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Surveying the Landscape of Post-secondary Options and Support for Undocumented Students in the Pacific Northwest: A View From One State's School Counselors

Abstract

Now more than ever, supportive practices and policies are needed to bolster the opportunities, safety, and future of undocumented students. K-12 school counselors and educators who aim to support the college and career readiness of undocumented youth need to be well informed and prepared to adequately address requests for guidance by students and families. This article seeks to uncover the primary areas of need, support, and resources identified by school counselors in one Pacific Northwest state in order to optimize post-secondary options and success.

Keywords

Undocumented students, school counselors, immigrant youth, post-secondary options, advocacy

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Introduction

Many school communities have struggled to provide adequate support and resources for undocumented students. Practices and policies that impact the opportunities, safety, and future of undocumented students enrolled in K-12 public schools have been especially unstable and tenuous in recent times. Moreover, many educators aiming to support post-secondary options have found themselves at a loss when faced with family requests for guidance. Across the country, school counselors have reported high levels of stress, confusion, and discouragement amongst undocumented students as they look toward their futures. In order to get a better sense of how well informed and prepared some Northwest counselors felt to address these needs, we conducted a state-wide survey.

Research regarding how school counselors support undocumented students in K-12 settings is limited. This article investigates the needs of school counselors who want to learn more about this topic, and who wish to provide greater support to students and families struggling with the ongoing risks associated with undocumented status. The following section provides an overview of literature that highlights current immigration policies and their impact on school communities. Next, we describe the purpose and methodology of this study and summarize survey findings and recommendations from Pacific Northwest counselors working in rural and urban K-12 school districts.

Increased Vulnerability

Recent anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies including mass deportations, family separation at the U.S. border, and fluctuating DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) policies have had a chilling effect on many communities. In schools that serve significant numbers of undocumented or mixed immigration status families, students have felt especially vulnerable. Intensified and indiscriminate immigration enforcement activities have caused what the Southern Poverty Law Center describes as a sense of “fear and terror” in immigrant communities (SPLC, 2019) and increased isolation in the undocumented student population (Gándara & Ee, 2018). These same students already experience high rates of anxiety due to fear of deportation for themselves and their families (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales et al., 2013).

Undocumented students often experience multiple risks associated with family separation, economic hardship, and psychological trauma (Heiman & Nuñez-Janes, 2021; Henderson & Baily 2013; Lamberg 2008). The constant threat of deportation and changing laws are linked to stress, depression, anger, withdrawal, sleeping disturbances, behavioral problems and in some cases substance abuse (Brabeck & Xu 2010; Dreby 2012; Capps et al., 2015; Zayas & Bradlee 2015).

The broader community also suffers negative consequences. Following immigration raids and deportations, community members are often more fearful and mistrustful of authorities and are less likely to participate in schools and other public institutions (Hagan et al., 2010; Hagan et al., 2011; Vargas, 2015). The proliferation of indiscriminate ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids particularly during the last presidential administration have left a deep sense of fear and distrust in many communities. The notion of “safety” that once characterized many neighborhood schools and other local resources that were previously safeguarded from federal immigration enforcement (Martinez et al., 2015; Crawford, 2017) has been greatly diminished. School officials indicate that a fear of deportation has led many immigrant families to keep their

children home from school, impacting performance, attendance and operational budgets which are based on average daily attendance (Jones, 2017).

Some school districts have tried to assuage fears by passing “sanctuary” resolutions with the goal of reassuring families that information will not be shared with immigration officials nor will they be allowed on school campuses. For example, one Northwest superintendent posted the following statement on the district website:

In light of the recent national conversation around immigration, we wanted to assure our community that [our]schools are a safe place for students. We recognize the diversity and worth of all students, individuals and groups, and are committed to both educating and providing a safe and inclusive environment for everyone, regardless of their immigration status, race, color, religion or any other basis. In fact, [district] does not collect or track any information regarding a students' or their family members' immigration or citizenship status.

Impact on School Performance and Post-Secondary Options

States cannot constitutionally deny students a free public education on account of their immigration status, yet only 98,000 out of an estimated 125,000 undocumented students graduate from high schools each year (Zong & Batalova, 2019). There are a myriad of reasons for the low graduation rates of immigrant students. In addition to concerns about deportation, undocumented students can lose motivation due to the stigma, shame and secrecy related to lack of legal status (Gonzales et al., 2013). The vulnerability of these youth can devastate their sense of identity and well-being (Dreby, 2012) and lead to a sense of hopelessness about the future (Storlie & Jach, 2012). Given the serious obstacles they experience, undocumented students can struggle to persist in school (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2010). Of those who do graduate high school, it is estimated that less than ten percent enroll in college (Gonzales, 2007; Hallett, 2013, Zong & Batalova, 2019).

The DACA initiative originally created by the Obama administration in 2012 provided temporary relief from deportation and work authorization to young undocumented immigrants. Millions of undocumented students found hope through this initiative and began to pursue higher education and other post-secondary options. Unfortunately, this hope was dashed when DACA was rescinded in 2016 by the next presidential administration. In 2021, recently elected President Biden reinstated DACA, but this initiative continues to be challenged in the courts, leaving many Dreamers still feeling unsettled. Clearly, a more comprehensive and permanent path to citizenship is desperately needed, but senatorial gridlock continues to leave this dream out of reach. Regardless, it is clear that greater access to education and assistance in pursuing postsecondary options is critical, as education is the primary path and hope students from undocumented immigrant families have for upward social mobility (Batalova et al., 2014).

Supportive School Policies and Personnel

Supportive school policies and personnel can foster students' sense of belonging, promote academic achievement and engagement (Fredericks et al., 2004; Suárez-Orozco et. al, 2007). Strong relationships with supportive school personnel are key for encouraging undocumented students to persevere (Gonzales, 2009, 2010).

Caring educators can positively impact immigrant youth's levels of attendance, engagement, motivation, and achievement (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, even just one steady and supportive educator relationship can help young people develop resiliency and enable them to overcome trauma and adversity (NSCDC, 2015). Strong school relationships and clear guidance policies are critical for undocumented students, because they are often the means by which they access the resources and information needed to navigate the school environment and their post-secondary options (De Leon, 2005; Gonzales, 2009; 2010).

The Role of School Counselors

School counselors play a vital role in providing academic, affective, and psychological support needed to retain these vulnerable students (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Todd et al., 2020). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) ethical guidelines acknowledge that counselors are uniquely positioned to support undocumented students and requires that they address the academic, social/emotional, and career needs of all students through the integration of counseling services that foster access and pathways for success (ASCA 2017; 2019). In the updated 2019 guidelines, ASCA took an even stronger stance, *requiring* school counselors to “recognize that undocumented students face additional legal, financial and social stressors and need additional support with these barriers as well as assistance with postsecondary goals.” Moreover, ASCA guidelines state that counselors “have a responsibility to provide services to all students regardless of their citizenship status, to advocate for their access to services and to prevent discrimination against students by removing barriers impeding student development and achievement.” (ASCA, 2019).

Although there is limited research describing how school counselors support undocumented students in K-12 school settings, several studies are instructive. Crawford & Fishman-Weaver (2016) found that school counselors who were privy to sensitive information impacting undocumented students helped to build resiliency and negotiate difficult and uncertain life circumstances. Previous work on the role of social capital found that some counselors were able to use their professional position and networks to advocate for these students (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Similarly, a more recent study (Crawford et al., 2019), examines how school counselors engaged in everyday acts of advocacy, and assumed leadership roles when needed to challenge policies or school personnel they perceive as deficit oriented towards undocumented students along the Texas-Mexico border.

Abrego (2006) and Gonzales (2010) found that school counselors provided students with academic information and supports to help them navigate post-secondary options that were not familiar to their undocumented parents. Some studies found that that undocumented students mistrusted school officials (Gonzales, 2011; Enriquez, 2011; Munoz, 2008), but those that did seek advice were most likely to turn to teachers and counselors (De Leon, 2005).

Chen, Budianto and Wong (2010) documented the ways in which counselors served as “social justice advocates,” fostering hope and resilience with immigrant students during group therapy sessions. Similarly, Crawford et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study exploring how school counselors advocate for immigrant students and what motivates counselors to advocate for educational access.

A recent study by Todd et al. (2020), found that counselors in two large Texan districts who were aware of the barriers faced by undocumented students acted as “empowerment

agents,” as described by Stanton-Salazar (2011) and Hallett (2013). Though they did not refer to themselves in this way, counselors nonetheless performed individual and collective actions of advocacy in order to increase outreach and expand the social networks of undocumented students.

The limited but powerful studies described above show that school counselors can play a vital role in setting social justice and empowerment initiatives in motion within the school system. In order to learn more about the role that school counselors play, it is important to find out how aware, informed, and prepared they are to support this vulnerable population. Our study described below provides further insight into this topic.

This Study

In light of the current anti-immigrant climate, we were interested in knowing how well school counselors in one Pacific Northwest state described feeling informed and prepared to support undocumented students about their future opportunities and mental health needs. The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the needs of K-12 school counselors, so they in turn can adequately support undocumented students who rely on them for direction and advocacy, as well as college and career guidance.

We framed our study around the following guiding questions:

- 1) What are the areas of knowledge and information school counselors feel most and least informed about that would allow them to build better relationships with undocumented students?;
- 2) What are the areas of need that school counselors observed in the families of undocumented students?; and 3) In what ways can school systems provide support, including secondary planning support, for school counselors who aim to support undocumented students?

Methods

This exploratory study involved an examination of non-experimental, quantitative and qualitative data collected through a cross-sectional, web-based survey. Descriptive statistics were used for quantitative items to describe the participants and their work experiences. In addition, qualitative survey items allowed for understanding of personal experiences and perceptions of the target population. The mixed methods approach of the survey allowed each participant to share perspectives and expand upon them if desired.

Participants

The participants in this study were enrolled members of the state school counseling association. The final sample consisted of 61 participants who were currently working as school counselors throughout a Pacific Northwest state. Of the respondents, 86% (n = 52) self-identified as female, 2% (n = 1) identified as woman, and 12% (n = 8) self-identified as male. Sixty-seven (n = 41) identified as White, 14% (n = 9) identified as Latina/o/x, 12% (n = 7) identified as Multiethnic, 3% (n = 2) identified as Asian American, 3% (n = 2) identified as Native American. Of the school counselors who responded, 29% (n = 18) had 0-3 years of experience, 39% (n = 24) had 4-7 years of experience, 7% (n = 4) had 8-10 years of experience, 18% (n = 11) had 10-15 years of experience, and 7% (n = 4) had more than 15 years of experience.

There was strong representation from school counselors working in a variety of levels, sizes, settings and locations. The majority of respondents served in high school settings (56%; $n = 34$), followed by elementary (31%; $n = 19$) and middle school (23%; $n = 14$). School size varied from 1-1000 students (67%; $n = 41$), 1000-1500 (16%, $n = 10$), and over 1500 (16%, $n = 10$). Counselors worked in a variety of urban and rural locales throughout the state, including urban (44%; $n = 27$), suburban (30%; $n = 18$), and rural (26%; $n = 16$).

Instruments and Procedures

The survey was designed to explore school counselors' perceptions related to the needs and resources that would allow them to better support undocumented students and families in their school setting. Survey questions and content validity were completed by the two authors, who collaborated in the ongoing development (content, relevance, clarity, organization) and adaptation of the survey.

Demographic questions asked participants to select from multiple choice options for ethnicity, years of work as a school counselor, current school level, type of school setting, and size of school. A question asking the respondents' gender was open-ended and not multiple choice. In order to maintain anonymity, the researchers did not require specific school names or geographical locations.

To gauge their perceptions of student and family needs, respondents used a multiple-choice format to indicate whether there were students or family members at their school who had undocumented status (*yes, no, not sure*) and if they perceived an increased need in supporting or advocating for students and families with undocumented status in their school (*yes, no, not sure*). There was also an open text option following these questions to allow respondents to explain their response, if so desired. To explore school counselors' most utilized resources when supporting undocumented students and families, the survey used a similar format with a multiple-choice question listing various personnel, organizations, and media (*websites, colleagues in the school building, other school counselors, national organizations, local organizations, social media*), followed by an optional open text box requesting examples.

Respondents were asked to use a 10-point Likert scale (*1 = completely confident, 5 = somewhat confident, and 10 = not at all confident*) to rate their confidence level in providing accurate information to students and families with undocumented status. The survey asked similar questions related to school counselor perceptions of support and needs from their current school, district, and previous graduate school training programs (*1 = not at all supportive, 5 = somewhat supportive, and 10 = extremely supportive*), as well as open text options allowing examples of the types of information and resources that would improve the supports they were already providing. Lastly, an open text box format was used to explore the areas of greatest need for students and families with undocumented status in their schools.

Researchers sent an email invitation to enrolled members of the state school counselor professional organization to respond to a survey focused on improving the understanding of the school counselor experience in supporting students and families with undocumented students. Of those approximate 515 members included in the listserve, 61 ultimately responded to the survey, resulting in a 12% response rate. The results of the completed surveys provided a solid geographic, demographic, and experiential representation of the school counseling population throughout the state.

Data Analysis

The authors utilized descriptive statistics to describe the demographic data and the Likert scale data. This strategy allowed for understanding frequencies and comparative percentages for the categorical data. For qualitative data analysis, Joffe (2011) recommends thematic analysis when exploring a specific group's (e.g., school counselors) conceptualization of the phenomenon under study (e.g., perceptions and needs of support for undocumented students and families). Open-ended responses to survey items are especially suited for this analysis.

To analyze the qualitative data, the authors followed guidelines presented by Joffe (2011), ensuing a search for essential patterns within the data using emerging themes for categorical analysis in relation to the research questions. The first step was examining the full data set, then creating a coding frame by developing categories, definitions, and examples of survey responses. The two authors independently coded the data before comparing thematic patterns via discussion. The coding of data was completed manually by typing notes and creating categorical codes once repeated patterns formed themes. The most significant and prevalent themes were examined and identified, and consensus was reached, resulting in three primary qualitative themes.

In an effort to best represent the reality of participants' perspectives and experiences, the participants' original words were used to describe categorical themes. The authors also worked collaboratively to agree upon which quotations would be used to best illustrate the meaning of the thematic findings.

Findings

The survey data provided a clear sense that most counselors had knowledge of undocumented students and families at their schools and signaled an urgent call to support these communities. Moreover, they provided qualitative feedback to this effect in their responses.

A majority of school counselors (80%) were aware of undocumented students or family members who were part of their school communities. Most school counselors (67%) believed the need for supporting these vulnerable students and families had increased in recent years. Significantly, 64% of counselors reported feeling *somewhat* or *very confident* in providing students and families with accurate information, including legal and post-secondary planning information, while 36% *did not feel confident* in their ability to provide accurate information.

Counselors were also asked to indicate where they accessed information and resources to support undocumented students and families. Quantitative results indicated that the top informational sources were *websites* (71%), *other school counselors* (67%), and *local organizations* (58%). Respondents were allowed to check more than one category. The data revealed that common sources of information came from their schools in the form of counseling staff meetings, district websites, communication from administrators, community, and school district attorneys, and ESOL Coordinators. Respondents cited that the types of information they most sought were related to state and national financial aid options and procedures, college admissions websites, and legal rights guidelines related to deportation and DACA/Dreamer status.

Most counselors felt their schools (64%) and districts (61%) were *somewhat* or *very supportive* of undocumented students but could also offer more support. The most common requests from counselors were an increase in multilingual resources about the financial aid and

admissions process; opportunities to share information via school sponsored events; and the need to share knowledge from experts in the community. At the training level, 67% felt they were *partially or not at all adequately trained* while only 33% felt they had been *adequately* prepared to support undocumented students and their unique post-secondary college and career needs.

Qualitative Themes

Participants provided extensive written responses regarding their perceptions of the greatest needs in supporting and advocating for undocumented students and families. The authors identified three themes that described school counselor participants' perceptions and experiences with supporting undocumented students and families as posed in the qualitative survey items: 1) Safety and Trust; 2) Mental Health Needs; and 3) Resources and Information Sharing.

Safety and Trust. Most counselors cited the rising sense of fear amongst undocumented families and the urgent need to reinforce a sense of trust and safety at their schools. The majority of qualitative responses mentioned an increased sense of anxiety and lack of safety amongst this student population. As one respondent stated, "We don't necessarily have more undocumented students, but their sense of safety and security is much less that it has been in the past." Others addressed specific fears, such as, "students are afraid to come to school and/or stand out for fear of deportation." Respondents described their key role in supporting families: "counselors need to let students know that they are welcome and valued, and that our support comes with no strings attached."

Several participants blamed shifting immigration policies and the federal administration for this sense of fear and uncertainty. "We have always had a large number of undocumented people in our community, but it has felt like more students have come to school upset—more family members deported, questioned, etc." Counselors described a delicate balancing act of providing truthful information about the realistic post-secondary barriers and options that often felt limiting, without discouraging or damaging trust in the student-counselor relationship. Respondents emphasized creating "a school that will stand up for families regardless of government policies or district mandates."

School counselors were often at a loss themselves about how to address the lack of safety and trust that students seemed to experience, and addressed their efforts to sow reputations as reliable, trustworthy adults in their school communities. There were several comments that indicated how challenging it was to reassure students when working under a climate of uncertainty. One participant described this sense of wariness: "It is very difficult to tell students they are safe when it is unknown." Similarly, another counselor wrote that it is "difficult to assure students are safe when I am not even sure" and that intentional efforts were necessary "even just establishing the fact that I am a safe resource."

Mental Health Needs. School counselors at all levels reported alarming levels of stress, fear, anxiety, and depression among students who were undocumented or had undocumented family members. The impact was often observed in students' failing grades, sense of motivation, attentiveness, and ability to focus on schoolwork, at-risk behavior, overall school experience, and lack of financial security. Oftentimes, their immediate needs conflicted with longer-term desires for college education and substantial careers. A high school counselor noted these mental health effects, highlighting one student whose father was arrested and detained by ICE:

...his grades plummeted, and his behavior unraveled. I met with him regularly and he told me about money worries since his dad is no longer around to work and help provide for the family. He also talked frequently about missing his dad and feeling worried for his mom and sister...

Among the most frequent responses was a general “increase in levels of stress” as well as “extreme anxiety” they noticed among their undocumented students. As one school counselor described, “It seems like the anxiety and depression level of students who have family members who are undocumented have increased ... I think it is anxiety about family members disappearing or getting arrested while they are at school.”

Several participants observed the impact on the entire family system, prompting the need for “mental health services for the family and support groups/services for adults” to address current situations, such as “the emotional toll that they go through if one or their whole family gets taken away by ICE.” One counselor stated their most immediate need was “mental health support: the amount the stress these families are facing is unbelievable.” Numerous respondents associated the stress and anxiety with unmet basic needs related to food, employment, rent, and utilities as well as new stressors such as seeking legal representation, filing paperwork, and creating child custody plans in case of deportation.

Resources and Information Sharing. Repeatedly, school counselors described the importance of staying abreast of current immigration and academic policies so they could provide reliable information to families and connect them with valuable post-secondary resources. The most common topics counselors desired included information related to college admissions, financial aid (federal, state, and local), DACA protections, deportation/custody planning, emergency housing and food resources, and legal aid.

Understanding postsecondary options were foremost issues for high school counselors, stating that exploring job and college options following graduation were often immediate concerns. Counselors provided examples of their ongoing support in helping students complete various aspects of college admissions and job applications. Respondents stated the importance of knowing information related to “clear and risk-free steps for continuing education after graduating high school” and a “straight forward process for financial aid for undocumented students,” as well as, “motivating Dreamers who had lost hope.”

Many school counselors described their role in supporting the financial aid process. They often regarded themselves as competent resources to escort students through the college financial aid process, including the FAFSA, the state-specific financial aid forms, in-state tuition documents, and scholarship opportunities accessible to undocumented students. Respondents noted the individual attention that undocumented or DACA students needed, stating, “Our students need a lot of support when it comes to the financial aid and admission process ... they also need a lot help filling out affidavits to earn in-state tuition.....and additional paperwork to continue their education.”

Discussion

Findings point to a general climate of uncertainty for counselors and educators, which mirrors the experience of many undocumented K-12 students. School counselors expressed feeling challenged by the lack of supports for undocumented students and ever-changing policies. They

also found themselves stuck between providing realistic college and career information and providing hope to students with limited access and options. The three themes that emerged from the qualitative data: 1) Safety and Trust; 2) Mental Health Needs; and 3) Resources and Information Sharing, point to the need for tiered support for both themselves and their students at the school, district, and community-wide levels. These responses are sensible given that many counselors also expressed a lack of control and sense of frustration with many of the barriers that undocumented students face.

Counselors provided examples of the supports they need to better serve K-12 undocumented students. Many requested unified, clear, and supportive communication from school and district leaders. Others suggested that schools provide space and resources to families struggling with immediate needs and seeking information. The most pronounced request was for professional development opportunities for all staff members to better understand the experiences, barriers, and resiliency of undocumented students, and to collectively establish a safe, inclusive school community. A shared understanding of the challenges faced by these students and a call for a unified commitment to advocacy by school personnel resonates strongly with findings in the literature (Chen et al., 2010; Crawford, 2017; Enriquez, 2011).

Participants observed that mental health issues and ongoing stress inside and outside of school often interfered with academic and future-oriented goals. As noted by other studies (Crawford et al., 2019; Crawford et al., 2016; Capps et al., 2015) as well, multilingual counseling services that address complex family trauma is another area of need. Findings emphasize the importance of accessing current and relevant mental health research and partnering with culturally responsive community agencies that provide counseling services for immigrants, as well as tapping into online national advocacy organizations.

Respondents also requested specific trainings to improve their own professional development specific to supporting undocumented students, including updated trainings on FAFSA and state financial aid applications, scholarships, and undocumented/DACA friendly colleges. Many high school counselors encountered complexities in working with undocumented students at-risk of not graduating, such as options for earning credits and meeting all diploma requirements. They also emphasized the importance of sharing information that is accurate, unbiased, and up-to-date. Counselors also encouraged the practice of pooling information across schools and communities, so that solutions and opportunities were made available in an effort to widely support undocumented students and their post-secondary success.

Outcomes suggest that it will take a community-minded approach to address the needs of undocumented students and families and that school counselors are significant players in coordinating and providing such services. Developing a professional identity as an advocate and life-long learner (ASCA, 2019) is critical for this work and requires collaboration with training programs, school buildings, district leaders, community organizations, experts, and colleagues.

Implications

This study reveals several implications for K-12 schools and the profession of school counseling to address the emergent findings and themes. First, respondents agree that a general increase in discussion, information, and consistent messaging is necessary to build a safe community as well as share concerns and resources. Schools should provide professional development opportunities to learn more about current immigration policy and best practice recommendations from local resources. Communicating information consistently across staff and discussing the implications

to risks, boundaries, and sense of safety are critical conversations. Transparency in district communications is especially necessary in situations when misinformation may increase the likelihood of confusion or trauma, or impact future opportunities.

Second, schools can leverage their role as community hubs to provide space and resources to disseminate information to families throughout the district. Rather than generic online resources, districts should provide direct access to trusted people in the community through multilingual, cultural-specific events that nurture personal connections. Pooling information as a district allows for networking to identify and vet the most helpful resources. Moreover, centralizing information and designating point-people at both the school and district levels would increase efficiency in fielding requests for legal, policy, and college and career resources.

Third, school counselors should continue to prioritize relationship building while maximizing their critical role in advocating for undocumented students and families. Given their direct role in supporting undocumented students, counselors benefit from strong school policies that support student mental health wellness, academic success, social/emotional development, and post-secondary planning. Counselors could be helped by communicating their professional needs via a coordinated plan in an ongoing, systematic manner to ensure that their voices are heard.

Lastly, the findings reveal important implications for school counseling training programs. Programs can enhance their learning opportunities and exposure to issues affecting undocumented populations at the local and national levels. Adding specific course content to graduate programs that goes beyond general knowledge and focuses on advocacy, law and ethics, learning strategies, personal experiences, college and career supports, and community resources specific to undocumented students can increase professional confidence and competency. Moreover, it is critical for graduate programs to stay abreast of appropriate terminology and current information about the financial aid process. Continuing education units (CEUs) related to licensure renewal is another opportunity to stay updated on pertinent information while meeting ASCA standards (2019) to ensure that all students experience a school environment is safe, welcoming, and conducive to learning, regardless of immigration status.

Conclusion

Clearly, there is a dire need for schools to rebuild confidence amongst immigrant communities. Ample research has established that students' lack of legal status poses multiple challenges, including a sense of identity and well-being, motivation, achievement, perseverance, stress, and levels of engagement (Gonzales et al., 2013; Fredericks et al., 2004; Zayas & Bradley, 2012). Strong school relationships and supportive counseling practices are critical for undocumented students to persevere and access education and career pathways from childhood through adulthood (Gonzales et al., 2013; DeLeon, 2005; Batalova et al., 2014). Clear policy guidelines and supportive advocacy can also transform school counselors from institutional agents to empowerment agents (Todd et al., 2020.)

Much more research is needed to document ways in which school counselors can better support undocumented students. While it is beyond the scope of this exploratory research, it would be interesting to see if there is a correlation between knowledge and concern for undocumented families, and counselor demographics. For example, are Latinx counselors more

aware of this topic, or more likely to be perceived as “safe” for students to share this sensitive information?

In this study, we investigated how some Pacific Northwest counselors described feeling informed and prepared to support undocumented students about their overall needs. This research contributes to the literature by providing insight into the ways in which counselors advocate for these students, the information and community organizations they rely on, and what schools and districts can do to share information and support counselors in this work. Recommendations for graduate programs include ideas for building capacity and advocacy skills for counselor and teacher candidates around these issues. Most of all, counselors and educators must be well informed and prepared about the policies and practices that impact undocumented students as they strive to empower students and optimize academic, behavioral, and social/emotional supports.

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