

# What does it mean to be UndocuBlack? Exploring the double invisibility of Black undocumented immigrant students in U.S. colleges and universities

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## Abstract

The scholarship concerning undocumented immigrant students continues to overlook the lives of Black undocumented immigrant (undocuBlack) students. This interpretative phenomenological study aims to increase awareness of how undocuBlack students experience college. Our findings suggest that undocuBlack students experience double invisibility because of two of their salient identities: Black and undocumented. Study participants overwhelmingly indicated feeling invisible, even in spaces presumably designed for Black and undocumented immigrant students, such as Black Student Unions and Undocumented Student Resource Centers. This article provides a grounding understanding of undocuBlack college students and concludes with recommendations for increasing the undocuBlack college student visibility in higher education and research.

## Practical Takeaways

- **Diversify and Train College-wide Institutional Agents.** Hire and promote institutional agents and student leaders who intimately understand undocuBlack lives and issues. Train institutional agents on undocuBlack realities, which should involve partnering and paying (yes, paying) current and formerly undocuBlack immigrants who

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are content experts to share their experiences and research.

- **Center/ing UndocuBlack Student Voices:** Review yearly programming calendars to ensure that undocuBlack stories are represented (e.g., Black History Month, Disability Pride Month, Latinx Heritage Month, Pride Month, Undocumented Immigrant Week/Month, and Women's Heritage Month, among others).
- **Cross-Campus and Community Collaboration:** Collaborate and disseminate reliable content from organizations, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, UndocuBlack Network, and Black Alliance for Just Immigration to strengthen our ties and widen our support for undocuBlack students and staff (and overall communities) on and off campus.

## INTRODUCTION

Increasingly in the last 20 years, anthropological, educational, legal, and sociological studies have paid attention to how undocumented immigrant students experience higher education in the United States (Abrego, 2006, 2008; Conger & Chellman, 2013; Flores & Horn, 2009; Gonzales, 2010, 2016; Perez, 2010; Reyna Rivarola, 2017). However, few studies have focused on the unique experiences, struggles, and needs of Black undocumented immigrant (undocuBlack) college students (see Hall, 2022; Meitzenheimer, 2020; Russell, 2022; Salinas Velasco et al., 2015). The limited research about undocuBlack college students should not surprise us. After all, higher education research parallels the global and national anti-Black sentiments that efface Black people and their lives. Specifically, in the case of the United States, anti-Blackness has shaped the national perception of undocumented immigration as an almost exclusively non-Black Latinx issue, thus invisibilizing the particularities of undocuBlack lives (Palmer, 2017; Patler, 2014).

This interpretative phenomenological study aims to increase awareness of how undocuBlack college students experience college. We break down this article into five sections. First, we provide a brief overview of the literature concerning Black immigration and immigrants in the United States. Second, we review the literature on undocumented immigrant college students and pay specific attention to undocuBlack students. Third, we review our study design, including participant overview. Fourth, we present findings and suggest that undocuBlack students experience double invisibility because of two of their salient identities: Black and undocumented. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for increasing the visibility of undocuBlack students in higher education and research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Contextualizing Black immigration and immigrants in the United States

The "Black immigrant" category in the United States includes foreign-born people who migrated into the country and are systemically racialized as Black. Black immigrants

include Black African, Afro-Asian, Afro-European, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latin American people, among other individuals and groups who are racialized as Black before or upon arrival in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Anti-Blackness has virtually shaped all aspects of societal life in the United States, including immigration. In the early onset of U.S. immigration policy, Black people were seldom allowed to migrate to the United States until the Naturalization Act of 1870, which extended immigration privileges to some people of African heritage. In the 1910s and 1920s, the tropical fruit trade between the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America created a push and pull factor for Black migrants (Hamilton, 2020; Palmer, 1974, 1995).

Black laborers from the Caribbean, Latin America, and other parts of the world who transported fruits, such as bananas, to the United States had a facilitated entrance to the country (Palmer, 1995). Decades later and carrying the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 further increased Black immigration to the United States. In the 1980s, The Refugee Act of 1980 upped the annual ceiling to 50,000, granting refugee status to many Black people (Kent, 2007). Most recently, the Diversity Immigrant Visa program in 1990 opened avenues for Black people to migrate to the United States (Hamilton, 2020). The Black immigrant population has grown in recent decades, from less than 1% of the U.S. Black population in the 1980s to 4.6% in 2019 (Tamir, 2022). From 2000 to 2013, the Black Caribbean immigrant population grew by 33% and the Black African immigrant population by 137% (Hamilton, 2020). Overall, the Black immigrant population in the United States has increased from 3.8 million in the 1980s to over 4.2 million in the 2000s (Anderson, 2015).

## UndocuBlack immigrants

According to Budiman (2020), undocumented immigrants, or people without legal immigration status, account for 3.2% of the U.S. population. About 6% of undocumented immigrants in the United States are Black, and encompass people from African countries, including Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Uganda, and the African diaspora from Caribbean countries, including Colombia, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, and Venezuela among others (Anderson, 2017; Meitzenheimer, 2020). Black immigrants, including undocuBlack immigrants, face the structural and social realities of the United States, such as racism and xenophobia (Patler, 2014). As Palmer (2017) remarkably stated, “Black immigrants live in the crosshairs of American-bred anti-Black racism and anti-immigrant sentiments” (p. 120). Statistically, undocuBlack immigrants are over-criminalized within the immigration system because of their Blackness and are twice as likely to be held in deportation proceedings than their non-Black counterparts (Meitzenheimer, 2020; Morgan-Trostle et al., 2016).

## Undocumented immigrant students and U.S. higher education

A new report by FWD.us report estimates that 120,000 undocumented students will graduate high school in 2023 (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). However, undocumented students face multiple barriers to higher education as a product of a national, state, and institutional-level policies network (Castrellón, 2021; Nienhusser, 2018; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Reyna Rivarola, 2017). One example of how these policies affect undocumented immigrant college student participation is the United States Supreme Court ruling for *Plyer v. Doe* (1982), which extended the privilege of accessing primary and secondary education to undocumented immigrants (López & López, 2009). The ruling, however, did not include

higher education. Additionally, a new report by the American Immigration Council and the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education noted that there are 408,000 undocumented students within higher education (Undocumented Students in Higher Education, 2023).

To date, no national policy dictates whether undocumented immigrants can participate in higher education. States must decide whether they will accept undocumented immigrant students in their colleges and universities and what benefits they can access (e.g., in-state tuition policies and licensure; López et al., 2020). In addition to the uneven state policy geography, some undocumented immigrant college students are currently dealing with the uncertainty of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals<sup>2</sup> (DACA) program, which President Obama announced in 2012. Given the gravity of the national and state policies, an estimated 1% to 3% of undocumented immigrant college students graduate from college annually (American Federation of Teachers, 2017).

## UndocuBlack college students: Relevant literature

In recent years, higher education scholarship has shed light on undocumented immigrant student subgroups and what campuses are doing to address the needs of undocumented immigrant students. For example, studies have begun to document the experiences of Asian undocumented immigrant (undocuAsian) and Queer undocumented immigrant (undocuQueer) college students (see Buenavista, 2016; Dao, 2017; Cisneros, 2019; Cisneros & Bracho, 2019; Cisneros & Gutierrez, 2018; Reyna Rivarola & Cisneros, 2021). Others have focused on the roles of USRCs in supporting undocumented immigrant college students (see Cisneros & Reyna Rivarola, 2020). Even with the literature expanding to other multiply-marginalized undocumented immigrant groups and USRCs, limited research exists about the particular experiences of undocuBlack college students.

To understand the experiences of undocuBlack college students, we turned to scholarship on undocuBlack immigrants and students. Scholars such as Benjamin (2018) and Meitzenheimer (2020) have studied undocuBlack immigrant lives broadly, and Hall (2022) undocuBlack college students specifically. Utilizing Patricia Hill Collin's (1990) *Black Feminist Thought*, Meitzenheimer explored the experiences of undocuBlack women and aimed to understand how they navigated their status, race, gender, and being invisibilized for being undocuBlack women. Meitzenheimer found that despite the constant erasure to which the state and people subject them, undocuBlack women find and build communities to nurture and sustain themselves. Benjamin (2018) discussed the relationship between anti-Blackness and citizenship and found that, unlike their non-Black counterparts, undocuBlack immigrants simultaneously navigate all the barriers associated with being Black and undocumented. Benjamin (2018) stated,

Black undocumented people have different experiences from [non-Black] Latinx population in regard to racial profiling, criminalization, educational attainment, and access to jobs, and Black immigrants are resisting marginalization and exercising agency by advocating for their own incorporation into mainstream immigrant rights organizations. (p. 14)

In 2022, Hall explored the experiences of undocuBlack students on college campuses and found that undocuBlack students experience a sense of erasure from faculty, staff, and administration. The national discourse about undocumented immigration continues to promote a particular image of what an undocumented immigrant student "looks like," thus erasing or invisibilizing those who "do not look" undocumented (Reyna Rivarola & López,

2021). This discourse contributes to the sense of invisibility undocuBlack college students' experience.

## METHODOLOGY

The current study was motivated by one question: How does being Black *and* undocumented shape the educational experiences of undocuBlack college students? To examine the experience of undocuBlack college students, we engaged in qualitative research and used interpretative phenomenology to collect data and intersectionality as a framework to analyze it. An interpretative phenomenological analysis allows researchers to examine study participants' lives in detail by first focusing on the experiences of each participant and then drawing on themes and dissimilarities (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Intersectionality is an analytical tool and framework that originated from legal scholarship arguing that Black women experience racism and sexism simultaneously; thus, their experiences must be analyzed simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1991). Through this multifaceted analysis, we gained an intimate insight into the experiences of 15 undocuBlack students and how race (and racism) *and* immigration status affect their collegiate experiences.

### Participant selection and data collection

Purposive sampling was used to invite participants to form part of this study because undocuBlack college students are legally vulnerable (Hall, 2022). The selection criteria for prospective participants were to (1) identify as Black and undocumented and (2) be currently or previously enrolled at a 2- or 4-year higher education institution in the United States. A recruitment flyer was sent to three sectors of trust within undocuBlack communities. The first was through the UndocuBlack Network, Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), and African Communities Together (ACT), as these organizations directly serve undocuBlack immigrants. The second recruitment sector was through institutions with USRCs, whose sole focus is supporting undocumented immigrant students in higher education. The final recruitment source was higher education practitioners who worked at multicultural centers or outside organizations, such as Immigrants Rising. This recruitment strategy ensured that the reach for participants was broad as not all undocuBlack immigrants were currently involved in on-campus activities or organizations. A total of 15 participants were identified for the study. The participants represented 11 countries of origin and lived in ten states (i.e., California, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, New York, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Utah). Seven participants had DACA, one had Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and seven had no documentation. Thirteen participants were pursuing undergraduate degrees and two graduate degrees. Of the 15 participants, nine identified as women, and six as men. All participant names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their identities. See the demographic data in Table 1.

Sixty-to-ninety-five-minute interviews were conducted with each participant on Zoom. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and recordings deleted from desktops and cloud services to protect the participants and respect the integrity of the study. Multiple coding rounds were completed, transcripts summarized, and emergent and subordinate themes identified. Following, the summaries were shared with three esteemed scholar-peer debriefers whose research focuses on U.S.-based undocumented immigration and the social institution of education; the second author in this article was a peer debriefer and manuscript contributor.

**TABLE 1** Demographic data.

#	Name (Pseudonyms)	Age	Gender	Immigration status	Country of origin	Educational status
1	Darius Major	28	Man	DACA	Trinidad	B.A.
2	Arion Dirk	28	Man	DACA	Jamaica	B.A. student
3	Lucy Ivette	26	Woman	TPS	Haiti	Ph.D. student
4	Abraham Brace	26	Man	Undocumented	Senegal	M.A.
5	Taryn Hoover	24	Woman	DACA	Barbados	B.A.
6	Shannon Avery	23	Woman	Undocumented	Kenya	B.A.
7	Fatima Oli	21	Woman	DACA	Nigeria	B.A. student
8	Teresa Moore	26	Woman	DACA	Malawi	A.A. student
9	Mitch Monroe	20	Man	Undocumented	Gabon	B.A. student
10	Anthony Esmine	22	Man	Undocumented	Imo State	A.A. student
11	Rosemary Rundell	22	Woman	Undocumented	Jamaica	B.A.
12	Greg Talib	23	Man	DACA	Togo	B.A.
13	Gabby Neumann	24	Woman	Undocumented	Kenya	J.D. student
14	Sasha Oscar	30	Woman	DACA	Trinidad	B.A. student
15	Raven Reeves	20	Woman	Undocumented	Jamaica	B.A. student

## Positionality statements and trustworthiness

Interpretative phenomenology holds that the researchers' previous knowledge and assumptions help them better understand the phenomenon under study (Hopkins et al., 2017). As noted by Glesne (2011), a researcher's subjectivity is not regarded as a bias or a limitation of the study that would limit trustworthiness; instead, it is considered a strength. We approached this study having a critical understanding of our identities and experiences as Black (Felecia) and undocumented immigrants (Alonso and Felecia) might have created gaps in our abilities to see beyond similarities and differences with the participants' experiences. For this reason, post-study member checks and peer-debriefing strategies were conducted to enhance the trustworthiness of interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each participant was invited to review the interpretation of their experiences and agreed that they were accurately represented. Furthermore, the scholar-peer debriefing strategy supported credibility by reaffirming the overall trustworthiness of the themes and findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## FINDINGS

### UndocuBlackness on college campuses

One of the main questions that the lead researcher asked each participant was, "What does it mean to be undocuBlack?" Taryn, a former undergraduate student and DACA recipient stated,

To be undocuBlack is to feel very much invisible, and sometimes I feel as though my struggles are not heard enough. I often feel torn and, in a sense, feel like I am living a double life. On the outside, people will see me and not

think I am undocumented. In all honesty, I feel I will never be able to truly fit into society.

UndocuBlack college students and graduates reflected on their relationship to undocuBlackness with dejection. Like Taryn, many undocuBlack students felt misunderstood by non-undocuBlack students, administrators, faculty, and staff because of the assumption and treatment of Blackness and illegality as mutually exclusive. As aforementioned, the discourse surrounding undocumented immigration in the United States has created a visual of who is and can be an undocumented immigrant (Reyna Rivarola & López, 2021). This portrayal is often of a non-Black Latinx person, thus making invisible the unique struggles of those who experience life at the crux of Blackness and illegalization.

Arion, a current undergraduate student in the final year of his baccalaureate program, related how the flattening of the undocumented immigrant narrative shaped his experience in U.S. society and college. He explained:

To be undocuBlack means being invisible in a [country] that only recognizes Hispanics as immigrants. And being Black does not help because I constantly get categorized as African American, so when it's time to apply for scholarships, I don't fit [into] any of the [boxes].

As microcosms of U.S. society, higher education institutions have un/knowingly adopted the notion of the non-Black Latinx undocumented immigrant as the archetype of undocumented immigrant students, which inadvertently dictates its assumptions, policies, and practices surrounding supporting or not supporting undocumented immigrant students. This narrative dictates how institutions perceive student identities (e.g., who is Black/who is undocumented) to how their practices are conceptualized and operationalized, for example, non-Black Latinx-centric undocumented immigrant student programming, application categories, and demographic data collection practices, to name a few.

College campuses have produced an isolating effect on many undocuBlack students. As Rosemary, a college graduate, stated, "In higher education, it feels like I am a unicorn and that I am navigating these processes on my own and as the first of my kind. It can feel very lonely." UndocuBlack students felt they could never be themselves in college campus spaces; even the resources and spaces presumably designed to serve students with their experiences, such as BSUs and USRCs, have built their programmatic practices informed by the popularized anti-Black image of "who is" and "who isn't" undocumented, thus dismissing or ignoring undocuBlack students.

## Invisibility in black college spaces

... I have a unique Black experience. I have a difficult time when I get into spaces. And first of all, there's people who believe that people from Africa and the Caribbean aren't Black. So, like, I have a difficult time being in those spaces because I don't consider myself African American. I consider myself Black. And you know, to be Black does not mean that you're African American, but to be African American does mean that you're Black, and I think that a lot of people miss that, so I just have a really difficult time navigating a lot of those spaces.

In the excerpt above, Sasha, a current undergraduate student, explained how spaces created for Black students on campus generally center and reflect the experiences of African American students and not Black students from diasporic origins and immigrant

backgrounds outside of the United States. Arion, an undergraduate student from Jamaica, agreed. He said he never felt he could fully relate to the Black American students in BSU because there was a disconnect between the African American experience and his own experience as an undocuBlack immigrant. He stated,

I am in the Black Student Union but never go to any of their meetings. I just feel like I am not African American, so I felt distant between Black Americans, and immigration status was [n]ever mentioned. I also joined [Caribbean student organization]; they talk about [unimportant] things [when] they should've been discussing more social issues and helping kids on campus.

Arion noted that his time in the Caribbean student organization was also fruitless because the organization failed to focus on social issues. Experiences in student-led organizations, such as BSU and Caribbean student organizations, contributed to undocuBlack students feeling like they did not belong on campus, in these spaces, or with their peers.

Rosemary, a graduate student, also described her lack of sense of belonging in Black spaces because she could not relate to African American experiences. She stated,

I joined a Caribbean student club and BSU. With BSU, I felt like it was mostly African Americans and... I could never relate to African Americans completely.... Immigration was only mentioned in terms of discussing differences between... first- [and second-] generation immigrants.

UndocuBlack students explained that discussions about immigration in Black college spaces were very limited and often did not receive the attention they deserved. This was especially true for Rosemary and other undocuBlack students concerning undocumented immigration and undocuBlack immigrants in the United States. UndocuBlack students felt like Black college spaces were not spaces where they could be fully themselves due to the lack of understanding about undocumented immigrant experiences. Darius, a college graduate, shared his experience navigating Black spaces on college campuses. He stated,

I was part of... a Caribbean [student] organization, as well as Black Student Union. My experience was that I never told anyone I was undocumented; just, like, blended [in] and flowed and did all the things. Everyone knew I was from Trinidad, and I grew up there, but no one ever questioned why I did not go back for spring break. Immigration was never mentioned.

Although Darius joined the BSU and a Caribbean student organization to gain a sense of belonging on campus, he felt uncomfortable disclosing his immigration status. Therefore, he could not “show up” with all his identities because he was fearful that his immigration status would affect his experience or relationship with his peers. His reflection emphasizes that undocuBlack students often do not feel seen or represented in Black spaces; however, the same is true about undocumented immigrant college spaces.

## **Invisibility in undocumented immigrant college spaces**

UndocuBlack students reflected on their experience with undocumented immigrant college spaces with disappointment. Out of the 15 participants, only four had access to a USRC on their campus; nine participants never joined undocumented immigrant student



spaces on their campus because they did not want to be the only Black person in the room, and six participants joined an undocumented student club. However, they were the only Black people in the spaces. The four participants who had access to a USRC noted that they were involved with the USRC on their campus because they wanted a space to belong with other undocumented immigrant students. A sense of belonging is important because college students need to feel heard, seen, and supported (Strayhorn, 2020). Additionally, USRCs were created to give undocumented immigrant college students a sense of belonging (Cisneros & Reyna Rivarola, 2020; Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Enriquez et al., 2019). Yet, while undocuBlack students received material support in these spaces, they also experienced invisibility because they were often the only Black students and rarely saw Black staff or programming that reflected their identities, communities, and knowledge.

Greg, a college graduate at the time of the study who frequented the USRC during his undergraduate career, noted that he often felt like a “vagabond.” While the USRC did not intentionally make him feel like an outcast, Greg struggled to connect with the USRC staff and the programming offered. Sasha also maintained that she did not feel a sense of “home” in her USRC because she did not relate to non-Black undocumented students on campus. These statements of not belonging on campus in undocumented immigrant spaces were prevalent and consistent for Sasha, Greg, and many participants.

In addition to the lack of undocuBlack staff and programs offered at colleges and USRCs, undocuBlack students noted that institutional agents were often uninformed about the issues affecting undocuBlack immigrants, such as higher criminalization and deportation rates, and the mental and physical health effects of anti-Blackness and an anti-Black campus climate on Black students. According to Salinas et al. (2015), non-Black Latinx undocumented students rarely experienced or even question the absence of ethnic or racial diversity within undocumented student spaces. This observation is essential because undocuBlack students who joined USRCs hoped to engage with other students and institutional agents who intimately understood their experiences but met many fellow undocumented immigrants who had little to no connection to Blackness.

While only four participants had direct access to a USRC, others only had access to an undocumented immigrant student club (UISC). Arion had access to a UISC at his university but mentioned that he was the only Black student in the club, which made him feel isolated. When asked if he felt race was a factor in joining the UISC, he responded, “I always felt everyone was staring at me, and now when I see people on campus, they act like they don’t remember me. In that aspect, I think race plays a part.” Despite being an undocumented immigrant student, Arion felt he did not belong in that club. Arion described his undocuBlackness as, “no one expects a Black person to be undocumented. For instance, in the [UISC], no one looks like me and when [I] show up, they don’t even know what to do.” Fatima, an undergraduate student who did not have access to a USRC, was a member of the UISC on her campus. She attended group meetings and was consistently one of the only Black students. She said, “People were always surprised when they found out I was undocumented.” She mentioned wanting to join a club for DACA students but felt that she did not identify with them because most members were non-Black Latinx.

UndocuBlack students struggled in USRCs and UISCs on their college campuses because the staff and students were not representative of them, and the programming did not reflect their realities, wants, and needs. Furthermore, undocuBlack students were often the only Black people in these college spaces, which was draining and isolating.

## CREATING UNDOCUBLACK STUDENT SUPPORT IN COLLEGE CAMPUSES

UndocuBlack students noted that institutional agents' lack of awareness and knowledge about supporting undocuBlack students hindered their college experiences and success. This lack of understanding and expertise was similar across the college, including BSUs, USRCs, and UISCs. Sasha expressed disillusion with how the institution treated her and the lack of resources available to undocuBlack students. She said,

I will ask one question, and that person will point me to one direction and another to another direction, so I would literally kind of study it, and I was just like 'none of y'all got answers.' I would ask questions through email because last semester was completely virtual, so I was just kind of like emailing everyone, and some people would just not respond, and I'd keep sending the same email, and eventually, they would respond and send me somewhere else, and then that person would say, 'Oh try this person,' and I'm like already spoke to them, but I have not found any services.'

As Sasha reflected on her experience, it was evident that because of the lack of knowledge among the staff she encountered, she did not trust them to help her navigate higher education as an undocumented immigrant student (Contreras, 2009; Perez, 2010). She experienced what Castellón (2021) termed "evasion of responsibility," or the commonly held practice in higher education where institutional agents ping-pong undocumented immigrant students from one student resource center or institutional agent to another instead of taking the initiative to help undocumented immigrant students find answers. As Sasha continued making meaning of her undocuBlack experience in college, she noted that she had to work hard to understand the issues she faced and find available resources. This additional work of serving as her own student affairs professional ultimately led her to pursue opportunities outside the college campus to fund her tuition and engage in the community.

When institutional agents evaded the responsibility of helping undocumented immigrant students, undocuBlack students often wasted their time and emotional energy seeking support in the wrong office spaces or with the wrong institutional agents (Castrellón, 2021). For example, Abraham, an undocumented college graduate, pursued the advice of a staff member who referred him to the international student office. He said: "... I did utilize other services, but they were not helpful... I went into the 'international student' office, but they did not understand my immigration status. I tried getting an internship, and they did not know how to help me."

Abraham sought help, but the staff he encountered were un(der)prepared to answer his questions. As Abraham reflected on his experience, he noted that because he needed help finding support on his campus, he had to work to find his own resources, which did not leave him time to participate in campus activities. Like Abraham, Mitch, a second-year undergraduate student, expressed searching for undocumented student resources at his college campus but was unsuccessful. He stated, "I mean, sometimes they have a board where they post everything on campus; I've been looking through it, and I didn't see anything about it, they don't have anything for undocumented students. I don't know like if there are other students in my situation." The lack of visible resources for undocuBlack students furthers their sense of invisibility on campus.

Mitch shared that the lack of visible support hindered him from sharing his status or participating in campus activities. He wanted to find resources and get involved; however, he

could not do so because no apparent support services for undocumented students existed on his campus. Overall, undocuBlack students experienced a lack of support from institutional agents who did not know how to help undocumented and, specifically, undocuBlack immigrant students in their colleges and universities. Institutional agents did not do everything in their power (and position descriptions) to find the correct answers for Mitch and other undocuBlack students.

## IMPLICATIONS

### Implications for practice

College students deserve to experience a sense of belonging on campus (Strayhorn, 2020). Strayhorn (2020) noted that a sense of belonging is an optimal precursor for meaningful student engagement and success, particularly for multiply-minoritized student populations. For undocuBlack students, it is no different, except the opportunities and spaces to genuinely experience a sense of belonging are few to nonexistent. Generally, undocuBlack students with access to a USRC or someone on their campus who could answer questions about undocumented immigrant students felt more inclined to share their immigration status or find ways to be involved or engaged. USRCs provide undocumented immigrant students a place on campus for social, emotional, and legal support that understands immigration as central to the educational experiences of undocumented immigrant students (Cisneros et al., 2021; Cisneros & Reyna Rivarola, 2020). Yet, as undocuBlack college students expressed, USRCs continue to operate from a vantage point that dismisses or ignores undocuBlack experiences.

**Diversify and Train College-wide, BSU, and USRC Staff.** Rosemary noted that “undocuBlack students are not present in many spaces, which makes it difficult for us to be represented.” Not seeing anyone that looked like them added to their invisibility. Additionally, with the rise of USRCs, some undocumented immigrant students now have access to spaces on college campuses designed to support them and their experiences. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by this study, undocuBlack students often do not see other Black undocumented students or staff members, even in spaces like BSUs and USRCs. Hiring staff and student leaders who intimately understand undocuBlack lives and issues is imperative to change our collective practices in college campuses, specifically in Black and undocumented immigrant student-centric spaces. Also, colleges and universities must provide further training for institutional agents, which should involve partnering and paying current and formerly undocuBlack immigrants who are content experts to share their experiences and research on how to support undocuBlack students in their respective school types and considering local contexts (e.g., demographics and languages).

**Center UndocuBlack Student Voices in BSUs, USRCs and UISCs.** To center the voices of undocuBlack students on college campuses, BSU (or equivalent), USRC, and UISC leaders must review their yearly programming calendar to ensure that undocuBlack stories are represented (e.g., Black history month, undocumented immigrant weeks or months, and more). Highlighting the stories of undocuBlack people can provide a sense of representation and belonging for undocuBlack students. BSUs and USRCs practitioners must be willing to disrupt their programming to diversify and include other voices besides non-Black Latinx experiences. Including stories of undocuBlack students, scholars, practitioners, professionals, and community members would benefit undocuBlack and non-undocuBlack students.

Another prevalent experience for undocuBlack students is that only some (if any) students and institutional agents pay attention to, know about, or understand their

experiences. This includes non-Black undocumented immigrant students and staff. As Abraham noted, “[even] the undocumented community misidentifies undocuBlack people as refugees all the time.” Centering undocuBlackness in programming, and practices can help expand our collective understanding of the effects of anti-Blackness and illegalization in the land we know today as the United States and its effects on undocuBlack immigrants specifically.

**Cross-Campus and Community Collaboration.** Another way to center undocuBlackness is by disseminating information from multiple reliable sources. Collaborating with various organizations, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, UndocuBlack Network, and BAJI, to share relevant information strengthens our ties and widens our reach. According to Salinas et al. (2015), non-Black Latinx undocumented students can access information and resources through public sources, such as counselors and organizations, while Black and other racially minoritized undocumented immigrant student populations (e.g., undocuAsian and undocuPacific Islander) access it from private sources, such as friends or parents. This lack of access to information leads to invisibility, disengagement, and minimizes a sense of belonging for undocuBlack students. When undocuBlack organizations are involved, it creates a sense of collaboration for students. Further, ensuring that information disseminated to the undocumented community is available in multiple languages and to all undocumented students.

## Implications for research

Further research is needed to explore the experiences of undocuBlack students on college campuses. The research pool also needs to expand to undocuBlack immigrants who never attended college due to fear of disclosing their status or not finding adequate support, as well as those who started college and were pushed out of college due to lack thereof of resources available for undocuBlack students. Another way to study this phenomenon is by solely interviewing institutional agents to gauge their understanding of undocuBlack immigrant student support. Finally, researchers should consider the experiences of undocuBlack institutional agents and their own experiences navigating higher education as former students and now professionals. We believe that supporting undocuBlack students is everyone’s fight.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Investigating the experiences of 15 undocuBlack college students in U.S. colleges and universities, this study found that undocuBlack students face invisibility on college campuses, even within spaces presumably created for Black and undocumented immigrant students, such as BSUs and USRCs. Our study reverberates and builds on Hall (2022), whose research raised awareness about how college campuses subject undocuBlack students to institutional erasure. We posit that the erasure and invisibilization of undocuBlack students on college campuses is both a product and continuation of anti-Blackness as a central ontological premise and practice of the U.S. education system and the United States writ large. The meta-assumption that undocumented immigrants are non-Black Latinx people also proved critical to undocuBlack immigrant students experiencing invisibility. This finding extends Meitzenheimer’s (2020) work, which found how this fallacy affected undocuBlack women and heightened their sense of erasure and invisibility experienced when attempting to socially navigate and negotiate their immigration status, race, and gender simultaneously. Additionally, the erasure and invisibility participants

experienced was compounded because institutional agents, such as college administrators, faculty, and staff hired to support them as students, often did not know how or pushed them from one institutional agent to another without ever addressing their questions and concerns (Castrellón, 2021). Finally, undocuBlack college students felt erased and invisible because they were not represented in the staff, stories, programming, scholarships, and events, even those designed for Black and undocumented immigrant students.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Black people white settlers kidnapped and enslaved in the “United States” from the 1600s until 1865, and arguably much later, were not immigrants. Any narratives that claim to depict Black enslaved people as immigrants are wrong and grotesquely attempting to rewrite history.

<sup>2</sup>DACA granted eligible undocumented youth temporary relief from deportation and 2-year renewable work permits. The program has been under political threat since its inception.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Felecia S. Russell**, EdD, is the study’s principal investigator and led the literature review, data collection, coding, and analysis as part of her doctoral dissertation. **Alonso R. Reyna Rivarola** was a peer debriefer during Dr. Russell’s doctoral dissertation and contributed to the article’s framing, theoretical underpinnings, and editing.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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