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# DREAMing Big: Understanding the Current Context of Academic and Career Decision-Making for Undocumented Students

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# DREAMing Big: Understanding the Current Context of Academic and Career Decision-Making for Undocumented Students

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## Abstract

Undocumented student immigrants in the United States face substantial challenges in higher education including systemic, institutional, and cultural barriers that often impede access to and success in higher education. These barriers directly influence academic and work opportunities. The purpose of this article is to discuss the myriad of factors that affect the academic, career, and work development of undocumented college students. The three main objectives of this article are to (1) examine legislation that directly impacts access to higher education, (2) explore common barriers and systemic challenges undocumented college students face, and (3) review culturally sensitive interventions and resources for working with undocumented college students. Vocational psychologists and career counselors employed in higher education are in a unique position to provide culturally sensitive counseling services to undocumented students as well as to advocate for their academic and work-related needs.

**Keywords** : undocumented students, career development, academic development, barriers and supports

Immigration has played an important and, at times, controversial role throughout the history of the United States. Approximately 28% of the current immigrant population, or 11 million individuals, are legally classified as unauthorized (Passel, Cohn, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013). Undocumented students enrolled in primary or secondary schools make up approximately 16% of this population, with an estimated 65,000 undocumented high school student youth graduating each year (National Immigration Law Center, 2011). Undocumented students are frequently subjected to traumatic experiences in the United States such as discrimination, racial profiling, indiscriminate checking of family and community members' immigration documents, separation or removal from their families, relocation of family due to the possibility of immigration raids, and deportation (American Psychological Association, 2012). Due to political, historical, and social complexities

surrounding the issue of immigration, undocumented students encounter many obstacles unique to their immigration status when attempting to access higher education and also while enrolled in colleges and universities (Gildersleeve, Rumann, & Mondragon, 2010). These obstacles pertain to college admission, finding employment that relates to their academic majors, and accessing basic human rights (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). The purpose of this article is to explore the myriad of factors that may affect the academic and career development of college students with undocumented immigration status in order to help psychologists and counselors better serve this student population.

Unauthorized immigration occurs when individuals reside in the United States after their visas legally expire or when they enter the country without legal authorization (Passel & Cohn, 2011). A multitude of factors, such as threatening life circumstances, extreme poverty, lack of employment opportunities, challenges related to reuniting with family members, and efforts to find humanitarian refuge, all contribute to unauthorized immigration (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). According to the Pew Hispanic Center, 81% of unauthorized immigrants are from Latin America, 11% from Asia, 4% from Europe or Canada, and 3% from Africa (Passel & Cohn, 2011). Similar to previous researchers (e.g., McWhirter, Ramos, & Medina, 2013), we use the terms "unauthorized," "undocumented," "without documentation," and "with undocumented status" interchangeably to refer to immigrants who do not have the legal approval or documentation to reside in the United States. We purposefully refrain using the terms "illegal" or "alien," as we find these terms to be dehumanizing to immigrants.

Many undocumented youth are brought to the United States at a very young age, at times without their knowledge. Undocumented minors are afforded primary education through public institutions and many undocumented students have obtained the majority of their K-12 educations in U.S. school systems (Gonzales, 2009). However, only 5-10% of this population attends college (Gonzales, 2007), which is likely due to an inability to afford college tuition or meet legal residency requirements rather than a lack of desire to pursue higher education (Bruno, 2012). Once enrolled in college, undocumented students face unique challenges (e.g., lack of financial aid, transportation issues) due to their undocumented status. As Gonzales (2009) notably asserts, "undocumented students are trapped in a legal paradox in which they have the right to primary and secondary education and are generally allowed to continue college, but their economic and social mobility is severely restricted due to their undocumented status" (p. 4).

Undocumented students may not utilize social supports and academic resources available on college campuses due to systemic and cultural barriers. This withdrawal ultimately contributes to the hidden nature of the undocumented population (Gonzales, 2009). However, recent changes in legislation and executive actions may result in a larger and more visible student population of undocumented immigrants on college campuses. It is imperative that psychologists and counselors possess the necessary knowledge and skills to work with undocumented students in a culturally sensitive manner. We believe that gaining comprehensive knowledge of the unique concerns of undocumented students will allow for psychologists and counselors to work more effectively with undocumented students since practitioners will likely encounter students who are facing challenges regarding their academic work and career trajectory. However, research and literature on the academic and career concerns of undocumented students are limited (Ellis & Chen, 2013), and the research that has been conducted crosses multiple disciplines (e.g., education, student affairs, psychology). To date, no exhaustive review has been conducted and little is known about what interventions and practices are most effective

when working with undocumented students.

The purpose of this article is three-fold. First, we outline historical and current legislation that directly affects access to higher education for undocumented students. We believe a foundational understanding of legislation and policies related to unauthorized immigration is necessary when working with undocumented students since students are directly impacted by these laws that determine their ability to participate in higher education. Second, we explore common barriers and systemic challenges related to seeking postsecondary education faced by undocumented students. This section highlights obstacles found in the extant literature and research. Third, we review culturally sensitive practices and interventions that psychologists can use when working with undocumented students.

### **Immigration Legislation**

The following section will provide a brief overview of historically significant legislation and legal cases that have influenced access to secondary and postsecondary education for students with undocumented status. We will focus our discussion on legislation that has either been implemented (e.g., Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA]) or is being proposed at a national level (e.g., Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors [DREAM] Act).

#### ***Plyler v. Doe (1982)***

Students with undocumented status have had access to publicly funded primary and secondary education since 1982 according to the Supreme Court's decision in *Plyler v. Doe* (Gonzales, 2009). The Supreme Court ruling notably declared that "undocumented children are 'persons' under the Constitution and thus entitled to equal protection under the law according to the 14th Amendment" (Gonzales, 2009, p. 11). In essence, the *Plyer v. Doe* ruling provided equal opportunity for K-12 educations for all children living in the United States, regardless of citizenship status (Gonzales, 2009). However, *Plyer v. Doe* failed to address access to postsecondary education for undocumented students. While federal law does not prohibit undocumented students from attending U.S. colleges, barriers related to college admission and financial aid prevents students from accessing postsecondary education (Gonzales, 2009).

#### ***Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986***

One of the first major revisions to address undocumented immigration was the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, implemented by Immigration and Naturalization Service. IRCA is primarily known for its general legalization program, which provided temporary resident status to individuals who entered the United States before January 1, 1982, and a pathway to lawful permanent residence (LPR) for temporary residents (Kerwin, 2010). The objective of IRCA was to limit unauthorized immigration by implementing a broad legalization program which included increased border control, employment verification, and employment sanctions to reduce "magnet" work which attracted people to the United States illegally (Gonzales, 2009; Kerwin, 2010). In order to obtain LPR status, immigrants needed to meet certain requirements including possessing minimal knowledge of English, U.S. history, and government, or providing evidence of pursuit of education or training in these areas (Enchautegui, 2013). Prior to the implementation of IRCA, employers could knowingly hire unauthorized workers without legal

consequences (Kerwin, 2010). With the enactment of IRCA, employers are now restricted from knowingly hiring or recruiting undocumented immigrants to work (Chishti & Kamasaki, 2014). Furthermore, IRCA prohibits employers from discriminating during the hiring and discharge process based on national origin or citizenship status (Chishti & Kamasaki, 2014).

### *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)*

Current legislation has shifted its focus to address the needs and concerns of children with undocumented status. DACA is an executive branch policy decision implemented in June 2012 as a response to the stagnation and failure to pass the DREAM Act (discussed below) by Congress (Fiflis, 2013). DACA provides qualifying young adults who immigrated to the United States before 15 years of age deferred status from deportation and/or removal proceedings. In essence, deferred action prevents undocumented young adults from deportation as authorized by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and also allows them to apply for employment authorization documents for the period of time in which their deportation is deferred (National Immigration Law Center, 2014). Proof of the following is required for all undocumented youth to be eligible for DACA: (1) identity (ID; e.g., passport, national ID document from country of origin, birth certificate with photo identification, or school or military ID with photo); (2) arrival to the United States before their 16th birthday (e.g., passport with admission stamp, school records from the U.S. schools attended); (3) immigration status (e.g., I-94/I-95/I-94 W Forms, charging document placing you into removal proceedings); (4) continuous residence in the United States since June 15, 2007 (e.g., employment records, rent receipts); (5) physical presence in the United States since June 15, 2012; (6) current enrollment in school, or graduation or receipt of certification of completion from high school; and (7) no conviction or felony offense (National Immigration Law Center, 2014).

Applying for DACA can be a cumbersome process that does not guarantee deferment of deportation. In order to obtain DACA benefits, a thorough set of procedures must be completed which includes submission of required paperwork and payment of US\$465 (National Immigration Law Center, 2014). It is estimated that about 573,000 requests have been filed under DACA, and of those, more than 430,000 have been granted (Fiflis, 2013). In the 2 years since its implementation, DACA has directly influenced undocumented youths' access to higher education (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014). For example, the National UnDACAmented Research Project survey found that young adults who received DACA have become more integrated into U.S. economic and social institutions (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014). Prior to DACA, many undocumented college students struggled to finance their education due to difficulties in finding legal employment. However, DACA beneficiaries are now allowed to work on campus and are eligible for campus opportunities and resources (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014). Close to 60% of DACA recipients have obtained a new job since receiving DACA, 45% have increased their earnings, 57% have obtained driver's licenses, and 49% have opened their first bank account (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014). The benefits associated with receiving DACA were greatest for students who were enrolled in or graduated from a 4-year college. Although these statistics clearly highlight the positive economic and social impact DACA has had for young, undocumented immigrants, Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez (2014) argue that DACA-eligible populations may continue to experience challenges that obstruct their attainment of a postsecondary degree since DACA does not override federal and state policies that exclude undocumented students from accessing financial

aid. Undoubtedly, DACA has alleviated some of the inherent barriers experienced by undocumented youth; however, it does not provide a green card, an avenue to enter the military, and or a path to citizenship (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014) and essentially only defers deportation for childhood arrivals.

### ***Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act***

The DREAM Act was designed to “allow undocumented youth who were brought to the United States years ago as children to obtain lawful permanent resident status if they remain in school through high school graduation and continue on to college or military service” (Gonzales, 2009, p. 22). Since its introduction in 2001, the DREAM Act has been fervently debated but has yet to be enacted as law (Kim, 2012). If passed, the DREAM Act would sanction several major changes in the current legislation (National Immigration Law Center, 2014). Specifically, the bill would allow current, former, and future undocumented high school graduates and general educational development (GED) recipients to obtain legalization status through a two-stage process (Kim, 2012). First, undocumented students will be able to apply for a conditional lawful permanent resident (LPR) status if they meet certain requirements (e.g., entering United States prior to 16 years of age and U.S. residence for a minimum of 5 consecutive years). LPR status can be valid for 6 years during which students will be allowed to work, attend college, or join the military (National Immigration Law Center, 2014). Students who have previous criminal charges on their record or who are a security or public safety risk would not qualify for LPR (National Immigration Law Center, 2014).

Students with conditional LPR would be able to obtain a driver’s license and participate in typical daily activities as legal immigrants (Kim, 2012) with some exceptions (e.g., lengthy travel abroad; National Immigration Law Center, 2014). Students with conditional LPR would not be eligible for federal education grants but could be eligible for federal work-study and student loans (American Immigration Council, 2011). Students could also obtain permanent LPR status by accomplishing one of the following within a 6-year time period: (1) complete at least 2 years in a bachelor’s or a higher degree program, (2) acquire a degree from a 2-year or 4-year college in the United States, or (3) serve in the U.S. armed forces for at least 2 years and receive an honorable discharge. The DREAM Act would also repeal Section 505 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, which discourages states from providing in-state tuition or other higher education benefits to undocumented students (National Immigration Law Center, 2011). Currently, 18 states (i.e., California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island) have laws permitting individuals who graduated from a state high school to pay in-state tuition rates (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014). In general, the DREAM Act would provide permanent access to postsecondary education and reduce financial barriers for undocumented students at a federal level (Gonzales & Bautista-Chavez, 2014).

### ***Executive Action on Immigration***

In 2014, a major executive action on immigration policy was implemented that expands eligibility for temporary residence status to millions of undocumented immigrants (Capps, Rosenblum, & Bachmeier, 2014). Along with increased border control and a stronger focus on the deportation of individuals who pose a threat to national security, the executive action on immigration expands eligibility for DACA to all individuals,

regardless of age, who entered the United States before 16 years of age and have lived continuously in the United States since January 2010 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2015). This expands previous requirements of DACA by allowing access to immigrants older than 30 years (American Immigration Council, 2014; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2015). It will also require undocumented immigrants who have lived in the United States for more than 5 years and are parents of U.S. citizens or LPRs to undergo a formal registration process, pass back-ground checks, and pay taxes. In return, parents can reside in the United States temporarily for 3 years at a time without fear of deportation (American Immigration Council, 2014). Additionally, the executive order will expand provisional waivers of unlawful presence to include immediate family (e.g., spouses and children) of both LPRs and U.S. citizens. According to the Migration Policy Institute, up to 3.7 million undocumented immigrants could qualify for relief from deportation under the executive order (Capps, Rosenblum, & Bachmeier, 2014).

### **Systemic, Cultural, and Institutional Barriers**

When placed within American higher education systems, undocumented students encounter many roadblocks that are not experienced by their peers (Perez, Cortes, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). This section will discuss systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers (e.g., educational, financial, transportation, institutional, psychological, and familial barriers) experienced by undocumented college students.

#### ***Educational Barriers***

Abrego (2006) was among the first to examine academic challenges for undocumented students. His qualitative inquiry found that undocumented youth, specifically children of working-class Latino immigrants, face limited opportunities for upward mobility through education due to barriers associated with college attendance. Abrego's findings suggested that some youth experience a decline in educational motivation due to experiencing academic barriers, suggesting that broader systemic barriers affect the academic and career development of undocumented youth. Similarly, a quantitative study by McWhirter, Ramos, and Medina (2013) examined how barriers associated with immigration status, age, and sex are related to vocational outcome expectations, academic plans, and perceptions of barriers for Latino/a high school students. McWhirter and colleagues (2013) found that undocumented students possessed lower vocational outcome expectations and anticipated more barriers to pursuing higher education compared to students with legal documentation. Undocumented Latinas were also more likely to plan to attend 2-year rather than 4-year colleges. The studies by Abrego (2006) and McWhirter and colleagues (2013) provide insight into the powerful role that educational barriers can have in the academic development of undocumented students in the United States.

#### ***Financial Barriers***

One of the most significant barriers for undocumented college students is a lack of financial resources (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). Although students with undocumented status are eligible to apply for college without a Social Security number, they are not, in many states, eligible for in-state tuition rates and are unable to receive federal financial aid (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). Furthermore, college administrators may not possess a nuanced understanding of how to support undocumented students. Financial aid offices often advise undocumented students to complete the Free Application for Federal Student

Aid without realizing the barriers they will encounter without a Social Security number. Students also face logistical challenges upon college admission (e.g., unable to obtain student identification due to not having a second form of identification). This may result in students' admissions and scholarships being rescinded due to citizenship status. Students with undocumented status may also encounter barriers related to holding a lower social class background (Perez et al., 2010). Due to lack of access to financial resources, family members may not be able to help students fund their education privately. Additionally, undocumented students who transition to college often attend low-income high schools and may not receive an adequate amount of preparation to experience a seamless academic transition to college (Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Similarly, undocumented students may not possess a large amount of social capital, or a network of resources and relationships. Having social capital can lead to greater cultural resources and economic capital due to networking opportunities and connections with powerful individuals (Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Enriquez (2011) examined the ways in which undocumented students develop and utilize social capital to navigate educational systems and pursue higher education. Social capital derived from emotional and financial support from family members, peers, and teachers was found to be a source of empowerment for undocumented students (Enriquez, 2011). Enriquez (2011) also found that undocumented students participate in "patchworking" which involves "piecing together limited resources from various sources" to help them overcome barriers to education (p. 480).

### ***Systemic Barriers***

Undocumented students may experience transportation barriers due to restrictions in obtaining driver's licenses. Although some states allow undocumented students who qualify for the Executive Action on Immigration to obtain a driver's license (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015), students may not have access to the necessary training (e.g., driver's education) to easily obtain a license since driver's licenses were restricted to them until very recently. Additionally, driver's licenses are still prohibited for individuals and family members in numerous states who do not qualify for the executive action. Students who live significant distances from their campus may find it challenging to locate accessible transportation to travel to classes without a driver's license and may also not have access to travel options (e.g., flying or car rental) for professional development opportunities. One way to protect against this obstacle is to have alternative modes of transportation (e.g., organized bus) available for students.

Undocumented students also face distinct barriers in finding employment during and after college. They often have very limited career opportunities and are at an increased risk of not securing a job in their area of education and training as a result of legal and systemic barriers (Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010). Many students do not anticipate long-term challenges they will face in finding employment after graduation. For example, many undocumented students are not aware of the "E-verify" system which employers utilize to confirm the citizenship status of employees via a Social Security number. Since undocumented students often cannot have their identities verified, they may invest thousands of dollars in their training, but remain unemployable due to their lack of Social Security number.

### ***Institutional Barriers***

Awareness and advocacy efforts for undocumented students may be lacking on college campuses. Considering that federal and state legislation change frequently, campus

offices may not be prepared to change policies following legislative changes, resulting in them providing students with incorrect or outdated information. This, in turn, could affect students' experiences in applying to college and/or financial aid. Research by Kantamneni, Shada, Conley, Hellwege, and Tate (in press) found that undocumented students often had to be very resourceful to obtain information on applying to college due to a lack of institutional support. Additionally, once enrolled on campuses, students may continue to experience a lack of institutional support when certain restrictions are placed upon them due to their lack of documentation status. For example, students may not be allowed to rent text books or attend off-campus activities due to lack of personal identification (Kantamneni, Shada, Conley, Hellwege, & Tate, in press).

### *Acculturative Stress and Psychological Factors*

Environmental and cultural factors that distinctly affect young immigrants from minority backgrounds may also influence the socioemotional development of undocumented students. Immigrants, for instance, may undergo acculturative stress when confronted with the process of adapting to unfamiliar customs of a new environment (Arbona et al., 2010; Ellis & Chen, 2013). The acculturation experience of immigrants has been found to be significantly influenced by the availability of parents, accessibility of peer support, length of time spent in the host country, and the sociopolitical climate of the receiving culture (Ellis & Chen, 2013). Acculturative stress has also been linked to feelings of marginality, heightened psychosomatic symptoms, identity conflict, and poor mental health outcomes (Arbona et al., 2010; Ellis & Chen, 2013; Hovey, 2000; Hovey & Magan, 2000). Undocumented students may experience acculturative stress not only when they immigrate to a new country but also when they transition to new environments, such as college. Moreover, students likely confront additional layers of discrimination due to the systemic barriers that prevent them from accessing educational opportunities (Perez et al., 2010). The consequence of this added discrimination contributes to anxiety related to applying and transitioning to college. Moreover, Perez, Cortes, Ramos, and Coronado (2010) argue that students with undocumented status may also experience rejection in their academic pursuits, resulting in feelings of insecurity related to achieving academically. Undocumented students often have poor mental health outcomes (e.g., depression and anxiety) due to concerns related to unattainable career goals, confusion about their identity, and uncertainty related to whom they can trust. Research has also suggested that the omnipresent fear of deportation negatively influences self-image (Cavazoz-Rehg, Zayas, & Spiznagel, 2007). Undocumented students may be fearful of having their immigration status exposed to peers, administration, or faculty and may feel shame for not being able to partake in "normal" college activities (Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Undocumented students may also be afraid to seek counseling due to concerns about confidentiality practices and fears that their status will be revealed.

### *Family Concerns*

Students with undocumented status may face a number of personal and family barriers that intersect with their educational pursuits. The context in which many undocumented family members live can be stressful, due to financial burdens, fear of immigration status being discovered, health-care costs, and instability of work. In addition, some families may have members with differing citizenship statuses resulting in different paths and responsibilities for each member (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010), which, at times, can cause conflicting relationships among members. Relationships among family members

can directly and indirectly influence academic and vocational choices. For example, while parents of undocumented students may not have attended college in the United States, many students may derive inspiration and encouragement from their parents to attend college and pursue their career goals. Parents may endure many hardships to ensure their children will be afforded greater educational and vocational opportunities. For example, a quantitative study by Perez and colleagues (2010) found that undocumented students with personal and environmental protective factors (e.g., supportive family and friends, participation in school activities) demonstrated higher levels of academic success despite risk factors such as low parental education, long employment hours while enrolled in school, and elevated feelings of societal rejection compared to peers with the same risk factors but fewer protective factors (Perez et al., 2010). Parents and family members can influence students' academic development in complex and multifaceted ways. The interactional patterns between undocumented students and their context ultimately affect their academic and vocational identity (Ellis & Chen, 2013). According to Ellis and Chen (2013), undocumented students consistently encounter threats to their educational and career goals. Students' assessments of their abilities to transcend such challenges directly influence educational and career outcomes. Individuals with undocumented status may experience decreased self-efficacy due to experiencing barriers related to their immigration status such as lack of cultural capital, fear of deportation, and increased levels of acculturative stress which may, in turn, affect career aspirations and work decisions (Arbona et al., 2010; Ellis & Chen, 2013).

It is evident that undocumented students face a multitude of systemic barriers and contextual concerns which substantially affect their ability to access higher education and persist in college. In turn, these barriers significantly affect academic and career development and mental health. In order to reduce mental health disparities on campuses and encourage successful academic and vocational progress, it is critical for psychologists and counselors working with this population to understand and attend to familial, cultural, and systemic factors that influence the academic and vocational development of undocumented students. Awareness of these systemic structures will allow practitioners to work more sensitively with students who have undocumented status.

### **Culturally Sensitive Practice and Implications**

Undocumented students may pursue counseling for vocational concerns, such as uncertainty about their future career outlook, as well as to build coping skills to manage the multiple stressors that they experience in finding employment. They may also seek counseling to cope with feelings of fear related to possessing unauthorized citizenship status or because they are considering withdrawing from college due to frustrations regarding limited work opportunities. It is also worth noting that undocumented students may enter career counseling for a wide range of presenting concerns that are typical for college students; however, these students also have the added layer of stress due to their documentation status. In this section, we highlight culturally sensitive intervention strategies and resources for working with undocumented youth.

#### *Establishing Climate of Trust and Sensitivity*

It may be particularly important to establishing a climate of trust when developing and implementing intervention strategies with undocumented students. Since students may fear deportation (Chan & Dorador, 2012), they may not reveal their status to fac-

ulty, counselors, or staff. Consequently, students may not seek services and may remain invisible on campus. Psychologists and counselors can communicate to students that it is safe to reveal their status as well as to openly discuss personal, financial, academic, and career-related barriers that they may be encountering. In a similar vein, clinicians can foster a sense of safety and trust by reviewing terms of confidentiality with undocumented students (Storlie & Jach, 2012). For example, practitioners can inform students about whether or not information regarding their citizenship status will be recorded in clinical documents. This disclosure may allow students to experience greater control over the types of information they choose to reveal.

Additionally, psychologists and counselors can enroll in programs on campus intended to increase sensitivity when working with students with undocumented status, such as the DREAMzone Ally certification programs. If these types of programs are not readily available, counselors can advocate for them at their universities. Counselors can also take action by forming committees and task forces that address academic, personal, and institutional needs of undocumented students. They can establish connections with host communities in the United States that have similar cultural backgrounds to immigrant students in an effort to help students with undocumented status feel more included and comfortable on college campuses (Munoz & Maldonado, 2012). These connections have the potential to increase undocumented students' social and economic capital. Moreover, psychologists, staff, and faculty can inform themselves about legislation and university policies related to undocumented students (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). Gaining knowledge on such policies can inform practitioners so that they understand the context in which academic and career decisions are made, provide students accurate information, help students set realistic career goals, and advocate for students. Simply conveying knowledge about the unique concerns (e.g., immigration legislation, financial barriers) of undocumented students can also help build trust with students who are often unheard and invisible within college campuses. Finally, psychologists and counselors can provide outreach to student organizations or groups that undocumented students may participate in to provide information on the types of "safe" resources that may be available to them on campus. Students with undocumented status may not be aware of resources available to them since they are often also first-generation college students (Gildersleeve et al., 2010).

### *Utilizing Culturally Sensitive Career Frameworks*

It is important for psychologists and counselors to conceptualize students' concerns using culturally sensitive theories that integrate a contextual perspective. Two vocational theories, Psychology of Working and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), may be particularly useful when working with undocumented students. The Psychology of Working approach takes into account that work is necessary, constant, and limited for a myriad of reasons depending on one's race, gender, socioeconomic status, ability, citizenship status, and other factors (Blustein, 2006). The meaning and necessity of work in an individual's life can include work as a means for survival and power, social connectedness, and self-determination (Blustein, 2006; Blustein, Perry, Kenna, & DeWine, 2007). For undocumented students, barriers could restrict their ability to reach optimal career or work goals, resulting in the possibility of performing work that is uninteresting or unrewarding (Blustein et al., 2007). Within a Psychology of Working framework, psychologists and counselors can work with students to explore and gain awareness around their vocational concerns by nurturing empowerment, fostering critical consciousness,

promoting clients' skill-building, and providing scaffolding in the support of volition and the role of advocacy (Blustein, Kenna, Gill, & DeVoy, 2008). For example, psychologists can help clients feel more confident and assertive in advocating for their respective needs. Students with undocumented status may not feel they have control in their personal career decisions. A psychologist, however, can assist clients in developing feasible goals and techniques by responding flexibly to uncertainty within the career context. Next, psychologists can aid clients in expanding their critical consciousness by understanding their sociopolitical, cultural, and economic contexts. Within this step, psychologists and counselors can help students explore the systemic nature of privilege and process feelings that may arise from not having the same opportunities as documented immigrants. In the third step, psychologists can work with clients to construct goals that utilize current strengths and skill sets as well as further develop skills that may assist them in gaining greater employment opportunities. This step is a prime opportunity for psychologists to act as a part of students' social capital by introducing them to beneficial resources. Furthermore, the last step supplements the third step by adding scaffolding, in which psychologists can utilize multiple sources of intervention to act as advocates for their clients. The pursuit of advocacy and social justice by psychologists can lead to students developing greater volition with respect to their academic and career goals.

SCCT is also a beneficial theoretical framework for understanding the career and vocational development of students with undocumented immigration status (Ellis & Chen, 2013; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). SCCT contends that a person's background, contextual variables, and learning experiences influence the development of self-efficacy and outcome expectations, which in turn shape vocational interests, goals, and actions. Distal and proximal contextual influences, such as perceptions of barriers, experiences of discrimination, and family influences, also shape the development of self-efficacy, interests, goals, and actions. Considering that immigration legislation directly impacts undocumented students' access to work and education, SCCT provides a framework to explore how distal and proximal contextual influences (e.g., perceived barriers and supports) play a role in the academic and vocational development of undocumented students. It is possible that undocumented students may have difficulty developing work-related self-efficacy due to inherent challenges related to their immigration status, such as fears of deportation, acculturative stress, and lack of career related information (Arbona et al., 2010; Ellis & Chen, 2013; Joseph, 2011). Barriers in students' environments may also inhibit their ability to cultivate self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and interests into vocational goals due to limited opportunity structures (Arbona et al., 2010; Berg, 2009; Ellis & Chen, 2013; Joseph, 2011; Lent et al., 2000; Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010). Additionally, an SCCT framework could facilitate a greater understanding of how social supports (e.g., mentoring) facilitate or hinder academic and vocational exploration.

### *Developing Resources for Undocumented Students and Acting as Change Agents*

Counseling services can facilitate institutional support that can buffer some of the barriers undocumented students' experience. For example, peer support can be a powerful coping mechanism for students with undocumented status. Career centers and psychological services can work with student organizations to offer a safe space for undocumented students to discuss their unique concerns as well as provide an avenue for documented students to act as allies for their undocumented peers. Orientation programs and learning communities geared toward first-generation students, which typically may include undocumented students, can also provide specialized information for undocu-

mented students and act as a source of support for students. Additionally, counseling centers could provide group therapy for undocumented students to address academic, environmental, and psychosocial concerns (Chen, 2013). Relationships with academic and professional mentors are also a crucial protective influence in the growth and resilience among undocumented students. Counselors and practitioners can work with community members to foster mentoring relationships for undocumented students. Additionally, counselors can advocate for changes within institutions' admissions and financial aid offices in order to receive training related to challenges that undocumented students face so they can provide accurate information to students.

Counselors can also engage in social justice on a broader systemic level. Ellis and Chen (2013) note that there is already an established pattern of advocacy within the mental health community that encompasses efforts to give voice to marginalized individuals through consciousness raising. Counselors could engage in social justice action by informing and educating faculty, students, and community members who are providing services for undocumented students' academic and personal needs (Perez et al., 2010). Ultimately, to achieve equity in higher education, professionals must advocate for undocumented students' legal and political rights to pursue a postsecondary degree under the same conditions as other students (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). For example, counselors can engage in letter-writing campaigns to support legislation that benefits undocumented students in their college experiences (Gildersleeve et al., 2010) and help establish advocacy and resource groups (Perez et al., 2010).

### **Future Research Directions**

Research examining the academic and vocational development of undocumented students is very limited (Ellis & Chen, 2013) and it is necessary for psychologists and counselors to conduct research that comprehensively understands the unique work-related needs of this population. Future research could investigate how varying levels of institutional, community, and personal supports are related to educational persistence and successful college transitions for students with undocumented status. Research could also examine the coping mechanisms undocumented students employ to overcome barriers and build resilience to persist in their educational and career goals. Additionally, longitudinal research could examine how academic and career-related barriers and supports are related to educational and work-related outcomes across students' life spans. It is also important for research to examine the impact that continually changing legislation has on undocumented students' psychological development and career-related hopes and dreams. Finally, in order to gain knowledge on how academic and career counseling can be beneficial to undocumented students, research could examine the efficacy of career interventions with this unique group of students. In order for psychologists and counselors to provide culturally sensitive counseling to undocumented students, more research is needed that examines the practices and interventions psychologists and counselors employ when serving this community. One mechanism to conduct more research with this "hidden" population, and in turn better inform career counseling practice, may be for psychologists to work collaboratively with community members in developing research projects as well as to become involved with community and campus organizations that serve undocumented immigrants.

## Conclusion

Students with undocumented immigration status confront numerous obstacles within higher education systems that restrict the opportunity structures available to them, constrain their potential for upward mobility, and severely limit them from reaching their full academic and career potential. Based on our review of the extant literature and research, it is evident that unique contextual and systemic factors play a role in how undocumented students make academic and work-related choices and construct meaning from these choices. Traditional career theories and interventions may not be suitable for undocumented students since they may not fully capture the unique contextual experiences that shape how undocumented immigrants make work-related decisions. It is imperative that psychologists and counselors employed in higher education settings gain the knowledge and skills necessary to work effectively with undocumented students in order to better support their academic and vocational development.

Considering continuing changes in legislation that directly affects access to academic and work opportunities for undocumented young adults, it is important that counselors and psychologists understand the work-related needs of undocumented students in order to better serve them. We encourage counselors to consider ways in which they can aid undocumented students in accessing higher education and work opportunities, cope with the multiple stressors they experience, and construct meaning from their academic and work decisions. We also encourage counselors and psychologists, to act as social change agents to create environments in which undocumented students have the opportunity to capitalize on their strengths, prosper in their academic and career goals, and achieve their dreams.

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