Luna:

> I always wanted to work in engineering. I really like working with my hands. My dad does a lot of construction; he works in construction, so I have that background. So it is hard to kind of see yourself in that kind of position because I don't know if I can be in that sort of position. Can I even get this job? Is it worth putting all of these hours of work to get the internships? You know, can I even get these internships? Like I said, it's a very stressful experience to think about your future. Because most people I think, stress about

> your future, but it is a lot harder when you have these, you do not have a social, you do not have these things. Taking care of, you don't know what is going to happen with that. I want to have these dreams, but can I even have these dreams at the same time?

Educational doubts and high tuition costs are also why Talia is attending community college in the fall rather than attending a four-year university. In the previous section, Talia expressed several doubts about her dreams that left he feeling ostracized from her peers and significantly limited her career and college options compared to her peers. In addition, Talia conveyed great cynicism and uncertainty when asked to share more about her postsecondary goals. Talia shared:

> Well, because of my status, most things are unrealistic. I am not a citizen, so that is a bit of a problem, so that is actually a big problem. I can't ask the university to give me money because they aren't known for giving U.S. citizens money. In addition, some colleges have a racist past, and you don't want to risk it. Like they don't have a specific office to contact about these issues. This is really why I decided to not go to college in the end. I decided to go to community college, and that even is a little iffy since I do not have DACA.

The high cost of college without the guarantee of being able to work in the USA also discouraged Citlati from pursuing higher education. When asked about her experience accessing college information, Citlati described:

> When I learned about the cost of college, I noticed it was not for me. I made average good grades in high school but college was not going to be my thing. I thought I could make it in dance and make a future, but I had no idea what the world actually cost. I never thought much about a career outside of dance. I didn't want to spend money to

explore options of jobs I'm not qualified for. I was not a terrible student, but not one who could receive an academic scholarship. I did feel sad, but I brushed it off.

Since graduating from high school, Citlati has discovered that in her state, she could qualify for state-based financial aid and in-state tuition, meaning not all college is as expensive as she believed it to be in high school. Her brother is pursuing a degree; however, Citlati still doubts the benefits of investing time into a degree when there is no guarantee she will be able to work. Citlati described:

> I am glad my brother is going. He deserves it. But for me, Education is not my thing. I make more as a nanny than my friends graduating from college right now. What happens is I do not work for two years to go to community, and then I come out and go back to being a nanny because I still have no DACA.

Citlati shared that she would probably pursue higher education if she received proper authorization to work in the USA. However, without DACA status or any guarantee that she will ever be able to work legally in the USA, she does not see the investment as worth it. She is currently doing well as a nanny in the city she attended high school but would like to have a job that provides health benefits.

Astrid began community college and is also taking a break from his education to work. He wishes his family would be more supportive of his perusal of art education and is currently trying to rationalize reenrolling in higher education. When asked about any cultural differences between him and his school counselor, Astrid described:

> I definitely think there were differences in the cultural background between me and the counselor in areas, like, where we could not relate in ways of urgencies. I kind of messed up by going to college right after high school. Even now, my mom is like, "you need to

> get a better job," but I am like yea but I want to go to college. And they are like, "yeah, but you need a job," and I am like, "yeah, I dropped out of school and I am working." Work is a survival thing. My mom wanted to study, but she had to work to survive. I want to prove to them that I can make money following my passions, but for now, I have to make money to do that. I hope I can get back but need to support myself first and prove to myself education is worth it.

Astrid believes his counselor had different values than his family. He considers his counselor probably prioritized education over work following high school. Astrid would be the first in his family to attend college and came from a family that valued work as a priority. He understood this created a barrier in which his counselor could not relate to him.

David had the most optimistic outlook of the participants but still experienced times of doubt when it came to asking for scholarship money. However, unlike several participants, his counselor greatly encouraged him, and his doubts did not hinder his trajectory. When asked about other interactions with the school counselor, he shared an experience where his counselor taught him to advocate for himself. David disclosed:

> She was very fundamental in me advocating for myself and finding confidence. I was just grateful for what I had and was going to try to figure out the rest. For one scholarship, I was just going to request I think, a thousand bucks or something like that, and she told me to have more confidence and ask for more. She was really instrumental and I am grateful to this day, she told me to request as much as you need, and the worst that can happen is that they say no. I requested 4,000 and they gave me 4,000. Very influential in me advocating more for myself and reminding me that to look at, and that I should have the same opportunities to go and pursue a higher education if I wanted to.

At the end of David's interview, he was asked how he believes school counselors can better support the undocumented population to achieve college access. David emphasized the need for schools to have support for undocumented students experiencing challenges. David described:

> I think beyond what I already said, schools, especially in schools where it is a significant population, just trying to have someone on the staff, or send counselors on a retreat, to really know how to best serve their students not only for academic success but emotionally if they are able to. Undocumented students face a lot of challenges and they need mental health support and someone to talk to.

The participants' responses to this research question reveal that undocumented students encounter various institutional barriers while attempting to access higher education. These barriers affect students' emotional health and, without adequate mentorship, can significantly affect academic aspirations and attempts to pursue higher education. Many participants became distressed when they discussed the hopelessness they experienced at some point in their educational journey. Several participants mentioned feeling alone during their experience with doubts. Thus, school counselors must be prepared to respond to the specific academic doubts experienced by undocumented students to achieve equitable college access.

These results indicate that undocumented students need more emotional support from their school counselors to alleviate their educational doubts. Unfortunately, school counselors were not helpful when it came to serving in this role in the experiences of these participants. Many participants did not feel comfortable discussing the emotional toll their immigration status took on them based on other interactions they had with their counselors. Most participants did not believe their counselors would be able to help them because they had such little

understanding of what being undocumented needs. Still, despite being unavailable to the emotional needs of participants, school counselors are viewed positively by all participants in this study and are believed to be helpful to a certain extent.

**Table 6**

*Theme 4: Exclusion*

Thematic Statement: Undocumented students are excluded from the school initiatives delivered by school counselors, including activities to boost college readiness.

| Category | Codes | |
|---|---|---|
| Institutional Neglect | "nothing focused for me" | "you've got to be a citizen" |
| | "none of my friends ever had a word about college with any of our counselors" | "all of the attention was on top tier" |
| | "did not speak to those of us" | "none of those emails never addressed undocumented" |
| | all for documented" | "never talked about DACA" |
| Abandonment | "she dropped the subject" | "did not bother with us" |
| | "I was stuck" | forgotten |
| | "just for US citizens" | "did not know what to say" |
| | "counselors they did not do undocumented stuff" | |
| Exclusion of opportunities. | "I could not drive" | "needed a social for internship" |
| | "no opportunity to work and get ahead" | Unable to take dual enrollment course |
| | "not able to take advantage" | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Unable to complete class tasks<br>"others were driving at 16" | "could not do the same" |
| Excluded from resources | "resources she had were not helpful for my situation"<br>"never really spoke to those of us who were not legally documented"<br>"advice for the other students"<br>"not for me"<br>"only talked about what was there for legal people"<br>"reserved for US citizens" | "None of the resources were not catered towards me"<br>"information did not meet my needs"<br>"not relevant to me"<br>"all the resources were for US citizens"<br>"nothing focused for me"<br>"nothing for undocumented" |
| Unalike Peers | "we were different"<br>"nobody else blinked"<br>"Other people get to choose"<br>"they could always jump on opportunities"<br>"others got more help than me"<br>"still a foreigner" | "all the other kids"<br>"get ahead, like my peers"<br>"second class citizen"<br>"other students were getting more help"<br>"other students did not have to worry" |

All participants expressed experiences where they were left out of the typical high school experience at some point during their interview. Exclusions included sitting through long assemblies on college access where nothing was mentioned or applicable for undocumented

students and being ineligible for most of the resources provided by the school counselor. These exclusions resulted in many students feeling unalike and, in some cases, inferior to their peers. Often, the limited resources and opportunities available to them discouraged students. Conversely, in some cases, students became envious of their peers who could access their counselor's information.

Citlati understood she faced more financial hardships than her peers but didn't realize how much her family's finances distinguished her from her peers until the talk about college began. Several of Citlati's friends applied to and currently attend private universities. One of her friends from dance received some scholarship money to one of these universities and recommended she look into it. She traveled with her friend to the university and met the coach, who told her she could also probably get some scholarship money. On this visit, she took a campus tour where tuition rates were discussed. Citlati became bothered when she saw the estimate of the total costs of tuition, not including room and board or other expenses. Her only hope was the scholarship, and she shortly found out that the scholarship was less than one thousand dollars; she would spend more each semester on textbooks. She described a specific incident that occurred on a college tour with a classmate:

> We went into a room, and they showed us the tuition. 55,000 dollars! Nobody else in the room blinked. Emma's family kept talking about how proud they were that she chose the university and did not mention the cost. Most other people at my school were choosing their colleges based on where they wanted to go and got some scholarships. I thought a scholarship meant they paid for your college, not just 1,000 dollars of it. There was no way I could come up with that money. My brother made 12 dollars an hour, and that supported the three of us. This is when I realized that even though I could act like my

> friends, go out with them, and dance; we were not destined to live the same lives. We were different, and while they went on to schools, I need to work.

Citlati continued to express how her school counselor treated her differently than others and did include her in conversations about college. When asked about her experiences accessing higher education information, Citlati shared:

> Other students would be in Mrs. Smith's room talking about college and filling out forms. She never asked me; I think it was because she knew I was undocumented and poor. She had told me I would get a dance scholarship, and when I told her it was too expensive, she dropped the subject. Other students talked with her about majors and stuff, and she made them speak to colleges when they visited our school, but we just talked gossip with me. She was like my friend.

Citlati did not receive any guidance on her college and career options despite having a close relationship with her school counselor. She noticed other students received information about higher education but she never directly asked for any because she believed she could not afford it. She wishes her counselor had helped her assess what qualities she had going for her other than being a talented dancer and helped her navigate public universities and scholarships. She also shared that she would have appreciated more discussions about what careers and majors were sustainable and lucrative for her based on her financial circumstances and immigration status. She described feeling oblivious in high school about finances and how expensive it is to live in the United States.

Citlati lost all hope of attending college following her college visit. She had worked hard to achieve a high GPA and be involved on campus but believed college was no longer possible for her. At the time, she did not know that all colleges are not that as expensive as the one she

visited or the difference between public and private universities. She watched her friends celebrate college acceptances, realized she was different from them and believed she would never have the same opportunities.

During Ajay's interview, he consistently gave examples of how he was excluded from the typical high school experience and how his counselors' advice did not include him. Ajay did not speak English when he immigrated to the USA in middle school. During his first years in the USA, he believed he could acclimate to society and pursue his dreams once he spoke English. In reality, Ajay realized that the more English he learned, the more barriers he recognized. At the beginning of the interview, Ajay was asked to describe his experience in high school, Ajay expressed:

> It was your pretty typical high school experience, except well, I was in ESL. The first couple of years, it was the barrier of language where I could not communicate, and then, as I was able to communicate, I realized I could not do the same as they did. I was still a foreigner. It wasn't until sophomore year of high school that I realized my track was going to be different. I understood more, and the more I understood, the more and more barriers I realized.

Ajay was asked to share more about the barriers he realized. He mentioned the detriment of not being able to get a driver's license and how that affected his opportunities and excluded him from his peers. Ajay vented:

> First of all, I could not drive. I had to ask for help for rides to all things outside of school hours. I, there, was no opportunity for me to work in a corporation or anything in high school and get ahead. I had to ask to get to everything so I was not very involved. All other kids were going to parties and stuff. I was stuck at home.

When asked about his experiences accessing the school counselor, he shared how he felt left out during school presentations from the counselors regarding college access. Ajay stated:

> Counselors gave a speech or a presentation on what to do for the FAFSA and what to do for the college and start thinking about that, the ACT scores. All that stuff, but that was like for everybody at the time. This is the first time I'm hearing about counseling to help undocumented students or, um, any counseling in that manner. Counselors only talked about what there was for legal people or the citizens. Those scholarships are there but, there was nothing focused for me. Counselors did not talk to those of us. We just sat there and watch and not listen, or maybe some people listened, haha.

Ajay was not fully aware of the services his counselors offered. He recalled attending assemblies where college access tools such as the FAFSA and scholarships were discussed, but these were only applicable to students with papers. Instead, Ajay learned about college opportunities through his friends and his research. He called several colleges and asked if they had any programs for undocumented students and realized that most did not.

Similar to Ajay, Edward also felt excluded from the guidance and instructions given by school counselors and other educators. He remembered incidences where he agreed with the school counselors and responded, "yes," to their suggestions, even though he knew they did not include people without legal citizenship. When Edward was asked to share how his counselor guided his postsecondary choices, Edward expressed:

> They said you can get scholarships but all the scholarships they had needed a social security number like the state scholarship. They all say, "Hey, you've got to be a citizen or you've got to have a VISA paper," So it was not for me. The scholarships they offered

were not for me. The school counselor told me to apply so, I said "yes." I did not apply and she did not say anything.

Herik thinks the school counselors at his school may have had presumptions about the international community due to the lack of counseling received. He described incidences of stigmatization that left him feeling hopeless. He mentioned feeling different from his peers entering college and doing well in education. He also did not find anything relevant to him in the emails he received about college. This experience is what initially deferred him from pursuing his education. When Herik was asked how helpful the counselor was in meeting his needs, Herik shared:

> I don't want to make it sound negative at all, but I had no counseling in high school. All of the attention was on the top tier students. Here are all my friends going to college out of state and scoring high on their ACT. But like I told you, I had no hope. My grades were low, and I did not care. I got college emails so I knew apply here. But none of those emails never addressed undocumented. Like saying, "hey, we have a way if you are undocumented." I can tell you for sure, none of my friends ever had a word about college with any of our counselors. I don't know if it is correct, but I think the counselors may have known that we usually don't go to college so they did not bother with us. I don't know if it is right, but it is just what I think.

David mentioned several ways his school counselor made efforts to include him and ensure he had equitable college access. Yet, he still remembered incidences of not being accepted and feeling left out of the same opportunities as his documented peers. Early in the interview, David mentioned an incident where he attempted to take a dual enrollment class at the community college and was turned away after the first class. David recalled:

> Everything up until the week of, when I went to the first class, Beverly had come to snatch me out of the class. I think she waited until I finished the lecture, and then said, I am not sure who called. Maybe the state did and actually the grant did not come through because they actually went and looked at the application, and I think it actually went through and looked at the application, they might of just approved it based on the automatic system, and then when they went back and did the audited and double checked everything it didn't come through they basically told me I could remain in the class but I would need to pay the out of state tuition rate. I felt like why do I have to take the basic high school English. I want to get ahead like my peers.

David continued to mention how this incident made him realize that his immigration status continued to be a barrier for him and something that would remain differencing him from his peers, especially regarding his options for higher education. David reflected:

> The majority of the crowd at my high school wanted to go to the big state university, so I was like, sure, I will go there, that is where everyone goes. It ended up being tough realization that it wouldn't be an option even though I was in the top twenty percent of my class and I mean, pretty decent ACT scores. All along, we had been told, you will be good as long as you get a good GPA and test scores, and as long as you have both, you are good.

David was asked to share how it felt when he realized he still faced additional barriers to accessing higher education. David described:

> I was lucky that I was able to have DACA at the time that I did, but I started to feel a little different when other students began getting their permits at 15 and driving at 16. I received DACA during my second semester of junior year and I believed everything

> would be good. I am registered with immigration; they've given me paperwork, and I've got a license, and different things like that. I should be good. Senior year is when barriers really started to hit with dual enrollment, being told I couldn't do it. It was not until my junior year that I started to realize that immigration itself, my status at the time, would get in the way of furthering my education even though I had DACA. I became more determined; to be frank, it just made me upset it seemed like to me I did not, not having a better understanding at the time like, per se, I had at the time what I thought would be enough, I had a driver's license, I had a social security number, I had permission to be in the USA legally like Obama said that. Why are you mistreating me now and putting barriers on my goals? Why am I being treated as a second-class citizen? I wanted to prove the system wrong.

Talia communicated several incidences of not being able to receive the same opportunities as her peers because of her immigration status. Examples of exclusion included not being able to acquire a competitive high school internship or pursue a career in many fields. She also mentioned watching her peers being able to take advantage of the resources offered by the school counselors that were not relevant to her. Following an initial question asking Talia to describe her high school experience, Talia stated:

> I also think I should mention my school was a really big magnet school that focuses on STEM education. They have research programs where you intern at other places and stuff, and they did have a lot of resources about college, but I was not able to take advantage of all those. Even with the internship program, I would not be able to volunteer at most of the sites because they are government like NASA, uh FDA. Yeah, those things, I can't work there.

She continued throughout her interview, discussing barriers she faced because of her immigration status. When asked about her postsecondary goals, she shares how the limitations on what she can study in college distinguish her from her peers with U.S. citizenship. Talia:

> Other people choose what they want to study, but because of my status, many majors are unrealistic. I can't go into politics, obviously. I can't go into criminology because a lot of those things require citizenship or for me to go through law enforcement. So you are heavily limited if you are undocumented. And also, history no, that doesn't pay well even if you are an American citizen. That's why I kind of settled on engineering because if I went into a science based thing it's going to be, again I am going to work with a lot of government offices, you have to go through the government sector and you need citizenship. Or they are really strict about it, so I decided to be realistic and go with engineering.

Talia discussed how she felt inferior to the students who did not have to worry about their immigration status and how they got more help from the school counselors. When asked about how the counselor was helpful or unhelpful in meeting her needs, Talia expressed:

> The other students were getting more help with their college applications. Our school constantly sent out newsletters about scholarships. They could always jump on those opportunities because they had a social or their counselors would tell them about scholarships they qualified for. Sometimes they could recommend people for the scholarships because of who they knew. Other students didn't have to worry about the whole citizenship aspect, so yeah. They all got more help than me, and I was like I'm, doing this all on my own.

Luna described feeling called out and ridiculed because his status did not allow him to complete a classroom task. He shared a situation where the school counselor visited his classroom and instructed everyone to complete a college application. He was unable to complete the application without a social security number. Luna explained:

> My school counselor would come to class every, I don't know how often, maybe every six months to talk about college. She would have a presentation about the TOPS program, the federal program, the student loan program, and I remember senior year she came into our English class and she told us. "We have this 80 percent goal for everyone to apply to college." Take this time to apply for a college. I basically just sat there, and she walked over to me in the middle of everybody and said, "why are you not doing anything?" She also told everyone about FAFSA and handed out all the forms, and then asked if anyone needed a waiver and I did not raise my hand. My classmates did not know I was undocumented, and I did not want that getting out.

Luna continued to express how he was left out of his counselor's guidance regarding college. When Luna was asked about how applicable the postsecondary guidance he received from his counselor was, Luna stated:

> Well, The usual way she would help students is, she would look at resources, local scholarships, and all the things like that. I could not really use those because all of those were reserved for U.S. citizens, so she just kind of stuck to those because all the resources she gave out were for U.S. citizens, and I am not a U.S. citizen. Well, she was pretty general. I don't know what she would use, but she had some sort of database where she would look for, and she would provide those resources for like if you, like psychology,y there are majors for psychology, if you like engineering, there are majors

> for engineering, but all of those resources would require you to be a U.S. citizen, almost all of them. So, it wasn't so much that she wasn't helpful; it was just that the resources she had were not helpful for my situation. Most of the resources they would talk about would be "try to get your GPA really high so you can apply to the TOPS program." That is dependent on your GPA. I would be like, "oh, my GPA is pretty good, but I can't get any of that money" None of the resources were not catered towards me.

Astrid recalled several conversations with his counselor and occurrences in the AVID program where college was discussed. Like other participants, these conversations left Astrid feeling left out, and he views it as a failure of the educational system to meet the needs of all students. Astrid also expressed feeling ignored, as his counselor would sometimes forget his name. Astrid described:

> But um, definitely with the counselors and avid program and all that, they never really spoke to those of us who were not legally documented. So sometimes I would talk to them and they would be like, who are you again? And they would look back at their notes, and look back at the notes in the system. I was like, "oh, It's fine, so yea." I found them helpful to a certain extent, but sometimes, I felt let down when they didn't recognize my name or remember what we talked about. I was like, "why do I keep coming here?" but I kept going.

Astrid credited his counselor for being helpful to a certain extent, but acknowledged he fell short in meeting all of his needs. He portrayed feeling discouraged because the school counselor often did not remember his name or previous conversations. In addition, he often felt like the guidance he received was not personalized to him and was primarily "cookie-cutter" and superficial advice.

Students described feeling left out during attempts by their school counselors to promote college access. Often, college information excluded the exceptional circumstances undocumented students face accessing higher education. Several participants expressed remorse when discussing areas where they were excluded. School Counselors must be mindful of the materials and resources available at their school to ensure resources are available for all students and be aware of the barriers students encounter when attempting to help undocumented students. When students are excluded from initiatives promoting college access, it is unhelpful and can lead to feelings of inferiority.

Not only were the undocumented students in this study often excluded from college access resources and initiatives, but also they often described receiving inaccurate guidance from their school counselors. Therefore, theme five is "Inaccurate Guidance" and explains how undocumented students often receive misinformation from their school counselors regarding their counselor's helpfulness.

**Table 7**

*Theme 5: Inaccurate Guidance*

Thematic Statement: Undocumented students receive inaccurate guidance on college access from school counselors.

| **Categories** | **Codes** | |
|---|---|---|
| Unrealistic promises | "dance will pay" | "you'll get a |
| | "kept telling me I | scholarship" |
| | could" | "you will qualify for |
| | "a high GPA will | the Tennessee |
| | give you options" | Promise" |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | "you can get Pell Grant" | "unqualified for scholarship" |
| | college alleviates poverty | "you will get Hope Scholarship" |
| Insignificant guidance | "superficial advice" | impractical advice |
| | "no guidance" | "it was superficial" |
| | "but, no social" | "for cookie cutter |
| | "but, funding?" | students" |
| Lack of cautiousness | "why not, try? | "we were just |
| | "but, it's a risk" | optimistic" |
| | "It won't hurt" | "didn't know the risk" |
| Patronizing | "get a job" | "heard of DACA?" |
| suggestions | "take out a loan" | "apply for DACA" |
| | "ask family for | "apply for |
| | money" | citizenship" |
| | "ask colleges" | |
| Misleading advice | "resources are | "different ideas about |
| | available" | opportunities" |
| | "it is misinformation" | "apply for Hope |
| | "do the Tennessee | Scholarship" |
| | Promise" | |
| Subcategory: FAFSA | "I filled out the | "FAFSA waiver?" |
| | FAFSA" | "filled out the |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | “everything was about FAFSA” | FAFSA” |
| | FAFSA” | “complete the |
| | “FAFSA did not like | FAFSA” |
| | me” | “do FAFSA” |
| | “FAFSA form” | |
| | “all that was said was | |
| | FAFSA” | |
| Deprivation of | “AB 540” | “I wish someone had |
| Resources | “caught me off guard” | told me” |
| | “I was too late” | “no private |
| | “no resources for | scholarships” |
| | Spanish speaking” | |

When asked about the helpfulness of their school counselors, all participants mentioned receiving incorrect, irrelevant guidance or being wholly deprived of resources. This was mainly related to financial aid and suggestions for financing higher education. Every participant was directed to complete the FAFSA, even though undocumented students are ineligible for federal financial assistance and risk exposing their status when completing the form. Most participants are self-driven, resourceful, and able to recognize that the information they received from their counselors was inaccurate. Unfortunately, this information came too late for students such as Astrid, Citlati, Talia, and Edward, and they missed opportunities because they lacked proper assistance. Due to missing out on opportunities, these students are not pursuing their initial college ambitions. Astrid realized he received incorrect guidance from his counselor during an advising meeting with his college counselor. Astrid described:

> My school counselor told me to apply for the FAFSA. I basically applied, and also my AVID teachers told me to apply. Everything was all about the FAFSA. I remember applying for FAFSA, and FAFSA did not like me. I did not even get a bog waiver. I applied and got a letter in the mail saying nothing went through. That's because I had DACA. I did not know this. I am not sure if I applied wrong? But then I went to college and had to pay out of pocket. It wasn't until after high school that I realized that I can get just as much money with DACA as FAFSA. There is money to apply for in high school that specifically caters towards undocumented students. I never heard about it. I knew DACA, I had DACA, but I thought it was only for work. I never knew that DACA had a scholarship thing that you could apply for. I never knew that until after high school.

Astrid was asked to share more about the financial guidance he received. Astrid shared:

> It was too late for me to apply for financial aid in California. Because with the funds, you know there are windows for when you have to apply and get those funds.
>
> My school counselor told me to apply for the FAFSA, and I did that instead.
>
> My counselor in college also happened to be Latina, so she was the one who told me, did you apply for DACA? And I was like, yeah, duh... I am a DACA recipient. And she was like, no, did you apply for the California government-funded DACA financial aid blah. So I was like nooooo, you actually have to apply for that? That's where I learned it was too late for me to apply, and I was like, I did not know that. She literally had pamphlets for undocumented students. Like AB 540! So I was like, I know this now. I wish I had known it was an option.

Astrid was asked how he felt discovering this information and he shared:

> I don't want to say I felt betrayed, but maybe let down.

Astrid is taking a break from college and trying to find a way to manage finances and education. He hopes to continue his education and enroll in more classes soon. Following the advice of his school counselor, Astrid applied for the FAFSA and was rejected from receiving any assistance. However, when he sought out the college counselor, she mentioned that he could have qualified for financial aid with his DACA status. He was impressed that his college counselor had pamphlets on the DACA benefits in her office since none of this information was available to him in high school. Unfortunately, he did not meet the deadline to apply for assistance. He wishes he had this knowledge in high school and describes feeling let down.

Talia's counselor could not provide her with accurate or practical financial advice. The lack of guidance resulted in Talia failing to find a helpful way to fund her education. Instead, Talia was instructed to complete the FAFSA, try to work in college, and apply for citizenship. Unfortunately, she did not have any guidance on how to apply for in-state tuition as an undocumented student and therefore got classified as an international student. Like Astrid, Talia also expresses frustration with the amount of unpractical advice and suggestions from her counselor. Talia shared:

> Oh well, they would tell me to get a job. They did not understand that I cannot get a job. I do not have an SSN. They kept encouraging me to go to college and get a loan, and I was like, "I cannot get a loan" again. I do not have a legal record of being here, and my parents do not have that money which is why I am trying so hard for the scholarships. I need options. Their options were not very smart or beneficial to someone like me. They said fill out FAFSA, get a loan, and ask family for money. Like do you think I have any of those options?

When Talia was asked about cultural differences between her and her school counselor, she shared more impractical advice, illustrating her counselor's ignorance of the situation. Talia shared:

> Ha, well, yea. It wasn't so much a cultural difference, but she just didn't understand. My school counselor asked if I applied for DACA, and I was like, well, it was ruled illegal. They were not updated with the news on DACA. The counselor asked, is there no way you can apply for citizenship? And I was like, haaa, if there was everybody and I would be doing it. I had to update her and be like this is the update. She really thought I could just apply for citizenship, and this would all go away.

Talia wishes her counselor had informed her about the process of applying to receive in-state tuition as an undocumented student. Unfortunately, Talia did not know the process in time and, therefore, missed out on the opportunity to receive in-state tuition. Talia described:

> Getting in-state tuition, you have to go through a long process. I did the process, but I did not get the papers in time. If you want to qualify under the Dream Act, there is a Dream Act that decides who qualifies for in-state if they are undocumented, but you have to present a lot of evidence that you were here for three years, and one of them is presenting tax returns in the state's tax office, and that is a process I had to figure out about myself because my counselor did not warn me about that. She did not say, "Oh yea, you might not qualify for in-state tuition. Once I got accepted, I found out that I was qualified as an international student. The process for applying for in-state tuition kind of caught me off guard. I did not have a warning that I would have to do that and needed to get the tax returns six weeks ahead of time. Okay, thank you for that because, by the time the tax returns did come the deadline had passed. I wish my school counselor had warned me

> that I might be entered as an international student and tell me that I should be ready for that and have all the paper work ready. I had to call them and tell them and ask, "how do I classify?"

Talia's inaccurate guidance completely changed her college trajectory. She seemed angry and annoyed while discussing all the steps she took to attempt to receive an affordable education. Her voice grew more profound as she spoke, and she talked with a scowl. Help with funding college was the most significant need Talia had. Unfortunately, her counselors could not help because all of their recommendations were irrelevant to an undocumented student. Talia was accepted to a highly competitive university. Still, she could not attend because of the high cost of tuition as an international student, paired with her inability to work or access loans. So instead, she is attending community college in the fall and hoping to pursue a four-year university someday.

Luna was often given repetitive impractical advice from his school counselor. These suggestions left him feeling overlooked and led him to give up on his dreams temporarily. His counselor told him he was her first and only undocumented student, and she did not know how to help him. He found himself in a position where he had to counsel the school counselor on the barriers he encountered accessing college. These messages left him with the impression that undocumented students had no resources. Luna expressed:

> I would tell her, and she would say, well, did you fill out the FAFSA form? And if you would, that will give you access to the federal Pell Grants and the state grant system. But when I would tell her I can't fill out FAFSA, I do not have a social security number; she did not know where to guide me. She would just say, "well get your GPA really high and you will have options," but she was unable to tell me what those options were.

Following this interaction, Luna recalls a meeting where his school counselor called him into her office, attempting to follow up with him. When Luna was asked how his counselor followed up with him, Luna shared:

> She would, well, there was one time she called me in, and I had no idea what I got on the ACT, and she showed me. I think it was a 34. She told me, "You should probably apply to something; why are you not applying to college? You got really good scores. I told her I can apply for college, but I cannot pay for it. Like I already told you, I do not have a social security number; I am not a US citizen. She would just nod and say, "I understand, but you still need to fill out the FAFSA waiver."

Luna did not go to college directly after high school because he could not find a pathway. His counselor did not seem to understand the problem or its complexities. Instead, he has spent the past year working with his dad and researching higher education opportunities. He was able to find resources online and will be starting college in the fall on a full-ride scholarship. He is thankful for the online community of other undocumented students who have helped him navigate a way to access higher education.

Luna is thankful he found a way to higher education and was eager to share his experience throughout the interview in hopes to enhance school counselors' understanding of the challenges undocumented students encounter. He presented himself confidently as he discussed what he was told in school compared to what he learned through his research over the past year. He was proud to share his success and excited to start school in the fall.

Citlati was continuously encouraged to work hard on dance and received the message that it would pay off in a college scholarship. She saw other students at her school get scholarships for athletics and assumed she could do the same. She learned on a college visit that dance might

be able to get her a minimal amount of money towards her education but would not provide full financial assistance such as athletes in sports, such as football or basketball. Citlati described:

> I saw other athletes from my high school earn scholarships to Universities. We had been signing parties. I thought I could get one too, because my school counselor and Emma's parents kept telling me I could. I put it all into dance. I put in so much effort to maybe get a fraction of my tuition covered.

Citlati was asked to describe in further detail how her counselor encouraged her to pursue her dancing career to fund college and any other ways her counselor worked to make college accessible for students in her financial circumstances. Citlati described:

> My counselor knew my family did not have money and that we did not have papers. She just acted like if I go to college, it will be the end to the financial hardships, and I could get a career. She never mentioned other college options for me or ways to fund them, like what my brother is doing. When I told her I was not going to college and would pursue dance, she was happy. Still, I wish she had told me that dance was not a career. I learned it all the hard way because people were too reassuring of my teenage ideas. I wish I could have worked to figure out something at that time. I needed a reality check.

Citlati's only college exposure was on a private university visit with a friend who did not face financial barriers. She assumed all colleges were as expensive as the one she visited and was never given resources on pathways for undocumented students or financial aid for low-income students. Citlati discovered these resources after high school, but she had already decided that college was not for her.

Citlati's mother recommended that Citlati and her brother consider attending community college. Citlati's brother took his mom up on her suggestion and set up a meeting with an

enrollment officer at the local community college. To Citlati's surprise, the tuition was reasonable, and the counselor had lots of information for undocumented students. But, again, she was surprised, as this information was never available in high school. As a result, her brother began community college last year and has had a very positive experience. He hopes to transfer to a four-year university and major in engineering.

Citlati is unsure whether she will attend any higher education. She wished she had the information in high school because if she had known there were affordable ways for her to attend higher education, she would have accessed scholarships. Citlati watched many of her friends graduate this past spring and believes she may have just missed her opportunity.

David received an abundance of practical help and guidance for college. Still, he recognized some of the advice he received was inapplicable. He believes it was all due to a lack of understanding rather than a lack of caring. Like other participants, David was instructed to complete the FAFSA, even though his counselor knew he was most likely ineligible. In retrospect, David realized this guidance could have made other undocumented students uncomfortable, especially those without DACA protections. While David received some inaccurate advice, his school counselor took additional steps to find different pathways to higher education. The incorrect guidance did not affect his opportunities to access higher education. David reflected:

> I was directed to some scholarship that I was ineligible for, but I think it was just because not caring, but just lack of knowledge. We were, I think I submitted an application for a state scholarship and maybe we were hopeful for that but, um, and I still filled out the FAFSA, at least the first year I did. Just um, I think we knew I was ineligible, but I think I just applied to those things because I figured it doesn't hurt. We were just optimistic.

When David was asked to describe the work he does now, as a college counselor, he described:

> I can't tell you how many times I've heard not just in my county but in the surrounding rural areas that maybe the population is very small, and because of whether it is stereotypes of whether it is misinformation, they don't even know which students are ineligible for FAFSA and in-state tuition. These students are just told to complete the FAFSA and apply to college and are left with no guidance to help them. I had DACA protection, so it was no risk, but for some students it can be chancy.

David received inaccurate guidance regarding his dual enrollment courses and completing the FAFSA. His school counselor took additional steps to find other pathways to higher education, such as private scholarships and an honors English course. David currently works as a college admissions counselor and is particularly interested in helping undocumented students. He is considering a Master's degree in Educational Leadership or School Counseling to help him guide high school students' journeys to college and careers.

During Edward's high school experience, he never believed college was an option. Like Luna, Astrid, and Citlati's experiences, his counselor never considered options for undocumented students. As a result, Edward ignored all of the guidance he received because he knew it did not apply to him. Like Citlati, Edward did not attend college and believed he would have if he had known it was an option, but he is now at a point in his life where he does not see the purpose of pursuing formal higher education. Edward reflected:

> They told me to fill out the FAFSA and apply for the state scholarship. That is what they told me. I think I tried to fill out the FAFSA but couldn't. Later I found out about people going to college, undocumented people and I was like, "hey how did you do that?" They

> said that the state university in the neighboring state gives in-state tuition to students from my state who are undocumented. Their school counselor told them. I was like damn it! I should have asked for more help. If I had known about that program, I would have gone to college.

Edward was asked to tell more about the resources his counselor shared with him. Following this prompt, Edward expressed that he wished his counselor had shared scholarship opportunities that would have been relevant to him. Edward disclosed:

> Yeah, it is almost like the scholarship I would have qualified for is some type of private scholarship. I'm not sure. You know, you know one thing I wish I had or had gotten was. Well, after high school, I started doing a lot of research on my own, and I found out about scholarship options, especially for Hispanic people. You know, I wish I had known about that. I probably would have made different decisions.

Through online resources such as YouTube, Edward discovered a coding boot camp. He attended a software school and received training to be a software engineer. He revealed that receiving DACA status and attending software school changed his life. If it were not for the guidance he received from other undocumented students through the Internet, he would probably still be waiting tables at the Mexican restaurant. He is pleased with his career outcome and makes decent money, enough to provide for his family and support his parents.

Herik described not receiving much guidance or personal interactions with his counselor about college. His experience during high school was similar to others, where he did not believe there were options for students like him. When asked about the helpfulness of the information he received, Herik described:

> I wish I had better mentorship in high school. I discovered these things after high school. I discovered groups like Futuros, and the YMCA, where they have all the information for undocumented students. All my counselors said to me was to fill out the FAFSA and go to community college. I got emails that said apply for FAFSA here, but I did not see a point. The counselor said something about how I would have to take classes over again if I wanted to go.

Herik worked at a local pizza joint following high school. Then, through the encouragement of his father, he decided to enroll in community college courses. During this time, he received DACA status and contacted the YMCA Latino Achievers. Through this program, he found out about a program in a neighboring state that would offer him in-state tuition as an undocumented student in Tennessee. So, without hesitation, he enrolled and completed his Bachelor's degree. He now works as a finance manager and is forever grateful for his support and guidance after high school.

Ajay recalled receiving minimal guidance from his school counselors, and all the advice he remembered receiving was irrelevant and unhelpful to his situation. When Ajay was asked about what school counseling meant to him, Ajay responded:

> I am not like the other students at my school. In my culture, and my family and our community helps me. The school counselors helped all the kids with a social that are not immigrants. I was friends with a lot of the white people, so I saw them get that help, but for me, I did not have a social, so the things they would say did not apply to me.

Ajay was asked to tell more about the help his counselors provided for all students, including immigrants, for college. Following this prompt, Ajay responded:

> The other international students have no life. Nobody in school helped them. I genuinely feel bad for them. The stuff the counselors talked about was just for US citizens. I genuinely feel bad for them. Their families could not help them either. There is a gym called Planet Fitness, and I see a lot of them there. They are still the same as high school.

Ajay acknowledged that his experience was much different than many other undocumented students. Ajay discovered a local community college that charged affordable rates for its online learning program. The rates for eLearning were the same regardless of immigration status. The community college had a program where students who completed the eLearning could transfer to a four-year university. If a student transferred directly from the community college, there were no questions about citizenship. He shared that he believes it may have been a loophole in the system. Ajay successfully completed his Associate degree and transferred to a four-year university through this program.

Ajay recalled receiving an email from the university questioning his status. He ignored the email because it was his last semester, and he was so close to graduating. There was no follow-up from the email, but he discovered that other undocumented students could not receive the discounted tuition the following year. He felt terrible for his friends who were enrolled in school because their tuition went up tremendously, and many came from families who do not make much money. Unlike many of his peers, his parents were able to borrow money from other families in their community. Ajay graduated with his Bachelor's degree and is content with his current career.

All participants mentioned receiving inaccurate guidance on college access from school counselors. This guidance ranged from deprivation of resources to misleading and risky advice. The emotional responses varied among participants as they discussed the information received.

Some, such as Talia, still feel remorse at the lack of help received. Others, such as David, Luna, Edward, and Ajay, were more comfortable discussing the messages they received in high school since they found a way to navigate high education independently. Following questions on the helpfulness of the information received by their school counselors, participants shared about their counselors' ignorance, which resulted in the following and final theme, "Unaware Counselors."

**Table 8**

*Theme 6: Unaware Counselors*

Thematic Statement: School counselors are unaware of the barriers undocumented students encounter and lack the knowledge and resources to help them access higher education.

| Category | Codes | |
|---|---|---|
| Insufficient training | “counselors aren’t learning” | “she did not know where to guide me.” |
| | “did not know how to handle the situation.” | “how do I know more about this than you?” |
| | “they did not know what to do.” | “maybe it was lack of knowledge?” |
| | “She was not equipped” | “maybe the counselors weren’t learning” |
| | “counselors need to have more awareness” | |
| Presumptions | “underlying assumption that we do not go to college” | “may have thought I was not worth the time” |
| | went along with racial joke | “felt like they were wasting |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | “she would never know me” “but to our counselors, they seemed like they were hopeless” | their time on me” |
| Ignorance | “never heard of DACA” “they don’t really understand what undocumented even means” “they do not understand” “had no awareness of what is going on” “didn’t even know that DACA existed” | “she just did not understand what the problem was” “she did not have awareness of what was happening” “she did not know what DACA was” “I do not think she knew or understood" |
| Inexperience | “I think I was the first” “never had an undocumented student” “I could tell they were not sure what exactly to do at first” | “did not have any experience interacting with undocumented individuals” |

Several participants expressed that their counselors were entirely uninformed on the subject matter of undocumented students. In some cases, such as Talia and Luna, this led them to realize they could not rely on their school counselors to discuss the emotional toll being undocumented took on their mental health since their counselors were oblivious to the subject

matter. Likewise, students such as Herik, Edward, and Ajay never bothered to ask their counselors for help because they assumed their counselor would not know how to help them based on the other advice they received. At the end of the interview, when asked if there was anything else they would like to share, several participants shared that more awareness is needed. Following this prompt, Talia vented:

> Please get more information. How do I know more about this than you? Aren't you supposed to like have the resources? You live in DC; how do you not know about this? And out of all the resources and connections you have, you don't have one thing for undocumented students.

Talia expressed disturbance about her counselor's lack of information. Earlier in the interview, Talia said that the barriers she encountered accessing college took a toll on her mental health, and she felt like she had nobody to talk to about the challenges. Several suggestions Talia received for college access were condescending and emphasized her counselor's ignorance of her situation. She shared that her counselor's ignorance affected their relationship, which was discerning. Talia shared:

> I sort of noticed that I couldn't really ask them for help because they don't really understand what undocumented even means. She was not equipped to help someone if they were emotional about it since she didn't even know what it meant. So I got that feeling that they would not be able to talk with me about my mental health. They do not understand, so you can't be empathetic to someone's problems or sympathetic because you can't provide help as a school counselor for that problem if you don't even understand the problem.

At the end of Talia's interview, she was asked to share how she believes school counselors can best help the undocumented population access equitable college access. Talia's response emphasized her frustration with her counselor's ignorance. Talia shared:

> Uh, school counselors can help undocumented students by, first off, understanding what it means to be undocumented. Counselors need to realize how big of an impact not having an SSN is and figure out which states and colleges are not safe to apply to as an undocumented student. Some colleges might have a racist past that you do not want to take a risk at. And also figure out how students would qualify for in-state tuition if that is a possibility in their state. It is also vital for counselors to warn their students that they may be classified as an international student at some universities and what that means financially.

Luna also discovered that his school counselor did not understand what it meant to be undocumented. Throughout his interview, he frequently shared how unaware his counselor was about the situation and did not know how to help him. Luna's attitude was much different than Talia's. He discussed her ignorance with a smile, almost as if he was embarrassed for his counselor. He consistently mentioned that his counselor did not know what DACA was and often told him he was the first undocumented student she had. Luna shared:

> The counselor, she did not have any experience interacting with undocumented individuals because I was, she would ask me why I was not applying for any colleges because the school had kind of a cut off where they wanted as many people applying to colleges as possible. I think it was 80 percent of the kids who would apply. I would not apply and she would ask me, "What is going on?" I would explain to her, "I can apply but I can't receive any money from a Pell Grant or any state programs," she would just nod

and tell me she did not understand what the problem was. She had never heard of DACA, she told me personally she had never had an undocumented student and she did not know how to handle the situation.

This theme arose later in the interview when Luna was asked how accessing the counselor felt. Luna shared:

> It made me feel sad that she did not have awareness of what was happening. She had no awareness of what is going on. My four years of high school were through the Trump term. Like, he got elected when I started high school. The whole four years was stressful because there would be court cases that would be deciding who they would let it have DACA, and then they would stop the program and then they would let new applicants, and then stopped it again. All of that was happening in the background, and I do not think she knew or understood that it was happening and affecting me so much. Part of that was my fault because I did not have as much information as I thought. But she did not know what DACA was; she had never had an undocumented student, so maybe providing some resources about what to do when you interact with an undocumented student would help so that you know what to do in those situations. And guide us, I would think and felt, in my mind counselors need to have more awareness of the different backgrounds of where their students are coming from. Because just telling them to pursue the state programs, and the Pell Grant programs may not be the best solution for all students, especially those who do not have a social security number. She would just say, "I do not have the information to give you to help you." Because, like I said, my counselor, didn't even know that DACA existed.

At the end of the interview, Luna was asked if there was anything else about his story he would like to share. This question prompted Luna to emphasize the importance of counselors providing resources to undocumented students. Luna shared:

> I've read that most undocumented students do not go on to college because they do not feel like there are not any resources for them. I felt the same way when I graduated high school. But like I said, having the community support. Reaching out, and realizing there are a lot of resources out there. And if high school counselors had access to those communities and realized there are resources out there, I feel like a lot more undocumented students would go to college.

Astrid expressed frustration at his high counselor's lack of knowledge and resources for undocumented students. When Astrid was asked to describe the helpfulness of the advice his counselor gave him, Astrid suggested:

> Like maybe it was lack of knowledge? Like maybe the counselors aren't learning. I am not sure if counselors have like regional meetings with like a head counselor, or like a principal? They are not being informed, so I think there is a disconnect in what the government offers for undocumented students and what they are telling them. I am not sure if counselors have actual updates on new things that are coming up for students who are undocumented. My counselor never talked about Latino scholarships, he never mentioned any benefits of Spanish speaking, he never talked about my DACA funds, he never talked about any of that. So I definitely think with counselors, it is getting more information for diversity. Not just Latin Americans, but anyone who comes into the USA. You know, lots of immigrants are undocumented or DACA. I wish there was more subject matter for DACA children.

Astrid regrets not getting more help in high school on how to apply for scholarships that would benefit him. He believes it would be beneficial if counselors received more training on working with diverse students. In addition, it would have been helpful if he received more guidance on his options with DACA status in high school. At other points in the interview, Astrid expressed how he believes the overall public school system is not conducive to immigrants, particularly those who are undocumented. He would like to see teachers and counselors emphasize students building self-esteem in who they are and pride in their culture.

Citlati had a close relationship with her counselor yet did not expect her to be culturally aware or have the resources to help her access college. Even though her counselor knew she was undocumented and faced financial hardship, Citlati highly doubts that she knew what that meant. When asked about cultural differences, Citlati mentions an experience where members of her school dance team made jokes and racial slurs toward a predominantly Hispanic dance team. She expected her counselor to say something, but to her disappointment, she laughed along with them. In retrospect, Citlati believes this experience might be why she never directly asked for help accessing college information from her counselor or any personnel in her school. Citlati reflected:

> Well, one time we were at an exhibition, and we saw a team from another high school. The girls and the team kind of stood out of place because the dance world is mostly white…and skinny. They were all a little larger. Olivia started joking and saying things about too many tacos and refried beans. I don't really remember the rest. Someone said something, attempting to speak in Spanish in an accent. I was so embarrassed. Mrs. Smith kind of just laughed. She was smiling and laughing and telling them to shhh. They forget that I am also not American because I have lighter skin and lost my accent.

Citlati was asked to share more about how it felt to see her leader go along with the inappropriate behavior. Citlati shared:

> I actually, well, I was frustrated but not surprised. Like, I actually did not know her well. Or, well I knew her well, and I knew she would never know me. She just knew the front I put on when I went to school and dance. But my life was really not anything she would ever understand. Even though she was nice to me, that area, we did not go there.

Herik revealed his counselors may have been prejudiced toward the Hispanic community at his school and overlooked their abilities to achieve and thrive in higher education. Herik was hesitant to share this speculation and presented himself in a nervous demeanor as he discussed his thoughts. Herik believes this was due to possible preconceptions. When asked what else he would like to share, Herik expressed:

> Counselors need to become aware of this situation. I don't know if it is factual, but I don't know if it is an underlying assumption that we do not go to college. Counselors need to know that this population is very capable. Undocumented students are very capable and have passions, pursuits, and many dreams to go after. We need that mentorship. We need someone to say, "hey, maybe there is a path for you." We want your guidance and need it. If you cannot help us, put us in contact with someone who can. That kind of thing goes a long way. High school is the pivotal point, and dreams are dependent on what information is accessible to them.

Herik considers the school counselors at his school were decent but not equipped to help the undocumented students. While his school had a large Hispanic population, only two of these students pursued higher education directly after high school. In his opinion, he thinks the counselors may have had the underlying assumption that Hispanic students do not pursue higher

education because none of his friends ever had a word with their counselors about college. He wants counselors to understand that undocumented students have passions, interests, and many dreams to pursue.

Herik shared that he wished the resources on accessing higher education had been available to him in high school. Since graduating high school, he has become an active volunteer with organizations working with undocumented students. He spends his free time volunteering at high schools and speaking to youth. He is passionate about helping students find pathways to higher education and a career and instilling hope in future generations.

Edward recalled that his counselors never followed up with him on his college application. He considers this might be because they figured out he was undocumented and, similar to Herik's experience, not worthy of their time. When asked how his counselor followed up with him. Edward's responded:

> No, um, they may have known since I did not have a social security number. I definitely did not tell anybody, but I don't know if they knew or found out. So it is it goes back to, maybe if I had said something, things would have changed, but it goes back to, you know, I still had financial reasons, so it's like even if I figured out how to get into college, I still could not have paid for it. It might be also because I did not have the best grades, in my school and my counselor may have thought I was not worth the time. Haha it may have been like, "You know what, you aren't going to college" I don't want to say they may have felt like they were wasting their time on me. I don't know but they may have thought that. Really, I think it goes back to the fact that they did not know what to do, or maybe they did and did not know how to help me.

Ajay did not expect counselors to help him with specific issues regarding his immigration status or accessing higher education and is glad his status was never brought to their attention. However, when asked Ajay was asked what memories arise when he thinks of school counseling, Ajay responded:

> Well, certainly nothing about helping undocumented populations. Like I said, our counselors were cool, but they did not do undocumented stuff. This is the first I am hearing about counselors caring about the undocumented population or, um, any counseling in that manner. I would not have like if they had pointed that I am undocumented. If they did that, I would feel uncomfortable and unwanted because I did not know they could help undocumented students and would assume they were pointing me out and maybe like I was going to be in trouble.

Ajay was asked to share more about why he seems surprised to hear about school counselors caring about helping the undocumented population. Ajay responded:

> Well, I guess it is just, um, I was the only one who wanted to go to college and get a degree. A lot of the other international folks in our school, they just lost hope. I mean, they see no life. They were in school only because they were required to be in school. I think helping them see the opportunities that are out there once you graduate and hopefully one day you get a work permit and I mean, helping them realize this is eventually going to help you, is needed, but to our counselors, they seemed like they were hopeless. The counselors did not focus on them. Their lives are completely different stories.

David imagines he was the first undocumented student to pass through his high school. His experience was much different than other participants, yet he recognizes his counselors did

not initially understand his dilemma or know what to tell him. When asked about what equity in school counseling means, David explained:

> At first, the counselors did not have a lot of understanding about what it meant to be undocumented. I was originally placed with another counselor and, I may have disclosed that because I wanted to do some summer program, they were always really friendly. They never mistreated me, or were rude, or mistreated me, but I could tell they were not sure what exactly to do. Beverly, with my permission, would always inquire with the connections she had, and that is what allowed me to find out about the different options. She did not always have the answer, but she always found it. I felt like somehow I was getting more help, which I was not complaining about but now looking at it and after having the opportunity to work in the high school setting, previously I was a college and career access coach at a high school and have been doing some college help, not fully as a college counselor but not through my current role, I understand it was equitable because I needed more help because of those barriers and she needed to spend more time on my case because she was learning as well and learning takes time.

Through David's current work, he is in frequent contact with his high school counselor. He mentioned how she has continued to find better ways to serve undocumented students and frequently collaborates with community groups stay informed on how she can best help all her students.

While examining how undocumented students describe the helpfulness of their school counselors in achieving college access, the participants in this study indicate that counselors are falling short. This includes excluding undocumented students during the college access initiatives, providing inaccurate guidance, being unaware of the challenges undocumented

students encounter, lacking the knowledge and resources to help them access higher education, and are not available to respond to the emotional needs of undocumented students. A lack of helpful information and guidance often results in students delaying or putting off higher education. Several participants in this study were able to achieve success in higher education, but for others, such as Citlati, Astrid, and Talia, the lack of helpful information interfered with their college trajectory and led to them not pursuing their college dreams. Therefore, appropriate and accessible resources related to higher education access are essential to providing equity in college access.

## Summary

This chapter provides the results of this hermeneutic phenomenological study. The chapter begins with a thorough description of the participants, including a table illustrating their demographics. Next, the data analysis process is described, including comprehensive descriptions and details of the thematic analysis backed by research. The following section includes descriptions of the six themes derived from the data analysis process. The themes are organized to show how they answer each research question. Each description includes a table showing the categories, codes making up each theme, and a thematic statement. Following the tables are descriptions of how each participant experienced the phenomena with direct quotes from the interviews. Finally, the research questions are answered through explanations and discussions of the themes.

# CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

## Overview

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study aimed to examine what school counseling means for undocumented youth who attempt to receive equitable college access. Eight participants shared their experiences trying to receive equitable college access during their experience in public K-12 schools. The chapter discusses the findings and empirical, theoretical, and practical suggestions. The limitations and delimitations of this study are discussed, along with recommendations for future research. Finally, the chapter ends with a summary.

## Summary of Findings

This study examined the lived experiences of eight participants between the ages of 18 and 28 who attempted to receive equitable college access from their school counselors during their experience attending public K-12 education as an undocumented student. Participants shared their stories through semi-structured one-on-one interviews. A concise summary of the findings is presented below by reviewing the findings resulting in answers to the two research questions.

### Research Question 1

The first research question asks: How do undocumented students explain the meaning of equitable college access from their interactions with their school counselors? Two themes from the data analysis process answer this research question. The first theme is "Positive Personnel," meaning undocumented students view school counselors as positive people in the school building striving to help students achieve academic success. The second theme, "Not the Counselor's Fault," builds upon the first theme. Most students do not believe they received

equitable college access from their school counselor. However, they still have positive views of school counselors and do not blame them for failing to deliver equitable college access.

The results of the data analysis indicate that the meaning of equitable college access from their interactions with school counselors is complex and reflects a significant inequity in the public school system. School counselors are viewed as kind, caring, and well-meaning personnel in schools for undocumented students attempting to access equitable college access; however, they are falling short in delivering equitable access to undocumented students. Participants believe this is not their fault and results from institutional policies, large workloads and expectations, and inadequate counselor training.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question asks: How do undocumented students describe the helpfulness of their school counselors in achieving college access? Four themes were derived from data analysis to answer this research question. The first theme, "Educational Doubts," describes how the barriers undocumented students encounter accessing higher education results in educational doubts, which are often unaddressed or unnoticed by counselors and highly affect undocumented students' college decision making. The second theme is "Exclusion," meaning undocumented students are often left out of school initiatives, activities, and guidance their school counselors deliver. The third theme, "Inaccurate Guidance," follows the theme of exclusion. This theme was derived from several incidences where undocumented students were given misleading or improper instructions on accessing higher education and financial aid. Finally, the fourth theme, "Unaware Counselors," follows the previous themes illustrating counselors' ignorance. This theme is made up of statements indicating counselors are unaware of

undocumented students' barriers and, therefore, cannot adequately help undocumented students access higher education.

Undocumented students experience educational doubts, which are often unaddressed or unnoticed by counselors and highly affect undocumented students' college decision-making. The educational doubts experienced by undocumented students often led these students to postpone their secondary education or not pursue higher education. School counselors must support the emotional needs of undocumented students experiencing uncertainty and despair in response to the challenges faced accessing higher education to deliver equitable college access. Overall, the participants in this study identified some ways in which their counselors were helpful but recognized that they fell short in providing equitable college access services.

Participants describe being left out of several school counselors-led initiatives to promote college access, including activities to boost college readiness. Several participants mentioned that their school counselor gave generic advice that applied to most students but was irrelevant to students without a social security number. These occurrences of exclusion made students feel inferior and aggravated, as they could not pursue the guidance received to get ahead on their college applications. When students asked for help, they received incorrect guidance, leading to distrust between students and their school counselors. All participants were told to complete the FAFSA, even though undocumented students are ineligible for federal funds and risk exposing their immigration status by submitting the form. Several participants sought out resources on their own and recognized their school counselors were unaware of the opportunities for undocumented students and the barriers to accessing higher education. Participants expressed frustration at their counselor's ignorance over the subject matter and believed their ignorance must be due to inexperience and insufficient training. Several participants missed opportunities

to pursue higher education or access scholarship funds because of inadequate guidance from their school counselors.

## Discussion

The findings from data analysis present results that confirm previous work along with new findings that contribute to the field of school counseling, efforts to make higher education more accessible for undocumented students, and research to understand how undocumented students experience the public school system. This section provides conceptualizations of the qualitative data in response to previous research in chapter 2. This section is divided into two parts: the first section describes how this study extends, contradicts, or reinforces previous research utilizing CRT theory to examine how students of color experience inequities in the public school system. The second is a discussion on how these findings confirm, expand, or contradict empirical research on how undocumented students experience college access.

### Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory is commonly used in educational research to understand disparities in student achievement (Braun et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011). CRT challenges the notion that public education is equitable for all (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Zamudio et al., 2011) and believes the low academic achievement among marginalized populations is a direct result of systemic inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The results of this study expand ideas of previous research utilizing CRT to understand the disparities in school achievement among marginalized populations.

#### *Academic Self Doubt*

Research utilizing CRT suggests that students of color experience more academic self-doubt than their White peers (Cherng et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond, 2004; McCardle, 2020). The findings of this study reinforce the previous research indicating students of color experience high levels of academic self-doubt. All the participants expressed doubts regarding their potential to access higher education and set goals for their future at some point in the interview. Participants' doubts included times when they seriously doubted the value of pursuing higher education, including questioning their potential and the importance of a college degree because of their immigration status. Furthermore, participants shared that these doubts took a heavy toll on their mental health and sometimes hindered their school performance.

### *Access to School Personnel*

Critical race theorists suggest that students of color have less access to resources such as school personnel than students in predominantly white school districts (Braun et al., 2006; Milner, 2012). Braun et al. (2006) and Milner (2012) conducted evaluations of school funding to illustrate disproportions in educational funding resulting in students of color having less access to resources such as qualified teachers and school counselors. Gonzales (2016) extended this notion and suggested that undocumented students often attend schools with some of the most significant student-to-counselor ratios. Students were not asked about student-to-counselor ratios, yet several participants mentioned their counselors had too many students and were overworked. Overworked counselors and large student-to-counselor ratios became main categories in the theme “Not the fault of the counselor.” These results are consistent with previous suggestions of critical race theorists, as many students believe their counselor’s workload is a contributing reason they did not receive equitable college access.

### *Educator Biases*

Various studies have found that teacher attitudes towards racial and ethnic minority students can be problematic, and educators commonly perpetuate common biases and stereotypes (Ladon-Billings, 2005; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2020; Starck et al., 2020). None of the questions in the interview asked explicitly if their counselors' attitude towards their ethnicity, yet two participants identified these types of incidences. The first incidence of bias occurred in Herik's reflection, where he mentioned that he speculated counselors assume the international population does not attend college. Following this speculation, he shared that he thinks counselors may have considered these students not worth their time and was confident that none of his friends ever had a word with their counselors about college. The second incidence occurred in Citlati's experience at a dance competition where her counselor went along with jokes other students made about a predominantly Hispanic dance team. Citlati and Herik's experiences are consistent with previous research on teachers' biases and stereotypes.

**Undocumented Students and College Access**

The findings of this study confirm various previous pieces of research suggesting that public schools are failing to meet the needs of undocumented students, particularly in the areas of higher education (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo, 2021; Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales et al., 2013; Passel & Cohn, 2019; Lad & Braganza, 2012; Zong & Batalova, 2019). This study differed from previous research because it examined students' specific experiences with school counselors rather than their experiences with educators. The results of this study expand, contradict, and reinforce previous research regarding how undocumented students experience college access.

***Relationships with Educators***

Previous research has suggested that educators fail to build trusting relationships with undocumented populations (Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2012). Other research suggested undocumented students perceive negative relationships with school officials (Gonzales, 2009, 2011, 2016). The findings of this study challenge these findings and indicate that undocumented students view school counselors as caring and trustworthy individuals. Five participants shared a close relationship with their school counselors, and three shared they did not have a strong relationship with them. The three students who did not have a strong relationship with their counselor still expressed a positive view of them and believed them to be supportive personnel in the school building. In addition, two participants who did not have a strong relationship with their counselors mentioned they were close with their ESL teachers. This finding contradicts the previous research indicating educators fail to build trusting relationships with undocumented students.

Nienhusser et al. (2016) discovered undocumented students often experience microaggressions from educators during the college access process. Educators' perpetuating microaggressions did not occur as a theme of this study. However, several microaggressions were evident in students' experiences with school counselors while attempting to get answers to their college questions. Previous research indicates that microaggressions experienced by undocumented students negatively affect students' college access by creating hostile relationships between students and school staff (Nienhusser et al., 2016). The microaggressions students shared were apparent in their counselor's ignorance over the barrier undocumented students encounter accessing higher education. Participants expressed frustrations in response to their counselors' condescending advice and unawareness.

Contrary to Nienhusser's et al. (2016) study, these experiences did not create hostile relationships between students and their counselors. Still, experiences of microaggressions hindered students' confidence in their counselor's ability to help them. Overall, participants maintained a positive view of their school counselor and excused their ignorance, suggesting that it was not their fault for not knowing how to help them. Participants like Luna still have the hope their counselor can impact future undocumented students with more awareness and resources despite experiencing microaggressions during his experience in high school.

All participants in this study describe having a relationship with their school counselor or ESL teacher. This finding challenges previous research and suggests it is not a lack of trusting or close relationships with school staff but possibly an absence of helpful relationships with them, leading to the underachievement of undocumented youth. A lack of helpful relationships supports the findings of Gonzales (2016) and Lauby (2017) that the absence of strong, valuable relationships between undocumented students and school personnel contributes to inequities among undocumented youth.

Despite many participants having close relationships with their school counselors, David was the only participant who received practical support accessing higher education from his school counselor. None of the participants felt they could speak with their school counselor or any educator about the educational doubts they experienced while attempting to access higher education. This finding challenges Crawford and Valle's (2016) suggestion that school counselors are primed with the skills to help undocumented students overcome challenges and build resiliency. All participants expressed that their counselor was unaware of the difficulties they encountered. Many participants shared that they could not discuss the emotional challenges

of being undocumented because of their counselor's unfamiliarity and lack of experience working with undocumented students.

### *Inaccurate Information*

Various research examining how the undocumented population experiences college access indicates students commonly receive inaccurate information, and there are limited opportunities for undocumented students to accurate information related to college access from educators (Barrera, 2019; Gonzales, 2011; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). All eight participants in this qualitative study received some inaccurate information making up the theme, "Inaccurate Guidance." This finding confirms the results of previous studies. It extends the previous findings to indicate that school counselors are not an exception to educators delivering inaccurate college information to undocumented students.

Barrera (2019) conducted a phenomenological study to access undocumented students' experiences in higher education. Barrera (2019) asked participants about their experiences accessing information regarding higher education before enrollment. Consistent with this study, every student in Barrera's (2019) study reported receiving misinformation from their educators about college enrollment resulting in students feeling discouraged to pursue higher education or attending community college directly after high school instead of a four-year university. However, this study varied from Barrera's (2019) study because not all participants pursued higher education. Some participants shared that they would have continued their education after high school if they had received accurate guidance. The findings of this study support Barrera's (2019) suggestion that helpful resources and accurate information is one of the largest factors influencing undocumented student's decisions to attend postsecondary education.

Pérez and Rodriguez (2011) conducted a qualitative study interviewing 15 Latinx undocumented students to understand familial and institutional support factors. Consistent with other studies, several respondents reported receiving incorrect information on financing their education (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). For example, this inaccuracy led one participant to pay exorbitant fees because their counselor misinformed them about the in-state tuition for undocumented students (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). Similarly, misinformation led participants in this study to miss out on initiatives to help undocumented students finance their education. This loss occurred in Astrid and Luna's experience and deferred them from pursuing their college of choice. Also, consistent with Pérez and Rodríguez's (2011) study, few participants were able to receive accurate resources for financing higher education. Therefore, this study extended the previous findings of Pérez and Rodríguez (2011) and emphasized the importance of counselors delivering precise information regarding higher education funding. Overall, consistent with this study's findings, students in Pérez and Rodríguez's (2011) study expressed a need for more knowledge among educators working with the undocumented population.

***Counselor's Expertise***

None of the eight students interviewed had counselors aware of undocumented students' challenges in high education. As a result, the theme, "Unaware Counselors," resulted from data analysis. This theme encompassed several student statements indicating school counselors are unaware of the laws and policies affecting undocumented students accessing higher education. This finding supports previous findings, such as those of Bernal-Arevalo, (2019) and Nienhusser et al., (2016), which indicate educators are unaware of barriers affecting undocumented populations. Still, contradict Crawford and Valle's (2016) finding that counselors are aware of

the obstacles students encounter but are not equipped to help them overcome the challenges and access higher education.

Bernal-Arevalo (2019) conducted a phenomenological study examining how school counselors work with undocumented students. Most of the school counselors interviewed shared that they had resources for their undocumented students and were willing to help them overcome the institutional challenges students encounter accessing higher education. However, when inquired further, Bernal-Arevalo (2019) discovered the resources were for the general college-bound population translated to Spanish. Counselors were not aware that this information was not relevant to most undocumented students. While this information is helpful, it does not meet undocumented students' specific needs and can leave them feeling excluded. This study varied from Bernal-Arevalo's (2019) phenomenological study in that this study interviewed previous students rather than counselors. Despite the variance in populations interviewed, both studies indicated that counselors are unaware of undocumented students' unique challenges and tend to give generic and unhelpful advice.

Nienhusser et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative phenomenological consisting of 15 undocumented youth from New York City participating in semi-structured interviews. A theme that emerged from this study was "Undocumented Immigrant Blindness." This theme was apparent in seven of the participant's interviews and was made up of their educators overlooking the challenges students faced by being undocumented. Characteristics of this theme are similar to the traits contributing to this study's theme, "Unaware Counselors," such as overlooking the challenges a student encounters without having a social security number. In addition, similar to this study, participants describe feeling overlooked by educators who assumed they were United States citizens. This study expanded on Nienhusser's et al. (2016) study by extending the

participant pool to more regions in the United States and identifying more categories contributing to the phenomenon related to counselors' ignorance.

The theme, "Counselor's Unaware," challenges the findings of Crawford and Valle's (2016) qualitative study, which suggests counselors are aware of undocumented students' limitations yet unaware of how to help students overcome the barriers. This study challenges these findings because the results indicate that counselors are unaware of undocumented students' obstacles. In addition, this study varied from Crawford and Valle's (2016) study because it focused on students in regions across the United States. In contrast, Crawford and Valle's (2016) study focused on schools in a border town community in Texas. In this study, two participants resided in states on the US/Mexico border with large immigrant populations. However, these students' counselors were just as ignorant about the barriers to college access as students residing in other states.

### *Counselor's Training*

Following the comments leading to the themes of "Unaware Counselors" and "Inaccurate Guidance," nearly all participants shared it would be beneficial if counselors received more training on how to work with the undocumented population. This is consistent with previous findings such as Bernal-Arevalo's (2019) study indicating counselors are dissatisfied with the lack of training and resources they received to work with undocumented populations and Lauby's (2017) suggestion that school counselors are unsatisfactorily trained and lack the proper knowledge to counsel undocumented students. In addition, Lad and Braganza's (2012) study also indicated that counselors do not precisely receive training to help undocumented students with their educational challenges. Following this study, Lad and Braganza (2012) recommend

mandatory professional development for school personnel about current policies concerning undocumented students and their families (Lad & Braganza, 2012).

This study did not ask any questions about the training of school counselors; however, students made several suggestions that their counselors are not receiving proper training to work with undocumented students. Again, this supports recommendations and findings of previous research and suggests implications for the field of school counseling (Lad & Braganza, 2012; Lauby, 2017). Participants in this study shared that they trusted their counselors and confided in them for help accessing college resources as undocumented students. Unfortunately, most participants' counselors in this study were unaware of their students' challenges and any practical resources to help them. More professional training for school counselors would allow them to have a more significant impact on the undocumented population.

## Implications

This study examines undocumented students' experiences attempting to access equitable college access from their school counselors. The following section describes theoretical, empirical, and practical implications based on the results of the findings.

### Theoretical

Critical Race Theory provided the theoretical basis for this qualitative study. This study contributed to the theoretical framework because it exposed the educational realities of eight undocumented students through semi-structured interviews to better understand how undocumented youth experience college access from their school counselors. A significant goal of CRT in education is to expose the realities of marginalized populations in schools to understand their experiences better and ultimately create a more just school system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Individuals who have experienced oppression

have the right to use their experimental knowledge to inform better practices (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Taylor, 2006; Zamudio et al., 2011). This study created a platform for undocumented students to share their lived experiences for qualitative research and efforts to promote equity in education.

CRT is commonly used in educational research to challenge the notion that public education is equitable for all (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Zamudio et al., 2011). The findings of this research contribute to CRT's notion, indicating several incidences of inequity in the educational experiences of undocumented students. The results of this study indicate the undocumented population faces disparities in their school achievement including being overlooked by educators and left out of educational activities, receiving less help than other students on their college applications, experiencing high levels of educational doubt due to their immigration status, and encountering incidences of prejudice from their school counselors.

**Empirical**

Prior research examines how undocumented students' experience the college access process yet has failed to investigate how they receive college access from their school counselors. The empirical findings from this study made a substantial contribution to the literature on how undocumented students experience public education through their attempts to receive equitable college access from their school counselors. The empirical findings from this study indicate that undocumented students view their school counselors are caring, trustworthy, and well-meaning, yet are falling short in helping them achieve equitable college access. This finding is significant because prior research has not identified the role of the school counselor's relationship with undocumented students.

Further research on how school counselors serve the undocumented population is needed to inform school counselors' work better. More empirical research on counselors' training working with the undocumented population is needed following the findings of this study. Qualitative research could be utilized to understand better the educational doubts undocumented students experience in high school on their postsecondary trajectory. Quantitative and qualitative research could be beneficial for identifying gaps in counselors' understanding of the undocumented population and be used to create more substantial learning opportunities for educators.

**Practical**

The results of this study are of significance to school counselors, school administrators, and organizations supporting undocumented students' access to higher education. The findings of this study indicate school counselors need more training on working with undocumented students and helping them throughout their education. School counselors are positioned in schools in ways where they can impact several students with the right resources. Students view their counselors as trustworthy and caring, and several mention seeking their counselors out for guidance on several occasions. With the right resources, counselors can positively impact the educational trajectories of undocumented students.

Several participants mentioned recommendations for school counselors throughout their interviews, especially towards the end. Three participants recommended school counselors collaborate with community groups serving undocumented students and put students in contact with these organizations. One participant pointed out that this is especially helpful because these groups can continue supporting students once they graduate high school. Another participant mentioned collaboration would be impactful because the laws and policies regarding

undocumented students are constantly changing and a lot for school counselors to keep up with on their own. More collaboration with outside organizations would provide counselors with updates on laws and policies affecting students. Overall, more training, collaboration, and resources would create more understanding for school counselors working with undocumented students and ultimately lead to a more significant impact.

## Limitations and Delimitations

This qualitative phenomenological study examines what school counseling means for undocumented youth attempting equitable college access. The research tried to minimize delimitations and limitations. However, delimitations and limitations occur in all types of research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This section discusses the limitation and delimitations presented in this qualitative study.

### Limitations

The presented qualitative study encountered various limitations. The first limitation observed was the sample of participants. The researcher extensively attempted to recruit a diverse selection of participants and found eight participants who met the qualifications and wanted to engage in the research process. The participants in the study attended high school in five different US states and represented immigrants from four countries. There was no representation from some regions of the US, and laws regarding undocumented students' access to higher education vary significantly by state. Five of these participants live in states with limited access to higher education. In addition, only two participants in this study were female. Finally, some potential participants did not feel comfortable engaging in an interview with a stranger due to the topic's sensitive nature and declined to participate in the study.

The role of the researcher posed a limitation. The researcher conducting the qualitative interviews is a school counselor and not from the same ethnic background as any participants. Several participants mentioned their school counselor was white, the same race as the researcher. This dynamic may have influenced participants' willingness to share or accurately describe their experiences.

Researcher bias is a common limitation in qualitative research. As in many qualitative designs, the researcher's role in hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative research inevitably influences the study (Yardley et al., 2021). Unlike other types of qualitative research, hermeneutic phenomenology includes the researcher's interpretations (Laverty, 2003). Interpretations are applied to participants' narratives to describe the phenomenon accurately (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that researchers cannot completely eliminate their preconceptions (Laverty, 2003). Rather than bracketing off all of the researcher's bias, Hermeneutic phenomenologists accept the influence of a researcher's experience and preconceptions on the research analysis (Moran, 2008). The researcher's bias creates a limitation to the validity of the results. To reduce researcher bias, member checking and peer review followed the interviews and data analysis. The researcher's background and interest in the phenomenon are exposed. This allows the reader to determine the transferability of the results.

Phenomenological qualitative research examines how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990; Smith et al., 2022). This research design poses various limitations. For example, participants shared experiences are the primary source of knowledge in phenomenological qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, shared experiences can be limited because all interviews are subjective, and

people rarely produce the same responses when asked in different contexts (Yardley et al., 2021). A thorough description of the context is provided to minimize this limitation.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations occurred in the boundaries set by the researcher to protect participants' privacy and follow guidelines for ethical research. The first delimitation was the lack of a focus group. Focus groups commonly take place in qualitative research. Focus groups can benefit phenomenological studies because participants might be hesitant to share their experiences in a one-on-one setting and more likely to share in the presence of others who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, a disadvantage of focus groups is that confidentially is not guaranteed. For this reason, the researcher chose not to conduct a focus group to respect participants' privacy.

The inclusion criteria present delimitation. The researcher specified that the age range for participants was 18-28. Over the past decade in the United States, there have been several changes in policies affecting undocumented youth. Students who recently graduated high school face more challenges accessing DACA and spent a hefty portion of their high school years during the COVID-19 pandemic, where schools were closed for significant periods affecting access to resources. Therefore, experiences vary greatly depending on the time students attended high school. Most current high school students do not meet the age requirement to participate, so the inclusion criteria did not allow current high school students to participate. In addition, all participants were required to be able to complete the interview in English. This requirement limited some participants' opportunities to contribute to the study.

The researcher transcribed and conducted the data analysis manually rather than using software for coding. This method was chosen to give the researcher more control and ownership

of the work and protect participants' privacy (Saldaña, 2021). In addition, using software for the data analysis presents advantages such as improved validity and trustworthiness in the results (Saldaña, 2021). Despite the benefits, the researcher conducted the coding process manually rather than using software. This choice fostered trust with participants. Due to the topic's sensitivity, participants may likely have felt hesitant to participate if they knew their interviews would be processed through unfamiliar software.

## Recommendations for Future Research

The current low number of undocumented students in higher education calls for more research on how undocumented students experience all aspects of college access (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Nienhusser, 2013). This study addressed the current gap in the literature by creating a platform for individuals to share what equitable school counseling for college access means for undocumented youth. The current lack of research regarding undocumented students and education contributes to the various educational inequities encountered by the undocumented population (Chen et al., 2010; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales, 2016; Pérez & Rodriguez, 2011). In addition, more quantitative and qualitative research to understand better professionals working with undocumented students to alleviate further educational and societal marginalization is recommended (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2021; Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzales, 2016).

This study examined the experiences of undocumented youth from various regions of the USA. Previous research on undocumented youth focuses on states with large undocumented populations, such as New York (Nienhusser, 2013), California (Gonzales, 2016), and Texas (Crawford & Valle, 2016). This study had six participants in areas of the USA, such as Tennessee and Louisiana, which has not been a focus for researchers examining the experiences

of undocumented youth. More research on how undocumented students experience education across all regions of the USA is needed, particularly in areas such as the Southeast with growing immigrant populations. Many states in the Southeast region of the USA have restive policies for undocumented students accessing higher education. Further research is needed to understand how educators can serve students in this region.

Undocumented students and counselors could benefit from research examining counselors' training and professional development opportunities. "Counselors Unaware" and "Inaccurate Guidance" were two themes derived in response to the question regarding the helpfulness of school counselors. Not only did this occur in this research study, but the notion that educators are not trained or knowledgeable has occurred in various research attempting to understand how the undocumented population experiences college access (Barrera, 2019; Bernal-Arevalo, 2019; Gonzales, 2011; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). Therefore, further research evaluating counselor preparation programs is recommended.

Participants in this study could not confide with their counselors or adults about the educational doubts experienced due to the limitations of their immigration status. Further qualitative research examining how school counselors and other school-based mental health providers support the mental health of undocumented students is necessary based on the findings from this study. The educational doubts participants experienced took a heavy toll on participants' mental health and wellbeing. Further research could support initiatives for mental health services in school, particularly for marginalized populations.

Finally, further research on how marginalized populations view their school counselors is recommended. The results of this study indicate undocumented students view their school counselors as positive personnel and find them trustworthy, kindhearted, and approachable. More

qualitative research on how diverse populations interact and view their school counselors is recommended to support the work of school counselors.

## Summary

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explores what school counseling means for undocumented students attempting to receive equitable college access utilizing Critical Race Theory as a theoretical basis. CRT is a foundation for empirical research to understand the disparities in school achievement among marginalized populations (Braun et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011). Undocumented youth are among the most marginalized students in public schools and continue to fall further into the margins without access to equitable educational opportunities (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; Groce & Johnson, 2021; Nienhusser, 2013; Passel & Cohn, 2009). Access to equitable education opportunities is necessary for students to overcome their circumstances; however, statistical data shows undocumented youth consistently attain lower levels of education than their documented peers (Bjorklund, 2018; Gonzales et al., 2013; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Zong & Batalova, 2019). CRT believes that implications from previous discriminatory laws affect the opportunities and academic success of students of color today (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Leonardo, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011).

Professional school counselors are ethically obligated to help students remove barriers impeding their education access and encourage academic persistence in schools regardless of their legal status (ASCA, 2019c; Mainzer, 2013). This study was the first to examine what school counseling means for undocumented youth attempting to achieve equitable college access. Eight participants engaged in one-on-one interviews to share their experiences in response to the two

research questions. The participants were viewed as co-researchers in the process and completed a series of member checking to ensure the qualitative data accurately represented their experiences. Upon completing this step, an intensive data analysis was executed to explore and identify codes, patterns, categories, and themes from the eight datasets, following the recommendations of Saldaña (2021) and Creswell and Poth (2018). The data analysis process yielded six themes in response to the two research questions. A thorough description of each theme, including direct quotes from participants, is presented to articulate the phenomenon. The results of this study provide implications for further research and practical suggestions for educators working with undocumented youth. In addition, the findings of this study are consistent with previous studies examining how school counselors serve undocumented youth (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011; Lad & Braganza, 2012) and how educators work with undocumented youth (Lad & Braganza, 2012; Lauby, 2017), and challenge other findings suggesting that educators fail to build relationships with undocumented students (Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales, 2016; Lad & Braganza, 2012).

The undocumented population makes up a large portion of students in public schools (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Zong et al., 2019). This population faces various obstacles to accessing higher education. Therefore, professional school counselors are positioned in schools to help all students achieve academic excellence and overcome barriers to success (ASCA, 2019c). This study is significant because it is the first to examine the experiences of undocumented youth to understand how they experience college access from their school counselors. This research provides theoretical, practical, and empirical implications for the field of school counseling and educators working with undocumented students.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of a doctoral degree requirement. My study aims to understand better what school counseling means for undocumented students attempting to receive equitable college access. This research will contribute to efforts of making higher education more accessible for undocumented students and ongoing initiatives to improve school counselors' multicultural awareness. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, have attended a U.S. public high school between 2012 and 2022, have identified as being undocumented during their attendance at a U.S. high school (participants do not need to reveal their current legal status or location to participate in the study), be able to complete all interviews in English, and have access to a computer. For the purpose of this study, "undocumented" refers to foreign-born individuals who lack proper authorization to be in the United States. Participants, if willing, will be invited to engage in an audio-recorded virtual interview. To ensure the researcher accurately represents each participant's story, the researcher will grant all participants the opportunity to participate in member checking. This process will allow participants to review a transcript of the interview and make changes and add additional information if needed. It should take approximately 3 hours to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at [redacted]

A consent document will be emailed to each participant upon selection. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me via email prior to scheduling the interview.

Sincerely,

Victoria Landi

[redacted]

[redacted]

## Appendix B: Consent

**Title of the Project:** A Hermeneutic Exploration of the Meaning of School Counseling for Undocumented Students Attempting to Receive Equitable College Access
**Principal Investigator:** Victoria Landi, M.S., Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be must be 18 years of age or older, have previously attended a U.S. public high school between 2012 and 2022, have identified as being undocumented during your attendance at a U.S. high school, be able to complete an interview in English, and have access to a computer. For the purpose of this study, "undocumented" refers to foreign-born individuals who lack proper authorization to be in the United States. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The study aims to examine the experiences of undocumented students attempting to receive equitable college access from their school counselors. The current lack of research challenges efforts to help undocumented students achieve educational access. This study creates an opportunity for participants to use their experiences to contribute to efforts to make college more accessible for undocumented populations and improve school counselors' multicultural competence.

### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Engage in an audio-recorded virtual interview lasting between approximately 45 minutes and an hour. No questions pertaining to participants' past or current legal status will be asked during the interview process. Participants do not need to disclose any information about their current legal status or location to participate in the study.
2. Have the option to review interview transcripts to ensure the transcription accurately reflects your experience. During this step, you will have the option to omit or add to the transcription. This step is optional and will take between approximately 30 minutes and 2 hours.

### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Participating in this study could benefit society by improving a firsthand account of how undocumented students experience college access from their school counselors. Participants' first-hand experimental knowledge is the most valid form of understanding the injustices in society. Participating in this study may improve how undocumented high school students experience college access.

**What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Only the researcher will have access to participants' legal names. The researcher will conduct all interviews in a private location where others will not overhear the conversation.
- Electronic data will be stored on a password-locked computer, and hard copy data will be stored in a locked drawer. After 3 years, electronic data will be deleted and hard copy data will be shredded.
- All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

**How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes. Participants will receive a $50 Amazon gift card for participating in a 45-minute to an hour-long interview. If the participant decides to terminate the interview, the amount will be prorated based on the amount of time the participant has spent in the interview.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Victoria Landi. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Victoria Landi at [redacted] or at [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Todd Shultz, at [redacted]

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

The following questions may be used during the interviews to build rapport. A minimum of one of these questions will be asked to each participant at the beginning of each interview. The number of questions asked will depend on the amount of time each participant takes answering each question and how well the researcher perceives the participant's comfort.

- Tell me about yourself?
- Tell me about your family?
- What is something you enjoy doing?
- Do you have plans for the (next holiday)?
- What is something you would like to accomplish before you turn 40?
- What brings you joy?

The following questions will be asked to gather demographic information on participants.

**Demographic Questions**

- What state did you attend high school in?
- Was your high school in an urban, suburban, or rural area?
- How many years have passed since you were in high school?
- Do you identify as male, female, or non-binary?
- Is there anything else about your demographic background that you would like me to know?

The following questions will be used to gather qualitative data. Each participant will be asked a minimum of two questions for each category. The number of questions asked will be dependent on the amount of time each participant takes to answer each question and complete a 45-minute to an hour-long interview.

**Meaning of experiences**

- Tell me about the high school you went to?
- What did it mean to access the school counselor?
- Why did you interact with a school counselor?
- What were your postsecondary goals when you were in high school?
- Tell me about how the counselor made you feel?
- Tell me about your experience with attempting to access higher education information?
- What memories arise when you think about school counseling?
- How did any cultural differences you encountered influence your experiences with your school counselor?
- How did the counselor follow up with you?
- Did you have any other interactions with your school counselors?

**Helpfulness of experiences**

- How helpful did you feel your school counselor was in meeting your needs?
- What were your personal and academic goals in high school?
- Tell me how the counselor guided your postsecondary choices.
- What questions did you have for your counselor?
- How helpful was the school counselor at answering your questions?
- How do you know the counselor was or was not helpful meeting your college goals?
- How applicable was the advice your counselor gave you?
- How did the counselor help or not help you achieve your goals?

**Concluding Questions**

- Is there anything else about your story that you would like to share?

- What would you like school counselors to know about your experience?