

“It Is Who We Are. We Are Undocumented”: The Narrative of Two Undocumented Latino Male Students Attending a Community College

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Cristobal Salinas Jr.¹ , Ronnie Malavé²,
Omar D. Torrens¹, and Ethan C. Swingle¹

Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this narrative study was to document and explore the life experiences of two undocumented Latino students at a community college in Southeastern Florida. The research questions that guided this study are “What are the narratives and lived experiences of undocumented Latino males attending a community college in Southeastern Florida?” and “What assimilation experiences inform undocumented Latino males’ educational aspirations to attend a community college?” **Method:** A narrative inquiry was used to document the lived experiences of two undocumented Latino male students. Each participant was interviewed; all data were recorded, transcribed, then coded for themes. **Results:** The findings provide an understanding that experiences in K-12 educational spaces were vital to their development and self-understanding of their undocumented identity; the notion to pursue college was cultivated in both these undocumented Latinos from an early age; and despite the anti-immigrant stereotypes they encountered, they continue to stay focused to help their families and accomplish their academic goals. **Contributions:** Undocumented immigrants, more than ever, continue to face different challenges in the United States, which affect their educational attainment, particularly for Latino

¹Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, USA

²Palm Beach State College, Lake Worth, FL, USA

Corresponding Author:

Cristobal Salinas Jr., Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Leadership and Research Methodology, Florida Atlantic University, 777 Glades Road, ED47-245, Boca Raton, FL 33431, USA.
Email: salinasc@fau.edu

males. Implications for practice include that institutions should become *undocufriendly* for all undocumented students.

Keywords

Latino, males, undocumented students, narrative, community colleges

Immigrants in the United States have been referred to as undocumented, foreigners, and alien illegal (Abrego, 2006; Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017); often, those terms signify any person who does not hold legal residency in the United States, including not holding an appropriate visa, green card, or U.S. citizenship (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010). Referring to a person as an alien has the effect of dehumanizing them, and referring to a person being illegal has the effect of demonizing them (C. Garcia, 2012). M. M. Suárez-Orozco (2009) explained that “undocumented immigrants are not from the other side of the moon”; they are people brave to improve their lives and “who inspire anxiety . . . exclusion and xenophobia” (p. 2). The term *undocumented students* is used throughout this article to refer to undocumented immigrants who do not have legal residency or citizen documentation in the United States. Undocumented students are also known as the “1.5 generation,” as they “are not first-generation immigrants because they did not choose to migrate, but neither were they born and spend part of their childhood outside of the United States” (Gonzales, 2009, p. 7).

Estimates for undocumented Latino male graduation rates are further obfuscated, due to the difficulty in gathering data on this vulnerable population (Abrego, 2006; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). The lives of these undocumented Latino males and their experiences attending community colleges have been described by some as *shadows in the classroom* (Barato, 2009), and many scholars indicate a need for more research into undocumented Latino male educational attainment (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Cervantes, Minero, & Brito, 2015; McWhirter, Ramos, & Medina, 2013; Passel, 2003; Perez et al., 2009). Furthermore, Flores (2010) stated that college enrollment for undocumented students is higher for females than males; therefore, it is important to “examine males and females separately” (p. 271).

The transformative potential of undocumented students, specifically undocumented Latino males, to become productive members of society is severely limited by their ability to access higher education (Abrego, 2006; Ruge & Iza, 2005), open admission and in-state tuition rates (Flores, 2010; Ruge & Iza, 2005), discrimination throughout their college careers (Barato, 2009; Cervantes et al., 2015), and access to employment once they graduate (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Lopez, 2004; Muñoz, 2015). Knowing the challenges undocumented students face in higher education is essential. In this study, the lived experiences of undocumented Latino male community college students are examined.

The purpose of this narrative research is to document and explore the life experiences of two undocumented Latino students (Matias and Mateo) at a community

college in Southeastern Florida. Through this narrative study, we investigate Matías and Mateo's experiences in the educational system as undocumented students. We examine how the racism Matías and Mateo experienced influenced their self-perception and Latino identity development, and how their experiences affected assimilation and decision to attend a community college. As such, the research questions that guided this study are as follows:

Research Question 1: What are the narratives and lived experiences of undocumented Latino males attending a community college in Southeastern Florida?

Research Question 2: What assimilation experiences inform undocumented Latino males' educational aspirations to attend a community college?

Undocumented Latino Students

Every year undocumented immigrants make the news, mainly because current political figures verbally attack and dehumanize these communities of people (Yee, Davis, & Patel, 2017). For example, undocumented immigrants are associated and stereotyped with gangs, violence, and drugs, and there is a stigma that these communities of people are taking jobs away from documented U.S. citizens. Policy makers and the federal government have not figured out a way to constitutionally approach the challenges that undocumented immigrants face and bring to the United States. The White House (2017) administration reported that they are "committed to building a border wall to stop illegal immigration, to stop the gangs and the violence, and to stop the drugs from pouring into our communities" (para. 6). Undocumented immigrants, more than ever, continue to face different challenges in the United States.

Since the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, much of the research on new immigration patterns, immigrant communities, and their assimilation into the country has "been focused almost exclusively on the first generation, that is, on adult men and women coming to the United States in search of work or to escape political persecution" (Portes & Zhou, 1993, p. 75). When undocumented immigrants come into the United States, many under harsh circumstances, they too, wish to build a better life for themselves and their families. Undocumented children who come to the United States early on in their lives grow up being socialized and are assimilated to the *American Dream*—the acculturated social ideal commonly referred to in the United States as the opportunity for everyone to have the equal ability to achieve prosperity (C. Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2011).

Undocumented students come from society's most vulnerable circumstances (Abrego, 2011) marked by racism and poverty (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010). There are an estimated 65,000 undocumented students (children born abroad who are not U.S. citizens or legal residents) who graduate from U.S. high schools each year (Diaz-Strong, Gómez, Luna-Duarte, & Meiners, 2011; Huber, Malagon, & Solorzano, 2009; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). According to Diaz-Strong et al. (2011), only 7,000 to 13,000 undocumented students enroll in college nationally each year but face legal and

financial barriers to higher education (Abrego, 2006; Abrica & Martinez, 2016; Muñoz, 2015).

Undocumented Latino students in the United States face many barriers to improving their lives and contribute more to society. As a subset, male Latino students face certain barriers which are different from that of their female counterparts and which make it potentially even more difficult for them to achieve success in academia (Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, & Guida, 2018). While some of these barriers are products of structural inequalities within the education system in the United States, others stem from issues related to how their culture, family, and friends help define what it means to be a man (Sáenz, Mayo, Miller, & Rodriguez, 2015) and how to successfully navigate community college settings (Sáenz et al., 2018). Undocumented students are understudied (L. D. Garcia & Tierney, 2011), specifically the experiences of male students (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). In recognizing the gravity of the situation, some scholars have called this phenomenon the vanishing Latino male (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009) and others have stated that we need to examine male and female college enrollment separately (Flores, 2010).

Undocumented Latino students in the United States commonly come from families of low socioeconomic status (Abrego, 2011; Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010). Many come from parents who themselves are undocumented and may lack the immigration status to obtain legal employment. As a result, often their employment options are very limited, requiring many to gravitate to larger populated areas where more forms of menial employment may be found (Portes & Zhou, 1993). This type of employment typically may not be as discerning about the employees' immigration status, but of course it also does not usually pay decent wages and often relegates undocumented families in the United States to impoverished conditions (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Crosnoe and Turley (2011) asserted that "today's predominantly non-European immigrants must struggle ever harder to provide the economic foundation their children need to pursue higher education, even as that education becomes increasingly important to their children's future" (p. 131). The importance of the traditional male role of providing for the family—which is often seen as an important family responsibility—becomes heightened. Latino males are typically raised with an expectation to become good providers (Sáenz et al., 2015). This often leads many Latino males to favor employment over education as a means to begin earning for their families and thereby keeping with the valued characteristic of being a good provider (Clark, Ponjuan, Orrock, Wilson, & Flores, 2012; Sáenz et al., 2015). If they do make it to college, the expectation does not go away as they work 14 to 15 hours, contribute to the household, and have expectations to help pay bills at home even though they might not be living there (Clark et al., 2012).

This negative impact on undocumented Latino males' ability to remain in school, because of their low socioeconomic status and their sense of responsibility for the family, is often coupled with the low educational achievement levels of their parents, which tend to keep them at that socioeconomic status (Clark et al., 2012). This becomes a cycle, which may be difficult to break. The lack of the parents' familiarity with higher education further complicates the challenges faced by undocumented Latino

males. While strong family ties often provide an emotional support system for undocumented Latino males, when parents lack higher educational achievement, they cannot easily provide the same type of support system which families whose parents achieved higher academic levels are able to provide.

Undocumented students who aimed to pursue a postsecondary education, regardless of the states' policy of in-state tuition policy, are more likely to enroll in community colleges due to affordability and accessibility (Abrego, 2008). There is a growing body of research examining how the undocumented status of Latinos affects their aspirations to attend college (Abrego, 2006; Flores, 2010; Martinez, 2014; McWhirter et al., 2013; Muñoz, 2015; Ruge & Iza, 2005); however, there is a need for more research specifically focusing on undocumented Latino males attending community colleges and their lived experiences.

The Effect of In-State Tuition Policy

Scholars have made the argument that educating undocumented students and providing them with in-state tuition for college can help society overall. For example, Ruge and Iza (2005) pointed to legislation in Florida¹ arguing that “these students will be more productive with a degree, and that without one undocumented immigrant students are more likely to end up needing governmental assistance” (p. 275). While this progressive stance is admirable, it is not always the case in states that do not offer in-state tuition to undocumented students. Furthermore, with the recent mixed messages from the White House Administration, it is unclear what the future is for undocumented students and in-state tuition policies.

As of April 2018, at least 18 states had provisions allowing for in-state tuition rates for undocumented students (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). Oklahoma and Rhode Island are two of the 18 states that allow in-state tuition for undocumented students through Board of Regents' decisions. The following 16 states extend in-state tuition rate to undocumented students: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Texas, Utah, and Washington. In addition, only six states allow undocumented students to receive state financial aid: California, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, and Washington (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). States like “Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina employ state policies that prohibit undocumented students from enrolling higher education” (Muñoz, 2015, p. 5).

In-state tuition policies for undocumented students are confusing and inconsistent, reflecting the disagreement of state and federal law (Drachman, 2006). It is clear that in-state tuition policies “[have] effectively created a new type of person—a new identity—to use as its target subject” (Gildersleeve & Hernandez, 2012, p. 10). While in-state policy has named undocumented students as “foreigners,” “illegal,” and “illegal alien” (Abrego, 2006, p. 215), these students have adopted terms and a “language of ‘justice’ to claim legitimate spaces for themselves in higher education” (Abrego, 2008, p. 730). For example, in 2001, when Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540)² was passed in

California, media and students started using the term and referred to them(selves) as “AB 540 students.” Policy makers and students adopted the term “Dreamers,” after the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act³ (Dream Act) was first introduced in the U.S. Senate. The term “DACA Students” was adopted to identify undocumented students after President Barack Obama created the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival program⁴ (DACA).

Policy for undocumented students continues to be at the center of the currently political climate. Their lives are on hold (Gonzales, 2009) as they are “forced to live in the shadows of society and in legal limbo” (Drachman, 2006, p. 98) and concurrently excluded from U.S. society (Abrego, 2008). Undocumented students have learned to assimilate within and manipulate political and social assumptions to avoid answering questions with regard to their immigrations status. In addition, undocumented students are often silenced about their living and work conditions. They adopt new terms based on policy, they organize around communities, and they seek access to higher education opportunities (Abrego, 2006, 2008, 2011). Abrego (2011) stated that undocumented students are informed from a legal consciousness that is often driven by fear. Legal consciousness is “commonsense understandings of the law” that provides people with a level of awareness to negotiate strategically within political and social climates (Abrego, 2011, p. 341). Undocumented students have learned to assimilate and live in the United States and, because of their legal consciousness, they have endeavored to “reclaim dignity and freedom through fighting for equity in a holistic sense” (Muñoz, 2015, pp. 75-76).

Latino Male Students in Education

While the challenges to this point have been common to most undocumented Latino/a students pursuing education in the United States, there are challenges unique to males. When considering these challenges and combining them with those faced by being undocumented Latinos, the odds stack against the undocumented Latino male rather quickly. The literature on this matter revolves around the identity and sense of self which Latino males have become acculturated to. The role Latino males have come to learn ties them to their culture, their family, and their community; yet, it may drive them further away from the pursuit of higher education (Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013; Sáenz et al., 2015).

The history of the educational system in the United States has been generally an unchallenged view that men were favored over women. It did not matter whether it was primary school or higher education; women were deemed to be academically inferior, whereas men were deemed to be able to fend for themselves (Deem, 1978). Where once men may have dominated the ranks of education, today, the opposite is somewhat true. Latina female students outperform Latino male students in almost every academic indicator from primary through secondary schooling (Clark et al., 2012; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). The numbers of enrolled Latino male students versus Latina female students paint a stark contrast, and even more so when compared with their non-Latino/a counterparts (Sáenz et al., 2018; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009).

The numbers of Latino men versus Latina women enrolled in any type of schooling in the United States showed alarming numbers. For example, Sáenz and Ponjuan (2009) illustrated the disparity, specifically within the Latino/a population between an age range of 16 and 17, when 92.5% of boys and 92.6% of girls were in school and between an age range of 18 and 19 when 51.8% of men and 57.2% of women were in school. This gap continued to widen at the age range of 20 to 21 when 25.2% of men and 35.3% of women were in school (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). The 2009 data indicated more Latino men were continuing their education; yet, the same trend in the gap between Latino men and Latina women pursuing education continued to exist (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). It is, then, not surprising to find that nationwide statistical data show that Latino men have the lowest graduation rates in high school, college, and university settings (Clark et al., 2012). Only 12% of Latino men above the age of 25 have earned a baccalaureate degree or higher in comparison with 30% of other males (Sáenz et al., 2015).

As early as preschool, statistics show that Latino male students are represented in fewer numbers compared with Latina female students (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). This lack of preparation puts them at a disadvantage when entering the K-12 educational system and may begin to negatively influence their perspective on education. It is noted that students' perspectives on education and their learning have been established by the third grade, which shapes how their future educational endeavors will unfold (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). Add to that a statistic of boys typically being a year to a year and a half behind girls in reading and writing, as well as twice as likely than girls to be retained a year between fourth and eighth grades, and the disparity mounts (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). This proves unfortunate for Latino males who may begin to have negative views about the educational system and thereby might develop discontent with learning. As Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, and Villegas (2009) indicated, "men are often less encouraged in their academic environments and may have fewer resources and greater cultural barriers in finding personal and social connections than their female counterparts" (p. 332). These factors all shape how Latino males view formalized education in the United States.

Clark et al. (2012) outlined a number of structural factors that negatively affect male Latino students in the U.S. education system. Latino males are often enrolled in high schools, which suffer from overcrowding, have undertrained teachers, and have minimal support staff to help aid in their learning process (Clark et al., 2012). Their schools often lack the ability to scaffold successfully through their early years to help them achieve more in later years. Latino/a students are overrepresented in special education and Latino males specifically in remedial education classes. This overrepresentation has been noted to be even more pronounced in high school years and make navigating a path to higher education even more difficult (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). In addition, the push by such school districts to place male Latinos in vocational education tracks instead of higher education pathways (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009) does not help with the challenges that Latino males face in the United States.

Some Latino males have assimilated and persisted in educational environments despite the myriad of aforementioned issues. They have experienced more isolation

and alienation than Latina female students in higher education and have faced barriers which have a detrimental impact on their emotional well-being (Gloria et al., 2009). Unfortunately, their secondary school experiences often prepare them for such an environment in higher education. Clark et al. (2012) interviewed Latino students at a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) and found a common thread of experiences related to their counselors in high school. The students reported that they found their counselors “(a) provided inappropriate or inadequate advisement, (b) were not readily available, (c) provided minimal individual counseling and attention, (d) gave preferential treatment to other students, and (e) had low expectations toward their college aspirations” (Clark et al., 2012, p. 460). Parallel to Clark et al. (2012), Muñoz (2015) stated that undocumented students are less likely to receive appropriate academic advising, information about postsecondary education and opportunities, and support from their school counselors.

The same sources outlined that school counselors are often unprepared to handle the types of issues facing Latino males, such as immigration policy and its implications for postsecondary education, language needs, and communicating with non-English-speaking parents. As a result, school counselors are not able to help the students prepare for or realize higher education goals. In addition, counselors’ ethical practice demands advocacy of underrepresented students such as male Latinos in education (Clark et al., 2012; Muñoz, 2015). The lack of resources to this end is yet another challenge to Latino males pursuing education in the United States.

All of these factors have revolved around the educational setting, predominantly in prekindergarten through 12th grade. Although these experiences have shaped many Latino male students’ perspectives on education, they are not in isolation. There exist a number of social stigmas for Latino males, usually identified through peers or others in society, which also shape the role of a Latino male.

Theoretical Framework

Park (1950) and Gordon (1964) developed assimilation theories which posit that second- and third-generation immigrants become acculturated into the dominant society so as to almost become indistinguishable from the rest of society with regard to socio-economic characteristics, behaviors, and customs. Although this may have been true in the 1950s and 1960s, it does not hold true today. Portes and Zhou (1993) brought a new perspective of segmented assimilation noting that

Descendants of European immigrants who confronted the dilemmas of conflicting cultures were uniformly white . . . Their skin color reduced a major barrier to entry into the American mainstream . . . Such an advantage obviously does not exist for the black, Asian, and mestizo children of today’s immigrants. (p. 76)

Discrimination based upon a person’s skin color is as old as the United States itself, so discounting how this characteristic plays in the assimilation of undocumented Latino males is naïve at best and complicit racism at worst.

Another aspect of segmented assimilation that informs this study suggests that immigrants tend to be concentrated in central cities, which “puts new arrivals in close contact with . . . native-born minorities. This leads to the identification of the condition of both groups—immigrants and native poor—as the same in the eyes of the majority” (Portes & Zhou, 1993, p. 83). These structural, societal, and sociocultural factors help explain why immigrant groups experience assimilation differently (Abrego, 2006; Portes & Zhou, 1993).

Abrego (2006) also informed her study with an analysis of how legal status influences educational attainment and aspirations. She interviewed three different types of Latino immigrants: undocumented Latino immigrants, documented Latino immigrants, and native-born Latino children of immigrants in low-income families (Abrego, 2006). Her study concludes that “while all youth in my sample face similar socioeconomic challenges, undocumented youth confront legal barriers and contradictions that often lower the aspirations and impede educational attainment of even the most eager students” (Abrego, 2006, p. 217). Segment assimilation validates that the United States is an unequal, or stratified, society. Immigrants who settle in the United States are very likely to experience institutional, cultural, and structural challenges, yet they can choose how to navigate those challenges. Therefore, assimilation theories are important to explore the narratives and lived experiences of undocumented Latino males in a community college.

Method

Like many qualitative approaches, narrative inquiry is a method that can be seen in a multitude of fields, especially in education and higher education (Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008). Narrative inquiry has been interpreted as a methodology where experience can be seen as a story; it draws on the lived experiences of others through the listening and sharing of stories (Hamilton et al., 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narrative inquiry has received many definitions since its inception; however, for this study, we use Connelly and Clandinin’s (2006) definition of narrative inquiry:

Narrative inquiry, is the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study. (p. 477)

To make narrative inquiry as effective as possible, Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) further discussed eight components that fulfill that definition. These include a common element to be investigated, a naming of the phenomenon being researched, discussion of the methods used to address the phenomenon, an accurate analysis and interpretation, the positionality of the inquirers, a description of the uniqueness the study presents, any ethical consideration, and the process of representation. Hamilton et al. (2008) discussed how the eight components can lead to justification of initiating the process of situating the research. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to enter into

the story that the participants are explaining (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). The narrative approach was used in this study to hear the stories, and to document the lived experiences, of undocumented Latino male students to further assist this striving population.

This narrative study aims to document the lived experiences of undocumented Latino male students attending a community college and investigate their experiences in the educational system as undocumented students. Understanding the essence of being an undocumented Latino male lends itself well to narrative studies (Creswell, 2013). In addition, the complexity around undocumented Latino males regarding cultural dissonance between home life and school life (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011), assimilation (Abrego, 2006), contradictory sentiments on masculinity and education (Sáenz et al., 2015), and how legal barriers relating to undocumented status lower aspirations of undocumented students (Abrego, 2006; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Clark et al., 2012; McWhirter et al., 2013) requires in-depth investigation.

Data Collection and Sample

This work is part of a larger study in which we interviewed men of color at a community college with the aim of exploring how they understood the influences of oppression and privilege on their experiences at a community college. This study was conducted at a community college in Southeastern Florida. Three focus groups, conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol designated to probe how students' aspirations and success are affected by factors, such as masculinity, peer pressure, perceptions, mentorship, and campus belonging, facilitated to collect data on different points of experiences and views from men of color. Each focus group consisted of four men of color participants and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Eighteen participants were invited to volunteer for the study during an educational program meeting for men of color. Only 12 of the 18 students agreed to participate in the focus groups. To be part of the initial study, they had to self-identify as a man of color, be enrolled in a community college, and then complete an institutional review board (IRB) consent form.

After completing the focus groups, one Latino male came forward to the researchers and self-identified himself as an undocumented student. The student stated that the focus group interview questions were important, but that he did not want to answer some of the questions as he "didn't want to change [the narrative of] the focus groups [and study] to undocumented students." The comment of the student led to this current study. While this study is a narrative of two undocumented Latino male students, more students were invited to participate in an interview. Snowball sampling was used to recruit other undocumented Latino male students to participate in this study. An email was sent to some of the community college's administrators, academic advisors, and faculty with the purpose of helping to recruit students for this study. Three other students agreed to participate in the study but did not show up at the scheduled time for the interview. We believe that these students could not participate in the interview due to other responsibilities or concern of sharing their stories as undocumented students in the United States.

Two students, Matías and Mateo, were interviewed individually again using a semi-structured protocol to understand how being an undocumented Latino male affected their identity development and aspirations to attend college. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in a private room in the library of the community college.

Data Analysis

Each interview was recorded and transcribed by the authors of this article. To protect the identity of the two student participants of this study, we gave them the pseudonyms, Matías and Mateo; in addition, all other names of people and institutions were changed. Using the transcripts, the data were first open-coded for words and phrases. Values coding was used to identify student's values, beliefs, and positions regarding their college aspirations (Creswell, 2013). Among other major content themes, this revealed how their undocumented status influenced their identity development and how it affected their college aspirations. In the next round of coding, the data were analyzed using coding to identify dominant categories and themes (Creswell, 2013).

Participants

At the time of the interview, the two student participants of this narrative study were earning their associate's degree with aspirations to transfer to a 4-year university to earn their bachelor's degree. A description of each participant is provided. Thereafter, a narrative on three emerging themes is presented in the findings.

Matías. Matías is an undocumented student who migrated to the United States from Mexico at the age of 3. His recollection of entry into the United States is hazy, but the way his parents told him the story paints quite the picture. His mother and father made the journey to Florida just after he was born in Mexico. After 3 years, and establishing themselves in the United States, his father returned to Mexico to pick him up. Matías was raised by his grandmother during those first few years and when his father came to get him in Mexico, he said, "I didn't know who he was." Using the U.S. birth certificate of another child of the same age as Matías, provided by a family friend, his father brought him over the border from Mexico to the United States. While crossing the border, Matías was crying so his father gave him some sleeping medicine to calm him through the journey.

Matías is the eldest of three children and feels the responsibility to be a role model to his two younger sisters. He indicated that both of his sisters are U.S. citizens, which provides them with more benefits such as access to health care for free, whereas he has to pay out of pocket for any medical treatment due to his immigration status. Matías has advocated for his sisters to enter educational programs at their schools and is using what he has learned throughout his K-12 educational experience to educate his family and make the most out of the opportunities presented to his siblings. Throughout the

interview, he made the distinction between his status and that of his sisters by saying he was “different” rather than undocumented.

Despite indicating that he is “different,” he admitted trying to blend in when his family moved into a predominantly White neighborhood. He seems to hide his immigration status even though he has protection and benefits afforded through Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) although, with the 2016 change in White House administration, those benefits are in question. Matías makes it evident throughout the interview that his family has money as his father owns a landscaping business. This makes Matías an outlier among other undocumented students because he has access to a lawyer and financial stability not afforded to those with less means like our other participant, Mateo. He mentioned numerous times throughout the conversation how he could always go to his father to ask for money if he needed it, and his father had yet to deny him.

Because of Matías’ immigration status, his decision-making is always based on the repercussions if he makes a mistake. For example, he used the scenario of drinking and driving with friends because he understands that if he gets pulled over for driving under the influence (DUI), his DACA benefits can be stripped, potentially opening the door for deportation. With the recent string of deportations ordered by the president of the United States, he takes special care to stay invisible to federal officials.

Mateo. Mateo immigrated from Mexico to the United States at a young age after his father passed away and his mother decided to move for better opportunities. Despite losing his father, he discussed how three male mentors provided him advice and guidance as he grew up. One mentor was an Italian-immigrant he met through his stepfather, the second was his U.S. Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) officer in high school, and the third was his wrestling coach in high school. Mateo’s mother remarried in the United States to another undocumented man, which he believes keeps his family in the shadows of society. Neither of his parents has a college degree, and both parents are undocumented.

Mateo sees himself as a role model for his youngest brother. He provides his brother with advice on schooling and education that neither of his parents can. Mateo’s brother is a U.S. citizen and, much like Matías’ situation, has more access to government programs and benefits. Throughout the interview, Mateo did not speak much about his family, and it is evident that his mentors played a significant role in his decision-making and resilience. It is not surprising that with his family’s lack of formal educational attainment, he seeks people outside his home for guidance on topics relating to college.

Mateo refers to his neighborhood as “*Chico* [small] Town,” an area of low-income housing consisting of predominantly immigrant families. He states that on the other side of his housing complex he can see mansions that overlook a river. Mateo’s family is struggling to make enough money to pay for rent and other bills. He works as a waiter at a restaurant and there have been some months where he has paid the full rent of his home along with other bills. His mother is unable to work due to an illness and, with no insurance, his family continues to deal with the stresses of living at the poverty

line. This reality has affected his efforts to gain DACA benefits. He has applied for DACA twice and, even though he has provided documentation of being in the United States since 1999, he has been rejected both times. Each DACA application has cost about US\$500 and, relative to his family's financial situation, that means a lot of money. Despite this, his mentors have helped him pay for the DACA applications and his first community college course. He is thankful for having his mentors in his life and refers to them as family members.

Despite his undocumented status, Mateo speaks openly about it. He states that he wants to share his experiences with others so he could create awareness and support other undocumented students. He has experienced discriminatory comments throughout his life and has used those instances to educate others. Although he was unable to join the military, he states that "The individuals on the field are my brothers and sisters, fighting for a country that has rejected me."

Findings

After data analysis, three themes emerged from the narratives of Matías and Mateo. The three emerging themes are presented as findings in this section, namely, "Experiences in K-12," "Pursuing an associate's degree," and "Anti-immigration stereotypes."

Experiences in K-12

Both Mateo and Matías stated how as they grew up they did not disclose their immigration status. They both explain how in high school they started to assimilate and feel comfortable sharing with some of their teachers and coaches and only told close friends about their immigration status. For example, Matías remembers his K-12 school-age years as holding his undocumented identity very private. He stated,

If I had to say something about myself I would just like to keep my private stuff private . . . My parents say we don't have papers, but personally, I don't say it . . . I never disclosed my citizenship or anything like that.

Similar to other studies on undocumented students, it is common that this population of students does not learn about their immigration status until they are in high school, they try to get a driver's license, or when they are apply to a college or university (Muñoz, 2015). All of these experiences often times challenged societal and sociocultural factors that helped undocumented students to make sense of their assimilation process in their communities (Abrego, 2006; Portes & Zhou, 1993).

When asked about barriers they faced during their K-12 education career, Matías and Mateo stated that they were challenged to keep their immigration status a secret from their peers. Each indicated that because of their experiences as undocumented students in the K-12 educational system, they were "real-life smart." Matías said,

From my whole education from kindergarten to high school, I wasn't a very smart kid. I would say, I was about average and to be honest, I don't like going to school, and I'm not textbook smart, but more real life [smart] . . . I would always solve a problem even if it wasn't supposed to work, I would figure it out somehow.

Mateo's school years were a roller coaster with its highs and lows. He reflects and explains,

I'm not going to lie, when I was younger, I did not want to go to school. I was that kid! I was lazy and then around the time I was 14 or 15, I was like, "Okay, I need to get my things together." And then I also found when I was younger, I'm undocumented so what's the point? I'm just going to end up mowing lawns or something . . . Then I met a family friend, his name is Thomas. I was with my step-dad teaching me, because he didn't want me to end up like him because he mows lawns, so he brought me along . . . Thomas took a liking to me because his parents were also immigrants, but they were Italian . . . He taught me that education is really important . . . He really helped me out a lot.

It is evident that both Mateo and Matías had negative impacts derived from their undocumented immigration status. Matías says to this day "If is like friends or relationships, or anything like that. I don't really disclose [my undocumented immigration status]." Mateo discusses being in gifted classes, "from first grade through fifth grade . . . I thought I took it for granted because I thought it was too easy at first." Then, when Mateo was in middle school, he felt a weight of inevitability when he discovered his undocumented status, so much so that his grades suffered. Mateo remembers his teenage and early community college years:

I just wanted to have fun and that was when I started declining and taking education for granted. In high school, I saw how a lot of kids my age take it for granted. They [his classmates] have opportunities to be in school and apply for all these things [different college/universities, scholarships], but they don't. And then there's me paying for my classes out of pocket. I wishing I could join the military; and then there are kids who are just wasting their time.

Mateo and Matías were challenged by their peers in their K-12 educational environments to disclose their undocumented immigration status. Despite the financial challenges and the lack of opportunities due their immigration status they might face, as they entered a community college, they slowly learned to share their immigration status with their mentors or close friends.

Pursuing an Associate's Degree

The notion to pursue college was cultivated in both Matías and Mateo from an early age. It is evident through their narratives that their families value formal education as they believe that a college degree will help them achieve the American Dream and socioeconomic mobility. When asked about how education is discussed in his home, Matías states,

Education, I believe, is very important because at the end, education is something no one can take away from you. It is vital for anyone to succeed in life. Succeeding comes in many shapes and forms. Succeeding could be money or happiness or anything, but for me I feel that succeeding is being educated and happy with who you are.

Matías' parents insisted that he make the most of educational opportunities. He went on to say,

They always wanted me to have a better life than they had and my father was the only one who has some college experience in Mexico, but he didn't finish because he had me. Then I was born and I was told I was sick, but my parents didn't have enough money for the medication. So it was like coin by coin paying for medication, and then my dad had it . . . He couldn't live like that . . . my parents say "keep going because you don't want to have children and work you butt off like we have."

Although their families value education, Mateo and Matías also had mentors who helped them assimilate and reminded them about the importance of earning a college degree. For example, Mateo talks about how three people have encouraged him to focus on a college degree. When asked how his mentors affected his idea of earning an associate degree, Mateo replies,

Tom [his father's immigrant friend], showed me about education. Tom told me education is all you need. Then, Chief Gonzales had a big impact on my since I met him. Chief told me to never stop, never quit. He always believed in me. He has helped me out with immigration, paying for my first class . . . Also, my wrestling coach told me "keep the fire burning, keep moving and looking forward." That's what I've been trying to do.

Mateo identified three mentors who made a difference in his life as he tried to earn his associate degree. These three mentors include his father's immigrant friend, his wrestling coach, and Chief Gonzales—his JROTC officer. Both Mateo and Matías were engaged in mentorship. Similar to other community college men of color students, they "tend to take ownership of their role in the relationship of mentorship" (Torrens, Salinas, & Floyd, 2017, pp. 517-518) as they both seek mentorship and see themselves as mentors for their younger siblings. For Mateo and Matías, having "multiple mentors can provide extra support and networking opportunities which are vital to career success" (Torrens et al., 2017, p. 518). For example, Tom and the wrestling coach motivated Mateo to earn a postsecondary education, while Chief Gonzales helped him pay for his first community college course.

College affordability is a major barrier for most undocumented Latinos (Abrego, 2006; Abrica & Martinez, 2016; Muñoz, 2015); however, the experiences of Mateo and Matías are much different in this regard. The landscaping business that Matías' father owns generates enough income that Matías mentions:

Money was never a problem for my family. Again, I'm not rich or poor or anything, but I have been very blessed and whenever I'm financially in need, I was able to look for my father and ask if it was school related. He didn't have a problem with that because it was

school . . . My dad always says “don’t be an idiot like me and quit college.” He doesn’t say it in a bad way but . . . he tells me life doesn’t forgive and neither does time.

One aspect that has helped make college more affordable for both students is the Florida House Bill 851, which allows postsecondary institutions to waive out-of-state fees to undocumented students (Florida House of Representatives, 2014). Mateo speaks on how “the waiver helps a lot. I went from [paying] \$3,000 to \$1,000. My first semester in January, I went from [paying] \$700 to \$300 and now from \$3,000 to \$1,000.” He suggests that his community college could form an office to help undocumented students navigate their way through the process because of the extra residency requirements he must meet to be eligible for the in-state tuition waiver. Regardless of how much financial assistance Mateo and Matías received to pay for their tuition, it is evident that they both have to work to pay for the remainder of the tuition cost and personal expenses, apart from other living expenses.

Anti-Immigration Stereotypes

Encounters with negative stereotypes throughout both Mateo and Matías’ school-age years shaped the way they assimilated and interacted with the world. Matías learned to keep to himself in private, whereas Mateo was more open. When asked if he remembers anti-immigrant remarks said to him, Matías’ responds,

They were just terms of like, “you’re an illegal” and this and that. But I mean, everyone faces instances like that every day. It never hurt me or anything and I never thought “why was I put into this situation.” I’m very thankful for being here because others wouldn’t have the opportunity to be where I am. My father always says “there’s always someone who would want to be in your situation or would want to live a lifestyle you do.” . . . Since I became a DACA student, I’ve been to Mexico twice, and every time I go back I always reflect that I’m very blessed and thankful for having the opportunity to come here.

Although anti-immigrant remarks were said to him, his father’s words helped build a resilience in Matías that negated some of the effects.

In sharp contrast to Matías, Mateo was very open and candid about his undocumented status to his mentors and close friends. He remembers being scared in his early school years because people would joke about “calling immigration.” He goes on

With Chief [JROTC Officer], he would joke around with me a lot but I knew he was kidding and I got comfortable . . . Overtime, I just got comfortable with it. I have no problem telling people. I know who I am and know what I am capable of. One thing I heard of is I am one of the good ones actually from a police officer. It just stuck with me.

The positive reinforcement from male authority figures seems to have given Mateo a sense of self that enables him to be honest with the world about his status. When asked about how his city engages his undocumented neighborhood, he responds,

In a way they don't look at them to well . . . In the next town, there is a lot of racist, or rednecks per se, and they are always driving up and down screaming, honking the horn. I think it was just last year, a kid around my age was murdered from being Hispanic. They were "guac hunting" and beat him to death.

The assailants responsible for the attack attended the same high school as Mateo. He says, "One of them graduating a year before me or two years before me. So I knew the kid who killed the other kid." Even with this proximity to violence and anti-immigrant attacks, Mateo responds to a question about watching his back by saying,

When I'm out with my friend I am little more serious when it comes to being outside. I'm always making sure that everything is fine. But I'm not really afraid if it happens. I think I know how to handle myself, somewhat.

Although racism was present in both Mateo and Matías' lives, they have chosen not to let it leave permanent stains on their identities. Both Mateo and Matías show a resilience to discrimination in the form of self-awareness and appreciation for what they have. When asked what advice they would give to other undocumented students, they noted that stereotypes, racism, and anti-immigrant attacks are painful, but they continue to stay focused to help their families and accomplish their academic goals. Mateo said, "I mean, it is who we are. We are undocumented. Don't settle for the stereotypes." From their experiences with negative stereotypes from society and individuals and by understanding the law, Mateo and Matías have learned to assimilate and have cultivated a legal consciousness (Abrego, 2011; Muñoz, 2015). Through their narratives, we are able to identify the challenges Mateo and Matías faced, and how these students contextualized the relationship of their family and community members to assimilate within their communities and peers.

Implications and Discussions

This study reveals the narratives of the lived experiences of two undocumented Latino male students in a community college and documents their experiences in the educational system as undocumented students. Throughout their lives, Mateo and Matías recognized the differences between themselves as undocumented Latino males and their native-born siblings. Not having U.S. residency or citizenship had certain stigmas, yet the way these two Latinos carried these stigmas differed vastly. While Matías hid his identity and kept his undocumented status to himself, Mateo became comfortable in his community college with identifying as undocumented and openly speaks about his experiences with others in an attempt to break through the stereotype. The differences in socioeconomic status between the two also cannot be ignored. Matías has less financial stress to deal with when it comes to college affordability. His father's landscaping business has provided financial stability throughout his life and he now pays for most of schooling on his own through his photography business. Mateo's lack

of financial stability and his mother's continuing illness make it difficult for him to save up enough money to pay for school, apply for DACA, and pay other bills.

Although anti-immigrant attacks were experienced by both individuals, they chose not to let it affect them. Mateo even uses those opportunities to build understanding between people. It is clear through their narratives that both Matías and Mateo felt that being undocumented does not mean a life of menial jobs or closed doors; to them it just means they have to be acutely aware of their environment both inside and outside the classroom. Matías and Mateo have cultivated a legal consciousness, which provides them with an understanding of the law and which gives them greater access to assimilate within their communities and to find means to support their families.

Only two narrative stories are shared in this study. These stories do not represent the experiences of all undocumented community college students. There is a need for more empirical research that aims to document the lived experiences of undocumented Latino/a community colleges students. We agree with Gildersleeve and Ranero (2010) that "undocumented students come to college from some of society's most vulnerable circumstance" (p. 19) as undocumented immigrants "earn less, work in more dangerous jobs, and have little access to financial and housing aid" (Abrego, 2011, p. 340); therefore, it can be challenging to recruit undocumented students to participate in future research.

The estimates for undocumented Latino males and their educational attainment in the United States does not illustrate their future, especially with a president who described his deportation policy as "a military operation" (Merica, 2017, para. 4) and has already seen raids in 11 states with over 600 people arrested (Robbins & Dickerson, 2017). This has had a chilling effect on Latino/a communities of people, and the lost potential in this generation will be felt in the coming years. To help assuage this outcome, more scholars, practitioners, policy makers, and activists should focus on new research regarding how institutions can become more *undocufriendly* (C. Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). *Undocufriendly* colleges and universities are institutions that understand undocumented students and educated service providers on campus; provide academic, emotional, and resources-based support; and make public endorsements in support of undocumented students (C. Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). In a national survey, C. Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) found that "for undocumented students, cost and location rank first and second, follow by climate of the college around undocumented students" (p. 445). States, such as Florida, have already begun offering in-state tuition for undocumented students and these initiatives have been shown to increase college enrollments among the undocumented population (Dougherty, Nienhusser, & Vega, 2010; Flores, 2010; Nienhusser, 2011; Ruge & Iza, 2005). The ruling in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) asserts that educating undocumented youth is in society's best interest, so more research into how these undocumented youth access higher education and the barriers that prevent them from attending should continue to be examined.

A particular area of inquiry that warrants more study is how undocumented status influences accessibility to student services at community colleges. For example, do Latino male students who are more open with their undocumented status ask for help

more often than those who hide their undocumented status? This leads us also to consider how practitioners can become more culturally competent when it comes to the needs of undocumented Latino students. Adding the complexities of *machismo* and *caballerismo* into the context of communication may aid in understanding how Latino males interact with community college support staff and their classmates. The concept of *machismo* has a negative connotation, refers to hypermasculinity, masculine and power, whereas *caballerismo* is portrayed as positive, socially responsible, and emotionally connected (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008). Most importantly, researchers should examine how community colleges are intentional of their practices and policy to engage, recruit, and support undocumented students. It is critical that universities become *undocufriendly* and welcoming of community colleges' undocumented students. Community colleges must establish advising resources to help undocumented students who plan to transfer to a 4-year university with resources and immigration policy implications. In addition, career centers must provide guidance for nontraditional jobs and consultancy work for undocumented students. Finally, community colleges should host critical conversations on civic engagement and the current political landscape to create awareness and support undocumented students.

Conclusions

The Latino/a population in the United States continues to outpace growth of other racial groups (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2004), and it is imperative that we recognize the hidden potential in undocumented Latino males among this group. Although some may say that undocumented students should not be taking up space and using up resources that native-born citizens are entitled to, *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) further advocated for the societal benefits of an educated populace—whether they have papers or not. Society must stop the criminalization of undocumented students, as “crossing the border without documentation is legally considered a misdemeanor, U.S. society regards these actions as being parallel to most heinous punishable crime one can commit” (Muñoz, 2015, p. 2).

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Notes

1. As this narrative study was in Florida, we believe it is important to provide an overview of Florida in-state tuition policy. Florida House Bill 851 (H.B. 851) passed during the 2014 legislative session. H.B. 851: Postsecondary Education Tuition and Fees provides students who attended Florida secondary school for 3 consecutive years before graduation,

regardless of immigration status, the opportunity to enroll in a higher education institution at in-state tuition rates. However, students must apply for admission within 24 months after graduation (Florida House of Representatives, 2014).

2. California Assembly 540 (AB 540) was signed on October 12, 2001, by Governor Gray Davis. AB 540 allows undocumented students to pay in-state tuition (Abrego, 2008).
3. First introduced in 2001, and then passed in 2003 at the U.S. Congress, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minor Act (The DREAM Act) was introduced to provide in-state resident tuition. The DREAM Act is a “federal policy that was designed to allow, among the tuition discount provisions, undocumented students to get on the path toward citizenship and gain legal employment by going to college or serving in the U.S. military” (Flores, 2010, p. 251).
4. In November 2014, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was announced by President Barack Obama to provide protection to undocumented immigrants. As of September 2017, the White House Administration has plans to phase out DACA (Kopan, 2017).

ORCID iD

Cristobal Salinas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2628-5839>

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Author Biographies

Cristobal Salinas Jr. is an assistant professor in Educational Leadership and Research Methodology at Florida Atlantic University. His research explores the social and political context of educational opportunities for historically marginalized communities of people.

Ronnie Malavé is the assistant Dean of Student Services at Palm Beach State College. His research interests include Latino men and undocumented students.

Omar D. Torrens is a third-year doctoral student in the Higher Education Program at Florida Atlantic University. His research interests are mentorship and leadership development for Latinos/as administrators in higher education.

Ethan C. Swingle is a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Program at Florida Atlantic University. His research interests include intercollegiate athletics, with a focus on student athlete transfer experiences.