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Toward a Nuanced and Contextualized Understanding of Undocumented College Students: Lessons from a California Survey

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has established that undocumented immigrant experiences are dynamic, reflecting the complex web of immigration-related policies that create legal vulnerability. As such, undocumented college students' experiences must be situated in their current policy context. Drawing on descriptive analyses of a survey of 1,277 undocumented 4-year college students in California, we examine how undocumented students are faring in a relatively inclusive policy context. Results demonstrate the heterogeneity of undocumented student experiences and unpack the challenges they confront while also demonstrating the ways they thrive. We document how respondents are performing across a variety of academic, well-being, and civic and political engagement outcomes. We also show that undocumented students' perceptions of legal vulnerability are complex and varied, taking into account family-level legal vulnerability and individual protections. Further, students perceive campuses as fairly welcoming spaces, with some differences arising across the two university systems. Ultimately, we argue that undocumented college students' experiences merit more nuanced and contextualized analysis.

KEYWORDS

Undocumented students; higher education; legal vulnerability; campus context; academics; DACA

Undocumented students represent one out of every 50 students enrolled in postsecondary education in the United States (Feldblum et al., 2020). Previous research has highlighted how exclusionary laws and policies have compromised access, retention, and performance among undocumented students (Conger & Chellman, 2013; Hsin & Reed, 2020; Terriquez, 2015). However, shifting immigration policies have diversified undocumented students' experiences based on their local, state, and institutional context (Cebulko & Silver, 2016; Enriquez et al., 2019; Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018). State tuition-equity and financial aid policies have improved access by lowering structural and financial

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barriers (Flores, 2010; Raza et al., 2019), and an increasing number of institutions are implementing services and institutional policies to meet undocumented students' unique needs (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020).

California is at the forefront of these critical changes. Over the past two decades, California has adopted many policies that make it easier for undocumented students to pursue higher education. In 2001, the state legislature passed Assembly Bill 540, allowing undocumented youth who had attended at least three years of high school in California to access in-state college tuition. In 2011, it ratified the California Dream Act, providing undocumented students with access to institutional, private, and state-funded financial aid at public colleges and universities. In 2014, the legislature created the California Dream Loan program, allowing undocumented students to receive up to $20,000 USD in loans over the course of their undergraduate education. Taken together, these laws have lowered financial barriers and fostered the growth of the undocumented college student population in California. The state hosts 20% of the nation's undocumented students with approximately 4,000 attending the University of California (UC), 10,000–12,000 attending the California State University (CSU), and 50,000–70,000 at California Community Colleges (Feldblum et al., 2020; The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2018).

California offers a unique opportunity to assess how undocumented college students are faring in light of increasingly inclusive policies. Drawing on descriptive analyses of a survey of 1,277 undocumented college students attending the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU), this article documents how respondents are performing on a variety of academic, well-being, and civic and political engagement outcomes. We also examine students' perceptions of legal vulnerability and the campus context. We find substantial heterogeneity in undocumented students' experiences and unpack the challenges they confront while also demonstrating the ways they thrive. Ultimately, we argue that undocumented college students' experiences merit more nuanced and contextualized assessments of their outcomes, legal vulnerability, and campus contexts.

Literature review

Immigration-related laws and policies make undocumented immigration status consequential in everyday life by creating legal vulnerability. Such vulnerability emerges from the perception, recognition, or experience of everyday harms that perpetuate educational, economic, and social inequalities among immigrants and their families. Much of the scholarship to date has mapped the processes through which legal vulnerability affects undocumented students' education, highlighting their exclusion from and within postsecondary institutions.

Economic insecurity is a critical aspect of legal vulnerability that shapes undocumented students' experiences in higher education. In the absence of state-funded financial aid, students seek to pay steep tuition and living expenses largely on their own by working low-wage jobs acquired without work authorization (Gonzales, 2016; Pérez Huber & Malagon, 2007). Their low-income immigrant families may struggle with limited finances, making it difficult for families to help cover remaining costs (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). These financial barriers can dissuade undocumented students from pursuing higher education, encourage attendance at 2-year colleges over 4-year universities, harm academic progress due to the difficulties of balancing school and work, and compromise retention (Abrego, 2006; Enriquez, 2017; Terriquez, 2015).

Undocumented students also face the threat of deportation, which colors their experiences on campus. Students report limiting relationships with institutional agents such as teachers and counselors due to concerns about whom to trust with information about their immigration status (Buenavista, 2018). Lacking these relationships can lower motivation for pursuing higher education (Jefferies, 2014) and hinder access to crucial guidance (Enriquez, 2011). Undocumented students also confront threats of family members' deportation, and research has shown that experiencing such forced family separation compromises educational aspirations and contributes to poorer academic outcomes (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Macías & Collet, 2016). Further, parental deportation is linked to poor

mental health among youth (Allen et al., 2015), which can harm undocumented students' academic success (O'Neal et al., 2016).

Undocumented students also face immigration-related social exclusion. Anti-immigrant sentiment and discrimination can make college campuses feel unwelcoming (Pérez Huber, 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Institutional neglect and policies that invisibilize undocumented students can manifest as microaggressions that push students to the margins of campus life (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018). Additionally, social exclusion can evolve from structural marginalization, such as denying driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants; unwillingness to drive unlicensed may result in students spending hours on public transportation, limiting the time they have available to engage in campus life (Garcia & Tierney, 2011). These exclusionary experiences can also compromise students' mental health (Potochnick & Perreira, 2010).

The risk and harm associated with legal vulnerability coalesce to compromise undocumented students' academic and well-being outcomes. Undocumented students are less likely to experience academic growth over their college tenure (Kreisberg & Hsin, 2020) and are more likely to "stop out" (Terriquez, 2015). They also report higher rates of anxiety (Suárez-Orozco & López Hernández, 2020) and perceived stress (Enriquez et al., 2018). Conversely, undocumented students also tend to be engaged in volunteering, community work, or activism (Perez, 2012; Seif, 2016). Yet, their engagement is often fueled by feelings of otherness that push students to build community, mentor others, and advocate for policy changes (Negrón-Gonzales, 2013; The S.I.N. Collective, 2007).

Public policies, however, may reduce the legal vulnerability of undocumented students. At the federal level, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program created a liminal legal status by providing temporary protection from deportation and access to employment authorization. DACA recipients report improved financial situations (Gonzales et al., 2014), greater education completion rates (Gonzales et al., 2019), increased access to campus opportunities (Morales Hernandez & Enriquez, 2021/this issue), and better mental health (Patler & Laster Pirtle, 2018). However, expanded employment options have been linked to increased financial responsibilities (Abrego, 2018) and a higher likelihood of foregoing higher education (Hsin & Ortega, 2018). At the state level, tuition equity and financial aid policies have been shown to improve college enrollment, performance, and retention (Flores & Chapa, 2009; Ngo & Astudillo, 2019). In California, access to financial aid transformed how financial strains manifest with concerns shifting from the need to cover tuition and maintain enrollment to quality-of-life issues, such as food insecurity, inability to purchase educational materials like books, or paying for on-campus housing (Enriquez et al., 2019). Inclusive state and local governmental policies can also contribute to reducing concerns about the possibility of facing deportation (Enriquez & Millán, 2021). Finally, at the institutional level, universities have established undocumented student services to advance inclusion through targeted programs that provide academic, social-emotional, and financial support (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Sanchez & So, 2015).

The current study starts with the assumption that legal vulnerability is contextual and explicitly tied to the multi-layered, and frequently shifting, immigration policy context (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018; Silver, 2018). These realities mean that much of what we know about undocumented college students is context dependent. However, scholars often generalize across studies despite the fact that research has identified differing experiences across state contexts (Cebulko & Silver, 2016) and over time (Enriquez et al., 2019). Building on this work, we map the current experiences of undocumented college students in California 4-year public universities to explore how they are faring in the context of relatively more inclusive policies; this includes federal policies like DACA, state educational access policies for undocumented students, and the rise of undocumented student services provided by the CSU and UC systems. We ask three specific research questions: 1) How are California's undocumented 4-year college students performing on academic, well-being, and civic and political engagement outcomes?, 2) How do they experience legal vulnerability in the current policy context?, and 3) How are they experiencing the campus context?

Methods

Undocumented college students attending the CSU and UC systems were invited to participate in an online survey that was conducted from March to June 2020. Respondents were recruited at all nine UC undergraduate campuses and nine of the 23 CSU campuses. CSU campuses were selected with attention to matching the geographic location of UC campuses. Recruitment announcements were distributed widely, including e-mails and social media posts from each campus' undocumented student support services office, faculty teaching large general education courses and ethnic studies courses, departmental and university office newsletters, and undocumented student organizations.

The survey was administered via Qualtrics with an estimated completion time of 25–35 minutes. It included questions about academic performance, educational experiences, health and well-being, political and civic engagement, the immigration policy context, institutional context, resource use, and self and family demographics. Eligibility criteria included being over 18, current enrollment as an undergraduate student at a CSU or UC campus, being born outside of the United States, and having no permanent legal status (e.g., no legal status, DACA, Temporary Protected Status). Respondents received a$ 10 USD electronic gift card as compensation. All responses were reviewed for validity; incomplete responses, ineligible respondents, and suspected fabricated responses were removed using a detailed protocol.

The full sample of undocumented students consisted of 1,277 respondents with 667 attending a UC and 610 a CSU. Ninety-four percent of respondents reported a Latin American country of origin with 81.5% coming from Mexico. In total, they identified 36 countries of origin with the next largest groups coming from El Salvador, Guatemala, and South Korea. Sixty-nine percent arrived in the U.S. when they were under the age of five. Their average age when taking the survey was 21.8. Seventy-four percent were DACA beneficiaries, and 24.9% reported having no legal status. Women were overrepresented making up 75.3% of the sample. Household income varied with 24.0% of students coming from households that earned less than $20,000 USD annually and 33.9% earning more than $40,000. USD There was distribution across class standing, with 30.8% in the first or second year, 32.4% in their third year, and 36.8% in their fourth or more year. Thirty-five percent were transfer students. See Table 1 for more information.

We conducted descriptive analysis of measures listed in Table 2. We examined multiple outcomes related to their academics, well-being, and civic and political engagement; these included more typical outcomes examined in other studies (e.g., GPA, depression, organizational participation) as well as novel ones (e.g., academic engagement, flourishing, discussing voting with others). We adopted a multi-dimensional view of perceived legal vulnerability that included immigration-related academic distractions, deportation concerns, and economic insecurity for both themselves and their families. To operationalize their experiences of campus context, we examined use of campus-wide and undocumented student resources, pro- and anti-immigrant sentiment, and feelings of campus belonging.

We report descriptive statistics using case deletion of missing responses for the specific variable(s) being analyzed. Bivariate tests of association were performed to compare all study variables (academic outcomes, well-being and mental health outcomes, civic and political engagement outcomes, legal vulnerability, and campus context) across university system and immigration status (no legal status, DACA). Chi square tests were used for categorical variables, two-tailed t-tests for difference in means between groups, and Spearman or Pearson correlations for ordinal or continuous variables, respectively. All analyses were performed in Stata 16.

Findings

Undocumented student outcomes

First, we examined how California's undocumented college students performed on a number of academic, well-being, and civic and political engagement outcomes to capture a wide range of college experiences. Our examination revealed a comprehensive picture of undocumented students' experiences with evidence of both struggle and resilience.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents (n = 1,277).

Characteristic	Number	Valid Percent
Area of origin		
Mexico	1041	81.52
Central America	121	9.48
South America	34	2.66
Asia and Pacific Islands	71	5.56
All others	10	0.78
Age of arrival		
0 to 5	865	68.92
6 to 10	279	22.23
11 to 15	95	7.57
16 or older	16	1.27
Missing	22	
Age		
18–20	502	39.31
20–23	525	41.11
24 and older	250	19.58
Mean age	21.82	
Immigration status		
No current legal status	318	24.90
DACA	943	73.84
Other undocumented status	16	1.25
Gender		
Women	958	75.31
Men	292	22.96
Non-binary, queer, transgender	22	1.73
Missing	5	
Household income		
Less than $20,000	289	24.00
$20,001 to $40,000	507	42.11
Greater than $40,001	408	33.89
Missing	73	
Year in school		
First year	205	16.14
Second year	186	14.65
Third year	412	32.44
Fourth year	348	27.40
Fifth year or more	119	9.37
Missing	7	
Transfer status		
Started as first year student	824	64.73
Transfer student	449	35.27
Missing	4	

Valid percentages exclude missing values.

Academics

In our study, 64.8% of respondents reported an overall GPA of 3.0 or higher. Although this appears to indicate that a majority are performing well, it is equally important to recognize that almost one in ten undocumented students (10.9%) reported a GPA under 2.5. We found similar trends in other measures of academic achievement. For example, 42.0% reported being on the Dean's List or Honor Roll, whereas 41.9% had failed at least one course.

Other measures, such as academic behavioral engagement, measured everyday activities through which undocumented status may compromise academics. We asked a series of questions about the frequency of which students engaged in activities that could promote or hinder their academic success. Substantial numbers of respondents reported actions that constituted academic disengagement: 46.1% sometimes or often went to class unprepared, 41.6% skipped class, and 29.5% failed to turn in a course assignment. But at the same time, the majority reported engaged behaviors: 69.9% contributed to

Table 2. Description of survey variables.

Variable description	Survey measure	Response options
Academic outcomes		
GPA	What is your overall GPA at [school name]?	0.00–0.24; 0.25–0.49; . . . 3.75–3.99; 4.0
Dean's list or honor roll	Have you ever earned a place on the Dean's List or Honor Roll at [school name]?	0 = No; 1 = Yes
Failed a course	Have you ever failed a course at [school name]?	0 = No; 1 = Yes
Academic disengagement	How frequently during this academic year have you done the following? 1) Gone to class unprepared, 2) Skipped class, 3) Failed to turn in a course assignment	0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Often
Academic engagement	How frequently during this academic year have you done the following? 1) Contributed to a class discussion, 2) Studied with a group of classmates outside of class, 3) Sought academic help from instructor or tutor when needed, 4) Communicated with the instructor outside of class about issues and concepts derived from a course	0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Often
One or more professional development experiences	Below are various opportunities that college students may take part in. Check all that you have participated in while at [school name]? 1) Unpaid internship, 2) Paid internship, 3) Credit-based internship, practicum, or field experience, and 4) Held a career-relevant job.	0 = No; 1 = Yes
Wellbeing and mental health outcomes		
Depression	Patient health questionnaire (PHQ-9): Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems? Sample items: 1) Little interest or pleasure in doing things, 2) Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television (Kroenke et al., 2001)	0 = Not at all; 1 = Several days; 2 = More than half the days; 3 = Nearly everyday
Anxiety	Generalized anxiety disorder scale (GAD-7): Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems? Sample items: 1) Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge, 2) Trouble relaxing (Spitzer et al., 2006)	0 = Not at all; 1 = Several days; 2 = More than half the days; 3 = Nearly everyday
Self-rated health	Would you say that in general your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?	1 = Poor; 2 = Fair; 3 = Good; 4 = Very good; 5 = Excellent
Flourishing	Flourishing scale: Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. Sample items: 1) I lead a purposeful and meaningful life, 2) I am optimistic about my future (Diener et al., 2010)	1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Slightly disagree; 4 = Neither agree nor disagree; 5 = Slightly agree; 6 = Agree; 7 = Strongly agree
Self-worth	These statements are about general feelings you have about yourself in relation to others. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement. 1) I matter to the people in my community, 2) I am worthy as others of getting my needs met	0 = Strongly disagree; 1 = Disagree; 2 = Disagree somewhat; 3 = Agree somewhat; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree
Civic and political engagement outcomes		
Participated in an organization	Have you ever participated in any organization that tried to solve a problem at your school, in the community, or in the broader society?	0 = No, I have not done it; 1 = Yes, I have done it in the past; 2 = Yes, I have done it this academic year
Held a leadership position	Have you ever been you in a leadership position in an organization that tried to solve a problem at your school, in the community, or in the broader society while enrolled at [school name]?	0 = No, I have not done it; 1 = Yes, I have done it in the past; 2 = Yes, I have done it this academic year
Community service or volunteering	Have you ever spent time participating in any community service or volunteer activity?	0 = No, I have not done it; 1 = Yes, I have done it in the past; 2 = Yes, I have done it this academic year
Talking to others about voting	Do you talk to people and try to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates?	0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Often

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

Variable description	Survey measure	Response options
Political engagement	Below is a list of things that some people do to express their views. For each one, identify how often you do it. 1) Take part in a protest, march, or demonstration, or rally on-campus, 2) Take part in a protest, march, or demonstration, or rally off-campus, 3) Boycott a company or product for social or political reasons, 4) Buy a certain product or service because you like the social or political values of the company	0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Often
Legal vulnerability		
Immigration-related discrimination	Perceived Immigration Policy Effects Scale (PIPES) discrimination sub-scale. Sample items: 1) Have you been treated unfairly at restaurant or store because of current immigration policy, 2) Do you feel that you have been exploited or taken advantage of at work because of current immigration policy (Ayón, 2017)	1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always
Immigration-related social exclusion	PIPES social exclusion sub-scale. Sample items: 1) Do you fear being deported or detained, 2) Do you feel that you have no rights because of current immigration policy (Ayón, 2017)	1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always
Immigration-related threat to family	PIPES threat to family sub-scale. Sample items: 1) Do you fear that you or a family member will be reported to immigration officials, 2) Do you worry about the impact immigration policies have on you or your family (Ayón, 2017)	1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always
Academic distraction – own immigration status	How frequently have the following occurred during this academic year because you were dealing with or thinking about an issue related to your immigration status? 1) Distracted in class due to your immigration status, 2) Missed class due to your immigration status	0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Often
Academic distraction – family members' immigration status	How frequently have the following occurred during this academic year because you were dealing with or thinking about an issue related to your family members' immigration status? 1) Distracted in class due to family members' immigration status, 2) Missed class due to family members' immigration status	0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Often
Deportation thoughts	Please rate how frequently you think about the following people's deportation. 1) Your own deportation, 2) Your parent(s)/guardian(s) deportation	0 = Never; 1 = A few times a year; 2 = About once a month; 3 = About once a week; 4 = Daily
Family separation worry	Do you worry about family separation due to deportation?	1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always
Food insecurity	U.S.D.A. food security scale (Blumberg et al., 1999)	–
Own economic insecurity	Indicate how often you have experienced the following since starting school this year. 1) Worried about not having enough money to pay for things, 2) Had difficulty paying your bills, 3) Had to go without the basic things that you need, 4) Had to go without the materials needed for your studies (e.g., books, laptop, iclicker, art/lab supplies)	0 = Almost never or never; 1 = Once in a while; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = A lot of the time; 4 = Almost always or always
Family economic insecurity	Thinking about your family's current economic situation, indicate how often you expect that your family will face the following circumstances in the next three months. 1) Expect your family will experience bad times such as poor housing or not having enough food, 2) Expect your family will have to do without the basic things that your family needs	0 = Almost never or never; 1 = Once in a while; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = A lot of the time; 4 = Almost always or always

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

Variable description	Survey measure	Response options
Family financial responsibility	How often do you complete the following family responsibilities? 1) Help family members pay the bills	0 = Almost never or never; 1 = Once in a while; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = A lot of the time; 4 = Almost always or always
Campus context		
Campus resource use	Please identify how frequently you have visited the following offices or services at [school name] during this academic year? 1) academic counselor, 2) academic support services, 3) peer tutoring, 4) career center, 5) identity-based center, 6) basic needs/food pantry, 7) student health center, 8) mental health counseling	0 = Never; 1 = A few times a year; 2 = About once a month; 3 = About once a week; 4 = More than once a week
Undocumented student services use	Have you ever been to an office or met with a staff person at [school name] who focuses on supporting undocumented students and/or students with undocumented family members?	0 = No; 1 = Yes
Visited undocumented student services office	Please identify how frequently you have done the following this academic year? 1) Visited the undocumented student program office/center	0 = Never; 1 = A few times a year; 2 = About once a month; 3 = About once a week; 4 = More than once a week
Referral from undocumented student services	Have undocumented student program staff connected you to another person on campus who could provide support, services, or resources?	0 = No, never; 1 = Yes, 1 other person; 2 = Yes, more than 1 other person
Experiences accessing campus resources	During this academic year, have you experienced the following: 1) Had to educate a university staff person about your eligibility to receive a resource, 2) Been given inaccurate or incorrect information about how to complete a university procedure, 3) Been denied access to a campus resource because of immigration status	0 = No, never; 1 = Yes, 1–3 times; 2 = Yes, more than 3 times
Effort to access campus resources	Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. 1) It is stressful to get an answer about something related to being an undocumented student, 2) It takes a lot of time to get an answer about something related to being an undocumented student	1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree ; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree ; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree
Pro-immigrant sentiment	How often have you heard or witnessed the following groups express positive feelings about undocumented immigrant communities? 1) Faculty, 2) Staff, 3) Students	0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Often
Anti-immigrant sentiment	How often have you heard or witnessed the following groups express negative feelings about undocumented immigrant communities? 1) Faculty, 2) Staff, 3) Students	0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Often
Sense of belonging	Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. 1) I feel a sense of belonging to this university, 2) I see myself as part of the university community, 3) I can present my whole, authentic self on campus without worrying about repercussions	1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

a class discussion, 56.6% studied with classmates, 53.5% sought academic help when needed, and 51% communicated with the instructor outside of class.

Finally, participation in co-curricular opportunities can indicate the extent to which students are mobilizing educational opportunities in preparation for post-college labor market transitions. For example, internships and career-related jobs facilitate the transition of low-income, first-generation college students into the workforce (Salvadge, 2019). Students in this survey reported limited participation in such opportunities with only 37.9% reporting ever having one or more professional development experiences: 17.8% held an unpaid internship, 14.5% a paid internship, 13.9% a credit-based internship, and 15% a career-relevant job.

Well-being

Two clinically validated measures, the PHQ-9 and GAD-7, were used to assess depression and anxiety symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2001; Spitzer et al., 2006). About one in four (26.3%) respondents reported depressive symptoms that warrant clinical treatment and one in five (20.6%) reported severe anxiety symptoms. In all, 30.8% reported anxiety and/or depression symptoms at a level that warranted clinical treatment. Respondents also reported poorer general health than would be expected for their age group (Tsai et al., 2010). Specifically, equal proportions of respondents reported poor or fair health (28.2%) than very good or excellent health (31.5%).

We also assessed positive mental health as a signal of resilience. Respondents rated the degree to which they experienced flourishing, a form of social and psychological prosperity that includes feelings of self-respect, optimism, purpose, and living a meaningful life. Undocumented students' average score (M = 44.31) was in line with the average reported in many other samples of college students (Diener et al., 2010). Additionally, respondents demonstrated high rates of self-worth: 65.7% agreed that they matter to their community and 86.5% believed they are worthy of getting their needs met. These findings suggest that undocumented students have a wealth of resilience resources that co-exist with emotional distress.

Civic and political engagement

The immigrant youth movement has been led by undocumented students, fostering the perception that many undocumented students are civically and politically engaged (Nicholls, 2013); however, we find substantial variation. We assessed civic engagement with measures that captured both formal and informal actions. Of surveyed respondents, 44.2% had ever participated in an organization that tried to solve a social problem, with 60.1% of these having done so that academic year. More than three-quarters (77.8%) had ever participated in a community service or volunteer activity, with 52.3% of these having done so that academic year.

We also examined multiple forms of political engagement. This included whether they talked to people to persuade them to vote for or against certain politicians or political issues; 79.3% of respondents had. Fewer reported more public forms of engagement: 54.1% of respondents reported taking part in a protest, march or demonstration on-campus and 49.2% off-campus. Respondents ranged in exercising their political voice such as by signing a petition (75.3%), discussing political issues on social media (63.6%), and wearing buttons or displaying stickers with social or political messages (58.2%). These multiple measures provide a more nuanced sense of the different ways that undocumented students may engage.

Such high rates of civic and political engagement can be interpreted as positive outcomes; however, correlation analyses suggest that this engagement is associated with more legal vulnerability. For example, students who reported experiencing more frequent immigration-related discrimination (civic: $\rho = .11$, $p < .001$; political: $\rho = .22$, $p < .001$) and anti-immigrant sentiment on campus (civic: $\rho = .16$, $p < .001$; political: $\rho = .23$, $p < .001$) had higher civic and political engagement scores. Furthermore, students who experienced more immigration-related social exclusion ($\rho = .13$, $p < .001$) and threat to family ($\rho = .18$, $p < .001$) reported higher political engagement. Economic insecurity also had some narrow effect as students with higher levels of food insecurity were more likely to take part in some forms of engagement (civic: $\rho = .09$, $p < .01$; political: $\rho = .16$, $p < .001$). Thus, substantial strain may belie undocumented students' political and civic engagement.

Experiences of legal vulnerability

Second, we explored how California's undocumented college students experience legal vulnerability in the current policy context. We found high saliency of family legal vulnerability. Comparisons across

immigration status suggest that DACA provides limited protections, differentiating undocumented students' experiences. Overall, these findings painted a complex picture of legal vulnerability in the lives of Californian undocumented students.

Saliency of family legal vulnerability

We found that immigration-related concerns prevented undocumented students from fully engaging in their academics. Our respondents reported high levels of academic distraction due to dealing with or thinking about an issue related to their own or a family members' immigration status. For example, 76.2% reported being distracted in class due to their own immigration issues and 66% due to a family member's; of these, half (50.1%) experienced this once a month or more due to their own immigration issues and 42.4% due to a family member's. Additionally, 40.8% missed class due to their own status issues and 31.4% due to family member's. These data reveal that it is not only students' own immigration issues that disrupt academic engagement, but also those of their family members.

One source of immigration-related concerns is deportation threats. Critically, 38% of undocumented students reported thinking about their own deportation once a week or more. However, a larger portion of students think about parental deportation; half (50.4%) reported doing so once a week or more. Furthermore, the percentage of students who think about their parents' deportation daily (29.3%) was ten percent higher than those who think about their own deportation daily (19.2%). Concerns about threats to the family are high, as 73.9% reported worrying often or always about family separation due to deportation. This suggests that students' experiences of deportability include threats to their family members as well as themselves.

A second source of immigration-related concern is economic insecurity. The majority of undocumented students in this sample (59.1%) reported food insecurity. They also identified personal economic insecurity; nearly all students (96.1%) reported worrying about not having enough money to pay for things, with 59.7% worrying a lot of the time or almost always. Similar economic insecurity existed for their families: 26.3% reported that they expect their family will sometimes experience bad times such as poor housing or not having enough food in the next three months, and an additional 15.5% expected it a lot of the time or almost always. Unlike with deportation, students felt that they were more financially precarious than their families as a whole: 20.8% reported having to go without the basic things they need a lot of the time or almost always and 12.7% reported the same for their family. Still, individual and family finances intermingle as 33.3% reported helping their family pay bills a lot of the time or almost always.

Legal vulnerability in the context of DACA

Importantly, receiving protection from deportation and employment authorization through DACA can alter students' experiences of legal vulnerability. For instance, DACA recipients were significantly less likely to report thinking about their own deportation: 35.5% of DACA recipients reported thinking about their own deportation once a week or more, compared to 44.9% of those with no legal protections ($\chi^2 = 16.6$, $p < .01$). Economic insecurity was also lower among DACA recipients as 56.8% reported food insecurity, compared to 65.5% of those with no legal protections ($\chi^2 = 7.4$, $p < .05$). However, DACA recipients also reported more family financial obligations with 35.9% helping their family pay bills a lot of the time or almost always, compared to 25.8% of those with no legal protections ($\chi^2 = 17.0$, $p < .01$).

DACA protections can contribute to diverging educational experiences among students. For example, DACA recipients were more likely to participate in professional development opportunities with 40.9% having participated in one or more, compared to 28.9% of those with no legal status ($\chi^2 = 14.6$, $p < .001$). As might be expected, there were only statistically significant differences in opportunities that likely require employment authorization: paid internships (DACA recipients: 15.6%, no legal status: 11%; $\chi^2 = 3.9$, $p < .05$) and career-relevant jobs (DACA recipients: 18.4%, no

legal status: 4.6%; $\chi^2 = 35.0$, $p < .001$). It is also notable that students with no legal status were overrepresented at both the highest and lowest GPA categories, indicating that this group includes students who are uniquely at risk of serious academic struggles but also remarkably resilient. Specifically, 33.1% of students with no legal status reported a GPA of 3.5 or higher, compared to 24.8% of DACA recipients and 14.3% reported a GPA under 2.5, compared to 9.9% of DACA recipients ($\chi^2 = 19.9$, $p < .001$).

DACA protections did not always lead to diverging experiences, however. There were no statistically significant differences in rates of anxiety and depression symptoms when comparing across immigration status; 29.6% of DACA recipients reported clinically-significant depression and/or anxiety symptoms, compared to 34.8% of students with no legal status ($\chi^2 = 2.9$, $p \geq 0.05$). This may be because DACA was in limbo during the course of this study; former President Trump had rescinded the executive action in 2017, setting off a protracted legal battle with the U.S. Supreme Court set to issue a decision about the program's future in the months this survey was fielded (NILC, 2020). There were significant, but very small, differences between DACA recipients and students who had no legal status in terms of reported rates of immigration-related social exclusion (DACA recipients: $M = 14.2$, no legal status: $M = 15.5$; $t = 4.33$, $p < .001$) and discrimination (DACA recipients: $M = 19.1$, no legal status: $M = 20.6$; $t = 3.26$, $p < .01$), indicating DACA's limited ability to buffer against these everyday aspects of legal vulnerability.

Examining the campus context

Ecological frameworks suggest that campus context plays an important role in shaping undocumented students' experiences (Nájera, 2020; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). CSU and UC campuses have developed undocumented student services which provide innovative programming for undocumented students as well as improve the campus climate through efforts like ally training. We found that this supportive institutional context appears to have fostered moderately positive campus contexts, but differences arose between the university systems.

Undocumented students attending CSU and UC campuses availed themselves of campus resources. Our survey asked respondents how frequently they used eight different types of common campus resources, including academic counselors, academic support services, peer tutoring, the career center, identity-based centers, basic needs/food pantry, student health center, and mental health counseling. Almost all of our respondents used at least one of these resources during the 2019–2020 academic year with 20.9% using one or two resources, 35.9% using three or four, 27.5% using five or six, and 13.5% using seven or more. Further, 74.3% reported having been to an office or met with a person who focuses on supporting undocumented students. Two of every five students who reported using services had visited the program office once a month or more. Additionally, 80.8% of respondents who had used undocumented student services reported being referred to another person on campus who could provide support, services, or resources. Indeed, students who had used undocumented student services were more likely to have used larger numbers of campus-wide resources ($\chi^2 = 75.6$, $p < .001$).

At the same time, interpersonal inclusion was relatively high on campuses. Students were more likely to report hearing pro-immigrant sentiment than anti-immigrant sentiment on campus. About three quarters of students reported hearing faculty (75.5%), staff (75.1%), and students (78.1%) express positive feelings about undocumented immigrant communities either sometimes or often. It was uncommon for students to hear faculty and staff express negative feelings about the population as frequently (11.4% and 10.1% respectively). However, 31.5% of students reported sometimes or often hearing negative comments from peers.

Such structural and interpersonal inclusion seemed to translate into feelings of belonging. About three in five respondents (62.6%) agreed that they felt a sense of belonging to their university and also saw themselves as part of the university community. However, fewer (55.9%) agreed that they could present their whole, authentic self on campus without worrying about repercussions. This indicates

the need for a more nuanced approach to belonging that captures potential stigmatization and desire to conceal one's immigration status.

Yet, we still found evidence that undocumented students continue to face barriers when trying to access campus resources. When seeking access to information, resources, and services, 35.7% reported needing to educate staff about their eligibility to receive a service and 44.4% received inaccurate information about how to complete a procedure or form. Such inquiries also required significant effort; 58.4% of our respondents agreed that it was stressful to get answers about an issue related to being an undocumented student and 43.5% agreed that it takes a lot of time. About one in four (28.4%) reported being denied access to campus resources due to their immigration status; students with no legal status were more likely to report being denied access, 36.2% compared to 25.7% of DACA recipients ($\chi^2 = 12.9$, $p < .001$). Although these rates of exclusion were higher than we might hope, they demonstrate that such experiences are not universal as the majority of our respondents did not report them.

Correlation analyses suggest that inclusive campus contexts are important for improving outcomes. Those students who heard more frequent anti-immigrant sentiment were more academically disengaged ($r = .21$, $p < .001$) and at increased risk of clinical depression and anxiety symptoms ($r = .16$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, those students who felt a strong sense of belonging on campus had higher GPAs ($r = .08$, $p < .01$), more positive classroom engagement ($r = .22$, $p < .001$), and less risk of clinical depression and anxiety symptoms ($r = -.20$, $p < .001$).

Comparisons across CSU and UC students suggest that there was significant variation in institutional experiences. Only 36.5% of CSU students reported using five or more common campus resources during the current academic year, compared to 45% of the UC students ($\chi^2 = 14.6$, $p < .01$). However, UC students were more likely to report difficulties accessing resources: 32.6% of UC respondents reported being denied access to resources, compared to 23.7% of CSU students ($\chi^2 = 12.3$, $p < .001$). UC students were also significantly more likely to report having to educate staff about their eligibility or receiving inaccurate information (UC = 39.6%, CSU = 31.4%; $\chi^2 = 9.5$, $p < .01$). Finally, CSU respondents were more likely to report both pro- and anti-immigrant sentiment than UC students (see Table 3).

Finally, there is some indication that students had different experiences of legal vulnerability across campus contexts. For example, economic insecurity seemed to manifest differently for undocumented students attending CSU campuses compared to those at the UCs. Personal economic insecurity was significantly higher among CSU students as they reported higher frequencies of having difficulty paying their bills a lot of the time or almost always (CSU = 40.1%, UC = 33.8%; $\chi^2 = 6.1$, $p < .05$) and having to go without materials needed for their studies as frequently (CSU = 27.4%; UC = 20%; $\chi^2 = 9.7$, $p < .01$). In contrast, UC students had significantly higher rates of food insecurity; 41.5% of UC students and 33.4% of CSU students were identified as having very low food security ($\chi^2 = 8.9$, $p < .05$). Additionally, the effects of such insecurity on students' perceptions of their ability to continue their education differed. About seven in ten respondents agreed that they have concerns about not being able to finance their college education, and this rate was higher among CSU students (74.6%)

Table 3. Undocumented students' perceptions of campus climate by university system.

	Percentage		p-value
	CSU	UC	
Sometime or often express pro-immigrant sentiment			
Faculty	78.8	72.5	.024
Staff	79.8	70.9	.001
Students	79.3	77.0	.593
Sometime or often express anti-immigrant sentiment			
Faculty	9.4	13.2	.000
Staff	7.7	12.2	.001
Students	27.8	34.8	.000

compared to UC students (66.8%) ($\chi^2 = 10.3$, $p < .01$). Three out of every five respondents worried about having to take time off from school to save money to pay for school; this rate differed significantly across the two university systems (CSU = 66%, UC = 54.1%; $\chi^2 = 22.1$, $p < .001$). Higher financial concerns may seem surprising given the lower cost of the CSU; however, the UC offers substantial aid packages that may buffer much of the higher costs.

Discussion and conclusion

Prior research has established that legal vulnerability is contextual and dynamic due to multi-layered and frequently shifting immigration policies (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018; Silver, 2018). This reality necessitates critical reflection and reassessment of how undocumented college students' experiences may shift and respond to changing policy contexts, including the growing establishment of inclusive state and institutional policies. To this end, we presented descriptive data from a survey of 1,277 undocumented college students attending four-year public universities in California. These data point to the diversification of undocumented college students' experiences and the need for nuanced assessments of their outcomes, legal vulnerability, and campus contexts.

First, we documented respondents' performance on a wide variety of academic, well-being, and civic and political engagement outcomes. Without a comparison group, we cannot say whether undocumented students are doing better or worse than their citizen peers. However, these data show wide variation in outcomes, demonstrating the heterogeneity of undocumented students' experiences. Future research should investigate this heterogeneity and examine its consequences. For example, Chavarria et al. (2021/this issue) identify different profiles of undocumented students based on the frequency of self and family-related immigration distractions and show that those in profiles with less frequent distractions are less likely to display negative academic engagement. Our findings also illuminate how examining a range of outcomes facilitates the recognition of students' struggles and resilience. Future research should examine multiple and/or novel outcomes. For instance, Valadez et al. (2021/this issue) examine both positive and negative academic engagement, revealing that these are distinct outcomes which are not predicted by the same aspects of legal vulnerability and campus contexts.

Second, we examined students' experiences of legal vulnerability. We found high levels of family legal vulnerability, including higher concerns for parental deportation than one's self. These findings suggest that inclusive policy contexts and protected social locations can buffer against legal vulnerability (Enriquez & Millán, 2021). We also documented high economic insecurity for both self and family, calling attention to the importance of examining multiple forms of legal vulnerability when assessing students' experiences. Future work needs to examine how different aspects of legal vulnerability may shape students' outcomes. For example, Velarde Pierce et al. (2021/this issue) establish the unique and combined effects of discrimination, social exclusion, threat of deportation, and financial insecurity on undocumented students' emotional distress.

We also compared students' experiences across immigration status. These analyses revealed that DACA provides some benefits, including lower deportation concerns and economic insecurity; however, it does not prompt fully diverging experiences. We found no differences in DACA recipients' emotional distress, possibly due to the threatened recission of the program. Institutional practices may also play a role in minimizing DACA's potential to engender unique benefits as both university systems offer programming to support undocumented students regardless of whether they have DACA. Future research must continue to elucidate the extent to which DACA protections may or may not foster diverging perceptions of legal vulnerability and how these may contribute to differing outcomes. For example, Rosales (2021/this issue) compare DACA recipients to students with no legal status and find that the legal vulnerability of those with no legal status appears to constrain their political engagement.

Finally, we examined how undocumented students are experiencing the contemporary campus context, especially in light of the fact that CSU and UC campuses have led the way in developing undocumented

student services. We found that respondents experienced relatively inclusive campus contexts. Pro-immigrant sentiment is high and anti-immigrant sentiment is low, with the exception of about a third of respondents who reported sometimes or often hearing negative comments from peers. While there are persisting barriers to accessing support, the majority of respondents did not report such experiences. Indeed, undocumented students reported accessing resources at high rates. Respondents also had relatively strong feelings of belonging. Our findings point to the importance of grounding studies in specific institutional contexts and examining the extent to which the campus context affects student outcomes. Notably, Sarabia et al. (2021/this issue) find that campus integration is associated with increased odds of using academic support services, while campus exclusion is not. Additional research should examine the campus context and its effect on educational experiences. Importantly, we also found that students across the two university systems varied in their perceptions of the campus context as well as their experiences of legal vulnerability. Additional research needs to explore why differences emerge across universities.

Our study has some limitations. First, we presented descriptive analyses only, and it is possible that some associations and differences may not hold in multivariate analyses. Second, we were unable to assess the representativeness of our sample; it is likely skewed toward those who are more engaged and open about their immigration status. Finally, we only surveyed students attending 4-year universities, but four out of five undocumented students in California attend 2-year community colleges (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2018). Community colleges tend to offer fewer resources for undocumented students (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015) but are also more affordable and provide flexible part-time enrollment that can increase accessibility (Hsin & Ortega, 2018). Future research should examine how community college students are faring.

Weighing our findings in light of past research conducted in California suggests that the inclusionary state and institutional policy context are advancing equity and inclusion for undocumented students. Although restrictive and exclusionary policies persist at all levels, many states have followed California's example in opening up higher education through inclusive policies that provide in-state tuition and financial aid and institutional programs that support undocumented students. Our findings provide additional support for the beneficial effects of these efforts; however, undocumented students' full inclusion remains elusive. Future research will be critical in advancing a more nuanced portrait of undocumented students' experiences so that policy makers and practitioners can implement effective means to support this student population. Such research would benefit from drawing on ecological and intersectional frameworks to explore the heterogeneity of undocumented students' experiences and unpack the challenges they confront while also demonstrating the ways they thrive (Enriquez, 2017; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011; Valdez & Golash-Boza, 2020).

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