SUPPORTING OUR MOST VULNERABLE FIRST-GEN STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF IMMIGRATION STATUS IN THE PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

First-generation students have received a great deal of attention from post-secondary institutions. Despite the attempt to help address the barriers faced by this student population, the generalization of the term "first-gen" limits the capacity to grasp how specific identities, such as those pertaining to immigration status, may impact a student's educational opportunities. Undocumented and DACA students face unique challenges in their pursuit of higher education. They often are more vulnerable to additional barriers and stressors due to the ambiguous nature surrounding immigration and education policy in the United States. Barriers for this subgroup of first-gen students include access to state and federal-based financial aid and in-state tuition rates, including a knowledge barrier in understanding the process of attaining post-secondary education. To help combat these obstacles, I developed programming under three overarching concepts: co-learning, supporting, and providing, which aimed to cultivate strong support systems and resources for student success. Thus, this community engagement profile focuses on how I addressed these barriers as the Immigrant Scholarship Hustle program fellow in my caseload of seven undocumented high school students through three applied methods, including student-parent orientation, educational workshops, and yearlong mentorship.

Keywords: *Undocumented students, DACA, First-generation, Higher education, Immigration, Arizona, Mentorship*

PURPOSE

There have recently been conscious efforts to help the first-generation student population succeed in pursuing higher education on many university and college campuses. Although this is a start to help bridge the gap in post-secondary attainment by first-generation students, many institutions need to acknowledge that the barriers these students face occur before attending college. The complexity of the term "first-generation" makes it challenging to comprehend and address the needs of students as it fails to grasp the specific backgrounds and identities that may impact their educational outcomes (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). The term "first-generation" encompasses a much greater population of students than the traditional definition of individuals who may be the first in their family to attend college (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). Although this term may seem self-explanatory, its meaning varies across various academic departments, programs, and research (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). Due to its ambiguous nature, the term first-generation covers a diverse group of students, many of whom are not specified

as having unique needs based on race/ethnicity, immigration status, and familial backgrounds. As a result, the inconsistency in defining first-generation college students can cause severe implications in policy and practice leading to generalizations among vastly different student subgroups (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Therefore, limiting our understanding of specific first-gen subgroups, such as undocumented students whose unique needs occupy an ambiguous and sometimes invisible space in which their educational pathway is complex due to federal and state immigration policies (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Thus, this community engagement profile aims to demonstrate the barriers undocumented first-generation students face in pursuing higher education and the educational methods that can be applied to help them succeed in their journey.

CONTEXT

The setting for this community engagement portfolio is Arizona, located in the United States of America. Arizona is home to immigration and education policies restricting access to higher education for undocumented and DACA students. For the context of this community engagement, an undocumented individual or undocumented immigrant is an individual who lives in the United States without legal immigration status (Legal Information Institute [LII], n.d.). A DACA recipient is an undocumented individual who applied for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status and now has a "legal presence" instead of being undocumented. DACA status provides recipients with protection from deportation, the ability to apply for a work permit and receive a social security number, and obtain a driver's license (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2022). As previously mentioned, "undocumented" and "DACA" are distinct and should not be used interchangeably, as they have different privileges and barriers. A DACA-eligible individual is an undocumented youth who would have qualified for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program but could not apply or have their application processed due to the program's current litigation in the courts. It is important to note that DACA-eligible individuals fall under the term undocumented. They do not have DACA status but would qualify for the DACA program if it reopened.

This community engagement focuses on my caseload of students as the Immigrant Scholarship Hustle Program Fellow of the 21'- 22' cohort. Each student varied in their immigration, familial, and educational background. All seven undocumented students came from different high schools across the Phoenix Valley and would be the first in their families to attend college.

During this community engagement piece, my partner was Immigrant Scholarship Hustle (ISH), a nonprofit organization based in Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona. This organization hosts a program for immigrant youth, empowering them to learn how to expand their educational and employment options despite the barriers of their immigration status through six days of educational workshops and yearlong support. Students learn about the resources available and receive the support and mentorship necessary to help them navigate their post-secondary educational pathways.

EXPERIENCE

Immigrant Scholarship Hustle has helped over 270 students in 10 different cohorts across two cities (Scholarships A-Z, n.d.). My journey with ISH began as a cohort member the summer before my senior year of high school. During this program, I connected with many other undocumented students and received valuable information regarding the scholarship application process. Transitioning from a previous participant to a program fellow, I had a unique perspective of being both a student and a teacher. As someone who has experienced these barriers, I have acquired a specific skill set to mentor and work with students, educators, and families about navigating the obstacles posed by immigration status.

Over the past two years, I have worked with a nonprofit organization called Aliento, focusing on immigration and education. Aliento is a community organization that serves undocumented, DACA, and mixed-immigration-status families to transform trauma into hope and action. They are youth-led and directly impacted people and allies invested in the well-being, emotional healing, and leadership development of those impacted by the inequities of lacking an immigration status (Aliento, 2020). During my time with Aliento, I learned an incredible amount about immigration and education policy and its effects on the immigrant community at the local, state, and federal

levels. I learned about the strategies behind community organizing, the power of storytelling in creating impactful change, and the importance of having and building community support. Overall, with the skills and knowledge I acquired through my personal experience and the mentorship and guidance of the Aliento team, I implemented student-centered programming that was beneficial for the academic success of the 2021 ISH Cohort.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

I am a first-generation undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Psychology with a minor in Pre-Law. I have over two years of advocacy and organizational experience working directly in the sectors of immigration and education through nonprofit organizations such as Aliento and ISH. I worked directly with families and students impacted by these restrictive policies, helping them navigate the barriers presented by the role of immigration in the college and scholarship application process. I have developed and presented resources alongside Aliento as a UCLA Dream Summer Fellow to educate students, families, and educators regarding the barriers faced by undocumented, DACA, and students who are part of mixed-status families in their pursuit of higher education. Previously I presented at Glendale High School Parent Night and Glendale Community College Counselor & Career Specialist Day. I also spoke on panels like the Arizona Center for Civic Leadership at the Flinn Foundation's CivEx: From Dreaming to Doing, where I discussed the barriers faced by these students.

PROCESS

Research demonstrates that first-generation college students are at a disadvantage relative to their non-first-gen peers, as it has been found that they are less likely than their non-first-gen peers to go to college or to prepare for college (Toutkoushian et al., 2018).

GOALS

My goal for this community engagement piece was to cultivate community and build strong support systems and resources for the students to help aid them in the scholarship and college application process for the 2021-2022 academic year.

METHODS

Undocumented and DACA students face unique challenges in their pursuit of higher education. Barriers include access to state and federal-based financial aid and in-state tuition rates. Additionally, there is a continued spread of misinformation in this community that poses barriers to families' and students' understanding of the available resources and opportunities. To help combat these obstacles, my partner Immigrant Scholarship Hustle and I applied the following methods: a student-parent orientation, educational workshops, and yearlong mentorship.

The first method applied in this community engagement piece was the student-parent orientation conducted in Spanish and English over Zoom. During this presentation, we introduced the ISH team and connected with students and families to establish trust. After introductions, we discussed the history and purpose of ISH and elaborated on the value of college education. During this presentation, we also provided the latest updates on DACA, eligibility for the program, and resources for assistance with DACA renewals. Additionally, we elaborated on education and immigration policy and its impact on tuition costs for undocumented/DACA students. Finally, we specified what this program would provide students, the participation expectations, and how families can support their students. After the main informational portion of the presentation, we provided a space for parents and students to ask questions. We had students join the Google Classroom and sign the program commitment form.

The second method applied throughout this community engagement was the virtual six-day programming. This programming ran Monday through Saturday and focused on immigration and education policy, mental health, the college application process, types of financial aid, and writing workshops. Students participated in these workshops through activities on Google Classroom and engaged throughout the lessons via Zoom. One significant programming component involved the writing workshops, which helped students develop their personal statements and gave them a peer-review process with community volunteers. These workshops also included structured activities focused on community building and coping strategies through art.

The third and final method included the yearlong mentorship provided to students during their senior year of high school. After students'

acceptance into the program, students complete a participant confirmation form. They provided information to assess their access to technology and their availability to participate for the entirety of the program. Additionally, students were requested to submit their most recent unofficial transcripts and disclose their immigration status and eligibility for DACA. With this information intake, I created individual educational pathways for each student according to their needs, goals, grades, and eligibility for DACA. Students participated in mandatory monthly one-on-ones for up to an hour based on their needs. I conducted one-on-ones virtually to check in with students' grades, progress on their scholarship & college applications, and overall well-being. Students were held accountable for scheduling their one-on-one through Calendly, an online scheduling platform, and could schedule more than one as needed. Throughout the yearlong mentorship, I also considered students' familial support systems and financial backgrounds when creating a plan of available scholarships and resources that would benefit them in their journey.

EVALUATION

Evaluating the use of the previously mentioned methods is critical to understanding and creating future solutions to the barriers faced by vulnerable first-gen populations like undocumented students. The effectiveness of the applied methods, including student-parent orientation, educational programming, and yearlong support, was evaluated through direct feedback and surveys.

The student-parent orientation was evaluated through direct feedback from parents and students at the end of the presentation. Although evaluation of this method is limited, many students and parents were able to ask questions that helped further their knowledge and break down some of the misconceptions surrounding education shared by this community.

The programming's overall effectiveness was evaluated through six surveys conducted by ISH staff and one additional holistic survey (ISH program evaluation) conducted at the program's beginning and end to measure basic metrics. These six surveys were conducted daily after each day of the six-day programming. One student from the cohort on the final day of programming stated in the survey, "The staff did a wonderful job with this program, and I appreciate their hard work and dedication to this program! I'm glad I got to be a part of this." Another factor used to evaluate the program's effectiveness was the outcomes of each student, specifically the number of scholarships received and their admission to a university or college. This was measured through a self-report survey conducted at the end of their participation in the program. It is important to note that when the survey was conducted, not all students had heard back from their scholarship applications and were still applying.

The yearlong support was assessed after every student's one-on-one session. When asked about current methods of communication, students indicated positive feedback stating they found newsletters and reminders to be very helpful in their application process. Despite the positive feedback, students provided additional feedback on improvement, asking for more motivational Remind messages and individualized check-ins throughout the week.

COMMUNICATIONS

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ISH 2021-2022 cohort was virtual. The communication plan for this community engagement consisted of platforms such as Gmail, Remind, regular text messaging, and phone calls. Throughout this community engagement, communication between staff and students was facilitated by me as the program fellow.

I used messaging platforms like Gmail to facilitate more comprehensive and formal student communication. This method of communication was used to send any critical and relevant information regarding students' participation in the program, including updates on social gatherings, programming surveys, or to request information from students needed by ISH staff. Additionally, I emailed comprehensive monthly newsletters to students, which reminded them to schedule their one-on-ones with their respective mentors (either the ISH coordinator or program fellow) and provided students with a resource guide, scholarship opportunities, and other educational opportunities available to them.

Remind was used to provide direct and constant real-time reminders to students about upcoming deadlines for scholarships/fellowship opportunities. It also provided them with encouragement

and additional reminders about upcoming socials or external events. This method of communication was used for its efficiency and effectiveness in messaging all students at once.

The participant confirmation form collected students' personal information, including email, phone number, and emergency contact. With this information, we could ensure our student's safety and hold them accountable throughout the program. Furthermore, regular text messaging and phone calls were used when students were not responsive to previous forms of communication or when technical difficulties arose when conducting a one-on-one.

LITERATURE

Many universities and colleges have begun conscious efforts to help the first-generation student population succeed in pursuing higher education. However, many fail to acknowledge that many of the barriers first-generation students encounter start before college. The term first generation captures several subgroups, many of whom are overlooked due to the generalization of this student population. Often overlooking how identity, power, and history dynamics intersect and impact their educational experiences and outcomes (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Undocumented and DACA students are among the most vulnerable first-gen students since they occupy an ambiguous and often invisible space where federal and state policies often hinder their path toward higher education (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018).

To understand how undocumented and DACA students are disproportionally affected in their pursuit of higher education by federal and state policies, one must view the historical and political context that leads us to today's present issues. At the federal level, *Plyler v. Doe, 457 U.S. 202 (1982)* ruled that undocumented students could not be denied a K-12 education so long as the same right was not denied to someone with lawful status. It was additionally specified that schools could not ask about the immigration status of their students. In 1996, Congress enacted two laws the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PWORA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). These two acts restricted 'unauthorized aliens' eligibility for "public benefits", encompassing both in-state tuition and financial aid (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, 1996; Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, 1996). On June 15, 2012, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program was enacted and allowed certain eligible immigrants who came to the United States as children to request consideration for deferred action for two years, subject to renewal (USCIS, 2022). This allowed these individuals to receive protection from deportation, the ability to apply for a work permit and receive a social security number, and obtain a driver's license (USCIS, 2022). Currently, the state of DACA is awaiting further litigation in the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. With this comes the uncertainty of the futures of thousands of DACA recipients as the program is in danger of ending ("The current state of DACA," 2022).

At the state level, Arizona passed 15 A.R.S. § 1825 (2006), hereby known as Proposition 300, which prohibited people without lawful immigration status from receiving in-state college tuition, financial aid, grants, and scholarship assistance, among other benefits that are subsidized or paid in whole or in part with state monies. As a result of this policy, undocumented and DACA students do not have access to publicly funded scholarships or in-state tuition, limiting their access to higher education. Another notable law is HB 2008 which denied subsidized tuition for students who cannot provide lawful status based on 12 specific types of documents, e.g., a U.S. passport or birth certificate (General Government; Budget Reconciliation, HB 2008, 2009). Thus, these two laws restricted undocumented and DACA students' access to publicly funded scholarships, in-state tuition, or subsidized tuition rates in Arizona.

Every year approximately 2,000 unauthorized immigrant students graduate from Arizona high schools (Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2019). Of those who graduate, only 5 to 10 % enroll in college, with far fewer attaining a college degree. (Gonzales, 2007; Capps et al., 2017). Of these students, most, if not all, lack the institutional support, guidance, and support systems necessary to help them succeed in their journey to higher education.

Although the discrepancy of knowledge for first-gen students, in general, is vast, undocumented and DACA students have additional discrepancies in understanding the effects their immigration status may have on their educational pursuits. A study

found that this subgroup of students was completely unaware of their legal status and only made aware until they were excluded from traditional "rites of passage," such as planning for college (Benuto et al., 2018). This suggests that this subgroup of students' lack of awareness of their legal status further expands their knowledge barrier of the college and scholarship application process.

Given the impact that immigration plays in the challenges of immigrant youth in their pursuit of higher education, it is essential to acknowledge that these students face the undue burden of being both a student and an educator simultaneously when navigating the higher education process (Gámez et al., 2017). After the implementation of Proposition 300, help from school officials drastically reduced with peer-to-peer contact increased for sources of social capital (Ruth, 2018). Although many students attempt to leverage these social connections to alleviate the loss of official ones, institutional support, guidance, and support networks have become limited, leaving students to figure out this process independently. Additionally, these students face various stress factors due to their immigration status. Numerous bodies of literature demonstrate that this subgroup of students experiences severe stress from a variety of sources, including financial obstacles, lack of academic preparation, job insecurity, parental immigration status, immigration laws, and perceptions of discrimination (Gámez et al., 2017; Garcia & Tierney, 2011).

A study conducted by Gámez et al. (2017) found that critical factors such as mentorship can contribute to the success of undocumented and DACA students in higher education. Even though mentors are generally unaware of the intricacies of the meaning of being undocumented, mentorship is one of the most beneficial factors contributing to many undocumented students' success (Benuto et al., 2018; Gámez et al., 2017). This suggests that despite the limited information and resources available to these students, intentional mentorship where mentors and students co-learn to navigate the systemic barriers makes a difference and can be one of the main factors for their success.

OUTCOMES

Due to the nature of this community engagement piece, the success of the applied methods was measured through student outcomes gathered through a self-report survey and direct communication with students. Overall, the ISH program evaluation (see Appendix) conducted at the end of the six days of programming demonstrates key aspects of increased student capability and knowledge in applying to scholarships and colleges, demonstrating its effectiveness in addressing previously mentioned knowledge barriers.

By the program's end, students better understood how to navigate the college and scholarship application process despite their immigration status. In a self-report survey, a student stated, "Something I learned while being in ISH is that despite my situation, I have an endless amount of opportunities. My status cannot prevent me from pursuing my dreams; it just means that my journey is more challenging than most people." This first-gen student population's many obstacles require proactive support to help students succeed past systemic and policy-based barriers. Another student stated, "During my time with ISH, I met amazing people who have inspired me to keep persevering and learned that there are people out there willing to help others."

Although programming for this cohort only spanned six days, moving forward, mentorship was the most significant factor contributing to student success and confidence levels when pursuing higher education, resulting in the following outcomes. From my caseload of students, all seven students completed the program and enrolled in college. All seven students received some award and scholarship to attend college, with six receiving full tuition ride scholarships. Ultimately, the outcomes of this community engagement portfolio show the success of the applied methods, which can be simplified into three key takeaways, including co-learning, supporting, and providing.

BENEFITS

As previously mentioned, the key takeaways from the 2021-22 Immigrant Scholarship Hustle cohort can be summarized into three methods: co-learning, supporting, and providing. Co-learning refers to intentional learning alongside students about the constant policy changes surrounding immigration and education. Supporting students by motivating and encouraging them and allowing yourself to listen to the needs of each student can provide the insight to help best address the student's

needs. As mentioned, the term first-generation college student can create generalizations that inhibit students' ability to aid the barriers. Therefore it is essential to address each student individually to ensure their success. Finally, providing mentorship alongside resources such as scholarships and other educational opportunities can help first-gen students bridge the gap in their pursuit of higher education. Ultimately providing students with the knowledge and guidance they otherwise would not receive from their parents.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Understanding these key takeaways can help educators, counselors, and community members build and develop programs to benefit first-gen students on their journey to higher education. Due to the limited capacity of knowledgeable and culturally competent school officials assisting with college pathways, the percentage of undocumented students that go on to post-secondary education in Arizona is very low compared to the national college completion rate of 18 percent (Capps et al., 2017). Implementing the applied methods from this community engagement profile can help address these issues, as demonstrated by the student's success in enrolling and securing funding for their college education.

It is crucial to remember that because of the political nature of the obstacles undocumented students encounter, there is always a chance that policy will change, impacting their eligibility for and access to educational resources and programs. As can be seen in the historical context of this issue, politics surrounding immigration and education are constantly developing and, at times, can be very detrimental, as seen by the passing of Proposition 300. As of December 5th, 2022, 15 A.R.S. § 1803 (2022), hereby known as Proposition 308, was passed by Arizona voters and declared law by Arizona Governor Ducey. Proposition 308 states that any Arizona high school graduates, including individuals without lawful immigration status, who meet the following two criteria (1) attended any public or private high school option or homeschool equivalent pursuant while physically present in this state for at least two years and (2) graduated from any public or private high school option or homeschool equivalent while physically present in this state or obtained a high school equivalency diploma in this state are eligible for in-state tuition rates (15 A.R.S. § 1803 (2022)).

With the implementation of this new law, further research must be conducted to analyze the effects of Proposition 308 regarding college attainment by undocumented youth. Overall, the knowledge from this community engagement can contribute to future program development of educational support systems to help the different subgroups of first-generation college students attain post-secondary education.

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