

GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS:  
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF UNDOCUMENTED, HISPANIC  
STUDENTS AT TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

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## **ABSTRACT**

This exploratory study used a qualitative research methodology to examine the academic and life experiences of undocumented Hispanic students at Texas State University-San Marcos. Data were collected from thirty individuals from two non-random samples: student participants (n=6) who were undocumented Hispanic-origin undergraduate students as well as key informants (n=24) who were faculty, staff and administrators. For the student participants, a semi-structured interview format was used, while for key informants, informal conversations were used. Both groups were identified using a combined snowball and purposive sampling method. This study is important since it addresses an apparent gap in the scholarly literature investigating this vulnerable population. Undocumented students are facing significant challenges in the current social, political, and economic climate in the U.S., including proposed immigration restrictions and the failure to implement the DREAM Act. Given the potential risks to this group and using a social justice model, it is important to give voice to their experiences.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	LITERATURE REVIEW.....	1
II.	METHODOLOGY.....	27
III.	FINDINGS .....	44
IV.	DISCUSSION .....	77
V.	REFERENCES .....	90
VI.	APPENDICES .....	99
	A. IRB SYNOPSIS	
	B. CONSENT FORM	
	C. INTERVIEW GUIDE	
	D. AFFIDAVIT	



# CHAPTER I

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

There is no single, agreed upon definition in the literature used to describe foreign-born non-citizens currently residing in the United States. In the past, such persons have been labeled in dehumanizing or derogatory terms such as “alien,” “illegal alien,” “illegal,” or “illegal immigrant.” These terms are misleading for at least two reasons. “Alien” implies someone essentially different and strangely non-human. “Illegal” creates a criminalized stereotype, when in fact, under current immigration law, it is not a crime to be in the U.S. without proper documentation; rather, it is a civil violation (National Association of Hispanic Journalists, NAHJ, 2011).

The currently preferred terms in the literature are “undocumented” or “unauthorized.” Hofer, Rytina, and Campbell (2007) state that these are equivalent descriptors that refer to foreign-born persons who entered the country without inspection and valid documentation, or those who were admitted temporarily and stayed past the date they were required to leave. Yet, the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services, a division of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, does not include “undocumented” or “unauthorized” designations in its glossary of terms (USCIS, 2011). To further complicate this confusion, the U.S. government uses the term “resident alien” to describe a foreign-born person who is not a citizen by naturalization or parentage, who entered the country legally, and who carries a registration card (known as a “green card” due to its color).

In practical usage, the term "undocumented" refers to individuals who do not have federal government-issued documents to show that they can legally visit, work, or live in the U.S. The NAHJ (2011) argues that descriptive terms should not be used as a noun (e.g., "illegals"). Thus, the adjective "undocumented" accurately reflects the status of these individuals in the country without labeling them in ways that are often regarded as offensive or potentially racist. The term "undocumented" will be used in this thesis, unless a reference uses "unauthorized," in which case, that term will be maintained. If a source uses "alien" or "illegal," these terms will be put in quotes to indicate that they are coming directly from the source.

A large percentage of the foreign-born and undocumented population in the United States is of Latin American origin. This demographic group has important implications for the entire American society and also raises the need to further clarify terminology. The U.S. Census Bureau distinguishes race from ethnicity; "Hispanic-origin" refers to Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino based ethnicity according to a respondent's self-identification. These three terms are considered equivalent, and they may be used in reference to any race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Further, according to this report, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines Hispanic or Latino as "a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture of origin regardless of race." Thus, an individual's ethnic identity can be designated as either "Hispanic or Latino" or "non-Hispanic or non-Latino." Typically, "Hispanic" is included in the racial category of "white" which designates people whose origins are from

Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. The five racial categories designated by the Census Bureau are white, black or African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander. For the purposes of this thesis, a broader discussion of race and ethnicity will not be pursued. Terms such as Hispanic, Latino, Mexican, etc. will be maintained exactly as used by a source.

Immigration laws are extremely complex and beyond the scope of this thesis. According to Passel (2006), there are three broad categories of migrants: authorized, semi-authorized, and unauthorized (although these are not official government terms). Migrants in the authorized category have achieved Permanent Legal Residency or have Employment Authorized Documents. Migrants in the semi-authorized (or “semi-legal”) category have Temporary Protective Status and Extended Voluntary Departure. This designation includes people who have applied for asylum but have not had their cases adjudicated. Migrants in the unauthorized category are of two types: people who overstayed their visa or who entered without inspection. People in this group may have applied for Legal Permanent Residence and are waiting for authorization, either through a “green card” or as an immediate family relation to a legal resident. This thesis will only address "unauthorized" immigrants and/or their families.

The history of immigration in the U.S. is very complicated and goes back to the earliest foundations of this country. An examination of the history leading up to the current impasse in U. S. immigration laws, especially around undocumented students, is beyond the scope of this thesis. While immigration is

generally regarded as a function of the federal government, several states have or are pursuing their own regulations. The thesis will focus on immigration laws as they specifically pertain to higher education, especially in Texas.

### **DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS**

Neither the Census Bureau nor any other U.S. government agency specifically counts the undocumented immigrant population or defines its demographics based on specific criteria (Passel, 2006). According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the “residual method” is widely accepted for estimating the size and characteristics of the undocumented population in the U.S. This method subtracts the estimated legal immigrant population from the total foreign-born population and treats the residual as a source of data on the unauthorized migrant population.

Obtaining demographic information from certain sectors of a population in a country can be extremely difficult, especially when talking about the undocumented population. Because of this complexity, statistics about this group not only differ, but can even appear contradictory (Gonzales, 2009). Approximately 10% have obtained temporary legal authorization to live and work in the United States; and, approximately 25-40% of unauthorized migrants have overstayed their visa (Passel, 2006).

### **Hispanic population and undocumented population in the U.S.**

The U.S. population is becoming more diverse, and Hispanic-origin ethnicity is the fastest growing group. In 2009, the U.S. population was roughly 307 million people (USA QuickFacts, 2010). According to the U.S. Census

Bureau, in 2010, the Hispanic population of the U.S. was estimated at 50.5 million, a 43% increase over the past decade; representing 16.3% of the total population and 23.1% of those ages 17 and younger (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). According to the Population Reference Bureau (Saenz, 2010), there are five times as many children under 15 years old than persons 65 and older among Latinos, as compared to about an equal share of children and elderly in the white population. "Never before in this country's history has a minority ethnic group made up so large a share of the youngest Americans" (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009b). The percentage of Hispanics in the general U.S. population is expected to nearly double by 2050 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009a).

The foreign-born population in the U.S. represents countries from around the world and totaled 37 million in 2005, representing approximately 8% of the total U.S. population (Passel, 2006). One-third of the current population growth in the U.S. is caused by net immigration, a significant percentage originating from Latin America (9.6 million), including Mexico (7 million) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In 2004, the Pew Hispanic Center reported that 11.3 million undocumented immigrants represented almost 30% of all foreign-born in this country (Passel, Van Hook, & Bean, 2004). Unauthorized immigrants from Mexico account for 58% of the total number of immigrants (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010a) and the rest of Latin America accounts for 22% (Passel, 2006). Taken together, these two groups represent 80% of the total unauthorized immigrant population currently residing in the U.S. Of the Mexican-born immigrants who arrived within the past ten years, 80-85% are unauthorized.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) estimates that the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States increased 37% from nearly 8.5 million in 2000 to 11.6 million in 2006 (Hoefer, Rytina & Campbell, 2007). The authors referred to the following DHS estimates: In 2006, California remained the leading state of residence for undocumented individuals (2.8 million), Texas was second (1.6 million), and Florida was third (980,000), followed by Illinois, New York, Arizona, Georgia, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Washington (250,000-700,000 each). All other states accounted for another three million people.

Undocumented immigrants come to the U.S. primarily to work. Other reasons may include joining family members or fleeing danger in their home country. According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2011), in March 2010, unauthorized migrants accounted for approximately 5% of the American labor force (Immigration Policy Center, 2010). While unauthorized migrants are disproportionately young, few attend college, so they are more likely to work. The pace of unauthorized arrivals is rapidly accelerating: 84% of the unauthorized population arrived in the U.S. since 1990 (Passel & Suro, 2005).

The state of Texas reflects these larger national demographic trends. In 2009, the population of Texas was roughly 25 million people (USA QuickFacts, 2010). In 2009, persons of Hispanic or Latino origin comprised 36.5 percent of the Texas population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), as compared to 15.8% of the national average. In 2006, the undocumented Hispanic population in Texas was approximately 1.6 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Based on Census data,

while the proportion of unauthorized immigrants has dropped in the U.S. over the past two years, the proportion in Texas (as well as Louisiana and Oklahoma) has increased (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010a). This overall drop nationally is largely attributed to the so-called Great Recession and enhanced immigration enforcement measures.

### **Undocumented immigrant family patterns in the U.S.**

There is a wide variety of family composition among the unauthorized population. According to Passel (2006), in 2005, the unauthorized population was comprised on 49% adult males, 35% adult females, and 15% children. While the vast majority of unauthorized adults are solo individuals, they often live with a partner or other adult relatives who may be U.S. citizen or legal immigrants. Most (60%) of these families do not have children. According to an analysis of the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data, the Pew Hispanic Center (2010a) reports that, "An estimated 340,000 of the 4.3 million babies born in the United States in 2008 were the offspring of unauthorized immigrants. The number of children born to at least one unauthorized immigrant parent in 2009 comprised eight percent of all U.S. births."

"Mixed status" denotes families in which at least one parent is unauthorized and at least one child was born in the U.S. According to Passel (2006), of families with children, 64% of the offspring were U.S. citizens due to being born in the U.S. Thus, just over one-third (36%) of the children living in unauthorized families are not U.S. citizens by birth. In about one-quarter of all unauthorized families, all of the children are born in the U.S. Another 7% of

unauthorized families have both U.S. citizen children and unauthorized children. Mixed status families comprise five out of six unauthorized families with children.

This trend is noteworthy since it encapsulates the population of undocumented students currently enrolled in Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) in the U.S. This immigration pattern can create complicated family dynamics. Siblings within the same family may belong to different nationalities depending upon when the parents arrived in the U.S. and where the children were born. As a result, children within the same family may experience different barriers and opportunities, especially regarding access to higher education and to employment.

Until the 1980s, most of the undocumented immigrants who came to the United States were seasonal workers. These individuals often came alone and left their children and families back in their countries of origin (Gonzales, 2009). However, during the past three decades, the number of labor migrations accompanied by settlement has dramatically altered the contours of today's migrants and the immigrant family. Consequently, the undocumented population now encompasses more women and children. Interestingly, the children who were born abroad yet brought at an early age to live in the United States represent a relatively new but significant population. About two million children currently in the U. S. are undocumented immigrants (Gonzales, 2009).

Undocumented children are commonly referred as to the "1.5 generation." This is because they fit somewhere between the first and second generations (Gonzales, 2008). Evidently, undocumented children do not belong to the first

generation because they did not choose to migrate and often are not familiar with their country of origin. Similarly, they do not fit in the second generation because they were born and spent part of their childhood in their country of origin, even though they have adapted to the U.S. For instance, members of the 1.5 generation have, for the most part, received much of their primary and secondary education in the U. S.

### **LAWS AFFECTING HIGHER EDUCATION**

#### ***Plyler v. Doe***

Prior to 1975, Texas law allowed for tuition-free public education to all children of the appropriate age residing in local school districts, without taking into account citizenship status (Hutchinson, 1982). However, in 1975, the Texas legislature changed its education code to allow local school districts to deny enrollment to “alien” children who were not “legally admitted” to the U. S., or to charge tuition to such students. Apparently, and as an incentive to compliance, the law also provided that state funds for the education of undocumented children would be garnered from local school districts. School officials in Tyler in east Texas, under the direction of Superintendent James Plyler, began charging about \$1,000 annual tuition for each undocumented immigrant student in accordance with provisions of the recent state law (Olivas, 2010). In 1977, a class action suit was filed on behalf of children in the Tyler Independent School District who were charged tuition because they could not prove that they had been legally admitted to the U. S. The families of the children affected could not afford to pay for their children’s enrollment into the schools. A U.S. district judge

issued a preliminary order requiring Tyler ISD to admit all students. In 1978, the same judge found that both the state law and Tyler's policy were unconstitutional, thus holding that they violated the equal protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment (Olivas, 2010).

The *Plyler v. Doe* case went to the U. S. Supreme Court, and in 1982, the Court ruled that undocumented children are "persons" under the Constitution and, according to the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, are entitled to equal protection under the law (Gonzales, 2009). The court ruled that there was no empirical evidence to indicate that this policy would substantially benefit the state's interest, and it would have the counter effect of creating a permanent underclass (Ruge & Iza, 2005). Additionally, the court held that states may not discriminate against undocumented children on the basis of their legal status in the provision of public elementary and secondary school education (Gonzales, 2009).

As a result of the *Plyler v. Doe* ruling, almost all undocumented children in the U. S. attend elementary school, and thousands of them graduate from high school each year (Flores, 2010). Scholarship on the *Plyler v. Doe* case suggests that, although this case does not guarantee a higher education, it certainly sets the stage for a battle at the postsecondary level for undocumented students in the U. S. As a result, *Plyler v. Doe* has faced some challenges and more pushback against this case might be expected in the future.

Since the 1990s, the contests over *Plyler v. Doe* have shifted to the local school level. Some school boards in different states are requiring the student or parent Social Security numbers, driver's license identification of parents,

additional “registration” for immigrant children, “safety notification” for immigrant parents, and separate schools for immigrant children (Olivas, 2010). Examples of indirect challenges to *Plyler v. Doe* include an Illinois school district that lost a case: *Joel R. v. Mannheim School District*. A U.S. citizen child who lived with his aunt, but who previously lived with his parents in Mexico, was found to be a resident for the purpose of attending a public school. In the process that led to the case, a school official told the aunt that she needed to obtain legal guardianship in a U.S. court and that the child could not be admitted to the school if the child’s mother was not a legal resident of the U. S.

The literature on the *Plyler v. Doe* case shows that practices of school districts in the U. S. to prohibit undocumented children from attending public schools have had negative implications. The challenges to this ruling have immediate repercussions on undocumented children because, rather than protecting them from immigration laws and deportation, children’s enrollment status and development of their academic abilities and performance is directly undermined.

### **Relevant federal immigrant legislation**

In 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PROWORA) set the federal rules and benefits for undocumented students wanting to attend college (Olivas, 2009). According to IIRIRA and PROWORA, undocumented students may attend private and public colleges, but states intending to enable these students to be eligible for in-state tuition must pass legislation allowing

them to establish in-state residency. Specifically, section 505 of the IIRIRA mandates that “unauthorized aliens shall not be eligible on the basis of residence within a state for any postsecondary education benefit unless a citizen or national of the United States is eligible for the exact same benefit without regard to whether the citizen or national is such a resident” (Feder, 2010). The 505 provision from the IIRIRA appears to be designed to prevent states from offering in-state tuition to undocumented students enrolled at public institutions of higher education. Since the enactment of Section 505, there have been debates about whether states should offer in-state tuition to undocumented students on some basis other than residency.

### **The Federal DREAM Act**

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) was introduced for the first time in the U.S. Congress in 2001. It has been proposed and defeated several times, most recently in December 2010. This federal law would have allowed undocumented students to get on a path toward citizenship and to gain legal employment by going to college or serving in the U.S. military (Flores, 2010). This legislation called for a federal level mandate that made in-state resident tuition available for undocumented students who attend IHEs. Therefore, the defeat of this legislation had a particularly negative impact on the prospects of higher education for these undocumented students.

The DREAM Act would have permitted undocumented students to obtain Legal Permanent Resident status based on multiple criteria (Gonzales, 2009). They would have been required to attend college or serve in the military and

satisfy certain additional conditions: 1) entered the U.S. at the age of 15 or younger and are under 35 on the date of the bill's enactment; 2) been continuously present in the country for at least five years prior to the bill's enactment; 3) obtained a high school diploma or its equivalent in the U.S.; and, 4) demonstrated good moral character. If undocumented students met these conditions, they would have been able to apply for six-year "conditional" legal permanent status that would eventually allow them to work, go to college, and/or join the military. If within this six year period, the DREAM Act beneficiaries completed at least two years toward a four-year college degree, graduated from a two-year college, or served at least two years in the U.S. military, they would have been able to change their conditional status to permanent and would become eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship (Gonzales, 2009). It is estimated that if it had passed, the DREAM Act would have allowed approximately 360,000 undocumented high school graduates with the legal means to work and to secure additional economic resources for college. In addition, it was considered likely that the DREAM Act would have provided incentives for another 715,000 youth between the ages of 5-17 to finish high school and to pursue a higher education (Batalova & Fix, 2006).

The DREAM Act represented more than just a dream of citizenship; it represented an untapped potential contribution to the country's labor market and to society at large. One of the most evident problems for undocumented youth is their limited career prospects once they reach adulthood. Today, no provision of current law permits the government to take any account of the inequities of the

circumstances of undocumented students and or their potential contributions (Gonzales, 2009). On the contrary, undocumented students are subject to arrest and deportation regardless of how old they were when they arrived, who brought them here or under what circumstances, how much they have accomplished and contributed to the society, or how well they conducted their lives. Much of the scholarship on this topic suggests that undocumented students should not only be allowed to obtain legal residency, but also be allowed to work in the country legally. On average, this population has demonstrated that they possess the qualities, capabilities, and skills needed to invest politically and economically in a better future for themselves and for the entire nation.

Between 2006 and 2009, support for the DREAM Act grew among IHEs, including community and junior colleges; public and land-grant institutions; private, independent, liberal arts, and comprehensive institutions; and, minority serving institutions (Ortega, 2011). For the first time in its history, The College Board took an official position on a divisive issue and endorsed the legislation (Ramirez, 2009). The *Chronicle of Higher Education* ran numerous articles in support of the legislation. These organizations represent “a shared conviction that is vested in the value of opportunity and the continued assertion of the belief that higher education serves both public as well as individual ends” (p. 51).

A misperception that persists among many individuals in the country is that, by allowing the DREAM Act to pass, it could take away many seats in colleges and universities as well as financial aid from native-born students (Gonzales, 2009). This argument is countered by two points: these students

were raised in the U.S. so they are not very different from native-born students and, if in the U.S., college admission is based on merit, then the most qualified students should be given the slot, regardless of individual immigration history. The problem with undocumented students is that they are neither “non-resident aliens” (i.e., international and exchange students) nor “resident aliens” (i.e., “green card” holders). As a result, undocumented students are neither “fish nor fowl,” but trapped by the imprecise uses and applications of immigration categories, as the terms mean different things under different legal statuses (Olivas, 2009).

### **State-level DREAM Acts**

While Congress has not passed any form of the DREAM Act, ten states have developed so-called state-level DREAM Acts in order to create in-state resident tuition policies. Each state is allowed to determine its own criteria for residency. Texas defines residency based on domicile as well as other criteria, such as high school graduation, in order to qualify an undocumented student for in-state tuition (Salsbury, 2003). There are ten states that currently grant in-state or flat-rate tuition to unauthorized immigrants: California, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, and Washington.

Texas enacted an in-state tuition benefit law in 2001, the first in the nation along with California. “Of all ten states, Texas has seen the largest increase in enrollment since enacting its tuition benefit law. ...However, data indicate that many of the students who benefited from the Texas legislation were not unauthorized immigrants” (Ortega, 2011, p. 51). This is because the main

criteria in most states for in-state tuition are high school attendance and graduation. As a result, U.S. citizens may benefit disproportionately since they may qualify for in-state tuition in other states, whereas undocumented students would not. In-state tuition is thought to lower the drop-out rate of undocumented Hispanic students since it gives them hope for higher education. This positive effect does not extend to employment, however, since undocumented immigrants are not eligible to work after they graduate, given current federal laws.

Across the U. S., different states have taken specific measures on in-state tuition that impact the undocumented student population at IHEs, often with the effect of limiting access. In 2007, Oklahoma became the first state to retract its policy (Hebel, 2007). That same year, Arizona decided to no longer enroll undocumented students as in-state residents (Olivas, 2009). In Georgia, a waiver system had for years allowed each public college to accord in-state status to up to two percent of the undocumented student population; however, in 2007, a new statute took effect and, by 2008, undocumented students were unable to establish in-state residency (Olivas, 2009). Missouri and Virginia introduced bills to ban all undocumented students from public institutions. In 2008, South Carolina became the first state to enact a statute barring undocumented students from attending state institutions, and Alabama has also enacted regulation to do the same (Olivas, 2009). Other states, such as Connecticut, are debating this provision. On the other hand, Kansas granted in-state tuition status in 2004, a success attributed to proponents framing the legislation as a public education issue rather than as immigration policy (Reich & Mendoza, 2008).

While state-level legislation has been a positive step toward ensuring access to higher education for undocumented students, it is not clear whether schools are adhering to the intent of these laws or the extent to which they provide equitable access to services (Contreras, 2009). The actual oversight of state level DREAM Act laws rely on the interpretation and implementation efforts of higher education administrators and staff. There is little information about the experiences of undocumented Latino students as they pursue higher education in states with DREAM Act policies. In addition, Flores (2010) notes that state-level DREAM Acts lack uniformity across the policies passed in the ten states. The policies have different residency requirements and varying criteria regarding the earning of a GED diploma. As is often the case, these laws are criticized, implemented unfairly, vulnerable to interpretation, and open to challenges (Salsbury, 2003). Further, IHEs often have their own policies on admitting undocumented students, regardless of state laws.

### **Federal and state financial aid**

The cost of higher education is a significant barrier for many undocumented students. The federal Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) essentially states that no undocumented student may receive any post secondary educational benefit on the basis of residency in a state unless a citizen is eligible for the same benefit. Although some states offer in-state tuition to undocumented students if residency requirements are met, many require them to pay out-of-state tuition as an international student, which is often cost prohibitive. Many private scholarships

require citizenship or other legal status, although some private colleges can offer scholarships or grants. There are also private scholarships that disregard immigration status, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Another issue related to access to higher education is financial aid because, in general, undocumented students are ineligible for federal and state financial aid (Olivas, 2009). Texas is among one of the more generous states toward undocumented students; it is one of only three states (along with New Mexico and Oklahoma) that allow access to state-level financial assistance (Olivas, 2009; Zota, 2009). Dougherty, Nienhuser and Vega (2010) speculate on why Texas, clearly a politically conservative state, would be one of the first to enact in-state tuition. They contend that it was due to the strong influence of the business community in the political process.

### **Martinez v. California**

A highly significant challenge to in-state tuition laws occurred in California in 2008 in the case of *Martinez et al. v. The Regents of the University of California et al.* The plaintiffs argued that in-state tuition violated federal law by providing a benefit to undocumented students that was not extended to U.S. citizens. In 2010, the California Supreme Court ruled against the plaintiffs. Of particular relevance to this thesis study, the Texas Attorney General, Greg Abbott, subsequently concluded that this ruling in California applied to Texas and that Texas would adhere to the ruling (personal communication with Bill Fly, Texas State University attorney, April 19, 2011).

## **UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT POPULATION**

### **Hispanic students in higher education**

Arbona and Nora (2007) observe that, although Hispanics are increasingly gaining access to higher education, they achieve a lower college graduation rate. The percentage of 25-29 year old Hispanics with a college degree was 10% in 2002, as compared to African-American (18%) or White (34%) groups. Extrapolating from U.S. Department of Education (2010) statistics, between 2008 and 2010, the Latino graduation rate from college was 16% in both Texas and at the national level. In contrast, the graduation rate for "non-resident aliens" was 23% and 25% respectfully. It is most likely that the "non-resident alien" population does not include any undocumented students, unless they have overstayed their visa.

### **Undocumented students in U.S.**

Undocumented Latino students who successfully persist to the point of higher education represent a marginalized group compared to the number of undocumented students enrolled in the kindergarten through twelfth grade sector (Contreras, 2009). There are an estimated 1.5 million undocumented students currently residing in the U.S., of which approximately one-half arrived in the U.S. prior to age sixteen (Passel & Cohn, 2009). According to research by the Urban Institute (Passel, 2003), it is estimated that 80,000 undocumented children have lived in the U. S. for at least five years or longer. Of this number, in 2000, only one-sixth to one-fifth failed to complete high school, leaving an estimated 65,000 undocumented students who graduate from high school each year. Amaya et al,

(2007) note that many of these undocumented students are honor students, athletes, student leaders, and aspiring professionals. Yet, because of their immigration status, the majority of these young people are unable to access higher education. Even if they go to college, they are not legally able to obtain employment upon graduation.

The number of undocumented students decreases as they reach a higher level of education, specifically after the twelfth grade. These students are less likely to be skilled in navigating the college admission process or to even be aware that they are eligible to go on to higher education (Contreras, 2009). Accordingly, it is not surprising to see fewer undocumented students attending IHEs in the U. S. Of the estimated 65,000 undocumented high school graduates, around 13,000 enroll in public IHEs across the country (Passel, 2006). It is not known how many of these students actually graduate, since it is extremely difficult to track this demographic group. Part of the difficulty is that undocumented students are a vulnerable group whose identity must be protected, as they are at potential risk for deportation.

### **Undocumented students in Texas**

It is difficult to estimate the number of undocumented students currently living in Texas. In public education, federal guidelines prohibit questions of legal status; while for higher education, residency is established by how long an individual has lived in a state, not by legal status (Combs, n.d.). As the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, Combs estimates that there were 135,000 undocumented children in Texas public schools in 2004-05, or about 3% of the

total school population. This website contends that, “The number of undocumented immigrants attending college in Texas also is unknown, as is the number of those paying in-state tuition rates.” Compared to other sources, this figure seems low. Flores (2010) states that Texas and California have the largest groups of undocumented students enrolled in IHEs: 24% in California and 14% in Texas.

A recent study indicates a steady yearly increase in the overall number of undocumented students and in their percentage of the total student enrollment in Texas, particularly in community colleges (Jauregui, Slate & Brown, 2008). It appears that community colleges may provide the degree of safety and assurance undocumented students seek in an IHE. Szelenyi and Chang (2002) found that community colleges are open-admission institutions that educate a greater majority of underrepresented student populations and, therefore, many students are drawn to these IHEs. Hispanics comprise the group with the largest percentage of enrollment in community colleges. Community colleges are a major source of students who go on to enroll in four-year universities, including undocumented students.

### **RESEARCH ON UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS**

Although literature exists on first and second generation immigrants, there is a lack of research on the undocumented student population in the U. S. (Perez et al., 2009). “Much of the scholarship on Latino political participation fails to address the complexity of their legal status and the salience for Latino communities” (Gonzales, 2008). Russell (2007) notes, “As is true for immigration

issues in general, public opinion is divided on how states should respond, and emotions run high.”

Dozier (2001) compared the academic performance of documented and undocumented international students at an urban community college in New York. This study was innovative since most prior research on international students has focused on documented students. Undocumented students are often very successful in higher education and possess strong academic skills. The research examined the college records of 540 community college students (294 documented and 246 undocumented). Results showed that the undocumented students scored lower on mathematics placement tests but higher on reading and writing. The outcomes of the documented students were better, however, as they had higher grade point averages and fewer academic problems (probations and dismissals). An important recommendation of the study is that documented and undocumented students should be treated as two separate groups as they face very different opportunities and challenges.

In a similar study, Levin et al. (2010) found that Native-American, African-American, and undocumented students continue to lag behind affluent white students. The study was conducted at California community colleges to identify programs that have demonstrated success (or potential) at improving academic achievement. The targeted programs were aimed at transferring students to four-year colleges, workforce participation, and developmental education. In addition to the critical role of faculty, successful programs demonstrated four key components of program personnel: 1) cohesion as a consistent unit, 2)

cooperation toward common goals and forming positive working relationships with each other and students, 3) connection with both internal (academic departments) and external (industry representatives) entities, and 4) consistency of promoting program goals.

Perez et al. (2009) examined 104 undocumented Latino immigrant students to better understand factors that led to academic resilience despite the marginalization that they experienced due to their legal and social status. Risk factors associated with this group include elevated feelings of societal rejection, low parental education, and high employment hours during school. Protective factors were a supportive social network including parents and friends as well as participation in school activities. The findings suggest that students with high levels of protective factors reported more academic success than students with similar levels of risk factors but lower levels of protective factors. This study illustrates that there is a probability of variation among risk and protective factors in this population.

In another study, Perez et al. (2010) explored the civic engagement patterns of undocumented Mexican-origin students. Civic engagement was defined as providing social service, activism, tutoring, or functionary work. The researchers surveyed 126 students and found that 90% of students reported being civically engaged. The students also reported high feelings of rejection, part-time employment, and a heavy load of household responsibilities. Higher civic engagement was found among female students and those with higher

academic achievement and extracurricular participation. In contrast, older students were more likely to engage in activism.

Stebbleton, Huesman, and Kuzhabekova (2010) explored immigrant college students' sense of self-rated belonging and satisfaction compared to non-immigrant college students. They used the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey based on over 55,000 undergraduate students at six large research institutions across the U.S. Immigrant student responses indicate a much lower sense of belonging and satisfaction. This finding was consistent regardless of how old the immigrant student was upon arrival in the U.S. These results have implications for immigrant students' persistence toward graduation.

Contreras (2009) studied undocumented Latino students and the challenges of persisting in college. The researcher conducted a qualitative case study of twenty students enrolled in multiple IHEs across Washington State. She used semi-structured interviews in order to understand the challenges they faced in Washington State. Despite a range of backgrounds, students shared common themes around living in fear, financial barriers, campus experiences, and concerns about the future. Despite these challenges, the findings emphasize that undocumented Latino students are determined, hard working, engaged, and optimistic.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THESIS STUDY**

Undocumented immigration has always occurred in the U.S., but only recently has it become a highly controversial political issue. A significant shift happened over the past century as the majority of immigrant groups entering this

country were no longer predominately Europeans or Asians, but closer neighbors of the U. S. Today, most immigrants come from Latin America, and the vast majority are from Mexico. In addition, larger percentages of immigrants are entering the U.S. without authorization or overstaying their authorization. Given the complexity of this topic and the strong positions that it evokes from both sides of the issue, it is important to understand the dynamics of undocumented immigrants, including students, from a rational perspective. This is particularly relevant given the close proximity of Texas to Mexico and the large percentage of undocumented immigrants, including students, in Texas.

Research shows that undocumented students are a vulnerable population who are particularly vulnerable to the impact of policies at the national, state, and institutional level. They are affected by the interaction of political, social, economic, cultural, and legal factors. Despite the relatively large percentage of undocumented immigrant students living in the U.S. today, there is very limited research focused on their academic and life experiences. They are often referred to as "living in the shadows," but undocumented students also often live in silence. It seems likely that most Americans are not aware of who they are, what they contribute to society, their goals, and why they persist in attaining a higher education despite the many barriers that they face. This study is important since it appears that this population has not been adequately studied and is facing significant challenges in the current climate in the U.S., including proposed immigration reform and the failure to implement the DREAM Act.

This thesis study is relevant since it will add to the growing literature on the academic and life experiences of undocumented Hispanic students in higher education. There are very few qualitative studies that involve actually interviewing the students themselves. [Arbona & Nora (2007) and Contreras (2009) are notable exceptions.] There are numerous non-scholarly reports that profile undocumented students, such as Gonzales (2009) and the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education (2007). There are also numerous non-scholarly profiles on the internet (e.g., Canales, 2010; Dreamer, 2010; Ramirez, 2010; Ulmer, 2010). This thesis study will add to the research literature by giving a voice to undocumented Hispanic students enrolled at a particular comprehensive public IHE: Texas State University-San Marcos.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **ETHICAL GUIDELINES**

A critical consideration in conducting this research study was to ensure that ethical guidelines were followed in the protection of human subjects. Part of the planning process was to anticipate the requirements of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Texas State and to comply with federal regulations. Texas State requires that all research projects involving human subjects, even for student projects, must receive approval from the IRB. Over the course of several weeks, in consultation with the thesis supervisor and the chair of the Texas State IRB, the researcher developed a proposal for submission to the IRB.

There were essentially four steps to IRB proposal development process. First, the researcher and supervisor completed the CITI training, which consisted of several on-line self-paced and objectively evaluated components on research ethics. Second, the original proposal was completed and submitted, requesting an expedited review (since the study did not involve children or medical research). The proposal consisted of three parts: study synopsis, consent form, and the interview guide for student participants. Third, based on the initial positive feedback from the committee, but with a request more detail on the methodology, the proposal was revised and resubmitted. Fourth, the researcher met with the IRB committee to answer questions and to clarify the research design, particularly regarding safeguards on confidentiality and protection of participants' identity. The proposal was approved at the meeting. The final IRB

documents are included in the Appendices as follows: synopsis (Appendix A), consent form (Appendix B), and interview guidelines (Appendix C).

There were three ethical guidelines that were particularly relevant to this study. As discussed in Rubin and Babbie (2011a), there are six broad categories of ethical issues in the conduct of social work research: 1) voluntary participation and informed consent, 2) no harm to participants, 3) anonymity and confidentiality, 4) deceiving subjects, 5) analysis and reporting, and 6) weighing benefits and costs. The IRB committee was most concerned with maintaining voluntary participation and informed consent, ensuring no harm, and protecting confidentiality. As evident in the documents submitted, each of these concerns was specifically addressed.

The synopsis explained how voluntary participation and informed consent were to be ensured. According to the IRB, voluntary participation is a process while informed consent is a document. The synopsis and consent form addressed how any potential harm would be minimized through protections for confidentiality. While the researcher could not promise anonymity since the data would be collected through interviews, confidentiality could be safeguarded through how the interviews were arranged and conducted as well as how the data was stored and analyzed. Most importantly, procedures were implemented so that the researcher would not necessarily know the identity of the student participant, as explained in the synopsis. This also helped to ensure that no harm would come to the participant in terms of risking the disclosure of his or her identity. Deception was not a factor in this study, and data have been honestly

analyzed and accurately reported. Finally, the researcher asserted, and the IRB agreed, that any potential risks to the participants were minimal, given the safeguards, and that the potential benefits to the university and future undocumented students were sufficient to justify the study.

### **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study was planned and implemented using a qualitative research design. In contrast to quantitative hypothesis-based research methods, in which numerical data are collected for statistical analysis, qualitative data are narrative. According to Rubin and Babbie (2011b), “qualitative research methods attempt to tap the deeper meanings of particular human experiences and are intended to generate qualitative data: theoretically richer observations that are not easily reduced to numbers” (p. 437). Qualitative research pursues comprehensiveness in exchange for specificity in that it is an in-depth exploration of a few participants rather than a broad exploration of a large group. It is particularly appropriate if the purpose of the research is exploratory, in which the researcher is seeking a preliminary understanding of a problem or population.

There are four main categories of qualitative research methods in social work: naturalism (field research), grounded theory (inductive logical process), participatory action (empowerment), and case studies (descriptive). This thesis study used a multiple case study approach in which an in-depth examination through face-to-face interviews of a limited number of individuals allows for a thorough description of his/her perspective and situation. This is in contrast to group level studies that attempt to support theory through extensive data

collection on a large and broad cross-section of a population, such as using surveys or standardized instruments. This methodology has a long-standing and well-respected reputation in social work research.

There are many advantages to qualitative research. It yields a depth of understanding of attitudes and behaviors and insights into particular individuals and groups. It allows for flexibility in data collection, and it is cost effective. On the other hand, it is vulnerable to subjectivity, results cannot be generalized to a larger population, and findings cannot support causal inferences. For purposes of this thesis study, a qualitative approach allowed for the student participants to tell their stories to an interested listener who was able to “give voice” to their perspective in a way that is not otherwise available to them given their undocumented status.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deep understanding of the academic and life experiences of undocumented Hispanic-origin students at Texas State. It was based on a thorough review of the scholarly literature. Two samples were identified: faculty, staff and administrators (referred to as “key informants”) and undocumented students (referred to as “participants”). While both groups were essentially participants, they are distinctly different.

“Informants” are members of a group deemed knowledgeable about another group and who are willing to talk about the other group, while “respondents” are people who provide information about themselves (Rubin & Babbie, 2011e). The researcher chose to refer to respondents as “participants” in this study in order to

emphasize the interactive nature of the data collection. Each group is discussed separately below.

Qualitative research methodology uses non-probability sampling procedures, which means that the selection of study participants is non-random. Random selection was not an option due to the lack of a sampling frame (a list of all possible participants from which a sample can be selected). Therefore, the sample is not representative and results cannot be generalized to the larger population which, in this case, would be undocumented Hispanic-origin undergraduate students attending Texas State. Non-random sampling is preferred, however, when potential participants are difficult to locate, the population is small, and the topic is sensitive (Rubin & Babbie, 2011e). In this thesis study, two types of non-probability sampling were used (as described below). First, with purposive sampling, key informants regarded to have expertise on this population were identified and contacted. Second, with snowball sampling, the key informants were asked to identify other key informants or potential student participants.

There are three general types of qualitative interviewing: informal conversation, general interview guide, and standardized interviews (Rubin & Babbie, 2011c). In this thesis study, two interview approaches were used with each group. For the key informant group, a conversational approach consisting of no set format ranged from very brief and limited contacts to more extended conversations. This format is extremely flexible and unstructured with no pre-determined set of questions. However, this approach is distinct from an informal

conversation since it is geared toward eliciting relevant information from the interviewee rather than an exchange of information.

For the student participants, an interview guide approach was used in which the interviews were planned in advance and were more structured than informal conversations. A semi-structured and flexible format was employed, as described below. An interview guide was used in which the same questions in the same sequence were asked of each participant (see Appendix C), but there was leeway for the researcher to probe certain responses and to pursue follow-up queries at the researcher's discretion. This maximized both the comparability of responses and the comprehensiveness of the data. A standardized interview does not allow this flexibility and follows the same set format for all respondents.

### **TIMELINE**

The study was conducted over a one-semester timeline, beginning in mid-January 2011 and finishing in the end of April 2011. The IRB process took approximately six weeks for the full review and approval, as discussed above. At the same time that the IRB process was pursued, the researcher was conducting an intensive literature review of relevant scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed journals as well as reputable web-based sites. The researcher was also meeting with key informants (TXST faculty, staff and administrators), in order to gain a greater understanding of variables on campus that influence undocumented students. In addition, it was hoped that meeting with key informants early in the timeline would facilitate the identification of potential student participants to be interviewed after the IRB approval was received.

On March 3, the IRB approved the research proposal. At this point, the researcher began to contact key informants to gather data and to request assistance in identifying and recruiting potential student participants. This was a slow process of communication through phone, email, meetings, and follow-up contact. Several key informants had agreed earlier to assist with recruiting students but subsequently did not follow through on this commitment, even after the IRB was approved. Throughout the month of March, eight potential students were identified and recruited to be interviewed. One student did not respond to a key informant's email, and another student who was scheduled to be interviewed did not show up and did not respond to follow-up attempts to reschedule. One key informant reported that several emails had been sent to students, but there were no replies. A draft of the thesis report was submitted to the Honors Program Director in mid-March.

Six students were interviewed by mid April. Meanwhile, additional informal conversations with key informants were initiated and conducted. At the conclusion of the data collection phase in mid-April, the total sample consisted of 30 individual: 24 key informants and six student participants. Data analysis was conducted in early April and the report written and revised in the last two weeks of April. The thesis project was presented at the University Honors Program Undergraduate Research Forum on April 29, a final draft was turned in to the Honors Program Director on May 2, and the approved final version was signed and submitted on May 9, 2011.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE UNIVERISTY**

According to the Texas State (TXST) webpage, the university currently enrolls 32,572 students in undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degree programs in nine colleges. The student body is diverse and, in 2010, the University achieved the distinction of being a Hispanic Serving Institute (HSI). One aspect of the HSI distinction is that, for the first time, Hispanics comprise more than 25 % of the TXST undergraduate student body. In fall 2010, there were 6,961 Hispanic undergraduate students enrolled (Hendricks, 2010). These numbers represent the success of TXST at recruiting and retaining Hispanic students, while at the same time increasing the diversity of the university. Thirty-five percent of students are ethnic minority and, according to the university homepage, *Hispanic Outlook* ranks TXST as thirteenth in the nation for the number of bachelor degrees awarded to Hispanic students. More information on the student body, including Hispanic students, is available from the *University Factbook* via the university website.

Texas State was established in 1903. In 2006, the university celebrated one hundred years of Latino presence with speeches, events, and publications. The university celebrated the first Hispanic student, Maria Elena Zamora O'Shea, and the first Hispanic faculty members, Olga Dominguez and Frances Gonzales, as well as the current Hispanic students, faculty, and staff. In 2007, Texas State was named as among eleven universities nationwide to be recognized as a model for Hispanic student success in higher education (Hendricks, 2007). Additionally, a new report from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the Education Trust, said that other IHEs can promote

greater academic success among Hispanic students by emulating the practices of Texas State and ten other American public universities with higher-than-average graduation rates for Hispanic students (Hendricks, 2007).

The University has a non-discrimination policy which prohibits discrimination against any person based on race, color, national origin, age, sex, religion, disability, or sexual orientation. Despite their lack of citizenship, undocumented students still have rights and, at Texas State, are protected under the national origin category of this policy.

The university is located in central Texas. The university attracts students primarily from this region, which has a large Hispanic population. The campus lies approximately fifty miles from San Antonio, which is one of the largest cities in the U.S.-and ethnically diverse, with a Hispanic/Latino population approaching 60% in 2000 (City of San Antonio Official Website, 2010).

### **KEY INFORMANTS**

This section will describe the specific methodology used for the interviews with key informants, who were selected Texas State faculty, staff, and administrators. There were three goals for key informants: 1) learn about their perceptions and experiences in working with undocumented students or their expertise in this area; 2) gain a greater perspective about how Texas State approaches this vulnerable group; and, 3) request assistance in recruiting potential student participants.

## **Procedure:**

This exploratory study used a qualitative approach ranging from brief contacts to lengthy face-to-face conversations lasting from fifteen to sixty minutes involving selected faculty, staff, and administrators from Texas State. A distinction is made between staff and administrators in that the former have direct and daily contact with students. It was originally projected that 10-15 informants would be contacted and interviewed, although this number eventually grew to 24 informants. One potential staff informant referred by a faculty member did not respond to the researcher's email.

Key informants were contacted via telephone or email. The shorter conversations typically led to the identification of another potential informant. When an informant seemed to have knowledge of undocumented Hispanic students and was willing to meet, an appointment was scheduled for a personal conversation. As a result, the extent of information gathered from each key informant varied.

While pursuing IRB approval, the researcher identified key informants and made initial contacts. Data collection entailed three aspects. First, if the informant knew of an undocumented student and was willing to assist in recruiting his/her participation, then the researcher arranged an informal conversation. Second, if a potential informant had valuable information about this population but did not know any undocumented students, then he or she was also engaged in a conversation. Third, if a potential informant did not have expertise or know of any undocumented students, he or she was asked to refer

the researcher to another key informant who might be of assistance, and a meeting was not scheduled.

In the conversations, after introductions and describing the thesis study, the researcher would explain the ethical guidelines of the study and clearly state that IRB approval was being pursued or had been received (depending upon the date when the meeting occurred). The researcher showed the key informant a copy of the IRB proposal. Then, the researcher would ask about the individual's knowledge, experience, and or awareness of undocumented students on campus. Typical questions asked by the researcher would include: Are you aware of any undocumented students at TXST? Do you know of any services or programs specifically for undocumented students at Texas State? What are the unique challenges faced by undocumented students? What do you regard as the most pressing needs for this group?

**Sample:**

Although the initial goal was to meet with 10 to 15 individuals including faculty, staff, and administrators, the researcher actually met with a total of 24 individuals. The key informants included ten faculty members, four student support staff members, and ten administrators (including two deans). There were ten females and fourteen males. Approximately half of the key informants included individuals from Hispanic origin, the other half were mostly Anglos. While in the process of meeting with key informants, the researcher learned about an opportunity to meet with the University President, Dr. Denise Trauth, during one of her student-oriented Open Door Sessions in February 2011.

During this short meeting, the researcher shared an executive summary of the thesis proposal.

A list with the names and job titles of key informants for the study is provided below. Only individuals who provided some level of data for the study are included. That is, if the researcher spoke with a faculty, staff, or administrators who stated clearly and quickly that they had no contact or information about this student group and could not provide a name of another potential informant, then they are not included on the list. If an individual spoke with the researcher, even to a limited degree about the study and/or undocumented students or provided the name of another potential informant, then this individual is included. The researcher specifically asked each informant for permission to use his/her name in the study. Since this was student research, a written consent form for this group was not required, although informants were included in the IRB application.

### **KEY INFORMANT LIST**

*Note: The names and titles presented below were collected from the 2010-2011 faculty and staff directory downloaded from CatsWeb via the University website.*

Ms. Laura Cano Amaya, Coordinator, International Office and Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs

Dr. Brock J. Brown, Professor, Department of Geography

Dr. Ronald C. Brown, Dean, University College

Dr. Mary Jo Garcia Biggs, Associate Professor, School of Social Work

Dr. Jaime Chahin, Dean, College of Applied Arts

Dr. Jesus Francisco De La Teja, Chair and Professor, Department of History

Dr. Lawrence E. Estaville, Professor, Department of Geography

Ms. Shannon M. Fitzpatrick, J.D., Attorney for Students

Mr. William L. Fly, J.D., University Attorney

Dr. Paul Hart, Associate Professor, Department of History

Dr. Michael R. Heintze, Associate Vice President, Enrollment Management

Dr. Ronald Angelo Johnson, Assistant Professor, Department of History

Dr. Jon S. Lasser, Associate Professor, Education Administration and Psychological Services; Chair, TXST Institutional Review Board

Ms. Diann A. McCabe, Associate Director, University Honors Program

Dr. Michael Nelson Miller, Lecturer, Department of History

Mr. Christopher D. Murr, Director, Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships; Vice President of Enrollment Management

Ms. Susan R. Northcut, Sponsored Programs Compliance Specialist, Office of the Associate Vice President for Research

Ms. Elizabeth Ramos, Academic Advisor, College of Applied Arts

Dr. Ty Schepis, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology

Ms. Stella Silva, Associate Director, Multicultural Student Affairs

Ms. Michelle Monique Sotolongo, Academic Advisor, University College

Dr. Denise M. Trauth, President, Texas State University

Ms. Letricia Valdez, Graduate Research Assistant, Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs

Ms. Gloria R. Velasquez, Senior Lecturer, Department of Modern Languages

## **STUDENT PARTICIPANTS**

This section will describe the specific methodology used for the student participant interviews, who were undocumented Hispanic-origin undergraduate students enrolled at Texas State.

### **Procedures:**

This exploratory study used a qualitative approach consisting of semi-structured interviews involving students who volunteered to participate. It was originally targeted that ten participants would be identified and interviewed. If a key informant agreed to recruit a potential student participant, he or she contacted the student, explained the study and ethical protections (particularly confidentiality), and gave the student the option of arranging the interview indirectly through the informant or directly with the researcher. Of particular note, students were told that they could use a pseudonym and that they could use a confidant's phone or email (see IRB synopsis). In that way, the researcher would not know his or her actual name or contact information and, therefore, could not identify the student.

In the time frame set aside for interviews following IRB approval, eight students were initially identified for interviews: seven students contacted the researcher directly (although one of these eventually dropped out), and one did not reply to a faculty email. Several key informants who had agreed to help recruit students were sent follow-up emails requesting assistance following IRB approval, but they did not fulfill their commitment in this regard. Given the slow nature of this process and the limited time frame of the study, the number of

participants was small. Nonetheless, the qualitative approach allowed for in-depth interviews with these participants ranging from sixty to ninety minutes. This resulted in rich data that compensated for the smaller sample size.

**Sample:**

A total of six undergraduate undocumented students of Hispanic origin participated in the study. As it turned out, one student was no longer undocumented and had just achieved Permanent Residency Status. However, this student wanted to participate and to speak of his/her experiences as an undocumented student and was included in the sample. One student had graduated the previous year; it was considered reasonable that he/she could speak about his/her experiences at TXST and was also included in the sample. One student was recruited through another student who had been interviewed and contacted his/her friend on behalf of the researcher.

Toward the end of the study, the researcher learned that there were 134 undocumented students enrolled at Texas State. Furthermore, the researcher learned that the University must report the number of undocumented students to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. After almost three months of being told that the identity of undocumented students is not known on campus unless they self-identify and that there is no formal record of this population, the researcher learned that all undocumented students must sign an affidavit when they apply to TXST (see Appendix D). On this form the student must confirm the following five points: the information provided is accurate, the student graduated from a Texas high school or received a GED certificate, resided in Texas for

three years leading up to this graduation, resided in Texas for 12 months prior to enrollment, and has or will file an application for permanent residency as the earliest opportunity. Thus, it seems that either certain staff members did not know of this policy or did not want to reveal it to the researcher.

The population of undocumented undergraduate students on campus is relatively small, and the exact proportion of these that are Hispanic is not known. It is assumed that the overwhelming majority are of Hispanic-origin given the larger demographic patterns of Texas. Furthermore, it is not known if the undocumented students are included in the total population of Hispanic students on campus, which is 6,961 students (Hendricks, 2010).

Participants were recruited and selected primarily through a snowball sampling method via key informants (as described above and in the IRB proposal in the Appendix A). After the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher asked key informants who were likely to know of potential participants to inform these students about the study and to give them the researcher's contact information. If students were interested in participating, they contacted the researcher directly. They were given the option of using a pseudonym and/or using a confidant's email or phone. After each interview and at the end of the data collection stage, all contact information was deleted.

While in the process of recruiting the students and at the interviews, students were told that their participation in this study would be entirely voluntary and ethical research guidelines would be followed in order to protect their identity and confidentiality. The researcher verbally explained the consent form while the

participant read it, and the participant was instructed to keep the form for his/her records since it was not signed (in order to maintain confidentiality). A copy of the consent form is provided in Appendix B.

The interview guideline questions were the same for all the participants and consisted of four parts (see Appendix C). The first part of the interview pertained to demographic information including age, gender, employment status, religious affiliation, native language, and income level. The second part of the interview asked about background information prior to attending Texas State. The third part of the interview consisted of questions dealing with the students' experiences at Texas State. This section included questions about their academic level, grades, and their academic experiences as an undocumented student at Texas State. The fourth section contained questions about the students' overall experiences in Texas and the U.S. Except for the demographic section, the rest of the interview allowed for students to share additional information with a closing open-ended question asking if they had any other information to share.

## CHAPTER III

### FINDINGS

#### QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis consists of “the non-numerical examination and interpretation of observations for the purpose of discovering underlying meaning and patterns of relationships” (Rubin & Babbie, 2011d, p. 478). There are two types of cross-case analysis: variable-oriented and case-oriented. In variable-oriented analysis, the emphasis is on using a relatively small number of variables to produce at least a partial, overall explanation of the patterns being studied. For example, demographic variables might be examined to determine if they can explain a particular outcome, although there is no attempt to explain a specific individual’s behavior or motivations.

Case-oriented analysis, as used in this thesis, places the emphasis on a full understanding of the factors that determine a particular person’s behavior or motivations. The case-oriented approach cannot be used to understand an entire population. However, by understanding one or several people in depth, the researcher can identify factors of the individual’s experience that can point to larger social variables. There is no expectation that the cases will resemble each other; but, multiple cases can suggest larger patterns.

The findings will be presented in two separate sections: key informants (n=24) and student participants (n=6). For the key informants, major themes will be identified and discussed across all individuals. Selected quotes illustrating

these major themes will be provided. For the student participants, major themes will be presented within each category of the interview with illustrative quotes.

### **KEY INFORMANTS**

Most informants seemed willing and interested in talking about the study and contributing valuable information. They were quite open and forthright in providing both factual information and their own opinions. However, some informants seemed guarded and protective of these students and, although willing to engage in conversation, were skeptical. Therefore, in order to avoid disclosing sensitive information, the researcher chose to not to link the source of data to any particular informant, even though all informants gave their permission to use their name. The researcher came to realize the highly sensitive nature of studying undocumented students on the part of some informants, so this safeguard was instigated to protect their privacy.

There were two major themes that emerged from conversations with the key informants: benign neglect and healthy paranoia. Regarding benign neglect, most informants seemed quite knowledgeable about undocumented students in higher education, even if they did not seem to really understand the unique challenges facing this group. They seemed genuinely concerned about the needs of this group and sincerely interested in helping them to succeed at TXST.

Similarly, some key informants indicated a limited awareness about undocumented students at TXST. While there is a wide array of support services available to these students, there is no single office or program that helps them to navigate through TXST. There is not a student organization specifically for

these students. Of course, it makes sense that such offices, programs, or organizations would be highly visible and that this might not be desirable. On the other hand, there is the perception that it is very confusing for students, who may not have any idea how to seek assistance. Given that this population is overwhelmingly first generation college students who do not have any cultural or family background in how to manage the bureaucracy of higher education, it is understandable that some key informants would wonder if the students had sufficient support.

*“There is no office that addresses this issue and there hasn’t been a systematic effort by the university to address this student population.”*

*“Sometimes students end up in my office and that is when I realize there are a lot of myths and misinformation at Texas State.”*

*“The question becomes, how can you help these students without harming them and making them safe?”*

While the researcher noticed a general lack of knowledge about this population specifically at TXST, this finding is not to be equated with a lack of concern. At the beginning of the study when the researcher was looking for people to contact, there was a large number of potential informants who stated that they did not interact with undocumented students, were not aware of undocumented students on campus, and wondered how they were able to attend college. They often seemed surprised to learn from the researcher that there were actually undocumented students at TXST or that there were services

on campus to assist undocumented students. Some of these early potential informants did not have any idea who the researcher could contact for more information. This is a perfectly understandable response given the nature of the topic, but was an interesting finding regardless.

A related finding was that throughout most of the study, no key informant seemed to know how many undocumented students are enrolled at TXST. Over the course of the study, the researcher would ask this question during each conversation. Most of the Hispanic key informants seemed surprised when the researcher asked this question. Most of them said that they did not know and that it was not possible to know the answer to this question.

*“I have no idea how many undocumented students there are and I do not want to know because it is very risky.”*

*“It is against federal law to identify undocumented students on your system.”*

However, after more than two months of doing research and meeting with key informants, the researcher learned that, as of the fall of 2010, there were 134 undocumented students enrolled at Texas State. The researcher did not clarify if this figure pertained to the total enrollment or undergraduate only.

*“We are asked to report this number each year to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Not only do we know who they are, but we are required to know and report these students annually, especially those whose status changes.”*

The second major theme emerging from the interviews pertain to "healthy paranoia." A few of the key informants expressed a willingness to discuss this topic with the researcher, yet seemed distinctly reluctant to provide useful information or to assist the researcher in recruiting potential student participants, despite initial reassurances that they would do so. This was an unexpected outcome that caused some confusion and consternation on the part of the researcher. These informants seemed to have what might be called a "healthy paranoia" on the topic of undocumented people, especially students, and to view the researcher as somewhat of a threat. Over time, the researcher came to appreciate that for many key informants, the current political climate nationally and in Texas makes this topic a highly sensitive one that generates real fear. This was one of the more significant findings of the study.

*"Today the people who are more critical of illegal immigration often belong to families of immigrants. I also think that the problem right now is that there is a fear of xenophobia and people think that immigrants are coming for criminal matters."*

*"The economical situation that we are facing right now is not favorable and the misunderstanding of the immigration issue creates skepticism about the DREAM Act. People believe that if students are given legal residency, they will compete and get their jobs."*

*"I think today the issue of illegal immigration is more cyclical. This happens when a society is confronted itself with political tensions and a bad economy, a society with high degrees of uncertainty."*

On the other hand, many informants seemed willing to be very frank and revealing in their conversations. They did not express particular fear for the students and felt that they were quite safe at TXST and not at any potential risk of disclosure and potential deportation. In order to protect the privacy of the informants, a breakdown of this difference of perspective will not be pursued, other than to say that it did appear to split according to ethnicity, with some (but not all) Hispanic informants being more cautious, while only one Anglo informant expressed doubts about the safety of undocumented students at TXST. Despite this difference, all of the informants were uniformly concerned about maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the student participants. One of the most frequently asked questions was,

*“How are you going to recruit students, and how are you going to protect their identity?”*

As stated previously, some of the informants who had agreed to assist the researcher in identifying and recruiting potential students did not follow through on this commitment. The researcher concluded that perhaps a significant reason is that there was not sufficient time to build rapport and for the informant to trust the intentions of the researcher. It seemed that these particular key informants were very skeptical that such a study could be conducted in a way that would protect participants, even though the researcher had received IRB approval, and had even met personally with the IRB committee. After explaining the ethical safeguards of the study, some informants expressed specific concern for the safety of the researcher.

*“There is nothing wrong with having good intentions, but the school IRB won’t protect you from the federal law.”*

*“Good, that topic is very interesting, but be careful!” or “How many people know about this study?” and “You have to be very careful about what you do and how many people you talk to about your thesis.”*

*“What if ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] comes and asks you to disclose the information you gathered? You can say you don’t remember, but that does not mean they are not going to force you to disclose the information.”*

## **STUDENT PARTICIPANTS**

Although the six participants comprised an extremely low percentage of the entire undocumented population at Texas State (n=134), the interviews revealed unique, relevant, and rich information. As a result, the researcher was given the distinct opportunity to build rapport and to learn more about these students in a deep and meaningful way, despite the small sample size and the relatively short duration of the interviews (60-90 minutes). There was a considerable amount of narrative data collected, so these findings will identify significant finding with selected quotes.

Rather than looking for themes across responses from the entire interview, the data was analyzed within each category of the interview other than demographic data which is presented separately. The three categories of the

interview were: background information, current experiences at TXST, and experiences in the U.S. (see interview guidelines in Appendix C).

While this population portrayed some similar ideas and experiences, as well as challenges and goals, each of the students had a unique viewpoint about the questions asked. The researcher attempts to provide as much information as possible from the interviews, highlighting particularly salient quotes from all of the responses of the six participants for each question in the different sections. Many of the responses were quite brief, so only more relevant and detailed responses were selected to include.

**Overall Impressions:**

All of the students impressed the researcher as very interesting, strongly motivated, highly intelligent, and extremely mature individuals who have diligently pursued their education and have worked hard to achieve their success. They were uniformly open, friendly, and willing to be interviewed, as well as seemingly happy to share their stories. All of the students expressed a strong desire for the research to continue, despite the challenges of locating undocumented students on campus.

After interviewing this group of students and reflecting upon their stories, the researcher gained an immense respect and appreciation for them, and was grateful to have had the opportunity to talk with them. As a result, the researcher became even more empathic to their situation. The face-to face interviews revealed far more than could be learned through scholarly articles or web-based

resources. They left the researcher highly motivated to give them a voice so that their stories can be known.

All of the students have faced many challenges and have gone through difficult circumstances that most other students of their age have not experienced. As the interviews progressed, the researcher began to realize just what it meant to be an undocumented student, even on a campus that is regarded as supportive. It is difficult to imagine that these students, who were raised in the U. S., cannot participate fully in this society simply because they lack a piece of paper. They face daily struggles that other documented students simply do not encounter, much less contemplate.

These students seem acutely aware that they are on the same level of academic and social skills as their classmates, yet they must be continuously cautious about their status and cannot plan for their future. It is particularly distressing to know that they have struggled so diligently for their education, yet they cannot take for granted that they will get a job when they graduate, or ever be able to legally work in the U.S.

While these students have gone through tremendous challenges, their stories are not known by most people at Texas State, who are often unaware that undocumented students actually attend college. Some of the most remarkable moments for the researcher came when one of the students revealed that he/she was reported to ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. This was a chilling memory for the student who feared possible deportation, despite having been a

model “citizen” and student. This really brought home for the researcher the daily stress of living with this undocumented status.

The researcher realized just how dedicated these students are to their dreams and how much they are willing to work to make them come true. As described below, most are high achieving students with strong GPAs (one student earning a 4.0), who are also working outside of school to finance their education. An amazing experience for the researcher was hearing about their long-term plans to give back to society and to help others: one of them wanting to create an organization for undocumented students on campus and another attending medical school.

Finally, although the stories of all of these students resemble some common patterns such as difficulties in adapting to the culture, learning the language, feeling unaccepted at times, having to fear deportation, and wanting to be given legal status, each of the stories and each of the students is unique.

### **Demographics profile of the sample:**

The following is an aggregate demographic description of the sample. Individual students are not profiled in order to protect their identity. This data pertains to questions 1-5 on the demographic information section of the interview guide. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 23 years. Gender included four females and two males. Regarding ethnicity, four respondents initially identified themselves as “Hispanic” and two by country of origin. The nationality of responses was: Mexico (3), Venezuela (1), Costa Rica (1), and Brazil (1). For religious affiliation, four identified as Christian, and two as non-

affiliated. Of the four Christians, one specified Catholic and one as Baptist. For native language, respondents were: Spanish (4), Spanish and English (1), and Portuguese (1). In terms of the language spoken at home, responses were: Spanish and English (3), Spanish (1), English (1), and Portuguese (1). Regarding income status, responses were low (5) and medium (1). Despite their legal status that denied legal access to work, most of them worked in order to pay for college and their everyday necessities. Xx of the students reported working as follows: 20-25/week (1), 30 hours/week (1), 10-55 hours/week (1), temporary during school breaks (1), not working (1) and not indicated (1). Of the three students who worked regularly, employment was indicated as working in a restaurant, cleaning houses, and babysitting.

### **Background Information:**

In this section, students were asked about why they decided to attend Texas State, their personal history prior to enrolling in TXST, their parent's history, and their immigration status. The responses of students to each section varied in detail, with some students being more expressive on some items and less on others.

**Question 6:** "What brought you to TXST?" the most common responses were that it was geographically proximate and that a family member and or friends attended the university. Four students mentioned a high school program or a particularly helpful high school teacher. One student made particular mention of the Bobcat Tram as a means of transportation to and from school.

Two students mentioned that it was affordable. Most of the participants specified going to college as an opportunity and saw education as extremely valuable.

While half of the participants seemed to be familiar with the application process, the rest considered it to be difficult. The students who considered the application process to be difficult attributed this to a lack of information available for them. In addition, these students also mentioned the greater amount of paperwork they had to complete and the lack of awareness about the laws in Texas that allowed them to attend college.

*“It was really hard because Senate Bill 1403 had just been approved and nobody really knew anything about it at Texas State.”*

*“It wasn’t as easy as it is for an American student. A lot of people did not have the information I needed. People did not know about the TASFA. When I called to ask about my application status I would say, ‘I am a senate bill 1403 student and want to know about my application,’ people did not know what I was talking about and still asked me for my social security number.”*

*“The application process was very tedious and I had to do things other students did not have to do. I also had to sign an affidavit in front of witnesses who were strangers to me. The affidavit said I would try to attain citizenship as soon as I could. I felt this was patronizing and I knew I had to do this and I tried to do this since I’ve been here. I felt like school saw I was here to use up resources and leave with no gains. I felt insulted. I also felt that federal regulations wanted to make things for me*

*as difficult as possible so that I would get disillusioned and thus marginalize myself.”*

**Question 7:** Regarding personal history prior to enrolling at Texas State, students initially focused on age: two were “brought over” at age 3, one at 4, one at age 11, one at 12, one at 13. Several stated that their parents explained their status to them, although they tended to keep it hidden from their friends.

*“I was always really embarrassed talking about my status. Most of my friends didn’t know I was undocumented and to this day many of them don’t know this either. For the longest time I hated the fact of being undocumented and for a long time I did not associate myself with the Mexican culture. I even tried to get my parents to talk to me and my sister only in English. I hated the fact of being Mexican for so long because I knew about my situation. I wanted so badly to be an American for a period of time. I do not hate being a Mexican anymore and I went back to my roots.”*

While some of the participants came with both of their parents, others came with a single parent. Because most of them have been in the U. S. for at least five years, they all seem to be not only very familiar, but fond toward the American culture and the country. One student said that the status was not a problem until it was time to drive. When asked about the transition of coming to the United States, most students described it as difficult. Some of the stories of the participants were similar in that they came to this country without knowing the real purpose of their journey.

*“I was told we were going on vacation.”*

*“I didn’t think I was going to be here for a long time.”*

One common characteristic of this group of students was that, while the students who came before age five learned the English language quickly and without many difficulties, the students who came after age ten said had more difficulties with the language. They had to work harder to be at the same or higher level of the rest of their classmates and to adapt to the culture.

*“It was extremely hard for me to learn English. I was super shy and it took me forever to start talking.” “It has definitely been a journey with many ups and downs, but I never gave up. There were many people on the way that always told me I could not attend Medical school without being legal, and yet here I am still fighting to be just like everybody else.”*

*“It was really hard at first because I did not know English. I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and I knew I was two years older than the rest of my classmates. I was held back because of this and this motivated me to do an entire summer of English courses. I took a placement test and passed it. Then I went from 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade and I began to apply myself even more and began taking ACC classes and graduated early from high school. In five years I went from being in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade to being a junior in college.”*

Some of the responses on personal history revealed how determined and hard working these students are in achieving their goals.

*“My dream since I was little has been to be a doctor, so that was my motivation that kept me focused in high school. I have good grades as an undergraduate student at Texas State and these good grades and very very hard work got me to the point where I am.”*

*“I came here because in my family's home, I was always told that education was the best way out.”*

**Question 8:** The third item in this section regarded student's parental history, students described either their mother or father coming to the U.S. alone or as a family. They described very complex family histories, such as blended families, single parent families, etc. Many spoke of financial hardship and sacrifices to enable them to grow up in the U.S. Some left relatively secure lives in order to pursue better opportunities, while some were very poor and struggling in their country of origin. No quotes are given here to illustrate the student's family transition to the U.S. since the responses were highly personal and deemed by the researcher to be too revealing.

**Question 9:** Asked if they considered themselves to be American despite their immigration status, students seemed to be surprised by this question and gave some really interesting answers. Usually students responded quickly to previous questions, but this one kept them thinking for a longer period of time and seemed to be a difficult one to answer at first. Overall, the overwhelming response was affirmative. This was attributed to growing up in this country, living the lifestyle, speaking the language, experiencing significant life events in the

U.S., and knowing no other culture. Two students commented on feeling that they were bi-cultural, seeing themselves as both Mexican and American.

*"I speak the language, I love the country. I want to fight in the armed forces. I feel more American than Mexican because I don't really know about Mexico."*

*"I consider myself American because even though I have different origins and respect them and cherish them, I also know that I have different values because of how both cultures have been combined."*

*"I do consider myself an American. I know the history of America, I've grown up in the American culture and I live the American lifestyle. I do not see any other reason why do not consider myself an American."*

*"I haven't felt like an American because I haven't had the same opportunities, but that is not to say that the U.S. is not welcoming because it has given me a lot. I have seen American students who party and use drugs, who have a social security and don't work, but could be doing something productive. This irritates me and sometimes made me want to go like, can I have your social security number so that I don't have to work under the table? I think many times you do not know what you have until you don't have it."*

*"I have spent half of my life in the U.S., it is definitely hard to call myself a true American after all the rejection and hard times I have encountered. However, in a way, yes I feel like I belong here more than I belong to*

*Mexico at this point, since the most important things in my life have happened in this country.”*

*“I grew up feeling American. However, over the years, wanting so badly to be American and because I did not fit in I pushed myself away from this thought. I identify with certain aspects of the American culture and more with a Mexican identity. Today, I am not American, not Mexican. I don’t think I belong to either.”*

**Question 10:** The open-ended question for this section, several students spoke about the emotional turmoil of their status, such as “extremely difficult,” “scared,” “absolutely terrible,” and “always afraid.” Some salient comments were:

*“I was trying to adapt to two different educational systems, while the Americans knew the system. I missed out on feeling included and now I’m trying to catch up.”*

*“The worst realization was when I felt discriminated against because of my ethnicity and feeling inferior, like a second class citizen.”*

*“I knew my mom was here because of me, so I knew that I had to apply myself.”*

*“I have been fighting my whole life to become a doctor.”*

In the initial stages of the interviews, the researcher noticed a gender difference in the responses. The female students seemed to be clear and at times brief, while the male students were for the most part were more detailed. For instance, when asked if they wanted to share additional information in this section, the female participants described working hard in school, missing out on

been involved in school, and not having the opportunities to drive and have an ID. Both male participants agreed that the issue of being undocumented didn't really come up until they were trying to get their driver's license.

*"This is when the fact the issue of being undocumented became more relevant to my life. I still don't have a license, I don't qualify for federal funds, and I can't travel abroad."*

*"When I was in high school I realized I couldn't get a driver's license and I felt absolutely terrible. It was the worse realization and the first time I felt discriminated against my ethnicity. I felt like a second class citizen and I would have taken the test, but I was not permitted the opportunities to carry out basic tasks of daily life."*

### **Current Experience at Texas State:**

In this section students were asked questions pertaining to their academic status, experiences and involvement at Texas State, impact of immigration status on their university career, extracurricular experiences, their contributions to campus life, quality of support services received, and their relationship to the TXST community. The participants interviewed seemed very goal oriented, hard working individuals, sympathetic to the needs of others, and very motivated.

**Question 11:** The students' academic level was broad: freshman, junior, senior (3), and first-year medical student. Majors listed were: Anthropology, Biology, Communication Studies, Geography (urban planning), International Relations/Social Work minor, and International Studies/Criminal Justice minor.

Five students indicated GPA as follows: 2.25, 2.5, 3.4 (2), and 4.0 (average = 3.1). All students expected to graduate within the next three years (one student has already graduated).

When asked what about their plans after graduating college, the students gave different answers such as volunteering abroad, finding a job, going to graduate, and helping people. Three students indicated post-secondary education (one to medical school and three to graduate school). Only two of the participants talked about the possibility of going back to their countries of origin.

*“My ultimate goal is to own an urban design firm and plan communities. I eventually want to go to Grad school in NYU or Cornell University, but I would really love to work anywhere in the U.S.”*

*“I am kind of in a limbo right now because if the DREAM Act does not pass, I can get a petition through my wife and if accepted I have to wait 10 years. I can also apply for a pardon in Mexico and, if it gets approved then I get to come back, but if not, I get to stay in Mexico. If I am not able to come back it will be very unfortunate because I love the U.S. and if America does not recognize me as a bright mind and asset for the economy, I would end up somewhere else, most likely Mexico. My parents have also told me that if I am not given legal status and find a job here, they are pretty sure I can go somewhere else in the world and work, and that the U.S. will be missing out on me.”*

*“My options are very limited. I cannot apply for jobs or internships here. Maybe I will wait for a couple of years for a change, but recent*

*experiences push me every day to the idea of going back to Mexico and applying to schools and jobs there. I am more critical of government policy and of the idea that undocumented students have a lot of hope and don't really have in mind that what they want to happen isn't going to happen. That is why I am preparing for my exodus."*

*"The Bible says, 'Freely you have received, freely you give.' There have been many people who helped me, and many people who need help. That is why I changed my major to International Relations and Social Work."*

**Question 12:** Most of the students stated that they have had a positive experience at TXST. Some of them agreed on how they have met wonderful professors who have guided them throughout this time, and other students said they liked the environment, the people, and opportunities to do research. One student who, because of personal circumstances not necessarily related to being "undocumented," considered the experience as a "rollercoaster" with some semesters being "really good" and others "really bad." The students also agreed on not being able to have the same opportunities other students have, such as receiving financial aid and being involved in campus activities due to work or family obligations.

*"I love Texas State, the environment, the people, everything. The best experience is the school itself. I got to experience TXST as my home. I can't really say that I had a bad experience."*

*“It was a great experience with lots of opportunities such as research and extracurricular activities.”*

*“Overall, wonderful! I’ve had numerous good teachers who I adore and been active in student orgs. I’ve learned a lot. I consider myself to be an intellectual and Texas State has expanded my knowledge. My education is priceless.”*

**Question 13:** Regarding how they perceive their status to have affected their experience at Texas State, this seemed to have some negative impact on some students.

*“It was hard to get financial aid for sure. Also some scholarships were only for residents or citizens. I could not travel or attend events for obvious reasons. I had to explain to my friends why I couldn’t do some things.”*

*“My status made me become self-conscious and introverted. I was always involved in high school. Ultimately, it has made me flip-flop. I am tired of being in the shadows.”*

*“My status has affected me negatively because though I am not an excellent student, I am a pretty good student, with honor status and I have made dean’s list the majority of the time. I have been offered work opportunities and internships, but I haven’t been able to get this experience because of my status.”*

*“The fact that I cannot work and college is expensive. I cannot really go out with my friends because of money or because I do not have an ID. I can’t drive to many college events and I can’t stay longer because of bus schedules. I get questioned a lot about why I don’t have an ID or driver’s license. When I call student services or financial aid, I have to figure out other ways to identify myself since I don’t have a Social Security number. It’s just a hassle. It’s made everything a bit more difficult than it has to be.”*

**Question 14:** Regarding extracurricular activities, four students indicated campus involvement and listed groups, one student was not involved on campus, and one student was not involved on campus but in the community.

Extracurricular activities on campus mentioned were: service activities (Bobcat Build and Love across Borders), Honors Program, academic and service honor societies, dance club, and church groups. Most stated that these activities were a positive experience.

*“I am a member of quite a few academic organizations on campus. I really enjoyed them. These are people who give their time because it is not required by a class. Some of the brightest people I have met.”*

Two students were involved in the community rather than on campus. One student indicated doing

*“1000 hours of community service.”*

Another was a part of the

*“...Texas DREAM Act Alliance, a youth activist group. This was definitely helpful. I had never really felt comfortable until I joined them.”*

**Question 15:** In general, students saw their attendance and pursuit of a degree at Texas State as beneficial to the university.

*“I think the whole world does. My ultimate goal is to give back to community or at least not overtake.”*

*“I think it does. I may not have legal status, but what I’ve learned here, I will take wherever I go and it will allow me to be successful in my future endeavors. This success will also reflect on the help some professors have given me during my stay at Texas State.”*

*“Yes, I think the goal of any university is to see their students grow, and I think I have used everything I learned at Texas State to keep growing.”*

**Question 16:** The participants had mixed views about the effectiveness of the information and services provided by Texas State. This question was very general and as a result students did not mention or criticize a particular service, but rather gave their opinion about how resources they have used at Texas State have helped them.

*“They provided me with everything they could.”*

*“Not necessarily, but I guess that goes for many colleges. I would like Texas State to have more linguistic courses. There is just so much*

*information. Texas State should not be held accountable, but each person should be responsible for finding out what they need.”*

*“Texas State does a decent job at providing students with what they need and could improve upon this. However, I think Texas State does a better job through extra-curricular activities. Most of the things that helped me or prepared me to be successful came from being involved in these activities.”*

**Question 17:** The relationship between undocumented students and the rest of the Texas State community, including faculty, staff, administrators, and students, appears to be good to most students, limited to one student, and poor to one student.

*“From the little bit of exposure I have had, I have had a good experience only to the extent that I can communicate and be listened. That’s really it. For instance, [I asked ASG] for help to create a student organization for undocumented students. They made a small effort to help.”*

*“I think the staff should be a little more aware that there are a lot of undocumented students who attend school. Some of them are completely clueless that some universities accept students without a Social Security number.”*

*“Oh, yea, I just think that people don’t really know about us.”*

*“Usually I do not disclose my status unless it interferes with something I am doing. Telling the staff was helpful to me, in that they were a little more understanding and tried to help me.”*

*“I think it is a very poor relationship. There was an instance last year when I went to talk to the [chair of a department] because I wanted to take a class. The chair was a very nice and sympathetic but didn’t think it was possible for me to be here because of my status. The chair tried to be helpful, but was not aware of how to go about it. I also talked with other professors and they wanted to help but could not help much. I also feel undocumented students have a stigma attached and because of this they prefer to stay unknown.”*

**Question 18:** This was an open-ended question on their overall experience at Texas State. Three students responded and shared some of the goals they have and for which they have been working so hard.

*“One of my advisors at Texas State told me one day that there was no way I could attend medical school because of my situation. I felt that I was working so hard for nothing. I started doing my own research; and, like I said, here I am and I proved her wrong.”*

*“I have tried working with other [Hispanic] student organizations on campus in order to create a student organization for undocumented students and anyone who supports us. Some of these organizations have helped me to contact other people who may be able to help. However, I*

*try to contact people and it didn't go further than that. When visiting with student organizations, I talk about my legal situation and say, 'Hi my name is...I am undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic.' At least I have intrigued peoples' minds."*

*"I feel like I have been pretty accepted and everyone is really interested."*

### **Experiences in the U.S.:**

This section asked about suggestions for improving relations with undocumented students on campus, their challenges and motivations as a student, their understanding of the current government position on immigration, the DREAM Act, and their desire for legal status.

**Question 19:** This item asked students about suggestion for universities across the U.S. for improving their relationship with the undocumented student population. Most students talked about improving access, such as the admission process and scholarships.

*"I would love to see is having the application process for undocumented students easier and more and the offer of more scholarships to enhances these students' success."*

*"What I would like to see is making the admission process easier. It was really tedious and I had to do things that other students didn't have to do."*

*"Jesus, first and foremost Georgia. They need to open their eyes and doors. They passed recent legislation that prevents undocumented*

*students from going to college. And across the nation, continue forging alliances in the undocumented community.”*

*“Pass the DREAM Act! Soon!”*

**Question 20:** This question asked about their experiences in the U.S. as an undocumented student. One student spoke powerfully about being reported to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

*“It’s been an extremely hard challenge, but at the same time, very rewarding. It is hard to get rejected for many things because of a piece of paper but, yet again, I have made it this far. Persistence and dedication are the key, and I have faith that one day my situation will be solved.”*

*“It really sucks because I can’t get federal help, and I can’t leave the U.S.”*

*“The only experience I have had that can make me a little wary is the fact that I have actually had someone report my name to immigration services. I never thought that people actually did that stuff in real life, and that’s when I understood that this is a real serious matter. I’m not just camping out in the U.S., I am living here illegally. No matter how simple and innocent my story, things can happen and I could possibly end up in [my country of origin] not knowing anything about my own country. My experience was the most frightening thing that I have ever experienced. Overall, I think focusing on school allowed me to not worry so much about what I couldn’t do while being illegal.”*

**Question 21:** This item explored the challenges, goals, motivations, and supports that the students have had in their life.

*“I haven’t had many challenges other than the day to day thoughts on wanting to be independent and not being able to do so. My support is my husband, he gives me hope, inspires me not to give up, and reassures me that one day it will all be over.”*

*“My motivation is that everything happens for a reason, and I have been very lucky to where I am. I have learned so much and I keep learning every day. One day this country will realize that we are just trying to progress, and that it was not our choice to come here when were young.”*

*“We pay taxes and people don’t realize that my process of growing up has been rushed. I’m more mature than I need to be, like a lot of immigrants.”*

**Question 22:** Regarding their opinions on the current government position on immigration, students tended to have very strong opinions.

*“In reality politicians are just playing with it. Whether Republicans or Democrats, they are juggling it around and we really have to put pressure on both sides at the same time. Currently, we are opposing Obama because, although he says that the U.S. is not deporting students, students are being deported and receiving deportation letters.”*

*“The government position on immigration is very xenophobic and I don’t see any party doing anything. They like to agree that this issue should be dealt with, but they don’t do anything. Politicians see illegal immigrants as leeches in a system where they are just drenching resources and not contributing. This angers me, because I have seen my parents struggle, work hard and seen how much is taken out of their checks and I haven’t seen many benefit. I just don’t understand. I also think the government and Americans in general are chauvinistic. The xenophobic and racist attitude of the government has been passed down to individuals and the ideals and beliefs of Americans.”*

*“For students, the DREAM Act has failed; however, the President has been speaking a lot about immigrant students, I think because he wants to be re-elected.”*

**Question 23:** When asked about the DREAM Act, two of them said this was the best solution to their problems, and they would like to see this law passed in the future. The failure of the DREAM Act seemed to have created a sense of disillusionment, pessimism and criticism in the students. The words of the students show the seriousness of the issue of undocumented people in the U.S., and how difficult it makes their everyday lives.

*“After the DREAM Act was denied I stopped looking at the news and being involved with the activist groups I was involved in. I was very discouraged and disappointed when it did not go through. For the longest*

*time I did not want to be involved with anything that had to do with immigrant events. I put so much time to work calling and emailing senators to support the DREAM Act. I just felt crushed. So, as of right now, I am not up to date on what is going on.”*

*“The DREAM Act is an insult to undocumented students, honestly. If you really think about it, you will realize that the process is so drawn out. I might be hurting some of these students, but the fact that they make the process so difficult makes you realize that they just don’t want to welcome undocumented students in this country.”*

*“Of course there are many regulations and rules for the DREAM Act, but it gives us hope. It is the closest thing that we have to fixing our situation without marrying a random person or just plain going back to our original countries where now we will be strangers.”*

**Question 24:** All of the students agreed on the desire to be given documented status. Some of the students specified why students should attain documented status and the benefits. Some of the students acknowledged their love for this country as well as the importance, uniqueness, and hard work of the undocumented student population. Each time a student talked, it seemed as if he/she was representing the rest of the undocumented students in the U.S.

*“Without the fees and paperwork for which we would have to pay, giving legal status to students is going to bring massive amounts of income taxes*

*and economic stimulus. There is also going to be more professionals, bright minds who can bring new research and ideas to the table.”*

*“I think these students are such an untapped resource. They are studying to be diplomats, doctors, teachers, etc. Undocumented students grew up American and are loyal to the U.S. almost to a fault sometimes despite their nationality. Although students have to deal with many obstacles, they are motivated, don't give up easily, are intelligent, persistent to make it this far. They could be successful for the U.S., but the U.S. doesn't want to use these resources.”*

*““Yes, I believe if a person is in college and they have good moral character, they should be given legal status. What would you say that you or undocumented students in general have to offer the country? We have dedication and gratitude to offer. We know the value on work, time, and freedom. We have so much energy, and true hard work to offer. We offer to respond to them as citizens and protect our country the way they protect us.”*

*“We have worked just as hard to be in this country like any other student. We are not criminals. We are just trying to have a normal peaceful life.”*

**Question 25:** The final question was an open-ended query regarding what else they would like to share about being an undocumented student. Some of the responses left the researcher speechless and aware of how tired these

students are of being undocumented as well as how eager they are for a political change and actions that can help them to change their lives in a positive way.

*“I think once you have some kind of light at the end of the tunnel is when you realize that all the troubles you have been through do not matter anymore, and you do not regret them. Now that I am married and I will soon not be undocumented, I feel as if everything I have suffered or experienced just made me stronger and more prepared for what life has ahead of me.”*

*“It has been an interesting journey, something I wouldn’t want anybody to go through. If any undocumented student happens to read this thesis, please come out, don’t give up, and don’t be afraid. As I said, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic. This is how I introduce myself when it is relevant, and I have done this in one of my classes.”*

It was very touching that this student said his/her name and told the researcher not to be afraid of sharing this information. The student volunteered that the researcher could use his/her name, although the researcher explained that this was not an option.

**Summary:** Altogether, the challenges and opportunities as undocumented students in the United States and at Texas State are both similar and unique. Each student has managed to succeed in his or her own way. The students’ stories are those of true courage and persistence despite many difficult

obstacles. Some of the specific challenges mentioned were: not qualifying for financial aid or being eligible for internships, not having the prospect of getting a good paying job, and not having a driver's license or other identification. As a result, they are not as involved in the Texas State campus life as they could be or would like to be and report feeling excluded from school and the society. This sense of not fully belonging was also a result of several of the students having to work long hours while attending school in order to finance their education. A particular relevant barrier that impedes the students' ability to live their daily lives with a certain degree of tranquility is the pervading awareness that they are not secure in this country and the constant underlying anxiety that this generates, despite their overall successful management of this daily stressor.

Overwhelmingly, the students impressed the researcher as a responsible, diligent, hard working, and positive group of students who are surviving and succeeding in life, even though their undocumented status places them at risk more than other student groups, especially their Hispanic peers. For most of the students, their family has proved to be an essential motivation and support during their daily lives and their pursuit of a higher education. Of particular note to this study, most also mentioned certain faculty and staff at Texas State as a resource in their academic path.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DISCUSSION**

While working on this thesis study at Texas State, the researcher came to learn that attaining a higher education an important goal for undocumented students. Overall the student participants reported and the researcher concurred that the Texas State campus, including faculty, staff, and administrators, is supportive of their educational goal. This is a vulnerable group, however, facing a unique set of challenges that impact their experiences while pursuing their degree. The dilemma of undocumented students in higher education as it relates to the larger issue of illegal immigration is a timely topic for the nation, Texas, and the university, particularly among people of Hispanic-origin. There is a growing scholarly literature addressing this vulnerable population, which has led many people to adopt an advocacy and action orientation on their behalf. This was certainly the researcher's motivation for engaging in this thesis study.

There appear to be many reasons why undocumented immigration continues to be controversial on the national stage. The recent attempt to pursue the DREAM Act, and the failure to pass this federal legislation last December, was a major defeat in the movement to reform U.S. immigration policies. Relations between Mexico and the U.S. have become more tense due to drug related violence along the border. The "Great Recession" and subsequent economic downturn has led to more of a sense of limited resources, especially among lower income persons in the U.S. Conservative political activities (such as the Tea Party and Minutemen) have made immigration a more contentious

topic of national debate. There is an enhanced effort to enforce immigration laws, particularly in certain areas (such as Arizona), which have created animosity among many segments of society.

For all of these reasons, many advocates in the immigrant rights movement have become more vocal and outspoken in favor of resuscitating the DREAM Act and giving particularly members of the “1.5 generation” a chance to legally work and live in the U.S., to enjoy the benefits of their education and efforts, and to have a legitimate path to citizenship. On the other hand, in this climate of fear and intimidation, many people have become more silent. It is certainly understandable that undocumented students would be reluctant to speak out, which makes it all the more crucial that other less vulnerable people make their voices heard on their behalf.

The need to speak on behalf of vulnerable groups, in this case, undocumented students, is more real than ever. The purpose of this thesis study was to give voice to undocumented students at Texas State. It is one of a very few scholarly efforts that qualitatively explores the unique strengths and challenges of this population. While there may be other unpublished studies on this topic throughout the U.S. or Texas, to the researcher’s knowledge, it is the first one at Texas State. Therefore, it is hoped that this study can be beneficial for future researchers at TXST who want to explore the topic of undocumented students, particularly using a qualitative methodology, and to researchers, especially students, at other IHEs.

Of all the key informant findings, there are two that most impacted the researcher. The first pertains to the differences in key informants in terms of their willingness to assist with the study. For the most part, most of informants were very responsive to emails and to arranging a conversation. They seemed very interested in the research topic and some even offered to help recruit students to interview once the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the application. However, some of the individuals who offered to help recruit students did not follow through and would not reply to emails once the researcher told them that the study had been approved by the IRB and the researcher could begin interviews. Other people, who were contacted and asked to assist, never responded to emails either.

Interestingly, the researcher noticed that a few (but certainly not all) key informants who were Hispanic seemed to display an attitude of defensiveness, concern, and what could be called “healthy paranoia” in terms of protecting undocumented students from the study. Some even stated that there were no undocumented students on campus or denied awareness of any undocumented students at all. This attitude and change in support was particularly surprising and unexpected since the researcher is Hispanic of Mexican-origin, Spanish speaking, and a recent documented immigrant. At first it seemed that there was rapport and trust established with these particular informants, but this did not play out over the course of the study. In contrast, the Anglo informants seemed much more open about undocumented students on campus and willing to cooperate in

the study. They were available for conversations and even stated regret over not being more helpful.

This discrepancy between Hispanic and Anglo key informants can perhaps be explained in three different ways. First, it may be a reflection of their cultural values, since Hispanics in general are not as direct as Anglos. Hispanics, at least of Mexican origin, tend to believe that it is better to say “yes” to a request than to say “no” in order to avoid making someone angry or disappointed. This is a generalization which, of course, may not be applicable, as individual differences certainly exist. As a person of Mexican heritage, the researcher has certainly experienced this cultural pattern first-hand. Second, the Hispanic key informants may have been closer to undocumented students, knew them better, and felt more protective. In general, the Anglo informants did not know many of these students directly and did not come into contact with them on a daily or regular basis. If this desire to protect students was indeed operating, it seems reasonable that it may have had the unintended consequence of further silencing their voices. Third, since the Anglo key informants tended to be in faculty or administrative positions while the Hispanic informants tended to be in staff or faculty positions, it may be that the Anglo informants felt more secure in their position. As a result, they may have been more willing to respond openly, since they may have felt less risk overall.

The second impression from key informants that impacted the researcher pertains to the overall apparent lack of awareness about undocumented students on campus. This lack of awareness should not be equated with lack of concern.

It took the researcher weeks of concerted effort to identify informants that were in a position to share information. This is perhaps understandable given that TXST is a huge bureaucracy, albeit a student-oriented one. It is possible that the University is just too large and that the undocumented student population is just too small for their presence to be known. It is also possible that there is a sort of "benign neglect" operating that has the unintentional effect of keeping the students in a low profile. The students themselves reported feeling that the campus is supportive overall. It seems that the undocumented students at TXST are not particularly vocal in comparison with some other universities across the country. Nevertheless, it is commendable that Texas State has a basically supportive stance toward these students. All of the key informants clearly indicated a strong motivation to help them to be successful in their academic efforts and to graduate, if only just in principle.

At times, the researcher felt very discouraged because of frequent reminders of the possible negative and legal consequences that this study could have on the undocumented students as well as the researcher. The concern was often repeated, even though there were many informants who commended the researcher for the study and its purpose. Some informants would whisper such comments as the following: "Good, that topic is very interesting, but be careful!" "How many people know about this study?" "You have to be very careful about what you do and how many people you talk to." "There is nothing wrong with having good intentions, but the school and IRB won't protect you from the federal law." One individual in particular implied that the researcher could be

in danger of being arrested and somehow forced to disclose the names of undocumented students. Even though the researcher did not know the identity of the participants and this scenario was regarded as an extremely remote by high level administrators, it was disconcerting nonetheless.

This tension often made the researcher feel uncomfortable and to occasionally wonder if the study was justified. The researcher had to engage in frequent self-reflection to ascertain if the study was in fact placing undocumented students at risk. Throughout the course of the study, the researcher had to revisit the IRB proposal and to weigh the cost and benefits of the study. This always led back to the original premise: that the stories of these students are not heard and need to be told. It was especially validating when the students were interviewed and each said that the study was important, they appreciate the opportunity to tell their story, and they wanted the researcher to continue in these efforts. It is the hope of the researcher that this study and others like it will produce policy changes that benefit undocumented students in the long term. Ultimately, the researcher learned that it takes a lot of courage to work on issues related to illegal immigration.

There are limitations to the study that need to be acknowledged. Given the qualitative methodology, there are no real conclusions that can be drawn, only broad patterns and suggestions for future research. The non-probability sampling procedures and the small sample size preclude generalizing to the larger population of undocumented students at Texas State. However, it would be highly unrealistic to propose a random sample that would be representative,

since that would require having the names of all undocumented students on campus. Given the experience of this researcher, such a list (or sampling frame) is not feasible.

The extremely short time frame meant that the study had to be streamlined, which may have resulted in incomplete data. As stated in the methodology section, the entire project was completed in about three months, including a very involved Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. More time may have allowed more opportunity to build trust with some of the Hispanic informants who seemed to question the validity of the study. They may have eventually become supportive, which likely would have recruited more student and allowed more interviews. This may have resulted in a "bigger picture" of the experiences of undocumented students at TXST than the researcher was able to gather under the circumstances.

This thesis study points to many directions for future research. There is a lack of research in the scholarly literature on this population, particularly regarding their experiences in higher education. More research may help to clarify any distinctions between undocumented immigrants and undocumented students. It may be that the general public views these two groups differently and may be more supportive of the DREAM Act in the future if they better understand the benefit of supporting the "1.5 generation" in attaining a college degree, becoming productive members of the educated workforce, and contributing to the larger society.

Further research will allow this vulnerable and often silent population to tell their stories in a way that breaks through stereotypes and creates mutual cooperation. More research will also foster greater understanding of the demographics of this population. In addition, more studies would be beneficial to these students since research could guide IHEs in terms of better understanding the unique needs of these students and providing better support services for them on campus.

Suggestions for future research might be to expand on qualitative examination of this group. There are only a few published studies that examine the academic experiences and needs of undocumented students; this is a real gap in the literature. Most studies focused on policy and legal issues advocating for these students rather than giving them the opportunity to share their point of view on their own lives. Another idea would be to gather additional perspectives from other relevant groups on campus, such as their fellow students and peers. This could include undergraduate and graduate students as well as other ethnic groups. The researcher speculates that other students may be more supportive and less judgmental than the undocumented students suspect, although this could vary by discipline or political orientation.

A final suggestion that emerged at the end of the study came out of an informal discussion with a faculty member at a University Honors Program event. The researcher learned that this faculty member was a former undocumented individual. It occurred to the researcher that it would be very interesting to study faculty, staff, and or administrators who themselves were former undocumented

immigrants. Research could focus on what knowledge and wisdom that they might bring to help understand current undocumented students. In addition, once identified, these people might be in a position to mentor current undocumented students in a way that would be more meaningful and beneficial to them. Then, evaluating the effect of this mentorship would be another interesting and important topic to explore.

There were many significant lessons learned from conducting this study. One of the most important observations made by the researcher was that, when doing a thesis study, one has to really commit, have time, and make it a priority to learn about the technicalities of research. In addition, it's important to select a topic that is of real interest and relevance to one's own life. This gives the motivation to persist and to grow as a scholar and person as well as the incentive to persevere when time constraints and workload seem almost overwhelming. Another lesson was the need to expect and plan for unanticipated turns in the process. The researcher was unprepared for the absence of follow through by some key informants, especially after they had indicated their support of the study. This was a disappointing experience that not only negatively affected the researcher and the study, but also probably prevented more students from telling their stories and having the chance to voice their opinions. Since all students said that participating in the study was a positive experience, the researcher would have preferred that they had been given the chance to make this decision for themselves.

One lesson in particular stands out: The critical role of empathy in qualitative research. While conducting this study over the course of the semester, one of the things realized is that the researcher came to share the participant's sense of fear. The researcher had read about how undocumented immigrants are constantly afraid of being identified and deported. As a documented immigrant from Mexico, the researcher did not fully appreciate this fear. However, the researcher came to recognize a sort of empathetic fear given the lack of support on the part of some of the informants, even more so than expressed by the students themselves. Over time, with repeated comments, the researcher began to have some real fears about the risk that the study may pose to the students or to the researcher. One key informant repeatedly suggested or implied the possibility that the researcher could be arrested for conducting the study and end up in court or jail. This was not even considered as a possibility when the study began.

The researcher was assured by several knowledgeable key informants that this possibility was so remote as to be essentially non-existent, yet these concerns persisted. Although the researcher was aware that these fears were extremely exaggerated, it had the beneficial effect of generating powerful empathy for these students and the reality of their daily lives, especially in the currently hostile political, social, and economic climate in the country. It made the researcher even more motivated to pursue positive changes in the policies and laws toward undocumented immigration, so that these highly deserving students can step out of the shadows and silence and proudly tell their stories.

The most powerful impression from the thesis study pertained to the students themselves. The researcher discovered a deep respect for these students, even beyond what was present when the study began. As the interviews unfolded, it became so apparent to the researcher just how hard these students were working to achieve their dreams and how much they had sacrificed in the process. While this is probably true of most students, it seems particularly salient for undocumented students. In a very real sense, they face the added challenge of going to school and living in a society where there is the ever-present possibility that they might be deported. This places them in a uniquely vulnerable position, particularly within the larger Hispanic community. It was very poignant to hear their stories and to realize just how difficult and challenging their position really is.

Undocumented students in IHEs in general and at Texas State in specific share a similar story: They want to be heard, but not only heard. They want to know that measures are being implemented in order for them to no longer live in silence, to be ignored, and to be at the will of legal forces beyond their control. It was not their choice to immigrate to this country as children. Even though they are on the margins of society, the participants in this study indicated that they consider themselves to be American, and that they are proud of "their" country. Most importantly, they want to belong fully to this society and to contribute toward a better future. In the words of one student in particular, "I want to help people and to make a positive impact on the world."

The stories of those students at Texas State leaves the researcher with the lasting impression that, despite the barriers they encounter along the way, they will continue to persist in their struggle to achieve an education, to pursue a career, and to attain legal citizenship in the U.S. Given the American ethic of self-determination and our cultural value on education, this seems like a fair, just, and equitable goal. The undocumented student participants in this study were mature, responsible, hard working, dedicated, bright, engaging, and hopeful. They represent the "best of the best" and have tremendous potential to fulfill their dreams. They regard themselves as Americans and want to be full members of society. Hearing their stories motivated the researcher to commit to more advocacy and action on their behalf, especially in terms of the DREAM Act.

As a member of a family of immigrants, the researcher thought often of relatives who have entered the U.S. without proper documentation. The children that these relatives left behind in Mexico could someday immigrate to the U.S. themselves and face similar or worse challenges that the current generation of undocumented students. Hence there is an urgent need to continue helping the undocumented students that currently reside in this country by giving them a pathway to citizenship and legitimate employment opportunities. Furthermore, the researcher hopes that this study may contribute to the creation of awareness and understanding of the undocumented student population as well as more humane immigration policies. If and potentially when these children in Mexico immigrate to the U.S., they may face fewer challenges impeding their pursuit of an education and life in the U.S. If this future can be achieved, then they may be

able to use their voices to speak freely and not need someone else to give voice to their stories.

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## CHAPTER VI

### APPENDIX A

#### **TXST Institutional Review Board Application: Synopsis, Consent Form and Interview Guidelines**

**Title of study:** Exploring the Academic Experiences of Undocumented Hispanic-origin Students at Texas State

**Student researcher:** Beatriz Gomez

**Faculty supervisor:** Dr. Catherine Hawkins

1. **Potential subjects:** Participants will be undocumented Hispanic-origin undergraduate students enrolled at TXST. It is anticipated that a minimum of ten students will be interviewed for the study. The sample will include male and female participants who are in the age of range 18-27. There are no considerations of "special class" that apply.

2. **Recruitment and consent:** Participants will be recruited through a snowball sampling method. TXST does not keep a record of undocumented students, so random or purposive sampling is not an option. Once the IRB application is approved, Ms. Gomez will ask key faculty and administrators on campus who know of potential participants to inform these students about the study and to give them her contact information. If students are interested in participating, they will contact her directly. No written record of the participant's name will be kept on the interview or otherwise, since this is not necessary. If a participant or another suggests the name of a potential participant, s/he will be asked to contact that person on behalf of Ms. Gomez and give her contact information. Thus, the identity of the potential participant will not be known unless s/he volunteers to be interviewed, and s/he can use a pseudonym of they choose. Ms. Gomez has a fairly small sample size ( $n=5-10$ ), so we think this method will be adequate to both recruit participants and to safeguard their identity.

A written consent form will be provided by the researcher at the time of the interview. The researcher will verbally explain informed consent and respond to any questions. In order to maintain privacy, a signature on the consent form will not be requested. Rather, the consent form indicates that voluntary participation in the interview signifies informed consent. A copy of the consent form is attached.

3. Methodology: The study will use qualitative data in the form of individual interviews. These interviews will be collected via semi-structured face-to-face or telephone interviews of approximately one to two hour duration. An interview guide will be used; however, since this is an exploratory study, the interviewer will be flexible in following the format. Ms. Gomez will not know a student's immigration status until the student voluntarily reveals this to her. As an additional precaution, potential participants will be told that they can use a pseudonym since it is not necessary to know their actual name. Any identifying contact information will be kept for only a week or two, enough time to schedule and conduct the interview, and will be deleted immediately after the interview is completed. There is no need to keep this information since no follow-up is necessary.

The interview guidelines are attached. The verbal directions will indicate that a participant can refuse to answer any question or part of a question. The interview will be divided into four parts: non-identifying demographic information, background information about the student and his/her family prior to entering TXST, current experience at TXST, and broader experiences in the U.S. Each section has a set of questions which will be used as prompts to facilitate the interview, including an open-ended question following each section so students can provide input that the questionnaire does not specifically address.

Interviews will be conducted in a School of Social Work meeting room in Health Professions Building room 145. This is a secure room; it is not a classroom, and it does not have public access. It can be opened only through checking out a key from the social work office, and it is available only for approved faculty-related use. The Director of the School of Social Work, Dr. Dorinda Noble, has approved this room for use in Ms. Gomez's study. Dr. Noble can be reached at 245-2583 or dn12@txstate.edu. Dr. Hawkins will schedule the room for use under her name and provide access to Ms. Gomez for the interviews. The reason for use is not required for the reservation. Participants will be directed to the room where Ms. Gomez will be waiting, so she and the research participant will not be observed together. Ms. Gomez has not shared with any fellow students that she is conducting her thesis research with undocumented students. She does not have any classes in this building, so it is highly unlikely that anyone will recognize her. Texas State does not keep a record of a student's immigration status, so there is no way that someone would be aware of this information unless the participant chooses to reveal it.

Once a potential participant has contacted Ms. Gomez, any contact information will be kept for only a week or two, just enough time to schedule and conduct the interview, and it will be deleted immediately after the interview is completed. There is no need to keep this information since no follow-up is

necessary. In fact, a potential participant does not even have to use his/her own phone number or email address to schedule an interview, further protecting the student's identity. Likewise, no written record of the participant's name will be kept on the interview or otherwise. When someone suggests the name of a potential participant, s/he will be asked to contact that person on behalf of Ms. Gomez and give her contact information. Thus, the identity of the potential participant will not be known unless s/he volunteers to be interviewed, and s/he can choose to use a pseudonym.

4. Risks: There are minimal potential physical, social, or legal risks associated with this study. The research and supervisor have spoken to several administrators on campus who state that information on a student's immigration status is not collected nor it is considered relevant to their student status or academic work at Texas State. Since no written record of a participant's name will be maintained, there is an extremely remote likelihood of any potential risk. There is always possibility that potential sanctions or changes in the law could be implemented (which we were told would have to occur at the Federal level), although this is unlikely given the extremely short time frame of the study, since the thesis is due no later than May 4, 2011.

5. Procedures for protecting minimizing risks: Participation will be entirely voluntary and ethical research guidelines will be followed. Participants will be given a written consent form. The researcher will protect privacy for this vulnerable group (undocumented students) by not using or recording participant names. Therefore, the informed consent form will not ask for a signature. An explanation at the bottom of the form indicates that participation in the study (i.e., interview) signifies informed consent. This is a good faith effort to maintain participants' privacy. Confidentiality will be further protected as all interviews will be conducted in a private place (see above) and identifying contact information will be kept for only as long as needed and then deleted. The researcher will take written notes during the interview, but no name will be attached to the notes. After the data is analyzed, notes will be destroyed (within two months). Demographic variables will be broad enough so as not to identify a specific individual. The interview schedule does not ask for emotionally sensitive information and requests participants to disclose within their own comfort level.

6. Potential benefits to be gained by the subjects: Participants will have the opportunity to tell their story (with a focus on personal strengths and successes) and to contribute to a greater understanding of their shared situation. The researcher may be in position to share useful information about potential resources to participants, and they will have the opportunity to advocate for

themselves through participating in the study. They may be able to make useful suggestions for support services that the research can share with relevant university administrators for the benefit of this group at present and the future.

7. Compensation: The study will involve no compensation.

8. Risks in relation to the anticipated benefits: The benefits greatly outweigh risks since the study involves minimal risks. Privacy and confidentiality will be assured since no names will be collected or associated with the data. No written research or interview notes will be maintained after the study is completed by the end of the spring 2011 semester. The study offers many potential benefits, such as contributing to a better understanding and awareness of the academic experiences of undocumented students. In addition, it explores the struggles and accomplishments of the participants, and their academic and social potential for success. It may produce valuable information that the University can use to enhance support services for students.

9. Sites/agencies to be used: Participants will include students and selected faculty, administrators, and staff at Texas State. There is no outside approval required.

10. Relationship of the proposal to the program or work: This study is proposed in conjunction with the researcher's University Honors Program (UHP) thesis. Ms. Gomez has been in the UHP since fall of 2007 and has completed most of the requirements that will allow her to graduate with Honors, except completing the thesis. She anticipates graduating in May 2011. The supervising professor is Dr. Catherine Hawkins, a Professor of Social Work and also an UHP Instructor.

11. Approval: The thesis application for the study has been approved by the Honors Director and is attached.

12. Approval by another IRB: Not relevant

13. Access to results: The results of the study will be written into a formal thesis that will be submitted to the University Honors Program Director, Dr. Heather Galloway, and available through the Texas State Library.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **CONSENT FORM TO BE A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT**

#### **Introduction**

This research study is being conducted by Beatriz Gomez, a University Honors Program student at Texas State, as part of my Honor's Thesis. The purpose of the study is to explore the factors associated with academic success of undocumented Hispanic-origin students at Texas State.

#### **Procedures**

You will be asked to volunteer for a one-to two hour individual interview. Questions will include demographic questions so that I can describe the sample. Data will be reported in aggregate form only; individual characteristics will not be revealed. Therefore, identifiable information will not be linked to your interview responses. Other data collected will be open-ended questions pertaining to your perceptions about the experiences of undocumented students and what factors contribute to the academic success of this group, particularly at TXST.

#### **Risks/Discomforts**

There are minimal risks for participation in this study. It is not anticipated that questions asked by the interviewer will cause any personal discomfort and you will be encouraged to disclose only within your own personal comfort level.

#### **Benefits**

It is hoped that your participation will help interested parties such as other researchers, faculty, university administrators, and academic advisors to learn more about how undocumented students have the capabilities to succeed in college, and what supports or services need to be provided. You will also have the opportunity to share about the difficulties involved and to make suggestions for what additional supports and/or services have helped you or would be helpful for the university to consider.

#### **Confidentiality**

All information provided will remain confidential and will only be reported as group aggregate data only. The researcher will not keep a record of your name nor will your name be associated with your responses. There will be no written record of your participation in the study. After the research is completed by the end of April 2011, all notes will be destroyed.

**Compensation**

There are no compensations involved in this research.

**Questions about the Research**

If you have questions regarding this study, or would like to request a summary of the findings, you may contact me at (512)787-3199, and to [bg1199@txstate.edu](mailto:bg1199@txstate.edu).

You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Catherine Hawkins, Professor of Social Work, at (512) 245-2592 or [ch11@txstate.edu](mailto:ch11@txstate.edu). Any questions about research or participants rights may be directed to Dr. Jon Lasser, Chair of the Institutional Review Board (512-245-3413 or [lasser@txstate.edu](mailto:lasser@txstate.edu)) or Ms. Becky Northcutt, Compliance Specialist (512-245-2102 or [sn10@txstate.edu](mailto:sn10@txstate.edu)).

The IRB approval number is 2011U7543.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions. You have the right to withdraw at anytime or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your standing with the University.

**I have read and understood the above information. My voluntary participation in the study signifies consent. I may keep this form for my records.**

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDELINES FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS**

**INTRODUCTION:** As explained on the consent form, the purpose of this interview is to explore your perceptions and experiences as an undocumented student, particularly at TXST. Please answer within your own comfort level; you may refuse to answer any question or part of a question, and stop participating at any time. Since I am not keeping a record of your name, neither your participation in the study or your responses can be traced to you. All data will be reported in summary form only without any identifying information attached to your responses.

#### **Demographics Information (to describe the sample):**

1. What is your gender? Your age? Your ethnicity to be?
2. What is your country of origin? What is your religious affiliation?
3. What is your native language? What language do you speak at home?
4. Do you consider yourself to be low, medium, or high income person?
5. What is your employment status? If employed, how many hours per week?

#### **Background Information:**

6. Briefly describe what brought you to TXST? For example, why did you decide to attend college, why did you choose TXST, did you receive any assistance in applying, how was the enrollment process, etc.
7. Briefly explain your personal history prior to enrolling at TXST. For example, when did you come to the U.S., how old were you, how difficult was this transition, etc.
8. Briefly describe your parents' history. For example, what is their respective country of origin, do they live together, what is their educational level, when did they come to the U.S., do they work, etc.
9. Despite your immigration status, do you consider yourself an American? Why or why not?
10. Is there other relevant background information that you would like to share that will help me to better understand your experiences prior to becoming a student at TXST?

### **Current experience at TXST:**

11. What is your academic level? Your major? What is your GPA? When is your expected graduation date? What do you expect to do after you graduate?
12. What has been your overall academic experience at TXST? What has been your best and worst experience?
13. How you think your status has affected your experiences at TXST?
14. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities on and/or off campus? Do you belong to any support group(s) or networks? How are these helpful?
15. Do you think TXST benefits from your attendance and pursuit of a degree? in what ways?
16. Do you think TXST does enough in providing you with the information or services you need to succeed? Is there anything not offered that might enhance your success?
17. Do you think there is a good relationship with undocumented students and the rest of the TXST community (students, faculty, and staff)? How can it be improved?
18. Is there any other relevant information about your experiences at TXST you would like to share so that I can better understand your situation?

### **Experiences in the US:**

19. What other suggestions do you have for the rest of the universities across the U. S. regarding their relationship with undocumented students?
20. Tell me about your experience in the United States as an undocumented student?
21. What have been the challenges, the goals, the motivation or support you have had as an undocumented student? What motivates you to persist?
22. What is your understanding of the current government position on immigration? What would you like to happen?

23. What do you consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed DREAM Act?
24. Do you think undocumented students should be given legal status? What would you say that you or undocumented students in general have to offer to the country?
25. Is there anything else about being an undocumented student that you would like me to know so that I can better understand your experience?

**APPENDIX D**

**AFFIDAVIT**

§

STATE OF TEXAS

§

COUNTY OF \_\_\_\_\_

§

Before me, the undersigned Notary Public, on this day personally appeared

\_\_\_\_\_.

1. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ I am \_\_\_\_\_ years of age and have personal knowledge of the facts stated herein and they are all true and correct.

2. I graduated or will graduate from a Texas high school or received my GED certificate in Texas.

3. I resided in Texas from three years leading up to graduation from high school or receiving my GED certificate.

4. I have resided or will have resided in Texas for the 12 months prior to the census date of the semester which I will enroll in \_\_\_\_\_ (college/university).

5. I have filed or will file an application to become a permanent resident at the earliest opportunity that I am eligible to do so.

In witness whereof, this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Printed name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Student I.D. #)

SUBSCRIBED TO AND SWORN TO BEFORE ME, on the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, to certify which witness my hand and official seal.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Notary Public in and for the State of Texas

