Article

A Sense of Belonging: The People and Counterspaces Latinx Undocu/DACAmented Collegians Use to Persist

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Abstract: Guided by sense of belonging and counterspaces, this critical ethnographic study investigates the people, places, and spaces collegians that are Latinx and undocu/DACAmented use to persist toward graduation amidst an ongoing anti-im/migrant sociopolitical climate. Findings reveal that (a) connections built with peers who share racial backgrounds and have liminal legal statuses, (b) supportive and affirming faculty, (c) access to culturally-based student organizations and academic programs, and (d) campus departments and programs catered to the holistic support of undocu/DACAmented collegians are salient for these students' sense of belonging in college, though belongingness is not fully attainable in the United States as a result of racist nativism. Recommendations for research and practice are offered for higher education institutional agents at all levels.

Keywords: undocumented; DACA; critical ethnography; sense of belonging; counterspaces; Latinx

> The idea of place, where we belong, is a constant subject for many of us. –bell hooks [1].

1. Introduction

The 2019 U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) indicates that collegians that are undocu/DACAmented account for nearly 2% (427,345) of students enrolled in higher and postsecondary education in the United States [2]. Many undocu/DACAmented collegians experience challenges on college campuses across the nation due to anti-im/migration rhetoric and policies [3,4], which often result in a lack of belongingness due to feelings of not fitting in and racist nativism [5]. Existing studies show that student belongingness in college is a crucial part of the collegiate experience and holistic success, especially as it relates to the intersectionality of social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, and im/migration status) of those who perceive themselves as marginal at historically white institutions [6–8]. For the last decade, the body of scholarship on undocu/DACAmented students has been increasingly growing, revealing the barriers they often encounter with access to and persistence in higher education (e.g., [4,9–11]) and their advocacy efforts, e.g., [12–14]. Although laudable, more published empirical studies are warranted that highlight the factors that influence sense of belonging and counterspaces among Latinx undocu/DACAmented collegians.

Currently, higher education, as a field, has a limited perspective on how minoritized students experience a sense of belonging. Most of the literature centering on Latinx students and belonging on campus does not take into account the intersectional lived realities of those who are also undocu/DACAmented. Thus, my study adds to the existing literature on sense of belonging, particularly via an in-depth participatory and collaborative critical ethnography for an extended period of time (discussed more in detail later) with the study collaborators (in lieu of participants). I further investigated the people, places, and spaces where Latinx undocu/DACAmented collegians—particularly those with origins from Mexico—have been finding belongingness, and have been used as counterspaces to persist toward graduation amidst an ongoing anti-im/migrant sociopolitical climate. This context

provides an opportunity for higher education administrators to understand better what people and community spaces are needed for Latinx undocu/DACAmented students to thrive on campuses amid hostile anti-im/migrant sociopolitical climates, with hopes that additional support systems are developed for these collegians' holistic success.

Despite no conclusive definition for *sense of belonging* (SOB), various scholarly definitions include the "connectedness to one's school or perceived school membership" [15] (p. 344); a phenomenon that "captures the individual's view of whether he or she feels included in the college community" [6] (p. 327); the "degree to which an individual feels respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a defined group" [7] (p. 87); and "the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community" [16] (p. 804). Simply put, "we all want to belong" [17] (p. 59). Sense of belonging has also been described as a "basic human need and fundamental motivation that drives student behaviors, and facilitates educational success" [7] (p. 87). Collectively, what these descriptions have in common is this notion of individuals feeling welcomed, accepted, and genuine members at their respective campuses, which may result in social and academic success.

Campus climates and institutional context directly impact college student SOB [6,18,19]. Existing racial campus climate studies highlight how racially minoritized collegians reported experiencing a sense of whiteness in physical spaces, curriculum, and school activities, which often created non-inclusive campus environments that affected their feelings of belongingness [20–22]. A lack of feeling mattered and belonging on college campuses often leads to dissatisfaction with academic and social experiences [23]. Feeling included in college for anyone is imperative; however, for undocu/DACAmented collegians, their belongingness is often under constant threat due to their legal status being seen by many others as equivalent to illegality. Migration scholars conceptualize illegality as a socially, politically, and legally constructed nuanced practice that reproduces and maintains systems of inequity, situating im/migrants as marginalized individuals who are deemed to be outside the law based on the fluid interpretation of immigration laws [24,25]. Illegality encompasses restrictive legislation that enforces borders and criminalizes undocumented individuals, a condition of their legal status and sense of deportability [24–26]. I begin this article with a brief overview of the existing literature on Latinx students' SOB, engage in the theoretical connections of SOB and counterspaces, and then provide the methodological approach. Finally, I offer exigent practice and research recommendations for higher education agents.

2. Latinx Students' Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

Scholarly research on college students' SOB, informed by psychological or socio-ecological theory and perspectives [7,17,27], often focuses on the relationship between belonging (i.e., academic and social integration) and student persistence, retention, and graduation [7,28]. One of the earliest and most cited empirical studies examining SOB in higher education is from Hurtado and Carter [6]. These scholars studied the effects of college transition and campus racial climate perceptions on Latinx college students. Hurtado and Carter [6] recognized that traditional campus belonging and college integration theories (e.g., [29], which suggested collegians sever ties with their home communities) neglected the role of a subjective SOB [16]. These researchers wanted to incorporate Latinx collegians' holistic experiences on college campuses [6] by not detaching their social identities [7].

Further, several researchers found that access to culturally-based academic programs, professional staff and peer support, community and educational engagement activities, and culturally-based student organizations are associated with Latinx students positively acknowledging their belongingness in college [22,30–32]. In a quantitative study with Latinx undergraduate students, Strayhorn [33] highlighted that high academic-achieving collegians and those who had encounters with peers from diverse backgrounds had a more significant SOB to their campus. Although some studies highlight the SOB of Latinx

students writ large, the following are some studies that center on the experiences of undocu/DACAmented Latinx collegians' feelings of belongingness in college.

3. Undocu/DACAmented Collegians' Sense of Belonging

Examining Latinx undocu/DACAmented students' experiences on campus is essential because college success serves as one of the primary means for im/migrants to improve their socio-economic status [34]. Furthermore, various studies have found that students with a greater SOB to campus are more likely to persist toward graduation [7,16,28,31]. Pertaining to Latinx undocu/DACAmented collegians, Valdez and Golash-Boza [35] found that students in their study identified their SOB in a college via multiple dimensions of their identity (i.e., ethnicity, legal status, class, and first-generation college student) and not solely on their liminal legal status in the United States. Further, Torres-Olave et al. [36] conducted a study alongside undocu/DACAmented community college students that transitioned to 4-year institutions and found that their experiences of dislocation (or being-out-of-place) associated with their undocu/DACAmented status impacted these collegians from fully developing a SOB on their campuses as they transitioned to the college environment. Stebleton and Aleixo [37] found the undocumented status of Latinx collegians prevented them from developing validating relationships with faculty and other institutional agents, resulting in a lack of SOB. Employing testimonio and participatory action research methodology, a research collective led by a formerly undocumented faculty member alongside current and former undocu/DACAmented collegians [38] was used to create a greater SOB and served as counterspaces for these individuals to be in community, receive affirmations and validation, and empower each other. The aforementioned studies showcase how feelings of SOB vary and are often based on institutional support structures, or the lack thereof, and validating institutional agents.

It would be remiss of me not to note that it is immensely difficult for any racialized minoritized person in the United States to *truly* feel a SOB within an endemically racist society, which includes those who also share the intersectional identity of being undocu/DACAmented [11,39]. In a country that constantly perpetuates legal violence toward these community members, such as exclusionary xenophobic laws and policies in addition to referring to them as illegal aliens (with a plethora of anti-im/migrant advocates who continue to use the term when describing these community members) until recently when President Biden ordered federal im/migration enforcement agencies to stop the use of the word when referring to undocu/DACAmented im/migrants in favor of a more "humane" im/migration system under his Administration [40]. The constant racist nativism [41] overshadows what it may look like to fully feel belongingness in a country that constantly pushes you to the margins. "To be American is to be white, and to be white is to be a native of America" [39] (p. 2).

Although some institutions of higher education have added undocu/DACAmented support services and resource centers, they are often understaffed and under-resourced [42]. Thus, it is essential these institutions enact various services in support of these collegians (e.g., Undocumented Student Resource Centers and UndocuAlly training); they must also be provided with adequate staff and resources to make effective changes on racialized campuses [43]. Even in an effort to create more *safe* and *brave* spaces, many institutional agents do not realize that higher education spaces "can be both homes and non-homes" [42] (p. 83) for racially minoritized undocu/DACAmented collegians. Although most institutions of higher education are ill-equipped to best support collegians that are undocu/DACAmented [38], hope exists. Several institutions are implementing various resources, programs, and services to better mediate some of the challenges faced by these collegians, which in turn assists with their feelings of belongingness, develops self-worth, and finds/creates counterspaces to persist toward graduation [38,44,45].

For these reasons, it was vital for me to investigate further Latinx undocu/DACAmented students' perception of affiliation and identification within university communities and where these collegians find belongingness on- and off-campus. In my study, I further

analyzed the SOB of the 10 collaborators that participated alongside me in this project, by learning more about who and where they identified belongingness and could be their (mostly) authentic selves [8], in addition to the counterspaces on- and off-campus that validated their multiple identities and experiences [46,47]. This study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting how undocu/DACAmented peers and groups (e.g., student organizations) and faculty support assist with Latinx undocu/DACAmented collegians' feelings of belonging. Further, the findings expand on how—although understaffed and under-resourced—services and resources provided by Undocumented Student Resource Centers are identified as beneficial and critical to the persistence of these collegians as they, despite challenges, continue to make the most out of these spaces.

4. Conceptual Connections

As a critical theorist, it was salient for me to engage in this study through a critical epistemological worldview. Using this worldview allowed me to center on the experiences, stories, and knowledge of a historically minoritized community through a social justice lens, with the aims of social transformation for these collegians individually and higher education institutions largely [48]. Undocu/DACAmented students historically and contemporarily encounter barriers concerning access and equity in higher education due to their racialized identities and legal statuses, so I drew on SOB as a guiding framework to gain a greater understanding of what people have supported and validated these collegians [49], in addition to the places and spaces they are using to persist toward graduation. Sense of belonging is an appropriate conceptual framework because it aims to investigate further and better understand the persistence and achievement of marginalized students with a history of exclusion in education [6]. Sense of belonging is also used as a tool to investigate the effects of racial campus climate [6,7,21,50,51], which I incorporated in the interview protocol questions and highlighted throughout the data collection processes. Further, I engaged with SOB via investigating the multiple identities held by the collaborators and, within the analysis, highlighted the effects of anti-im/migrant on- and off-campus climates and how the students navigated them.

In the interview protocols, I incorporated specific questions to instigate responses regarding experiences of feeling as if one belonged or was excluded from the campus community in different contexts. To situate what belongingness is, I shared some definitions and descriptions of SOB from the existing literature with the collaborators. I prefaced by stating that I do not want to assume what SOB means to them individually, so I asked the collegians to provide me with some terms they associate with belonging while navigating college. Many identifiers the collaborators shared with me (i.e., safety, authenticity, comfort, support, and trust) align with how other scholars have loosely defined SOB. It was evident throughout the data that without particular support (e.g., groups of people, physical and virtual spaces), it would have been much more challenging to navigate college as Mexican undocu/DACAmented students in an anti-im/migrant political climate.

On several occasions, the collaborators referenced validating and affirming spaces, physical locations and virtual; thus, as an extension and to compliment SOB, I also incorporated counterspaces as a theoretical connection. Branching from the workings of critical race theory (CRT) and Anzaldúa's *nepantla* (i.e., the liminal and in-between spaces Latinx people embody navigating a society based on white supremacy), Morales [46] expanded on Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso's [50] definition of counterspaces, which they described as "sites where deficit notions of People of Color can be challenged" (p. 70) to include:

> dynamic sites where people on the margins engage with one another in critical discourse, bring their whole (and multiple) selves, challenge each other, and make sense of the multitude of contradictions they embody, which are always present, as a means of undergoing moments of transformation. (p. 1)

From a CRT lens, counterspaces are used to identify spaces various racially minoritized communities build due to hostile campus and sociopolitical climates [46]. Morales [46] includes a centering of (a) relationship building (can be dynamic and not static), (b) critical

discourse (discussions and discourse that challenge dominant ideologies), (c) embracing multiple forms of self-expression, and (d) embracing the tension of contradiction (as opportunities rather than despair). Considering the conflict many undocu/DACAmented collegians have with fully feeling a SOB in the United States, it was salient for me to use counterspaces in conjunction with SOB to paint a more accurate picture of the collaborators' experiences in this study.

5. Study Design

This study is part of a more extensive investigation of the everyday experiences of collegians that are Latinx and undocu/DACAmented. I engaged in critical ethnography, guided by the workings of Madison [48]. Critical ethnography calls for researchers to spend an extended amount of time "in the field" alongside their collaborators to develop rapport and trust, in addition to addressing injustices by bringing to the forefront obscure and underlining operations of power and control [48]. Specifically, this study entailed two rounds of interviews and working and advocating with, for, and alongside collaborators for an extended amount of time. In alignment with the practices of critical ethnographic research, I aimed to co-create power with the collaborators. I also worked to disrupt the status quo by addressing social justice issues to ensure liberation for the collegians. The following illustrates the various parts of the study I engaged with and then I offer tangible recommendations for higher education institutional agents to enact transformational changes on campuses.

6. Collaborators and Site Selection

In this article, I use data from my work alongside 10 undocu/DACAmented undergraduate collegians with origins from Mexico, who have all recently graduated. At the time of the study, these collaborators were attending a historically white public university in the Southwest and their ages ranged from 19–24 years old. All but one are DACA beneficiaries, six identify as a woman (with one using gender-neutral pronouns), four identify as a man (with one using gender-neutral pronouns), and all were in their sophomore through senior year in college. They all were part of a student-led campus organization that advocates on behalf of undocu/DACAmented collegians' educational equity while providing a brave space for these community members and their allies. In this article, I will refer to this group as *We Will Overcome* (WWO). While working alongside the collaborators, I actively participated as a member of the organization.

We Will Overcome offers undocu/DACAmented collegians a brave space on campus to support each other, be their authentic selves, and advocates on behalf of equitable local, regional, and national laws and policies for the im/migrant community. Following the leadership of the late Dr. Peter Magolda [52], it is essential to note that I chose to use pseudonyms for the collaborators, in addition to altering the names and certain information of the research site, departments, and organizations, to make it more challenging for readers to identify these places and people. Although most of the collaborators initially asked me to use their given names, in recent years, especially under the Donald Trump presidential administration, a lot has shifted in the sociopolitical climate with regard to racist and xenophobic anti-im/migrant ideologies, laws, and policies (e.g., the termination and now liminal status of the DACA program). For ethical purposes and to not put targets on their backs, I used pseudonyms for the collaborators. After asking these collegians if the change was okay, one student, in particular, thanked me for being thoughtful of their long-term safety.

7. Data Collection

The data represented in this article is from two rounds of semi-structured, individual interviews with the aforementioned 10 undocu/DACAmented students I conducted over an academic year. Additionally, I was an active and collaborative participant-observer in on- and off-campus spaces (upwards of four times a week) where the collaborators

convened (e.g., WWO meetings, rallies, and protests). Conducting multiple individual interviews and being in community with the collaborators for an extended time allowed me to further probe significant moments or experiences throughout the academic year, such as their finding or creating counterspaces and other forms of belongingness. During the interviews, I employed a conversational style by engaging in mostly informal and two-way free-flowing communication while also being transparent and sharing personal stories and information about myself with the collaborators [53,54].

These practices followed into my active and collaborative role as a participant-observer in the field to help assuage any power dynamics as a researcher. By being an involved ethnographer and prolonging engagement with the collaborators, I built trust and rapport [55], which resulted in numerous opportunities to learn more about their everyday experiences. Lastly, I wrote memos on my observations, key conversations held in spaces alongside the collaborators, and my thoughts and feelings throughout the data collection process. The findings in this article are mostly representative of the interview data.

8. Analysis

I made copies of all my data during the initial coding phase, which became my coding and analysis copy [56]. I first conducted open descriptive coding [57]. As Saldaña [57] points out, there should be multiple rounds of coding for each research project, and coding can be a private affair between researcher and data to engage in deeply. To deeply engage in coding, I first needed to do so by hand with highlighters. I then re-coded by going through all of my data sources and using different highlighters to identify the salient parts of my research study and guiding frameworks. I also incorporated a deductive coding process [58], intentionally identifying details of the collected data with my guiding frameworks in mind. For example, I used different highlighters to identify people and places of belongingness and the counterspaces used. Following this data-coding by hand process [56], I used the Dedoose data analysis software to cluster commonalities within the codes to formulate identified themes represented in the findings.

To ensure validity and goodness and minimize potential miscommunication and subjectivity issues [52], I employed member-checking [59] and sought advice from and debriefed with other community and content experts who are Latinx and were formerly undocumented. From a critical epistemological standpoint, the member-checking process ensured that the collaborators felt ownership over their narratives [60]. This process offered an opportunity for the collaborators to review their interview transcriptions and my field notes and provide any corrections necessary. Further, I had follow-up conversations with the collaborators on what I identified within the data and sought their advice on what pieces of the data they hoped I would push forward in publications and presentations. I made necessary edits to ensure I shared their experiences in ways they wanted to be represented.

9. Researcher Positionality

As a critical scholar, I must highlight how my positionality informed this research study by acknowledging any biases and privileges while denouncing any power structures between myself and the collaborators [48]. I am a non-white Latinx (Puerto Rican) U.S. citizen who resided in a mixed-status family for over a decade. I recognize my stance as an insider due to similar social identities and experiences as the collaborators (i.e., Latinx, a first-generation college student from a high financial need family, and having experienced racist encounters), which increased connection-building. However, I acknowledge that I am also an outsider, having been born on U.S. soil and not having to navigate living and attending college with a liminal legal status during racist nativist sociopolitical climates. During the data collection process, I frequently reflected on my identity as a Latinx person and how my personal and professional experiences alongside collegians that are undocu/DACAmented informed how I interacted with the collaborators and interpreted the data. In addition to being cautious of not taking up space not meant for me, I worked

intentionally to check in with the collaborators to make sure they felt comfortable with the study and the direction it was leading in. I offered them opportunities to share how they wanted me to represent them as I disseminated the findings.

10. Findings

Findings from this critical ethnographic study revealed how the collaborators used specific people, places, and spaces for a greater sense of belonging on their respective campuses, in addition to the counterspaces developed by their institution and the ones they created. In the following section, I attend to the varying ways the collaborators were able to feel a SOB and what counterspaces played a positive impact on their belongingness and persistence toward graduation.

> "It [the university] has shown me that this isn't the space for me, but regardless of that, I'm going to make my space within it. Because I deserve to be here"–Yahaira.

As Yahaira stated, although their university offers various services and resources for undocu/DACAmented collegians, in times when they still do not feel like their institution is doing enough to support them holistically, many collaborators have found or created counterspaces themselves within the larger university space. These places make them feel a greater SOB and affirmation. One prominent finding from the data was the collaborators, alongside some of their other undocu/DACAmented peers and allies, took on the responsibility of self-creating the majority of the physical spaces they identified as places of belongingness. These collegians also used specific institutional-initiated programs and services. Some of the most salient people, places, and counterspaces of belongingness identified are (a) other undocu/DACAmented collegians and campus faculty, (b) their association with the WWO student organization, and (c) a campus department dedicated to undocu/DACAmented collegians and individuals with mixed-status families.

11. Belongingness and Support Networks via Peers and Faculty

In addition to their biological families acting as their primary sources of support while also being the people that bring them joy, the collaborators gained extended family after building connections with their peers on campus. When speaking about who inspired them to persist in college, all collaborators referenced other undocu/DACAmented students. These individuals consisted of others who shared similar life experiences, such as having liminal statuses and Mexican or Latinx identification. When Charles and I spoke about who and where he found belongingness, he shared that it was mostly in his relationships with other undocu/DACAmented collegians, even if he did not know them very well personally:

> They understand the experience. Even my citizen friends don't really understand, and they'll never be able to understand. So, even if I'm not really good friends with other undocumented people, they'll still know me better than my closest sisters or friends [who were born in the U.S.]

Karel and Puchi shared how other collegians that are undocu/DACAmented and their stories of struggle, success, and persisting through and graduating inspired them to work toward that goal too. Other undocu/DACAmented collegians have also inspired Yahaira as she persisted toward graduation:

> I've been able to make so many connections with other undocumented and DACAmented folks. So, just seeing the way that our networks have been able to connect and how we've been able to grow and learn from each other ... We all crossed borders, and we're all, in some way, at risk because of this [undocu/DACAmented status]. But just watching everybody exist in the ways that they're able to and the ways that they know how to exist has definitely been an inspiration to me.

In an anti-im/migrant sociopolitical climate, it was important for Yahaira to build community with others who share similar backgrounds. Similarly, Vivian and I spoke about how impactful it is to have found other undocu/DACAmented peers on campus that understood her struggle. Vivian mentioned this was especially needed when DACA was terminated during the Trump Administration because no one in her classes understood "how horrible this is" for her and the rest of the undocu/DACAmented community. Like many others, Vivian found it empowering to be surrounded by and share space with other undocu/DACAmented students who pushed forward regardless of the unfortunate circumstances and barriers. Furthermore, Fernando told me,

> I do have my close friends who were also undocumented, so I feel like they understand how it feels and how they also face similar experiences. It's nice to talk about it...they are the ones I rely on at the moment.

Similar to the validation, support, and encouragement received by other undocu/DACAmented collegians on campus, the collaborators found they could authentically be themselves when their faculty members supported them in and outside the classroom. Some collaborators spoke with me about individual faculty members verbalizing their support in classroom spaces, others talked about how some faculty made them feel inspired to express their *whole* and *authentic* selves, and some even developed mentorship relationships. Vivian spoke about how impactful it was for one of her faculty members to publicly make a statement to the entire class about the topic they would be engaging in during their next class, which focused on im/migration. She stated:

> She [the professor] was making a statement [to the class] like, "this issue directly impacts people more immediately than others, and I won't stand for hateful remarks." At first, I was like, "well, that's pretty rad that [she] would say that." her making that statement known at the beginning of class, saying like, "I'm not going to tolerate any sort of like dumb ass comments like that, like build the wall shit or whatever." In hindsight, it kind of means a lot more to have a professor make such a statement of solidarity. I feel supported, and I feel people do know about my status, but it's not a bad thing it made me appreciate the fact that she would do that and make the environment safe.

Every student needs and deserves safety on college campuses. Vivian and several others shared that when they encountered welcoming and accepting faculty members, they felt safer in specific campus spaces (e.g., classrooms), were more likely to connect with them on an individual level, shared their undocu/DACAmented status with them, and often developed mentoring relationships by these individuals. Yahaira and I spoke about how she probably would not have made it through college without the instructors and professors who "root for me," who have been genuine and consistently supported her throughout her undergraduate journey. One faculty member, a Mexican woman, is someone who has guided her through difficult situations she encountered regarding issues of im/migration, in addition to encouraging her to use her *voice* through writing. After reflecting on her experiences in courses that limited her creative writing and ability to write about politics, because it is part of her lived narrative, Yahaira told me:

> When I first met [faculty member], I was able to freely speak about whatever I wanted. Why don't we have more educators like this? She is who I confided in. I got really close to her, and now I see her as a mentor. I love her. She is my queen.

Yahaira stated that before having this faculty member of Mexican descent, she did not ever imagine teaching at a university level. As a result of her mentoring relationship with this faculty member, Yahaira is interested in pursuing graduate school to teach in a postsecondary setting. Eileen shared a similar sentiment with me after having her first faculty of Color, a Mexican woman. She, too, was inspired and one day wants to pursue graduate school to become a professor or researcher at a university. Eileen told me that it was not until senior year that she experienced having a professor of Color. She shared

how that was the first time she felt more comfortable in a classroom and was happy to see someone who looked like her and could relate to her. Eileen said that "she was the first Mexican professor I had. She is everything I want to be." Like Vivian's experience with a faculty member making a public statement that made her feel more comfortable in that classroom, Eileen had a related incident.

Eileen was happy to hear her Mexican faculty member sharing with the class that People of Color are not very trusting of researchers due to a long history of being exploited and sharing inaccurate depictions of these communities. In an interview together, she said to me, "She [the instructor] was so unapologetic about it. I think there were only three People of Color in that classroom. It needed to be said!" Eileen and I also spoke about her decision to add a second major with more faculty and People of Color because she "needed to be around a more diverse group of people." She told me that she needed to do so "to stay in school because I was very discouraged." Eileen and I discussed how she felt seen and validated in spaces with faculty and peers who shared similar cultural backgrounds and experiences.

Vivian shared that when she decided to come out as undocu/DACAmented to specific faculty members, she experienced positive changes, more welcoming and accepting of her, which made her feel safer around these individuals. Fernando and I spoke about their experiences with a Latina faculty, who was the first professor that inspired him by validating and encouraging him. Lastly, Diana told me how she feels most comfortable talking with one of her professors "because he is Brown." She told me:

> I remember wearing an "I Support Immigrants" shirt, and he's like, "oh, I like your shirt." Just the fact of him pointing that out makes me more comfortable with reaching out to him. So, I think it does play a part in how comfortable I feel around class spaces and just the willingness to speak to a professor.

Although some of the collaborators had positive experiences with white faculty, most of these collegians shared how they have found their faculty of Color, in particular, to be most validating and supportive. There is power in faculty members personally reaching out to these collegians, making public statements of support and solidarity about and with the undocu/DACAmented community, and in many ways inspiring these students to be their best and authentic selves. Next, I write about some of the specific counterspaces of belonging that were identified throughout the data, beginning with the WWO.

12. Counterspace via the *We Will Overcome* Undocu/DACAmented Student Organization

Association with the WWO student organization played a significant role in supporting the collaborators as they navigated college and persistence toward graduation. Many of the collaborators mentioned that their only reason for staying on-campus after hours was to attend the WWO weekly meetings held in the evenings. Charles and Pucho said that if it were not for these meetings, they would not have a reason to stay and instead simply go home after classes. Pucho spoke with me about how he learned about and joined WWO. He heard that the organization was meeting to watch the midterm elections, and he did not want to be alone when the results were announced:

> I joined when they had a screening for the midterms. I found the club that's about undocumented im/migrants. I came only because I really wanted to see what undocumented im/migrants were like, because most of the time, I didn't really know if someone was undocumented because no one was really telling me. So, I'm used to seeing a lot of People of Color, or at least Mexicans, but no one really ever said that they were undocumented. it just feels great to talk to people who are in a similar situation to me because I've always felt kind of isolated from that. I didn't really have any other support besides my family to help me with this kind of stuff.

Pucho also shared that since joining WWO, he has contributed to more significant causes and "feels relaxed in (WWO) spaces and around the other members," which is different than other organizations (non-undocu/DACAmented student-centered) he joined in the past. Vivian also spoke about WWO, in addition to other places where undocu/DACAmented students convene on campus, being a place where she found her "niche." These spaces offered more of a campus community than she had experienced prior. When speaking about the organization, Karel shared,

> That's like where I can openly talk about it [her undocumented status]. And just all of the things we do–like helping other students or the protests that we did– everything was because of our status. And we're always there supporting each other. Like when I sent out the thing about getting the fellowship [in the virtual group chat], everyone's like "congratulations!" and all of those nice things. We are motivating each other and helping other people and making a small change in their life... We are actually making a change, even if it's a small one.

Karel found a place within WWO and its affiliated members where she could be herself and speak freely about her experiences as a Mexican and undocumented student. Being involved in WWO has opened up opportunities for the collaborators to meet other undocu/DACAmented collegians that are Latinx. When Puchi and Diana described their involvement with the organization, they shared that seeing more Latinx students on campus made them "happy," "feels more like home," and "welcomed" because they "understand and share the same struggles." Puchi also mentioned how open and emotional they could be around those members and in the meetings, stating, "It reminded me that I'm not the only one going through this. There actually are people out there going through the same things, and that made me feel connected."

While being a participant-observer, I heard several collaborators publicly thanking the organization's members for being their support system at the university. Once, Pucho told the group that he was going through a rough time with mental health issues in the past, but after building connections with WWO members, he was "now at a better place in his life overall." Further, Diana spoke with me about WWO and how one of the organization's goals was to build a trusting community in a family-like environment. I witnessed the loving and caring environment and community these collegians constructed and maintained through WWO. In addition to witnessing the collaborators laughing, organizing, engaging in critical discourse, celebrating, crying, and just overall loving each other, many shared that WWO meetings and its members are what have kept them enrolled at the college during unprecedented times. *We Will Overcome* has also been where the collaborators, through the ongoing support of others, learned to embrace their undocu/DACAmented identities and be more visible and vocal about bringing awareness to their issues. Diana shared the following with me:

> During my freshman year, I got really involved with [WWO]. And that's when I started becoming more active with DACA and the undocumented community. I think that helped me find my place and find people who were going through the same things. My freshman year of college is when a lot of things started happening. They [WWO members] gave me a platform to speak about my experiences and my story. So, they really pushed me and encouraged me. They got me out of my comfort zone. I am still not extremely comfortable with talking about it [undocu/DACAmented status and experiences] like they are, but I do find it necessary for us to talk about it.

It was important for Diana to find a community of collegians who shared similar life experiences being Mexican and undocu/DACAmented, to learn and grow alongside. Members of WWO helped her feel a greater SOB on campus while also challenging and supporting her to use her voice to share her story and advocate on behalf of the undocu/DACAmented community. Further, several collaborators spoke with me about their strong connection to the physical space/room where WWO meetings are held on campus.

Outside of WWO meetings, Vivian shared that she went there between classes to "hang out" and sometimes took advantage of feeling comfortable and safe in that space and took short naps.

Diana described the physical space as a place that began feeling like *home* once WWO meetings were held there. I spent a lot of time in that space with the collaborators, and it is an empowering space. The room is filled with various paintings of Mexican and other prominent Latinx individuals and movements. Fernando described the room as a space with "nice energy where I just go and destress." Next, I write about a specific student services department on campus and its programs that many collaborators identified as a counterspace for belonging.

13. Counterspace via the UndocuCares Resource Center

The programs sponsored by the campus unit that caters to undocu/DACAmented collegians and those in mixed-status families, the UndocuCares Resource Center (UCRC; pseudonym), were also identified as counterspaces of belongingness. I have personally attended some of their sponsored programs and witnessed firsthand the critical work they do to support their undocu/DACAmented communities. These programs, services, and resources cater to mainly the social, financial, psychological, and emotional support of these collegians. The UCRC aims to provide spaces of comfort, support, and validation to the aforementioned student communities. When working toward building more relationships with members of the undocu/DACAmented communities on this campus, I attended some UCRC-sponsored events. It was in these spaces that I met several collaborators for the first time. One UCRC program that many of these collegians have participated in and have identified as a counterspace is *Brave Spaces* (BS; pseudonym), which acted as an exclusive space for undocu/DACAmented collegians to engage in conversations on their lived experiences. Vivian shared,

> It's made me feel less of just a random body at [campus]. And I feel like it's a good support system too. Everyone's just so positive and holds you up, even if you're stressed about school. I've seen the [BS] grow, and that's a really cool feeling. I've seen people show up to the [BS] once and then realize, "I can talk about all these issues." People get emotional, and then over the course of a couple of [BS], they feel a lot more comfortable. It's therapeutic. The community aspect, plus meeting with other people who were in a similar situation or just understands, has all kind of coalesced into the perfect storm being around people that can relate in that aspect, and also culturally, too.

Similar sentiments were shared among other collaborators. Charles has found the UCRC and the BS programs to benefit him in many ways. At the time of the study, Charles was employed as a student worker for the UCRC and mentioned that although he worked there, selfishly, he benefited from being in the same shared spaces as other undocu/DACAmented collegians. I asked Charles what kept him actively involved in the UCRC, and he shared,

> Cause I'm angry at the government. Because I see myself in the people we're helping, the people around me. It's a comfortable space, and I get to meet other undocumented faces. It helps me to see other people like me.

The UCRC programs are counterspaces where many of the collaborators went to be heard, seen, be in community with others who shared similar life experiences and build friendships.

Fernando shared that they continued to actively attend BS and other events hosted by UCRC because of the "blossoming connections" built between himself and other undocu/DACAmented students. He told me how "those spaces allow everyone in attendance to be open and themselves, without feeling obligated to do or say anything forcibly." Fernando also stated, "my peers there, I feel like I can go to and talk about certain things. Those are the people I pretty much vent to on campus." The people mentioned above and

the counterspaces described have assisted these collegians in surviving and persisting and thriving in college.

14. Discussion

The existing literature demonstrates a positive relationship between SOB and higher graduation rates and increased social and academic success [7,19]. By incorporating SOB and counterspaces as guiding frameworks, I could best highlight whom (people) and where (spaces and places) the collaborators found or created belongingness on campus. Although SOB is a social construct, and many undocu/DACAmented students may not feel belongingness on a college campus in ways that some of their non-undocu/DACAmented peers feel, this framework is appropriate because marginalized students should feel belonged, affirmed, and a valued member of their campus community, inside and outside of predominantly white institutional spaces. These frameworks are helpful to better inform higher education leaders and policymakers of the experiences of undocu/DACAmented collegians, with the ultimate goal of enhancing comprehensive support opportunities necessary for their educational success [7,23].

Similar to the literature on Latinx students and those who are undocu/DACAmented, my findings showcase the importance of coalition building, peer support, opportunities to work with and engage alongside validating and affirming faculty, and access to culturally-based student organizations and academic programs in building a greater SOB [6,14,18,38]. For example, Yahaira shared how meeting and developing relationships with peers on her campus who are undocu/DACAmented has inspired her as she persists toward graduation. Further, when Vivian's faculty member made a public announcement to her class denouncing anti-im/migrant hate, she felt a sense of safety and welcomed in that classroom space. Additionally, due to supporting and validating Latina faculty members, Yahaira and Eileen have been inspired to pursue graduate school and careers in postsecondary education. Furthermore, the collaborators had affirming experiences being associated with WWO and partaking in events sponsored by UCRC. These on-campus counterspaces and people associated with them were salient in their feeling a greater sense of belonging on their campus, even if they did not always feel a SOB from their larger institution.

The various overt and covert levels of validation and racial microaffirmations [61] mentioned above had positive impacts on the collaborators. Although several institutions are working toward better serving their collegians that are undocu/DACAmented, it is important to note that the findings highlighted in this article regarding their belongingness do not necessarily equate to inclusion, access, and total acceptance from the institutional community [62]. Thus, it is essential that institutions critically reflect on how they are perpetuating whiteness ideologies and work toward dismantling and unlearning them. Although the findings reflect some of the collaborators' positive experiences—some of which were a direct result of their campus supports—it is ultimately the responsibility of institutional leaders to investigate what special needs undocu/DACAmented collegians have and employ innovative ways to best *serve* them [63] by creating and ensuring a culture of acceptance, inclusion, and belonging.

15. Recommendations

15.1. Recommendations for Practice

Institutional leadership teams must have an intentional and strategic 5-year plan to cluster-hire and retain more Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) faculty and staff, including those who have/had various im/migration statuses and can relate to their students who are undocu/DACAmented. The collaborators highlighted the importance of engaging with their faculty of color, especially those who are Latinx. However, Latinxs constitute only 4% of U.S. college and university faculty [64]. Their feelings were analogous with their association to the student organization catering to undocu/DACAmented collegians, WWO, and the department on campus with dedicated work for these communities, UCRC. There is power in seeing people who look like them and have similar experiences

on college campuses. This trend was consistently identified throughout the data for all of the collaborators.

The findings also highlight the importance of institutions having access to these organizations and resources. Diana even mentioned that WWO and the meeting space of the organization felt like *home*. Thus, institutions need to develop these spaces, for example, Undocumented Resource Centers and DREAMzone training [65,66], if they do not already exist. Lastly, SOB can directly result from campus climates, which are often impacted by the local, regional, state, and federal climates. Therefore, it is crucial for institutional leaders to work with their collegians who are Latinx and undocu/DACAmented and their faculty and staff who are experts on im/migration issues to advocate and lobby legislators for more inclusionary laws and policies impacting these communities.

15.2. Recommendations for Research

The experiences of the collaborators in this article do not represent the larger community of collegians who are undocu/DACAmented (e.g., students who might have enrolled but were pushed out and those in rural areas); however, their narratives can act as a tool for institutional agents to continue pushing for a more accepting, welcoming, validating, and inclusive campus community. As I did with this study, I encourage researchers to use critical, asset-focused, and non-deficit-based frameworks to guide their studies with collegians that are Latinx and undocu/DACAmented. As I engaged in this critical ethnographic study, I have learned the importance of being in community and working alongside these collegians for an extended time, not simply "dropping in" and "taking from them" without giving anything back. Thus, I suggest future studies include ethical and humanizing methods [54,67] and spending extended time with the collegians, building trust, rapport, and hopefully friendships. Further, considering that there are many other racially minoritized undocu/DACAmented collegians that are not Latinx-identifying (e.g., non-AfroLatinx Black and Asian) [68], additional published empirical studies centering on their experiences are needed.

16. Concluding Thoughts

In bell hooks' [1] *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, she shared that we must revise and renew our commitment to the present world to make it a place where everyone can live fully and belong. That is also my hope and challenge to higher education agents across the nation: to fiercely advocate as co-conspirators for their undocu/DACAmented collegians at the federal, state, and institutional policy levels, to continue creating spaces of belongingness and environments that feel like sanctuary spaces, and to provide them with the services, resources, and people needed to be holistically successful as they enroll in, persist through, and graduate college, but also in their post-graduation lives. The institutional context shapes collegians' feelings of belongingness [19,32]. Thus, it is salient for higher education agents to (a) consider how many racially minoritized undocu/DACAmented collegians are forced to navigate an anti-im/migrant sociopolitical system that continuously targets their communities, and to (b) work toward intervening so the responsibility of surviving and thriving in college is not placed solely on these brilliant scholars' shoulders. Kudos to all institutional agents and policymakers who are fiercely working toward best supporting these collegians, for example, some exemplars of such programs, services, resources, and people I highlighted throughout this article. Still, more transformational work is needed to create campus climates that allow racially minoritized undocu/DACAmented collegians to thrive as they persist toward graduation and in their post-graduation futures.

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