

Amplifying Voices: A Qualitative Exploration of UndocuQueer Students’ Journeys Through Higher Education

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Abstract:

This qualitative thesis explores the experiences of UndocuQueer and first-generation students in U.S. higher education, focusing on their intersectional struggles, coping mechanisms, and strategies for navigating institutional barriers. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with 15 participants, the research examines how these students negotiate their undocumented status and queer identities while pursuing academic success.

Thematic analysis of the interview data reveals four major themes: (1) Immigrant Journeys, Adaptation, and Belonging, (2) Navigating Identity, Access, and Belonging in Higher Education, and (3) The Role of Resistance, Advocacy, and Reimagining the Future in Advancing their Rights and Access to Resources. Findings highlight the compound challenges faced by UndocuQueer students and the critical need for inclusive, intersectional support systems in higher education. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on social justice, educational equity, and the importance of creating policies that affirm the identities and rights of UndocuQueer students.

Introduction:

The intersecting identities of Undocumented and Queer (UndocuQueer) people and their lived experiences in pursuing higher education are limited in research. This study aims to understand better the specific needs, experiences, and worldviews of UndocuQueer students in higher education settings. The main inspiration for this idea came from having the lived experience of someone who is undocumented and queer and is in a community with UndocuQueer folks. The vision is to understand UndocuQueer students' experiences better, expanding our knowledge of how we can best serve the UndocuQueer student population in higher education settings.

Research has shown that both queer and undocumented (UndocuQueer) students in an institution of higher education face barriers and challenges due to identities and marginalization (Muñoz & Alleman, 2016; Raja et al.,2023). However, few studies have closely examined the challenges facing the intersection—students who are both queer and undocumented. Therefore, this study examined the intersections of undocumented and queer students navigating higher education spaces to expand the research and learn better ways to serve this population.

Methods:

Participants

- Participants were 18+, identified as UndocuQueer, and enrolled in or recently graduated from a college or university.
- They spoke and understood English or Spanish.

Recruitment

- A bilingual flyer was shared through college support centers and social media.
- Locations included CSULB, LBCC, Cerritos College, and the LA LGBT Center.
- Snowball sampling helped expand participation through community referrals.

Procedures

- IRB approval was received from CSU Long Beach.
- Participants completed a consent form and demographic survey on Qualtrics.
- Interviews were scheduled via the participant’s preferred method (text, call, email).
- Semi-structured interviews focused on UndocuQueer student experiences.
- Pseudonyms ensured confidentiality across survey and interview data.
- The audio was transcribed by the researcher and then deleted after transcription.

Data Analysis

- After data collection, the data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023).
- Transcripts were cleaned and translated when needed, preserving the participant's voice.
- Manual coding identified key themes, sub-codes, and patterns.
- Representative quotes were selected to illustrate findings.

Results:

This qualitative study revealed three core themes and subthemes from interviews with 15 UndocuQueer and first-generation students:

Theme I: Immigration Journeys, Adaptation, and Belonging

“The reason my dad gave me for bringing me over was for a better life...” – Miggie

- Motivation for Migration:** Participants migrated due to economic hardship, family reunification, natural disasters, and safety.
- Challenges of Migration:** Barriers included language, separation from parents, and legal precarity.
- Coping with Migration:** Community, school support, family, hoarding resources, and movement arts helped participants adapt.
- Negotiating the Transition to the United States:** Participants shared feelings of intergenerational gratitude, identity reflection, and cultural adaptation.

Theme II: Navigating Identity, Access & Belonging in Higher Education

“The Dream Center was there... but I didn’t see myself reflected.” – Keith

“I didn’t have... money for food... I would go to free events in college to eat...” – Yaxsiri

- Sociocultural Influences on Educational Aspirations:** Education as proof of worth, familial pride, and resistance to stereotypes fueled aspirations.
- Financial Aid & Employment Barriers:** Limited aid and ineligibility for loans or programs caused deep stress.
- Basic Needs Insecurity:** Participants faced food insecurity, housing instability, lack of healthcare, and unpaid labor.
- First-Generation Navigation:** Many lacked guidance, juggled family obligations, and navigated cultural shock.
- Experiences of Support & Exclusion:** Mixed experiences with counselors, Dream Centers, and Pride Centers; some felt deeply affirmed, others excluded.

Theme III: The Role of Resistance, Advocacy & Reimagining the Future for Resources

“Unless you advocate for yourself hard... it pushes us away.” – Oscar

- Self-Advocacy & Survival:** Participants relied on self-research, resource-seeking, and inner resilience.
- Student and Community Organizing:** Many engaged in youth activism, community outreach, and political education.
- Queering Human Rights and Social Equity:** Students named housing, food, healthcare, migration, reproductive, disability, and LGBTQ+ rights essential.

Table 1. Description of the Sample (n=15)

	f	%
Ages		
18-25	3	20
26-34	11	73.3
35-44	1	6.7
Immigration Status		
Undocumented	3	20
Work Authorized (DACA or TPS)	11	73.3
Pending immigration application (U-Visa, family petition, etc.)	1	6.7
Gender Identity		
Transgender	1	6.7
Woman	6	40.0
Man	4	26.7
Nonbinary	2	13.3
Gender Fluid	1	6.7
Two Spirit	1	6.7
Education		
High school	2	13.3
Some College	1	6.7
Bachelor's Degree	6	40.0
Master's Degree	4	26.7
Doctorate Degree	1	6.7
Specialized Degree (e.g., MD, DDS)	1	6.7

Demographics of participants.

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Implications:

Social Work Practice:

- Social workers must be trained to support **UndocuQueer students** through **identity-affirming, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive services** (Ayón et al., 2024; NASW Code of Ethics).

- Inclusive **mental health care**, safe spaces, and **access to financial aid regardless of immigration status** are essential for well-being and persistence (Ayón et al., 2024; Gonzales & Vargas, 2016).
 - **Fear of outing** and compounded stigmas prevent UndocuQueer students from using traditional mental health services (Ayón et al., 2024).
 - Culturally relevant and identity-affirming services should address the **psychological burden of intersectional oppression** and support **community-based care**.

- Student advocacy and community organizing were central to participants’ survival and strength. Social workers should actively uplift these efforts through **community empowerment** and institutional support, which promote belonging and resilience (DeAngelo et al., 2016; Muñoz, 2015).

Policy and Advocacy:

- Expand access to **in-state tuition and financial aid** for undocumented students at the institutional, state, and federal levels (Bjorklund, 2018; Immigrants Rising, 2024).
 - Address **financial insecurity**, which often disrupts academic continuity and mental health (Immigrants Rising, 2024).

- Fund and standardize Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs)** to provide intersectional legal, mental health, and career support (Cisneros et al., 2022).

- Higher Education Institutions should implement **campus-wide intersectionality training** to bridge the gap between undocumented and LGBTQ+ services (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Immigrants Rising, 2024).

- Safeguarding and protecting student data from immigration enforcement** through FERPA-aligned policies and institutional accountability is urgent, especially in political uncertainty.

Conclusions:

- This study contributes to UndocuQueer research by **centering voices often excluded from academic discourse**.

- Findings **illuminate the barriers and strategies** UndocuQueer students use to navigate higher education. The data provides educators, social workers, and policymakers with a roadmap for enacting inclusive, identity-affirming advocacy.

- Future research should examine:
 - The **long-term outcomes** of UndocuQueer students post-graduation
 - The **impact of shifting immigration policies**
 - The role of **intersectional campus resource centers** in sustaining student success

- Continued focus on lived experience in research and **strengthening support, resilience, and access** for UndocuQueer students. Ongoing studies are needed to **deepen understanding of both barriers and successes** of the UndocuQueer student population.

References:

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Full references available in the accompanying handout