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Dalila A. Sajadian

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Leadership Practices for Undocumented and DACA students in the Heartland



Dr. Dalila A. Sajadian
Director of Learning Support Division
North Iowa Area Community College

Continuous demographic changes are shaping the future of higher education institutions and as a result, leaders in educational institutions must adapt to those changes. Community college leaders, in particular rural leaders, are in a unique position and need to constantly evolve to serve different students, including undocumented and DACA students. The US Department of Education (2015) estimates that approximately 65,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools every year, however, “only 5 to 10% of undocumented students pursue higher education, and far fewer successfully graduate with a degree” (US Dept. of Education, 2015, p. 3). On June 15, 2012, President Obama announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, also known as

DACA program. The DACA program opened a new window of opportunity for these students as it allowed them to obtain job authorization and granted them the opportunity to attend higher education institutions.

Overall, what we know from research regarding the barriers, experiences, and educational outcomes of DACA recipients and DACA eligible students (collectively, DACA students), along with related policy considerations, naturally comes out of large populations coastal centers and other major population centers (Gonzalez, 2010; Gonzalez, Heredia, & Negrón-Gonzalez, 2015; Suarez-Orozco, et.al. 2015). This body of research has established implications for what leaders can and should do to serve the interests of this segment of the population, even as most research has been concerned with student services staff and diversity officers (Kezar, 2000; Kezar, 2008; Nienhuser, 2018) rather than executive leadership per se.

By contrast, rural colleges and universities in the interior of United States – relative to their peer institutions in coastal and large population centers – lack funds, training, personnel, and access to other support networks that offer specialized services and formal and informal support to undocumented and DACA students on and off their campuses. Higher education leaders in small, rural colleges may not benefit from the same wealth of

resources as their peers in large coastal areas. While the growth of immigrant populations, including many DACA-eligible students, may be modest in absolute numbers in the rural interior of the U.S., compared to places like California, Texas, Illinois, and Florida, the rate of relative growth in small communities can far outpace their peer communities, (USCIS, 2019) transforming the communities and civic institutions that serve them (American Council on Education, 2019).

The leaders’ voices in rural settings remain underrepresented in the literature with only a handful of studies addressing mostly their career path and the challenges serving in rural settings without many resources, and the competencies needed to lead successfully rural campuses (Eddy, 2013; Eddy & Drake, 2008; Eddy, Liu, & Hartman, 2019; Leist, 2007;). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the decision – making and meaning making processes of community college presidents in rural settings regarding undocumented and DACA students, I conducted qualitative research. Following a narrative inquiry methodology, within its “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space”: the personal and social (interaction), the past, present, and future (continuity), along with its context (situation), several rural leaders with executive power in their institutions were interviewed and data was analyzed. The main research questions were a) how do

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leaders of a community college in Iowa describe their decision-making processes with regards to undocumented and DACA students? b) How do they make sense of the decision-making process? The findings of this study provide some guidelines and recommendations to rural leaders to better address the needs of undocumented and DACA students on their campuses.

Four main themes were identified during the data analysis: a) for all leaders, the status of the students was irrelevant to the services they were providing to the students. Whether it was as a former faculty member, or as an administrator, the students' status did not have an impact in the leaders' willingness to help and provide as much support as the students needed; b) the leaders were very cognizant of the unfortunate existence of an underlying fear in this vulnerable population, and as such, they also were very aware that this impacted the number of students enrolling in college or coming to campus for informational purposes; c) there was a collaborative effort from leaders to make the college a safe and welcoming environment for these students, but the context and location of the college, undoubtedly plays a significant role. In addition, it was expressed through the course of this study, that there is much work to be done at the institutional level to attract and better serve undocumented and DACA students; this theme ties together with the fourth theme identified: d) the lack of information or misinformation surrounding undocumented and DACA students as a community and from institutional agents, due to having a homogenous demographics in their college area.

Although the sociopolitical contexts of

many colleges in typically predominantly white, politically conservative settings, mean that colleges operate under a very different set of circumstances, rural leaders have the capacity to implement practices that benefit these students within their campuses and within their communities and the impact those practices can have on undocumented and DACA students is palpable. Establishing partnerships with other community stakeholders and scholarships that benefit these students, as well as implementing in-state tuition practices, will translate in numerous benefits that will help close the achievement gap. As Eddy (2009) points out "leadership development in community colleges in general is a mosaic of practices and opportunities" (p. 21). Through this study, leaders expressed their desire to be able to make a difference in their student's lives, regardless of legal status, or the lack thereof.

However, rural leaders also need to be aware of the context of their institutions. Even though "diversity has a profound influence on America's community colleges. Diversity, however, can – and routinely does – assume a different form in a rural setting" (Leist, 2007, p. 37).

This study can help inform the different challenges and strategies that leaders of rural colleges may implement to better serve undocumented and DACA students on their campuses. By focusing on a different, unique perspective, it brings to light the narrated experiences of rural leaders addressing the very specific needs of undocumented and DACA students. By examining and sharing their narratives, this study adds to the discussion of rural leadership from a different point of view. This is important as rural community colleges serve over 3.4 million students at 600 colleges and 800 campuses, and they are the fastest grow-

ing sector of U.S. community colleges (Rural Community College Alliance, 2021). They remain the point of access for underrepresented minorities, including many undocumented and DACA students. Unlike previous research on rural leadership, this study shed light of leadership practices and challenges leaders at rural colleges face when addressing the specific needs of undocumented and DACA students.

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Katherine Wesley, Editor (ISSN 1551-7756) November 2021,
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E-mail: kwesley4@unl.edu

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