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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Esta Carta de Amor es Para Ti: An Autoethnography of an Undocumented Student's Survival in Higher Education

by

Cuauhtemoc Salinas Martell

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2024

Esta Carta de Amor es Para Ti: An Autoethnography of an Undocumented Student's Survival in Higher Education

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by

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This dissertation written by Cuauhtemoc Salinas Martell, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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I want to thank the faculty, teachers, staff, and higher education employees who have impacted my life throughout my educational journey. There are too many to name; however, the following people deserve their flowers. Lisa Golden was my college advisor in high school, and I thank her for my survival. She was given money from Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) as one of the country's best college advisors and gave it to me as a scholarship during Senior Awards Night. Many teachers at King/Drew fed me with food as they always found me hungry because I was malnourished at home. Many of my teachers did not know what was happening at home; however, they saw my eagerness to support King/Drew's culture of providing safe and brave spaces for my peers.

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While at UC Berkeley, Cruz Grimaldo and Carlos Perez (staff from the financial aid office) found loopholes to help me pay for my tuition, and they never stopped believing in me. At the University of Michigan, practically everyone in the student services department supported my survival. Thank you, Tim Colenback, Erin Zimmer, Michael McDermott, and Michelle Gorton, for always knowing what to say so I could retain myself on campus. Lauren Davis, thank you for believing in me and allowing me to join the DEI department. To all the faculty (too many to name), thank you for seeing something in me and for loving me for me. Finally, I thank my committee at LMU, Will Perez, Cynthia Alcantar, and Magaly Lavadenz, for never giving up on me because there was one moment at LMU when I gave up on myself. You are the reason why my voice had a purpose at LMU. Your unconditional love, talks, and replies to my emails promptly made me feel seen and heard on campus. To the other faculty who taught me, *gracias*, and to Michaela, thank you for being the backbone of our department.

Mis Angeles

To all my friends, whom I consider my angels, thank you for accepting me. To Manolo Rodriguez, thank you for adopting me into your family and home when I was banished. I know your mom (Martha Rodriguez), whom I considered my stepmom, is no longer with us, but she is also one of the main reasons I am writing and researching. To Shanae Cannon, Roman Christiaens, Naomi Wilson, and Andrea Medrano, thank you for keeping me calm throughout my dissertation process and for taking time out of your busy schedules to allow me to breathe, laugh, and smile. To the new angels I met along my dissertation journey (Arturo Acevedo and Krystal Henderson), *gracias*, thank you for believing in me.

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forget. When you were a baby, you cried for about five minutes straight, and no one could control you. When I walked into the room, you immediately stopped crying because you knew I was there to protect you. You are becoming a fierce, beautiful, brown Latina. You all could have given up on our lives and love for each other, but we are surviving together.

Mi Mami

Although I had a stepfather, a single mother raised me. My single mother, Lucia Martell, who escaped Mexico, was forced to work various jobs to maintain my older brother and me. Her working schedule prevented me from seeing her; however, I always woke up to a fresh school uniform and a table full of food. I noticed how the world treated her immigrant body and voice when I grew older. What made me love my mom even more was that even through xenophobia, racism, sexism, and discrimination, she did not allow that to diminish her bright smile, confident posture, or bravery. She walked this land with purpose so I could walk as well. There were moments when we disconnected, but I still thought of you. I was thankful to have witnessed you becoming a citizen because you worked hard to build the United States of America—a place every immigrant has helped to create.

El Diablo

I forgive you. If I do not forgive you, you will continue to take my power, voice, and body, and I will no longer allow that to happen. For every hit, my body got stronger; for every *pendeho* my brain got wiser; my voice got louder for every *cierra la boca*, and my heart got larger for every *no te amo*. I forgive you.

DEDICATION

This love letter is for my inner child, who did not have a home to go to and was not allowed to live. I want you to know that you are surrounded by many *angeles* that will show you the light to happiness, joy, and hope.

To all my undocumented, gay, low-income, first-generation Latinx *gente*: the words you are about to read might be complex to digest. However, your resilience and strength motivated my struggle to write this love letter.

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ABSTRACT

Esta Carta de Amor es Para Ti: An Autoethnography of an Undocumented Student's Survival in Higher Education

by

Cuauhtemoc Salinas Martell

This dissertation shed light on the need for higher education institutions to design support systems for undocumented students inside and outside of the classroom, especially when they apply to or attend prestigious universities. In addition, this study highlighted how I survived higher education, my home, and U.S. society through my multiple identities. The goal was to use my life experiences to show how powerful it is to be an undocumented student and how such students continue to influence laws, policies, and institutional change to make higher education more accessible and attainable.

This study added to the literature on subaltern undocumented student survival by telling the stories of my undocumented educational journey while illuminating my identities as a Latino, gay, first-generation, low-income student. Undocumented students struggle not only with institutional oppression, xenophobia, poverty, racism, legal discrimination, and harsh immigration policies but also with a society that does not view them as equals. To better understand this phenomenon, this insightful autoethnographic was guided by the following questions: (1) What survival strategies did I use during my undergraduate studies that prepared me to persevere and pursue a doctoral degree? (2) How can my intersectionality experiences as an undocumented, gay, low-income, first-generation Latino contribute to our research and literature and the work of higher education faculty, staff, and administrators?

The application of supporting undocumented students inside and outside of the classroom revealed the following main themes: (1) *mi identidad gay me enseñó sobre persistencia*, (2) *mi identidad Latino me enseñó sobre crecimiento*, and (3) *mi identidad indocumentada y pobre me enseñó sobre florecimiento*. This dissertation offers recommendations to meet better the needs of graduate undocumented students with diverse identities.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

¿Por qué lloras? Te dije que estes callado? When I was not in school, I would play my favorite game with a dark twist: hide-and-seek, a childhood game with adult consequences. The object of this game was for me to hide and become invisible so that he would not take advantage of me. From the age of 5 until the age of 16, fear riddled me, and threats and silence stifled my voice. My 16-year-old body was tired of counting the many times I had survived his beatings. I sat in the dark, trying not to make my tears louder than El Diablo's search for me. As his efforts to find me grew tired, I found that a piece of paper and a pen were more significant than the pills I was going to consume. My trembling and bruised hand started to write a letter to my younger self. At this moment, I realized that my multiple identities (undocumented, gay, low-income, first-generation Latino) were essential to my survival because they made me feel powerful and visible.

Although I have much more to disclose about my story, I wanted this introduction to set the foundation for how my dissertation will be read and understood. I utilized an autoethnographic method to explore how higher education provided me comfort, safety, and escapism, but also to highlight how unwelcoming, anxiety-provoking and complex higher education institutions can be. My autoethnography shows the reader the complexity of surviving academically through the lens of my different identities while I exposed my life to the academic world. The analysis in Chapter 4 includes various artifacts that show not only my academic and childhood journey but also how these artifacts served as resources to strengthen my survival in higher education and our society.

Statement of the Problem

As undocumented students increasingly attempt to pursue higher education, accessing and attending college becomes more challenging due to institutions lacking support for their identities and struggles beyond the classroom (Higher ED Immigration Portal, 2023). The Higher ED Immigration Portal (2023) reports that over 408,000 undocumented students, comprising approximately 1.9% of all postsecondary students, are currently enrolled in postsecondary education. This estimate shows a decrease of 4.2% from 2019 when 427,000 undocumented students were enrolled. The pandemic and economic pressures caused this decrease, as well as factors that affect undocumented individuals, such as the continued legal challenges that *Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals* (*DACA*; *Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals* [*DACA*], 2012) recipients face (Higher ED Immigration Portal, 2023). The above statistics highlight that although more undocumented students want to pursue higher education, nonacademic factors prevent them from doing so. In addition, it is essential to note the need for more undocumented students in doctoral studies and the lack of support for doctoral access. In 2021, 19.3% of *DACA*-eligible students were in graduate and professional programs, an increase compared to 14.2% in 2019 (Higher ED Immigration Portal, 2023).

To further expand on the demographics and diversity of undocumented students in higher education, Hubbard (2023) reported that 45.7% were Hispanic, 27.2% were Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI), 13.8% were Black, 10% were White, and 3.4% fell under other categories. Among *DACA* recipients, 68.8% were Hispanic, 16.5% were AAPI, 5.7% were Black, and 6.6% were White (Hubbard, 2023). The demographics highlight the diversity of undocumented students in higher education, and they are dispersed throughout the country, with

most identifying as Hispanic or Latinx (American Immigration Council and Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2023). Different states are home to a diverse population of undocumented students. The top five states with the highest share of undocumented college students are Texas (3.3%), New Jersey (3.1%), Florida (3.1%), California (2.8%), and Maryland (2.7%; Hubbard, 2023). More than 195,000 attend institutions outside these five states (Hubbard, 2023). These numbers continue to change as more undocumented students try to pursue higher education.

Hubbard (2023) also reported that many undocumented college students have resided in the United States since childhood or adolescence. Among those who qualify for *DACA* (2012), 85.2% arrived in the United States between the ages of 0 and 9, and 14.8% arrived between the ages of 10 and 16, which is in contrast to all undocumented students, where 34% arrived in the United States between the ages of 0 and 9 and 42.2% arrived between the ages of 10 and 16 (Hubbard, 2023). According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2024), there are seven mandatory guidelines a *DACA* (2012) applicant needs to meet to request or get granted *DACA* (2012. Two of these are that a *DACA* (2012) applicant has continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007 (until the time of filing) and that the applicant was under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012 (that is, they were born on or after June 16, 1981). It is vital to highlight these requirements because a *DACA* (2012) applicant must meet them before qualifying for *DACA* (2012) . Still, some undocumented students need the opportunity to apply because they are either too old or young.

How many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus (LGBTQ+) students are pursuing higher education is an important finding that needs to be emphasized. The statistics

below are relevant to this study because my gay identity has been a part of my educational journey, intersectionality, and survival. Like undocumented students struggling to access higher education, LGBTQ+ students are left out of their institutions because they cannot find brave and safe spaces in and outside their classrooms (Herrmann, 2017). For example, according to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI; Postsecondary National Policy Institute [PNPI], 2023), there is limited data about the over 250 LGBTQ+ students in higher education, despite the existence of numerous LGBTQ+ centers on college campuses. Existing research shows that LGBTQ+ students face multiple challenges in their K–12 experience that factor into their college enrollment and affairs (PNPI, 2023). The data also highlight that nearly 10% of LGBTQ+ students who experienced frequent verbal harassment did not plan to attend college after high school (PNPI, 2024). Even if LGBTQ+ students enroll in postsecondary education, they face unique challenges (PNPI, 2023). Verbal harassment is one example that can prevent LGBTQ+ students from pursuing higher education.

Further, LGBTQ+ college students of color are at a higher risk of attrition, exacerbated by institutions that serve predominantly White students (Jorgenson, 2020). Findings suggest that LGBTQ+ students of color experience discrimination, bigotry, and exclusion, both individually and institutionally, more than their White peers (Jorgenson, 2020). White supremacy and cis-heteropatriarchy culture and ideologies are maintained through the intrusive designs of Predominantly White institutions (Jorgenson, 2020). LGBTQ+ college students of color are often neglected and disregarded from strategic enrollment processes in higher education, which is why LGBTQ+ college students label their incisions as indifferent, apathetic, and unwilling to create substantive change (Jorgenson, 2020). White institutions can improve the experiences of

LGBTQ+ students of color by engaging in culturally responsive educational training focused on power and its inequitable distribution (Jorgenson, 2020).

As more LGBTQ+ students of color try to pursue higher education, undocuqueer students also face many challenges. Undocuqueer people are those who identify as undocumented and queer (Cisneros, 2019). According to Cisneros (2019), "borrowing from the coming out narrative of the LGBT rights movement, undocuqueer immigrants have come out of the shadows and the closet for self-realization, political mobilization, and coalition building" (p. 74). Although more undocuqueer students are coming out of the shadows, research is scarce regarding the experiences of undocuqueer students in higher education because many institutions do not have the adequate tools or resources to support them in and outside their classrooms (Cisneros, 2019). Research shows that when undocuqueer students graduate from high school, the college admissions process becomes acute because it presents various barriers to accessing and affording the colleges of their choice (Cisneros, 2019).

Pursuing higher education at prestigious White institutions as an undocuqueer Latinx student was challenging and empowering; however, I am grateful that my multiple identities challenged institutional norms. It is also vital to note that although I am a *DACA* student and recipient, I identify as undocumented. Despite having temporary privileges such as being shielded from deportation, having an Employment Authorization Card, and a temporary social security number, I still do not have a legal immigration status. In our society's eyes, I am still considered an undocumented person. Although this section does not speak to my first-generation and low-income identities, I wanted to address how my gay and undocumented identities have

challenged and celebrated my higher education journey, leading to the study's purpose and significance.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

In this study, I analyzed how higher education institutions should be designed to support undocumented students, both in and out of classrooms, particularly during graduate school, based on my personal experiences in my higher education journey. The goal was to highlight how undocumented and intersectional experiences like mine can influence laws, policies, and institutional change. This dissertation also aimed to contribute to the research literature on subaltern populations' survival in higher education, including undocumented graduate students who are Latino, gay, first-generation, low-income, and who face institutional oppression, xenophobia, poverty, racism, legal discrimination, and harsh immigrant policies in a societal context that does not see us as equal.

Research Questions

This autoethnographic study examined my multiple identities while detailing my survival strategies at prestigious institutions to explore the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What survival strategies did I use in pursuing higher education that prepared me to persevere and pursue doctoral studies?

RQ2: How can my intersectionality experiences as an undocumented, gay, low-income, first-generation Latino contribute to our research and literature and the work of higher education faculty, staff, and administrators?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, intersectionality, intersectional resilience, and community cultural wealth were used as theoretical frameworks to analyze and interpret ethnographic information. As illustrated in Figure 1, these frameworks helped to highlight the major factors that shaped my survival strategies and experiences in the educational system.

Figure 1

Intersectional Theoretical and Conceptual Framework (1989, 2002, 2005)

Note. Adapted from "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," by K. Crenshaw, 1989, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. Article 8, 139–167, (https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8,), copyright 1989 the University of Chicago Law School; "Intersectional Resilience Among Black Gay, Bisexual, and Other Men Who Have Sex With Men," by K. Quinn, J. Dickson-Gomez, B. Pearson, E. Marion, Y. Amikrhanian, & J. Kelly, 2022, *American Journal of Public Health*, *112*, S405–S412 (https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306677), copyright 2022 by the American Public Health Association; and "Whose Culture Has Capital?" by T. J. Yosso, 2005, *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, *8*(1), 69–91 (https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006), copyright 2005 by Taylor & Francis Group.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework posited that all oppression is linked to our social categorizations, such as race, class, and gender, creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Intersectionality theory has continued to evolve since its initial introduction. However, according to Taylor (2019), current iterations of the original

theory all acknowledge that everyone has unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, making everyone's intersectionality experiences different. Asmelash (2023) further added that recent versions of intersectionality highlight how our interlocking identities, such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, and others, play a crucial role in shaping our lives. Understanding societal impacts can help us comprehend how societal institutions affect people differently.

Moreman (2020) underscored that intersectionality continues to highlight the compounded impact of our social identities on our lived experiences within systems of power. An intersectional approach to research necessitates understanding how systems of injustice influence lived experiences across multiple categories and systems of power that are interdependent, complex, and inseparable. While the intersectionality framework addressed my multiple identities, it did not delve into my survival strategies and resilience. I employed intersectional resilience to illuminate my multiple identities while drawing attention to the trauma and stress I encountered in higher education.

Intersectional Resilience

I utilized Quinn et al.'s (2022) intersectional resiliency framework, which examines the systems and structures that support or threaten resilience and the adaptations oppressed individuals can make in response to these structures. According to the American Psychological Association (APA) (2024), resilience is the process and result of effectively adjusting to complex or challenging life encounters, mainly through mental, enthusiastic, and behavioral adaptability and alteration to outside and inside demands. The APA (2024) expanded on resilience by stating that many factors influence how well people adapt to adversity, including their worldview and involvement, the availability and quality of social resources, and specific coping strategies. This

definition can change when communities of color are involved and based on a person's unique experience. For example, Hu (2021) stated that the challenge of defining resilience in a way that applies to many groups of individuals becomes apparent when considering resilience studies. The concept of resilience is dynamic and ever-changing rather than rigid or binary.

Resilience can also capture a person's social, cultural, and biological experiences. Societal factors other than heredity, including systematic racism, poverty, and traumatic childhood events, can negatively impact an individual's health according to Hu (2021). The examples above are one of the many reasons the intersectional resilience framework informed this dissertation. My dissertation speaks about my multiple identities while demonstrating how resilient I had to be throughout my educational journey and personal life. Resilience meant looking internally and finding innovative ways to survive. I also realized that resilience came in different forms and that I used it to transform my definition of survival while celebrating my multiple identities.

Community Cultural Wealth

I also used Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model to highlight how I used aspects of aspirational, linguistic, family, social, and navigational resistance to survive in and outside my classroom. These six forms of cultural capital are what students of color encounter or use throughout their college experience. The Yosso (2005) model further investigates the skills, backgrounds, and experiences that students of color bring to their academic settings. In this study, the cultural wealth lens highlighted the support structures for my survival and elevated my identities throughout my higher education, home, and societal journey. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how the study combined the theoretical and

conceptual frameworks described in this section to inform the RQs, methods, analysis, and discussion of the implications of the results.

Methodology

This dissertation used a qualitative autoethnographic approach to highlight my multiple identities in higher education. Huff (2019) stated that autoethnography dismantles the barriers of traditional research approaches, positioning the researcher as an insider to the phenomenon being studied. Furthermore, this method gave voice to my multiple identities, explicitly focusing on my undocumented identity and resilience, as many of us do not have the opportunity to pursue higher education, especially graduate school.

Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience. According to Adams et al. (2017), those who engage in autoethnography can use their experience to discuss their political and cultural norms and expectations. The researcher can engage in “rigorous self-reflection typically referred to as ‘reflexivity’ to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life” (Adams et al., 2017, p. 1). In addition, autoethnography aims to support individuals trying to figure out how to live, what to do, and why they are struggling (Bochner & Ellis, 2006). Despite a few scholars who explicitly used the word in the 1980s, many researchers—mainly qualitative, interpretive social scientists—have continued to write about the significance of personal narrative and storytelling in autoethnography (Adams et al., 2017). I selected this self-narrative study because I was tired of feeling silenced while the higher education system continued to create false narratives of diversifying their campuses (Brown, 2022). Huff (2019) stated that the ability to craft new narratives from the perspective of the silent

is autoethnography's true power. Because autoethnography is personal, it is subject to criticism and necessitates a methodical and meticulous approach to data collection, coding, and analysis.

Autoethnography is a method that lends itself to subaltern people to speak up about how the educational system, which is often Euro-American or heteronormative, fails people like me. Adams et al. (2017) noted that researchers frequently utilize autoethnography to make their writing and research readable and engaging to enhance their own and other people's lives. Using autoethnography was essential to my study because it humanized this research and focused on my lived experiences. This method showed me that readers and authors matter and that others are involved or implicated in such projects. Lastly, my dissertation speaks to the irony behind my lived experiences and how—although my educational journey was traumatic, daunting, and hurtful—it taught me valuable survival languages and tactics such as *persistencia, crecimiento, y florecimiento*.

Positionality

Acknowledging more of my life experiences as a *DACA* student and highlighting some of my academic, community activism, and student leadership accomplishments increases the transparency of this study. For example, after discovering my new undocumented identity as a *DACA* student and speaking out about the abuse in high school, I also found out that I was the only one of my siblings who had been born in Acapulco, Mexico. Instead of breaking me and having resentment that my siblings had more educational privileges than I did, this revelation fueled my determination to become a community activist and undocumented leader. Despite feeling neglected and underprivileged by my society and educational system during my college

application process, I used my multiple identities to shape my survival in and outside my classrooms.

I used my *DACA*, first-generation, and Latino identities to challenge our immigrant laws and policies by leading and participating in multiple community protests, mobilizations, student activism, and advocacy efforts. These efforts have not only given a platform to other undocumented students in higher education, but I was able to give these students adequate resources and tools to attempt to end institutional oppression in their institutions. The complexities of revolutionizing our educational system have relied on my survival to implement tangible institutional change. I, along with other undocumented students, have been instrumental in the establishment of undocumented centers, undocumented faculty and teachers, and the implementation and creation of *DACA* (2012). This study highlights the community and student advocacy and activism efforts of which I have been a part, amplifying the voice that has been trapped within and outside my academic studies.

The Dream Resource Center (DRC) of the UCLA Labor Center accepted me into their prestigious Dream Summer national fellowship program after I graduated from high school, and this was my first introduction to community activism. As one of the many undocumented leaders, I played a pivotal role in challenging our government to implement *DACA* (2012*)* in June 2012. My involvement and active participation in campaigns, demonstrations, and protests, can be seen in Figures 2 and 3. The process of molding and changing our immigration policies was not easy; however, it instilled in me the confidence to openly discuss my undocumented identity and not shy away from being interviewed by our local news. My fellowship also allowed

me to connect with other undocumented trailblazers and to travel to Washington, D.C., to participate in educational rights movements and campaigns.

Figure 2

DACA (2012) *Implementation and Announcement*

Note. *DACA* (2012) Protest in Los Angeles (June 15, 2012) Picture taken via Phone and posted on my Facebook page, June 30, 2012. https://www.facebook.com/DreamersAdrift/photos/t.100001403647862/457858137565228/?type=3

Figure 3

Education Rights Campaign 2012

After adopting new advocacy, survival, and activism skills from the fellowship, I realized how my student leadership roles throughout my middle and high school years were one of the many reasons I had survived my home circumstances. Surviving abuse, homelessness, and my undocumented identity made me even more proud that I graduated with a 4.2 UC grade point average (GPA), led over seven student clubs, played on the boys' volleyball team, and got recognized at the senior awards night for receiving the most academic and student leadership cords. Having these achievements and accolades and staying engaged in high school enabled me to escape my home and gave me the knowledge I needed to speak about the abuse. I needed to excel in high school because I knew freedom began in college. I did not receive multiple awards for the recognition, nor did I do it for the validation; I stayed late at school and remained busy

because these positive distractions provided me the temporary shelter to avoid more punches, yells, and bruises.

Even though I accepted my offer to attend UC Berkeley, I did not realize how difficult it would be to be a *DACA* student. In my first year, I lived in a prestigious residential theme program, Casa Mora. It was prestigious because only 20–25 students got accepted to live in the theme program. After two months living in Casa Mora, UC Berkeley flagged my student profile. The student housing department told me that if I did not leave Casa Mora, I would have to leave UC Berkeley permanently because I could not afford my student housing and tuition. During this time, my *Casistas* (peers who lived in our theme program) allowed me to sleep in their beds or on the floor. Their kindness enabled me to attend, facilitate, and host Latinx events at UC Berkeley, which was helpful for our Latinx student retention because these events provided food, education, and community bonding.

As a primary student leader, I had the privilege of hosting and leading various Latinx events. One such event was our *Dia de Los Muertos* celebration (as seen in Figure 4), where we focused on building unity and respect within our UC Berkeley community as we honored our deceased loved ones. As a freshman, I stood before crowds, confident, sharing my knowledge and pride in our Latinx culture and heritage. This sense of community and connection, fostered by the *Dia de Los Muertos* event, was a powerful retention tool that strengthened our unity and forged connections with other student leaders, faculty, and staff. My ability to become visible allowed me to take on other student leadership roles as a primary speaker and host. However, my struggles of retaining myself in *Casa Mora* became a reality as I started to feel like I was becoming an inconvenience to my *casitas.* As I thanked my *casitas* for hosting me and possibly

facing homelessness, I went to our Chicanx Latinx Student Development (CLSD) Office to inquire about housing resources and support.

Figure 4

Casa Mora: Hosting a Día los Muertos Event at UC Berkeley, 2011

While discussing my potential departure from UC Berkeley with the CLSD director, an undocumented student opened her home to me. She and I shared a twin-size bed for about four months and discussed creating a house supporting undocumented students. With this conversation and the decision to advocate for institutional financial support, I supported the formation of Dream House, which provided affordable housing to undocumented students. As

someone who faced homelessness, I did not want my college career to end because of housing insecurity. With the formation of Dream House, I could house myself and other undocumented students. The Dream House inspired other theme programs to cater their housing services to more low-income and undocumented students.

My survival at UC Berkeley encouraged me to work in the nonprofit world for 2 years. After seeing that many Latinx people were either homeless or did not have the adequate resources or support to pursue higher education, I was eager to not only represent my community but also walk the streets in Skid Row (Downtown Los Angeles) daily to get people who were experiencing homelessness permanent homes. After my professional career, I felt I could support vulnerable and marginalized communities more by obtaining a master's of social work degree. As I started to apply for graduate school, I had time to revisit my childhood because my statements called for it. During my writing, I realized that I wanted to pursue my master's degree in social work because when I voiced that I was getting abused, the Social Services system temporally placed me at my auntie's house. I realized many of my social workers did not look like me during high school. The emptiness I felt throughout my scheduled appointments formed the basis for why I pursued my master's in social work with a focus on child and family well-being. Although I wanted to celebrate applying to school again, I was worried that the institutions I applied to would not have the adequate financial support I needed to retain myself in their school.

After applying to six schools, the following universities admitted me: Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, Columbia University, the University of Southern California, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Michigan. It was a challenging

process, as I had to navigate the complex application requirements and financial aid options without the support of my legal status. After weeks of talking to every admissions counselor and figuring out if these schools would financially support me, I decided to attend the University of Michigan. I selected the University of Michigan because it continues to be the nation's number one social work program. Most importantly, I advocated and received a full ride, alleviating my financial worries. My ability to advocate for more funding was significant because financial barriers often deter undocumented students from pursuing higher education. I quickly learned that it was uncommon for a student, mainly undocumented, to get a full ride. However, my advocacy and ability to connect with staff at Michigan enabled me to enroll in their prestigious program. As I celebrated my full ride in Michigan, I discovered I was the only *DACA* student in my classrooms, encouraging me to take on multiple jobs and student leadership positions. My commitment to creating institutional change at Michigan followed me throughout my doctoral studies at Loyola Marymount University (LMU).

I selected LMU because of its diverse faculty roster. I saw Latino men and women of color teaching courses related to my multiple identities. Many of them researched immigration and undocumented students. As I accepted my offer, I immediately realized that LMU was another institution where I had to survive. An undocumented student center did not exist, so I immediately felt isolated. Although I am grateful that the Dream Center was built in 2023, most services were geared toward undocumented undergraduate students rather than graduate students. The lack of support for graduate students like me was a significant challenge, as it meant I had to navigate the complexities of my status and academic life on my own. I also felt disconnected as LMU felt rich and White. It was difficult for me to connect with students outside

my program because they could not relate to my identities or struggles. At LMU, I did not find people who looked or acted like me aside from my doctoral program. Whenever I tried to venture outside of my doctoral bubble, I saw a lot of White students who were younger and who spoke about their parents' or family's wealth and support. I felt the void of not having rich or both parents, and I constantly felt disconnected outside of my program because I was older.

Although I was the youngest in my cohort, our educational program still had many challenges. The divide between students, faculty, and staff was apparent. Hence, I was not only the founding president of my cohort but also created a cabinet to support me in bridging the gap between students, faculty, and staff in our department. This was a significant step towards creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students, regardless of their legal status. In my free time, I played on the men's volleyball team, as seen in Figure 5, and traveled to different cities in California and other states, competing with other schools and teams. Playing volleyball was a recreational activity that challenged stereotypes. I wanted to excel not only in the academic field but also in the athletic world by empowering and showing other Latinx undocumented gay students that they can excel in all areas. During my last year at LMU, I took on the Vice President role. Being the only gay, Latino *DACA* student in my program and on my team, I realized that I not only had to change our educational system but survive it. I have brought a unique and powerful lens, story, and presence to the educational system in my capacity as a *DACA* doctoral student in a field not meant for me, making it more equitable for all.

Figure 5

January 21, 2023, Volleyball Tournament in Corona, CA

Delimitations

This study examined my experiences as an undocumented student, the rarity and scarcity of research, and the literature. Although there is limited research and literature on undocumented undergraduate students' experiences, undocumented graduate experiences are scarce in higher education. More specifically, this study addressed my unique experiences as an undocumented, gay, low-income, first-generation Latino student who relied on his education to survive while learning and adopting survival strategies to thrive in higher education, at home, and in society. Further, I used my voice to articulate and analyze my lived experience, focusing on the harsh reality of navigating prestigious White institutions that did not have the care, resources, or tools to support me.

Definitions and Key Terms

***Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals* (2012).** On June 15, 2012, President Obama announced the executive action named *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals* (*DACA*; 2012). It allows certain undocumented students to be protected from deportation and to obtain a work authorization card for 2 years. However, a new administration could rescind the program because it is based on executive powers rather than legislation. *DACA* (2012) has seven mandatory guidelines for eligibility (two of which were stated in the "Statement of the Problem" section), including that the applicant arrived in the United States before their 16th birthday and that they were in the country at the time of the *DACA* (2012) announcement. Applicants must have also graduated from a U.S. high school or be currently attending one. Lastly, certain types of serious criminal convictions disqualify applicants (USCIS, 2024).

***The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act* (2001)**. The first version of the *Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act* was introduced in 2001. Because of the law's notoriety, young undocumented immigrants are called *Dreamers*. Over the last 20 years, at least 11 versions of the *DREAM Act* have been introduced in Congress (American Immigration Council and Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2024).

DREAMer/Dreamer. Regarding immigration reform, a young immigrant who meets the requirements of the *DREAM Act* (2001) is referred to as a Dreamer (often also spelled DREAMer). Another term commonly used to describe Dreamers is *DACA* recipients. The latter speaks especially of Dreamers who have requested and been granted *DACA* (2012) status. Dreamers come from various nations and cultures, even though most are Latino (Hildreth, 2020).

Latinx. The term Latinx was first used in activist groups in the mid-2000s, mainly in the United States. It was a development of previous gender-inclusive terms like Latino/a (with the slash) and Latin@ (with the "at" sign). The *x* is intended to upset the grammatical binary that is ingrained in this romance language; it does not imply a definite gender, unlike the *o* (masculine) or the *a* (feminine) for nouns in Spanish (Gonzalez, 2021).

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer+ (LGBTQ+). The term LGBTQ+ is used to concisely describe the wide range of sexual orientations, gender identities, and life experiences that are part of the queer community. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer are referred to as LGBTQ+. The plus sign represents the various identities that fall under the LGBTQ+ category, such as intersex and asexual (Lopez, 2022).

Undocumented. Immigrants Rising (2023) broadly defined the term undocumented as including all immigrants who reside in the United States without legal status. This includes individuals who entered without inspection (EWI). For example, individuals who entered the United States without presenting themselves for inspection at an official checkpoint to obtain permission to enter the country (e.g., crossing the border without inspection) are considered EWI. Those who entered with legal status but overstayed are individuals who entered the United States with legal status (e.g., student visa) and then remained in the country after their "duration of status" date (found on their I-94) or after their visa expired. Individuals currently holding or who have held *DACA* (2012) are qualified to apply for *DACA* (2012). Those in the process of becoming legal (spouses of U.S. citizens petitioning for asylum, pending visa applications, etc.) do not yet have legal status. Lastly, those whose immigration status is in "limbo" puts them in danger of being singled out by immigration authorities, and they are considered vulnerable

immigrants. This could happen for various reasons, including politics (e.g., legislative changes could jeopardize the Temporary Protected Status program) or U.S. visa holders cannot modify their status due to personal circumstances (e.g., insufficient cash, missing a deadline; Immigrants Rising, 2023).

Undocuqueer. An identity that some LGBTQ+ and undocumented individuals use to demonstrate their intersectional identities (University of North Dakota, 2024).

Organization of Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into five chapters and summarized as follows. Chapter 1 established the groundwork for this study, introduced the statement of the problem, provided the purpose and significance of the study, addressed the research questions (RQs), gave a synopsis of the theoretical framework and methodology, stated my positionality, presented the study's delimitations and concluded with definitions and terms. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on undocumented higher-education students, focusing on seven parts. The first three sections highlight the laws and policies that have impacted or supported undocumented students, provide a quick history of *DACA* (2012), and then transition to highlighting how undocumented students navigate higher education. The fourth section focuses on institutional support for undocumented students, and the fifth part addresses the pitfalls of higher education for undocumented students and focuses on undocumented graduate students. The sixth part expands on the intersectionality framework by highlighting intersectional resilience and the various identities and methods. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the need for more literature on intersectionality and survival.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the methodology, revisits the RQs and the rationale for autoethnography, provides the data sources used in the study, describes the data analysis, and

concludes with the study's limitations. In Chapter 4, I present the data gathered from my survival in higher education from Pre-K through my doctorate journey, including various *recuerdos* and multiple artifacts I accumulated through my education journey. It also provides an analysis organized around key themes, such as the role of intersectional identities and how my various identities challenged and supported my survival inside and outside of higher education. It also presents the challenges and empowerment of intersectionality while summarizing the chapter with a concluding analysis.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss and summarize the key findings and address the three themes that emerged in the study, followed by lessons learned from my survival and intersectionality. I provide recommendations that highlight the challenges and empowerment of intersectionality. The chapter continues by focusing on the various survival strategies I used to pursue higher education. Then, I provide examples of how higher education faculty, staff, and administrators can support undocumented students. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research and a letter to my younger self.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review has eight parts and highlights the limited research on undocumented students in higher education in and outside their classrooms. The sections are the following: (1) laws and bills that have impeded or supported undocumented students, (2) a brief history of *DACA* (2012) and its impact on undocumented students, (3) navigating higher education in the current political climate, (4) institutional support for undocumented students, (5) the pitfalls of higher education for undocumented students, (6) undocumented graduate students, and (7) a discussion and rationale for the use of intersectional resilience theory as the guiding analytical lens, (8) and finally, highlight the importance of having more literature on intersectionality and survival.

Laws and Bills Impacting Undocumented Students

There are a variety of laws and bills that impede or support undocumented students from pursuing higher education. According to federal law, undocumented students can attend colleges and universities in the United States; however, no national laws prohibit undocumented students from enrolling in or graduating from colleges (Gonzales, 2009). Federal law can hinder undocumented students from receiving federal student aid, and some states have created legal restrictions that prevented undocumented students from attending college (Gonzales, 2009). These restrictive laws have affected the legal status of undocumented students are constantly changing. Multiple political and cultural factors have directly impacted undocumented students, dramatically changing their outlook on pursuing higher education (Gonzales, 2009). From 2000 to now, some laws and bills have supported undocumented students in pursuing higher

education. For example, in 2001, Assembly Member Marco Antonio Firebaugh implemented a California state law, *Assembly Bill (AB) 540. AB 540* (2001) was created to provide a fair tuition policy for all California high school graduates entering college in California (Wang, 2018). *AB 540* (2001) allowed undocumented students to be exempt from paying nonresident tuition at California public postsecondary institutions (Wang, 2018). Although this law has many requirements, undocumented students can pursue higher education because of it.

Maestas (2022) also noted that *Senate Bill 1159* (2014) was passed in 2014. This bill allowed undocumented immigrants to receive professional licenses if they completed the necessary training and other state licensing requirements. It also allowed undocumented immigrants to obtain professional licenses using an Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN) instead of a social security number. *Senate Bill 1139* (2016) was passed in 2016. This bill prohibited students from being denied admission to a residency training program based on their citizenship or immigration status (Maestas, 2022). Higher education can become more feasible and attainable as more laws and bills become available for undocumented students. These laws and bills are essential to highlight as they lay this study's political and historical context. Providing a quick history of immigration laws that have impacted undocumented students and people from pursuing higher education is vital to this study's purpose. The following section briefly discusses the history of *DACA* (2012).

A Brief History of *DACA*

Undocumented Political Activism: Pre-*DACA* Activism

Before *DACA* (2012) was implemented, many undocumented people spearheaded various movements, such as the Arizona 5, Undocumented and Unafraid, Coming Out of the Shadows,

the Trail of Dreams, and United We Dream, to change their immigration statuses. These movements are a few examples that have created a new era of political activism that influenced elections and immigration policies, igniting national conversations about exclusion and belonging (Arteaga, 2020; Munoz, 2015; Nicholls, 2013). *DACA* (2012) exists because undocumented youth lack citizenship and the ability to vote, forcing the President, Supreme Court, and Congress to act (Arteaga, 2020; Munoz, 2015). They put themselves at risk of incarceration, deportation, and family separation by coming out of the shadows. Because their lives and livelihoods were at risk, many undocumented immigrants refrained from taking direct political action until the 2000s (Arteaga, 2020). However, as more undocumented students started to realize that they could not obtain work permits, driver's licenses, or college admissions due to their immigration status, they had to make the impossible decision to either continue to live in the shadows or face deportation. One by one, undocumented students started to come out of the shadow, asking for a pathway to citizenship and assistance from immigrant rights organizations and congressional representatives (Arteaga, 2020; Escudero, 2020).

Young people without documentation launched direct-action campaigns after being inspired by the marches. They wanted to remain "on message" and work to get a comprehensive immigration policy passed by Congress (Arteaga, 2020; Nicholls, 2013). Donning robes from their high school graduation, they journeyed to the U.S. Capitol and carried out sit-ins in congressional offices to promote the *DREAM Act*'s (2001) enactment. In the process, they put themselves at risk of deportation (Arteaga, 2020). Following the *DREAM Act*'s (2001) defeat, a committed legal team sought "deferred action," a practically unheard-of administrative procedure, to prevent deportation. Presidents used deferred action as needed to keep immigrants

from being deported. Organizers made their case for potential temporary relief from the executive branch to the Obama administration, working with immigration attorneys. Undocumented students and people took to the streets when it was disregarded (Arteaga, 2020). They marched, protested, and even occupied the headquarters of President Obama's reelection campaign. Undocumented youth were once again exerting all their efforts to stop their deportation and find a solution, even if it was only temporary, by putting pressure on the president (Arteaga, 2020). It was because of these efforts and sacrifices that *DACA* (2012) was implemented; however, *DACA* recipients and students continue to be impacted by harsh immigration policies.

The 2001 *DREAM Act*

The *DREAM Act* (2001) was a legislation that was created in 2001 by Senator Richard Durbin and Representative Howard Berman (Carreon, 2012). The *DREAM Act* (2001) was implemented to support and help undocumented students enroll in a university or enlist in the military (Carreon, 2012). The act granted temporary residency to undocumented students who have graduated from a high school, have lived in the United States for 5 consecutive years before their 16th birthday, and have a clean criminal record (Carreon, 2012). The *DREAM Act* (2001) continues to be controversial legislation because many undocumented students benefit from this act (Carreon, 2012), and it contains myths and facts that Miranda (2010) addressed. One myth is that the *DREAM Act*'s (2001) detractors call it "amnesty." However, the act mandates responsibility and accountability for young people who apply to modify their status under the *DREAM Act (2001)*, resulting in a lengthy and challenging process (Miranda, 2010).

Another myth surrounding the *DREAM Act* (2001) is that it acts as a catalyst for more students to immigrate illegally and that applicants would exploit it to bring in their relatives. However, the reality is starkly different. The *DREAM Act* (2001) is specifically designed for young individuals who were brought to the United States as children, excluding those who arrive later (Miranda, 2010). This limited scope ensures that it cannot be misused as a "magnet" to encourage others to come. Moreover, even if *DREAM Act* (2001) candidates meet the stringent conditions, they must wait years before successfully petitioning for parents or siblings (Miranda, 2010). One final myth is that opponents allege that the *DREAM Act* (2001) will require taxpayers to support student loans for students who register under the Act, but the fact is that *DREAM Act* (2001) students are not eligible for government funding (Miranda, 2010). Despite the benefits, the *DREAM Act (2001)* is constantly evolving and has yet to become federal law.

***Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals*, 2012**

As noted in Chapter 1, the Obama administration announced that *DACA* (2012) would provide temporary protection from deportation for unauthorized immigrants who arrived in the United States as children (Singer et al., 2015). There is consensus that, as of June 2012, approximately 1.2 million were immediately eligible, and 426,000 were eligible if they enrolled in an education program or pursued their General Educational Development Test (GED) (Singer et al., 2015). To apply for *DACA* (2012), a recipient must meet various mandatory eligibility requirements (listed in the "Definitions and Terms" section). If they meet those requirements, a *DACA* recipient will submit their application every 2 years (Singer et al., 2015). To maintain their work authorization card and not accrue unlawful presence, they must apply for renewal 120 to 150 days before their *DACA* (2012) card expires (Singer et al., 2015). Although *DACA* (2012)

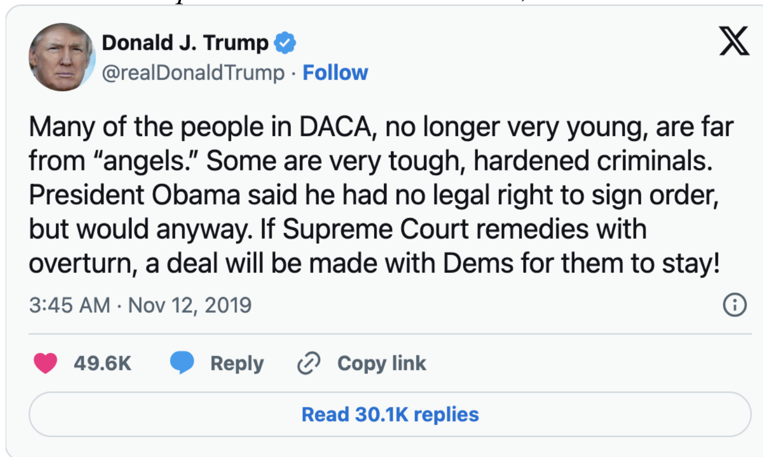
was implemented to protect recipients and give them access to higher education, it can be taken away anytime because it is not a permanent policy.

Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals (2017–2021) Under the Trump Administration

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 caused significant shifts in federal immigration policy and legal treatment of undocumented immigrants (FWD.us, 2020). Trump's rhetoric and actions caused deportations, criminal prosecutions, and enforcement raids of undocumented students (FWD.us, 2020). In 2019, the Supreme Court heard arguments about President Donald Trump's decision to end *DACA* (2012) (Rupar, 2019). As seen in Figure 6, Trump attempted to smear *DACA* recipients as "hardened criminals" (Rupar, 2019, para.1) on his Twitter page.

Figure 6

Donald Trump's Tweet on November 12, 2019



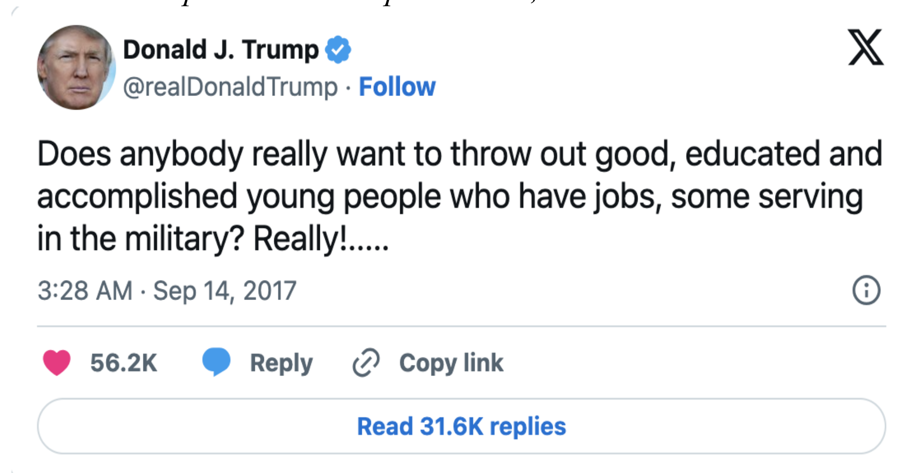
Note. Donald J. Trump [@realDonaldTrump]. (2019, November 12). *Many of the people in DACA* (2012)*, no longer very young, are far from "angels." Some are very tough, hardened criminals*. [Tweet]. X https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1194219655717642240. Copyright 2017 by D. J. Trump

Trump's tweet contradicted what he said about *DACA* recipients earlier in his presidency (Rupar, 2019). Rupar (2019) reflected on Donald Trump's September 2017 tweets after announcing his desire to end *DACA* (2012), in which he stated that he had "a great heart for

those folks we're talking about. A great love for them" (para. paragraph 1). However, weeks later, he posted a tweet to the contrary, "questioning why anybody would want to deport *DACA* recipients in the first place" (Rupar, 2019, para. 2), which can be seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Donald Trump's Tweet on September 14, 2017



Note. Donald J. Trump [@realDonaldTrump]. (2017, September 14). Does anybody really want to throw out good, educated and accomplished young people who have jobs, some serving in the military? Really! [Tweet]. X, https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/908276308265795585. Copyright 2017 by D. J. Trump.

DACA (2012) continues to suffer, and many political figures want to end it because they believe it is not legal (Arteaga, 2020). However, there are constant rallies, protests, and mobilization efforts to support the continuation of *DACA* (2012) (Arteaga, 2020). Despite Trump's efforts to terminate the program, many undocumented students continue to create political and historical change (Arteaga, 2020).

***Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals* (2012) in 2023–2024**

On September 13, 2023, Judge Andrew Hanen of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas decided that the program was unlawful in a decision affirmed by the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals (Weissman, 2023). Under Hanen's ruling, *DACA* recipients who attained protected status as of July 2021 could continue participating in the program and apply

for renewals, but new applications would not be processed (Weissman, 2023). This blockage was not the first time Judge Hanen had attacked *DACA* (2012). He first determined that the program was illegal in a 2021 decision after nine states sued to end the program (Weissman, 2023).

In February 2024, the Fifth Circuit began reviewing a case challenging the legality of the *DACA* (2012) policy. According to FWD.us (2024), the appellants defending *DACA* (2012) filed opening briefs in January 2024, and the opposition had until February 26, 2024, to answer their demands to save *DACA* (2012). 450 different leaders and state governments were represented in the seven briefs. Once oral arguments were scheduled, a decision on *DACA* (2012) was expected to be issued in early Spring 2024 (FWD.us, 2024). This constant political change and waiting for the fate of *DACA* (2012) created tension and stress in my *DACA* experience; this meant that institutions had an opportunity to use their institutional agency to support undocumented students better. As an undocumented, gay, low-income, first-generation Latino, surviving higher education, in addition to adapting to the political climate, was complex, traumatic, and hurtful.

Recent Activism

On January 25, 2024, the University of California Board of Regents and President Drake suspended the "Opportunity for All" campaign, delaying a commitment made in May 2023 to develop and implement a policy allowing the UC to employ students, regardless of their immigration status (Bolaños, 2024). Over 25 courageous undocumented students and allies launched a 72-hour hunger strike, shared their demands during all three days of the UC Board of Regents meetings, mobilized rallies at UC Berkeley, and held vigils in front of the University of California Office of the President (UCOP) office in Oakland (Bolaños, 2024). Even after these efforts, President Drake and most of the UC Board of Regents went against undocumented

students (Bolaños, 2024). This news empowered undocumented students and allies to continue the immigrant movement despite feeling challenged and neglected.

Navigating Higher Education in the Current Political Climate

Undocumented students often face obstacles in pursuing higher education, particularly in our ever-changing immigration political climate. However, a ray of hope emerged on April 11, 2024, with the approval of *Assembly Bill 2586* (2024) (the *Opportunity for All Act*) by the Assembly Higher Education Committee. This landmark legislation, championed by Assemblymember David Alvarez (D-San Diego), was a game-changer. It ensured that all students, regardless of immigration status, now had equal access to employment opportunities in the UC, at California State University (CSU), and on California Community College (CCC) campuses (Vasquez, 2024).

For many undocumented students pursuing higher education, there are other options than *DACA* (2012). This significantly burdens California's public colleges and universities to bridge the gap (Vasquez, 2024). The reality is harsh due to their status; a staggering 44,326 undocumented students enrolled in California's higher education programs are currently barred from applying to jobs in the education sector. To fully explore their educational options, these students need access to work-study jobs, paid internships, leadership roles in campus organizations, graduate student research and teaching assistant positions, mandatory practicums, and other professional and educational opportunities (Vasquez, 2024).

AB 2586 (2024) addressed the injustices undocumented students encounter in earning their degrees and providing for their financial needs while pursuing their education. It also unlocked their potential to contribute to California's educational and employment ecosystem.

This law strengthened California's leadership in diversity, creativity, and opportunity (Vasquez, 2024). The O*pportunity for All* Campaign (2024) was not the only recent news that impacted the immigrant community. *DACA* (2012) renewals and Advance Parole (AP) opportunities also changed the political system. Unfortunately, starting April 1, 2024, USCIS increased the filing fees for many immigration benefits applications (see Figure 8). This increase presented another financial hurdle that *DACA* recipients needed to overcome and could prevent them from renewing their *DACA* (2012) application, significantly impacting their protection status.

Figure 8

DACA Renewal Fee Change Announcement, February 26, 2024

Note. Informed Immigration [@Informedimmigrant](February 26, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C30sW0IuZ8K/?img_index=2, copyright 2024 by Informed Immigrant.

Institutional Support for Undocumented Students

The Emergence of Undocumented Centers

The emergence and development of Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs) have often been attributed to undocumented students' mobilization efforts both on- and off-campus (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2018). According to Cisneros and Valdivia (2018), most USRC practitioners have cited long histories of student mobilization, which led to the establishment of institutionalized support services for undocumented students on campuses. Student mobilizations prompted the formation of institutional task teams tasked with devising a comprehensive plan to develop institutional support for undocumented students (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2018). The task forces' intentional institutional advocacy for undocumented students, staff, and professors helped build institutional mechanisms for responding to their presence and needs (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2018). Common recommendations from this work frequently included the establishment of a USRC and financing full- or part-time employees committed to working with undocumented students.

Most USRC practitioners have cited long histories of student mobilization and the establishment of institutionalized support services for undocumented students on their campuses (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2018). Undocumented student mobilization efforts enabled institutions to provide more educational resources and tools for them to pursue higher education. These undocumented centers and institutional changes have also improved the national landscape. There are now about 46 USRCs that serve undocumented students (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2018). Despite undocumented students' mobilization efforts and the creation of institutional opportunities and resources, the higher education system continues to prevent many

undocumented students from pursuing higher education. USRCs, however, have tried to support students in pursuing higher education.

Exemplar Case: UC Berkeley Institutional Support

Drawing from a specific example of how USRCs have impacted undocumented students' higher education journeys, UC Berkeley has provided a space where undocumented students can thrive. In 2010, staff and students from UC Berkeley and the Immigrant Student Issues Coalition recommended several institutional changes to the Chancellor regarding immigrant students on campus (UC Berkeley, 2024). One key recommendation was to create a staff position to improve undocumented student experiences while elevating and providing on-campus resources (UC Berkeley, 2024). This recommendation resulted in the first Undocumented Student Program Coordinator, appointed in January 2012, establishing the Undocumented Student Program (UC Berkeley, 2024). The Undocumented Center at UC Berkeley pays tribute to undocumented students for implementing a center that has expanded its services and resources to encourage students to retain themselves at UC Berkeley (UC Berkeley, 2024). According to UC Berkeley (2024), undocumented and *DACA* students in attendance can now access academic counseling, mental health services, immigration legal support, professional development resources, and financial assistance. Living in California, with its undocumented centers, has opened a world of educational opportunities for students. Moreover, nonprofit organizations in California and other undocumented-friendly states further enhance these opportunities, supporting students in pursuing higher education.

Nonprofit Organizations' Support for Undocumented Students

Many nonprofit organizations, such as the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA), United We Dream, Catholic Charities, and more, are vital in supporting undocumented students in pursuing higher education and promoting immigration and educational policy change. Undocumented students, immigrants, their families, and their communities depend on nonprofit organizations for their survival (De Leon, 2014). Nonprofit organizations serve as community hubs where undocumented people may interact with people from their community who speak their language and get advice on adjusting to life in society. Nonprofit administrators who support immigration also serve as advocates and spokespeople who may encourage newcomers' civic and political involvement (De Leon, 2014).

Additionally, they create networks and act as a conduit for information about immigration between elected leaders, government agencies, and donors (De Leon, 2014). Nonprofits supporting undocumented students are crucial, but they must do more to accomplish their goals. Together with immigrant organizations, other nonprofits, government organizations, charitable organizations, and local businesses can support immigrant integration and, in the process, uplift and improve the community (De Leon, 2014). Furthermore, because of the high demand for their services, immigrant organizations frequently have inadequate funding and are overburdened, which is why comprehensive immigration reform should be implemented and passed (De Leon, 2014). Although there are nonprofit organizations that support undocumented students pursuing higher education, there are a variety of pitfalls that higher education presents to undocumented students.

The Pitfalls of Higher Education for Undocumented Students

According to Garcia and Murillo (2022), undocumented first-generation students suffer from social exclusion, lack of support, and low self-efficacy. Undocumented students experience social exclusion once they are admitted to or attend college (Williams, 2016). Due to limited institutional support and knowledge, students tend to experience a lack of confidence, resulting in lower self-efficacy (Simmons et al., 2018). Williams (2016) identified that undocumented students have a challenging time with the college application process due to being first-generation. They not only lack guidance, but they do not have general knowledge or information about the application process and costs (Garcia & Murillo, 2022).

An essential component of a student's educational journey is having a communal or familial support system. Family support for an undocumented individual is vital to their educational journey (Garcia & Murillo, 2022). Garcia and Murillo (2022) summarized their research by stating that the youth who placed greater attitudinal and behavioral emphasis on family interdependence were youth from undocumented families. However, challenges emerge when an undocumented student has family members who have little to no educational background. Undocumented students have shown remarkable resilience despite these challenges, forging social connections with school educators and counselors essential to their educational pursuits (Roth, 2017). As more and more undocumented students attempt to pursue higher education, they continue to fight for their right to obtain a college degree, demonstrating their unwavering determination and resilience.

According to the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC; California Student Aid Commission [CSAC], 2018), in 2021–2022, only 14% of California's estimated undocumented

college students received financial aid. During this time, CSAC (2018) brought together higher education leaders and stakeholders to examine undocumented students' unique challenges in accessing financial aid. California is known to be a leader in advancing policies that help ensure that the dream of a college education remains accessible and affordable; however, higher education continues to create barriers and challenges for undocumented students (CSAC, 2018). California's undocumented student population enrolled in postsecondary education is estimated to be about 100,000 (CSAC, 2018). Although this number seems high, undocumented students' higher education pursuits remain challenging and unattainable (CSAC, 2018).

CSAC (2018) found that "in 2021–22, only 29% to 30% of undocumented college students who applied for financial aid through the California *DREAM Act* Application (CADAA) ultimately enrolled in school" (para. 1). Additionally, they reported that only 14% of those undocumented students enrolled in postsecondary education received financial aid from the State of California (CSAC, 2018). These numbers are alarming, as many undocumented students who have the potential to make significant contributions to society cannot afford their postsecondary tuition, which can be one of the primary reasons why it is rare to see undocumented students in graduate programs. By providing the necessary support and resources, we can unlock the potential of these students and enrich our society by increasing the pipeline to graduate education.

Undocumented Students in Graduate Programs

Undocumented undergraduate students face incredible challenges in higher education (Wintemute, 2023). However, their options become even more limited when pursuing graduate programs because admission requirements and tuition rates can make such programs inaccessible

(Wintemute, 2023). Of the 427,000 undocumented graduate students in the United States, most need help accessing federal aid, and many cannot access in-state tuition rates or enroll at public schools in their home states because of their citizenship status (Wintemute, 2023). Undocumented graduate students, especially first-generation students, need an experienced support system (Wintemute, 2023). Some undocumented, unfriendly states, like Alabama and South Carolina, restrict graduate school at public institutions for undocumented students (Wintemute, 2023).

Depending on the school and program, paying for graduate school can limit the institutional options that undocumented students can apply to (Wintemute, 2023). Undocumented students can legally apply to graduate school but do not qualify for federal funding, and some state funding is restricted (Wintemute, 2023). While undocumented students attend graduate school, they can only rely on personal financing, private loans, fellowships, assistantships, and regional, state, and private scholarships (Wintemute, 2023). *DACA* graduate students have more opportunities than undocumented students because of their limited privileges; however, undocumented students may need to pursue other avenues to fund their education without federal funding (Wintemute, 2023).

Brief Data on Undocumented Graduate Students

According to the American Immigration Council and Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2023), there has been an increase in undocumented students pursuing undergraduate degrees. However, recent data suggests that undocumented graduate students also pursue advanced degrees. The American Immigration Council and Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2023) found a 3.9% increase in all

undocumented students pursuing graduate or professional degrees, from 10.3% in 2019 to 14.2% in 2021, and a 6.5% increase to 19.3% of *DACA*-eligible students pursuing graduate or professional degrees in 2021.

The American Immigration Council and Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2023) states that more undocumented students are trying to pursue graduate and professional degrees, and it has been found that they are heavily represented in STEM fields. More specifically, 33.6% of undocumented students and 37.1% of *DACA*-eligible students pursuing advanced degrees have an undergraduate degree in STEM (American Immigration Council and Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2023). STEM is a popular field for undocumented graduate students; however, only 30.5% have a healthcare-related degree (American Immigration Council and Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2023). These findings are vital given the nation's shortage of healthcare workers (American Immigration Council and Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2023). Although this data reflects the increase or decrease of undocumented graduate students in higher education, it needs to address the extent to which there is institutional capacity to support undocumented graduate students.

Support for Undocumented Graduate Students

In September 2019, the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (Presidents' Alliance) collaborated with university and organizational partners to establish the Undocumented Graduate Student Initiative (Higher ED Immigration Portal, 2023). This initiative developed and provided resources for institutions seeking to recruit, enroll, and support undocumented graduate and professional students (Higher ED Immigration Portal, 2023).

In addition to creating the initiative, the Presidents' Alliance implemented an Advisory Board that brings together campus leaders, faculty, administrators, undocumented students, and organizational experts (Higher ED Immigration Portal, 2023). They work to support undocumented graduate and professional students by giving them greater access to educational opportunities and programs (Higher ED Immigration Portal, 2023). Some of the partners in the initiative include deans, faculty, administrators, and students at UC Los Angeles, UC Davis, UC Merced, Cornell, and Brown, plus TheDream.US, Immigrants Rising, the Council of Graduate Schools, Pre-Health Dreamers, and Define American. Thanks to the participation of these multiple institutions that have developed guides and other resources, the initiative draws attention to the struggles faced by undocumented students who seek to enter graduate programs and look for pathways to face these hardships (Higher ED Immigration Portal, 2023). These efforts and initiatives will allow more undocumented graduate students to feel comfortable applying and getting admitted to a graduate school of their choice. This initiative and additional support from critical partners and organizations can encourage and empower undocumented students to pursue graduate school. The data, demographics, and statistics have thus highlighted the intersectionality and resiliency that undocumented students must overcome in and outside their classrooms. Resilience is a quality forced upon undocumented students as they strive for student and community roles.

Analytical Framework: Intersectional Resilience

Quinn et al. (2022) have reminded us that intersectionality is a framework rooted in Black feminist research and activism that elucidates how social conceptions of gender, sexual orientation, race, and other social categories intertwine and influence opportunities, resources,

and power. Intersectionality is rooted in social justice and has shed light on how structural oppression and privilege intersect. *Intersectional stigma* is defined as a process by which individuals are exposed to multiple forms of oppression, prejudice, and discrimination by Quinn et al. (2022). Intersectional stigma can impact a person's well-being, making it difficult for them to excel personally due to the constant changes in political climate and immigration laws. Although there is research on intersectional stigma, much of it is deficit focused. It loses sight of marginalized communities' strength, resilience, and resistance—contrary to the entire foundation of intersectionality (Quinn et al., 2022). The issues with the research on resilience being defined through a White, Western lens were found by Quinn et al. (2022)

This White, Western lens excludes people from marginalized communities when they discuss their experiences or intersecting identities. Fortunately, the framework has expanded to examine the systems and structures that support or threaten resilience and the adaptations oppressed individuals can make in response to these structures (Quinn et al., 2022). Quinn et al. (2022) noted that intersectional resilience emphasizes how people manage institutions that create adversity or promote wellness. It acknowledges that people with numerous marginalized statuses have distinct skills that may impose a protective impact. The educational system has impacted and challenged undocumented students with multiple identities, but it has also nurtured undocumented students' resilience, empowerment, and survival.

Survival and Intersectional Resilience

In Cisneros' (2019) study she found that undocumented students identifying as undocuqueer were found to have resilience connected to their survival. For example, Cisneros (2019) discovered that the participants often strategically concealed their gender, sexuality, and

immigration status as a form of survival. Cisneros (2019) stated that “given the risks of family rejection, discrimination, and deportation, coming out as undocuqueer was often not achieved until the conditions of one identity were deemed more manageable” (p. 76).

Undocuqueer Students

Undocuqueer students struggle to access and persist through higher education, and they feel even more challenged by federal, state, and institutional policies that keep them closeted or in the shadows (Cisneros, 2019). Cisneros (2019) concluded that undocuqueer students often uncovered their identities in college because they often served as liberators: “Public policy forced participants to focus on their undocumented status and deterred them from exploring and expressing their gender and sexuality before college” (Cisneros, 2019, p. 80). However, immersing themselves in peer groups and identifying supportive staff and faculty positively influenced the development of their intersectional identities (Cisneros, 2019). A community supporting my multiple identities helped me survive higher education while remaining resilient.

These findings and literature made me realize the complexity of separating my undocumented and queer identity. I tried to merge them so that I could survive in White, citizen, and hetero spaces. Coming out twice was exhausting, as faculty, staff, and peers did not know how to care for either identity. They were not fully versed or educated on how to support my queerness, and they probably did not know how to support my undocumented status based on how they interacted with me while I pursued higher education. This is why I created guides, toolkits, and educational opportunities to educate faculty, staff, and peers on how to treat me as an undocuqueer student. It was also vital to highlight how first-generation low-income

undocumented students survive through resilience, as I took pride in being a low-income first-generation student.

First-Generation Low-Income Undocumented Students

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that 24% of college students in 2012 were first-generation low-income students (FGLIs) and that 77% came from families earning less than $50,000 annually (cited in Redford & Hoyer, 2017). The degree-attainment disparity persists and becomes more pronounced as more FGLI students pursue higher education, with race and ethnicity being significant factors (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Cultural capital theory has mainly examined the experiences of FGLI college students (Lee, 2022). According to this research, FGLI students are not accustomed to a college environment because it predominately builds on middle-class ideals (Lee, 2022). A concentration on structural obstacles, however, ignores the viewpoints of individual students about their disengagement from predominantly White institutions (PWIs) when confronted with racist incidents and other difficulties (Lee, 2022). Moreover, even if these difficulties are met by institutional support, these students continue to face classism and racism and feel discouraged from developing support and successfully adapting to their college (Lee, 2022).

Historically, institutions have concentrated on providing services based on the premise that FGLI students "need help" to acquire—or have imposed upon them—dominant cultural capital (Lee, 2022). However, rather than being seen as a weakness, FGLI immigrant students require affirmation and acknowledgment that their cultural wealth is a significant advantage (Lee, 2022). It is critical that institutions perceive FGLIs and immigrant students as assets and

contributors, rather than seeing them as assistance beneficiaries to ensure their success (Lee, 2022).

Lee's (2022) study also showed how silence is a form of transformational resistance. Resistance and resilience are survival tactics I had to apply and adopt while I navigated higher education as an undocumented FGLI student. Lee (2022) stated that "in higher education, students have manifested transformational resistance in different ways, but with a common attribute of active engagement in taking action for change, a counter-feature of silence" (p. 14). According to Brayboy (2005), when marginalized college students maintain their academic resilience and are driven to give back to their communities, obtaining college knowledge and certificates is a type of transformational resistance.

Montoya (2000) asserted that communities of color and the dominant majority give distinct meanings to "silence." Silence has been viewed as passive and submissive because the ruling majority has employed it to uphold racial hegemony (for example, imposing an English-only language). Communities of color, however, use silence as a form of resistance against assimilation and opposition to the dominant norms (Montoya, 2000). As I navigated higher education as an FGLI undocumented student, I realized that my multiple identities supported my survival and resilience despite combatting institutional and societal norms.

UndocuCrit

Aguilar (2019) introduced UndocuCrit as the lens through which to understand better the complex and liminal experiences that characterize undocumented people in the United States. UndocuCrit is rooted in critical race theory (CRT) (Aguilar, 2019), Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit) (Valdes, 2005), and tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy,2025). UndocuCrit

encourages *DACA* recipients and undocumented academics to add to this developing framework by utilizing it for their own experiences and the experiences of other undocumented populations. UndocuCrit is not just a theoretical framework but a powerful tool that opposes dualistic discourse about immigrants and moves us closer to social justice and community empowerment. However, I did not utilize UndocuCrit as it did not speak to my survival in higher education, home, and society. By merely focusing on the intersectional resilience framework and the CCW model, I could explore my intersectionality more while giving voice to the authenticity needed to elaborate on my survival, trauma, and accomplishments.

The Importance of More Literature on Intersectionality and Survival

This chapter has highlighted the limited research on undocumented students in higher education and the importance of intersectionality, and it vaguely addressed survival. The literature review also highlighted the difficulties of accessing higher education in and outside the classroom. Numerous conventional viewpoints hold that undocumented students do not deserve the right to pursue higher education. Regardless of whether this viewpoint is valid or not, it has frequently resulted in undocumented students being stigmatized and marginalized. Undocumented students have the right to access higher education while being given the necessary tools and resources to retain themselves at their institutions. It is also vital for them to have committed and educated higher education faculty, staff, and administrators who can support them in their educational pursuits. This study contended that by identifying, exploring, and finding more literature on intersectionality and survival strategies, more undocumented students will have the opportunity to pursue higher education. Therefore, focusing on my survival enabled

me to focus on how higher education faculty, staff, and administrators can play their roles in supporting undocumented students with multiple identities.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Unfortunately, there continues to be an erasure of undocumented voices and stories in research and literature (Daily, 2022). Undocumented students constantly advocate for improving immigration laws and policies in the educational system; however, the intimate experiences of those engaged in this process are rarely written from their perspective (Daily, 2022). Our memories can provide insight into struggle, intimacy, and vulnerability (Acevedo-Febles, 2016). This autoethnography focused on my survival strategies in higher education through the lenses of intersectionality and intersectional resilience frameworks. I aimed to be transformative and empowering to those who read this autoethnography. I wanted individuals who shared my identities to empathize with my experiences so that they could feel seen, heard, and loved, and I wanted educators, staff, and leaders who worked with students like me to understand my struggles so that they could find the tools and resources to support us in pursuing higher education.

Research Questions

Through autoethnography methodologies, I embarked on a journey to explore the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What survival strategies did I use in pursuing higher education that prepared me to persevere and pursue doctoral studies?

RQ2: How can my intersectionality experiences as an undocumented, gay, low-income, first-generation Latino contribute to our research and literature and the work of higher education faculty, staff, and administrators?

Autoethnography as a Method

Autoethnography, the research approach I employed, is not just a method but a political, socially just, and socially conscious act (Ellis et al., 2011). It challenges the norms of traditional research by grounding analysis in personal experience (Acevedo-Febles, 2016). The stories and experiences that inform the autoethnography research process are pivotal in constructing emancipatory knowledge, akin to how academic research aids in bettering those being educated (Acevedo-Febles, 2016). This study, therefore, revolved around my experiences as an undocumented student survivor of higher education. Autoethnography is not a conventional research methodology; it can be a journey to find guidance on the process and procedures of conducting an autoethnographic study (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). As I delved deeper into the autoethnographic process, I grappled with the complexity of deciding what to keep private versus what to share to ensure the authenticity of the study.

According to Fasulo (2015), an autoethnographic researcher must discover new findings with insights that a mere observer cannot illuminate. Poerwandari (2021) offered one caveat: the researcher must have good research skills. Autoethnography can be an excellent method for analyzing valuable and specific experiences correctly and responsibly. Additionally, this research method can be an effective way for researchers from marginalized groups to offer insight into phenomena experienced. It requires observing ourselves and challenging our beliefs and assumptions to ascertain if we have penetrated as many layers of our defenses, fears, and insecurities as research requires. In the process, it seeks a hopeful narrative of the author as a survivor of the story they are living (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022).

Persistencia, Crecimiento, y Florecimiento

In addition to using autoethnography as the method, this study used Spanish terms to demonstrate my Latino identity, especially how *persistencia, crecimiento, y florecimiento* were connected to my survival in higher education, in my home, and in our society. Before identifying the data, sources used, I will define *persistencia, crecimiento, y florecimiento*. Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined persistence in English as the deliberate choice to carry out a goal-directed action in the face of setbacks, challenges, or discouragement. Because continuing to pursue something enjoyable or fulfilling does not entail enduring and overcoming difficulties, quantifying someone's length of time at a task does not fully reflect the essence of perseverance. However, for this study, I used *persistencia*, a Spanish term that resonated with my cultural heritage and held a more profound significance. It encapsulated the idea of resilience and determination in the face of adversity, which was a central theme in my research.

Crecimiento means growth, but no formal definition captured how my growth impacted my lived experiences. In this study, *crecimiento* focused on how I changed our institutional policies and politics and grew out of situations to survive in my home and society. Keyes (2002) developed the theory of flourishment (in English). However, I utilized *florecimiento* in this study. Keyes (2002) stated that living within the ideal range of human functioning—which implies goodness, generativity, growth, and the ability to heal—is what it means to flourish. This definition derives from groundbreaking research that quantifies mental health in terms of positive attributes rather than just the lack of mental illness. However, for this study, *florecimiento* focused on how I survived being a low-income, undocumented student. Defining *persistencia,*

crecimiento, y florecimiento allowed me to connect my experiences and various identities to the study and also supported me in identifying the data sources used.

Data Sources

Diverse data sources, including Facebook posts, artifacts, private writings, stories, and *recuerdos*, uniquely enriched my autoethnography. These sources spanned from my 4-year-old to my 30-year-old self and were complemented by recollections from my higher education journey from 1996 to the present (Creswell, 2008; Rodriguez Rico, 2021). Artifacts allowed me to revisit some of my lost childhood memories and speak about my childhood experiences at school and home. Private writings and stories revealed the truths of not only my experiences in higher education but also the battles I had to overcome as a survivor of abuse. I used *fotohistorias* as a methodological approach to strengthen the authenticity of my higher education and childhood journey, as the pictures captured memories I kept sheltered throughout my childhood and academic journey (Gomez, 2020). These data sources enabled me to triangulate my analysis and examine my lived experience through multiple vantage points. Like Assil's (2021) approach, I was the subject under study, and I used reflective narratives and autoethnographic vignettes to explore my experiences.

Johns (2020) described reflective narrative as an analytical approach that emphasizes systematizing and giving the reflective process of self-evaluation and reflection on the structure of everyday events. Along with using reflective narrative, I also used autoethnographic vignettes. Using reflective narrative in my autoethnography enabled me to revisit hidden childhood memories while allowing me to celebrate my accomplishments as a survivor of higher education and home. According to Griffin (2023), a vignette is a "short, descriptive passage that captures a

moment in time" (para. 3). Griffin (2023) also noted that a vignette differs from anecdotes because anecdotes are entire stories with a start, middle, and end, while vignettes typically provide a brief overview. Like Pitard (2016), I used vignettes drawn from artifacts to place myself in several social contexts, investigate my positionality as a researcher, remain aware of my prejudices, record my voice and story, and explain my experiences in higher education.

As part of my research process, I innovatively utilized Facebook as a diary throughout my educational journey. This modern platform served as a contemporary tool for self-reflection, enabling me to understand how these experiences shaped my *persistencia, crecimiento, y florecimiento*. It also provided a unique opportunity to document my struggles and accomplishments in real time, enriching the data source for my autoethnographic study. This rich tapestry of data allowed for a vivid portrayal of my educational journey, emphasizing my survival and accomplishments and the transformative power of my experiences. These experiences, encapsulated in the Spanish terms *persistencia, crecimiento, y florecimiento*, stand as a testament to the potential for growth and resilience in adversity.

Fotohistorias

Drawing from both photovoice and photo elicitation, *fotohistorias*, also known as photostories, is a method that sits at the confluence of nonparticipatory and participatory visual technologies (Gomez, 2020). Unlike photo elicitation, which incorporates photos into the interviewing process, photovoice uses participatory photography to empower individuals as part of a research process (Gomez, 2020). While the terms are sometimes interchangeable, photovoice and photo elicitation are distinct. Photovoice leverages the power of participatory

techniques to empower individuals and their communities through the collaborative creation of photographs (Gomez, 2020).

Fotohistorias is a powerful tool that leverages pictures to ignite meaning and conversation. By incorporating participant-generated photos into the research process, *fotohistorias* combines the strengths of participatory photography and photo elicitation techniques (Gomez, 2020). The *fotohistorias* methodology allowed me to utilize artifacts as *recuerdos* (Manzanero & Recio, 2012). The use of *fotohistorias* informed my process of self-reflection and writing of this reflective narrative. The artifacts and *recuerdos* became my language, making the reflective narrative process more manageable; however, I struggled to look at pictures of my younger self because I knew that my *recuerdos* would allow me to revisit things that I tried to erase to bring me solace.

Recuerdos

Memories, or *recuerdos*, were a powerful tool for illuminating my journey through higher education, home, and society. In the realm of memory research, the impact of trauma has sparked significant debate. As Manzanero and Recio (2012) asserted, memories associated with trauma stand apart from other autobiographical memories, mainly when trauma is characterized by its profound psychological repercussions. This underscores the crucial role of trauma in shaping our understanding of memory.

Research has indicated that memories linked to trauma diverge from those tied to other experiences, mainly when trauma is characterized by its unique features (Manzanero & Recio, 2012). Regardless of the context, it is crucial to consider the factors that influence memory recall. Among these, the degree of stress, intensity of emotion, and level of involvement are

paramount. These elements shape one's memory and influence the effectiveness of coping mechanisms in the face of trauma (Manzanero & Recio, 2012). Recognizing the variations in recollection accessibility and accuracy is critical in understanding and managing trauma (Manzanero & Recio, 2012). Since most of my *recuerdos* were traumatic experiences and memories, I tried to use them as a source of survival, resilience, and empowerment.

Artifacts

A crucial component of this study was collecting and analyzing various artifacts. These included the pictures and figures in this and previous chapters, which served as another data source. The guiding RQs and theoretical framework informed the selection of these artifacts. Following the process described by Ellis et al. (2011), I discerned patterns in my cultural experience, as evidenced by utilizing artifacts *y mis recuerdos*. I then described these patterns using various forms of storytelling, making my personal and intersectional experience meaningful and engaging. A guiding principle of this study was to reach a broad and diverse reading audience using an accessible narrative structure that could inspire personal and social change for more people with shared lived experiences.

Collecting and analyzing multiple artifacts and revisiting my *recuerdos* was a deeply emotional journey. It reminded me of my struggles and successes in pursuing higher education, but it also gave me the data sources I needed to speak to my younger self. For example, using the artifacts, my mom saved for me forced my adult self to tap into my younger self, which was both empowering and troubling. These binary feelings made the data collection and analysis process more difficult because I neglected pictures that showed my vulnerabilities as a child. Not including a variety of childhood artifacts was intentional to respect my family's privacy.

Nevertheless, I took the time to add artifacts that strengthened my voice. Throughout this dissertation, I thoroughly analyzed each artifact by describing what occurred and how each figure added more voice to my study and survival.

Reflecting and relying on *mis recuerdos*, I reread my private writings and stories to capture my survival authentically. This process involved reflective narrative and autoethnographic vignettes, allowing me to delve deeper into my experiences. My stories and *mis recuerdos* reconnected me with my teachers, faculty, peers, and mentors who supported me throughout my academic journey. Although many did not know what was happening at home, they still empowered me to pursue higher education by investing in my dreams. Before this process, I did not have the opportunity to revisit a lot of my childhood because I was scared to dig deeper: however, after using reflective narrative, autoethnographic vignettes, *recuerdos*, private writings, Facebook posts, and the process of revisiting my artifacts, I had a different vantage point on how I survived higher education and my home.

Data Analysis Process

After realizing I was the only undocumented student in my doctoral program, I knew an autoethnography would benefit the academic world and myself. Guided by the premise of the dissertation RQs, I began questioning the reflection process and asked myself if I would "come out of the closet" again to the academic world. I started to revisit relevant Facebook posts (www.facebook.com), childhood artifacts, and *recuerdos*, which became the essence of reflective narratives. I was determined to expose my secrets so that other undocumented students could read my writing and know that they were not alone, despite the higher education system showing us otherwise. *Mis recuerdos*, private writings, Facebook posts, and artifacts reminded

me of my hurt, struggle, and trauma in higher education, but also of how my identities influenced my survival. Nevertheless, these experiences reminded me of joy, hope, and strength. Ultimately, these materials and data encouraged me to speak out about the trials and tribulations of the higher education system and how surviving was not living. I embraced the resulting emotions of past events as part of the process (Assil, 2021). Arguably, no form of research lends itself more to ongoing data analysis than autoethnography (Assil, 2021). However, self-study naturally involves continuous reflection and development. Furthermore, it is through the ongoing collection and review of the data that themes, patterns, and theories unfold (Assil, 2021). The literature supported this proposition, claiming that personal narrative development and analysis is a cathartic process that drives the writer to the final product (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

My lived experiences, *recuerdos*, and questions formed the backbone of my data and study. Deciphering my stories while revisiting childhood memories I had long avoided gave birth to an authentic voice that had been silenced for too long. Through this revisiting, I grappled with intersectionality, survival, and resilience in higher education and at home. My survival profoundly impacted my inner child and my adaptability in higher education. It was relatively easy to analyze and reflect on my negative experiences, as they had dominated most of my life; however, revisiting my successes and smiles was a complex yet refreshing task. Despite the mix of positive and negative experiences in higher education, I made a vow never to forget my roots. I consistently advocated for my existence in and outside my classrooms despite the homophobia, racism, and xenophobia I encountered. Finally, I wanted my data analysis and collection process to be inclusive, welcoming those who did not share my identities or struggles.

The process of revisiting and remembering my narratives and childhood memories was a crucial part of the data analysis process and self-reflection. Unlocking these memories was taxing, but I am grateful for the data they provided to complete my childhood puzzle, which had felt lost and neglected. This process allowed me to reclaim my survival and resilience. For instance, having the courage to confront those who had harmed or supported me in the past provided a more valid and reliable data process. I had an opportunity to talk to my middle school bully and ask him about our lack of friendship and his mean behavior toward me. This conversation led me to speak "out and up" about the mistreatment I felt as a young scholar and how those incidents had tried to silence me. The first confrontation and honest conversation opened the door for me to revisit multiple people and thank them for their nourishment, regardless of whether they had harmed me. I also had a *plactica* with my college advisor, which reminded me of my resilience when applying for colleges. She was in the room when I found out I was undocumented and then advised me to put zeros as a replacement for my social security number. These *platicas* also allowed me to collect data that refined and illuminated my childhood and higher education journey.

Limitations

As the researcher, I needed to highlight the limitations of this study. First, due to the study focusing on myself, the study's results needed to be more generalizable to the experiences of all *DACA* students. Given that most *DACA* students primarily enroll in community colleges or public undergraduate 4-year colleges, it is rare to find Latinx *DACA* graduate students who attended or who are attending prestigious graduate programs. Even then, *DACA* students are only a tiny fraction of undocumented students who graduate from high school yearly (Garsilazo,

2020). Acevedo-Febles (2016) stated that an autoethnography's complexity lies in the validity process and in balancing the autobiographical with the ethnographic. For autoethnography to attain respect as a methodology, I, as a researcher, needed to be cautious about how I wrote about my experiences while carefully analyzing the literature on *DACA* students (Acevedo-Febles, 2016).

Shim (2018) stated that writing autoethnography has received scrutiny in academic circles. People who use autoethnography as a method are brave in displaying themselves but are seen as cheerful versions of teacher research. This scrutiny can invalidate an autoethnography narrative, discouraging researchers or scholars from writing autoethnographic studies; however, reading and writing about our lived experiences can only benefit our research and literature. This study provided unique and valuable insights into my survival as a *DACA* student and how the educational world can better support our voices, bodies, and stories.

The literature noted several limitations of the autoethnography method (Assil, 2021; Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999; Méndez, 2014; Sparkes, 2000). Examples included the complications of self-disclosure, which is a limitation, and the challenge of minimizing bias, particularly regarding the selection of data sources. I acknowledged that I was the subject of the study; this approach utilized personal narratives to explore my experiences in higher education. The data from which the autoethnography was drawn were personal experiences and memories I had accumulated throughout my childhood and educational journey. Despite this limitation, I knew what I was writing and revealing was authentic and needed exposure, as few undocumented students made it to the doctoral level. I knew the power of exclusion and wanted to be as authentic and transparent as possible to inspire others to share their secrets.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Mi Viaje de Supervivencia Desde el Preescolar Hasta Mis Estudios de Doctorado

This chapter analyzes my educational trajectory through the lenses of intersectionality, intersectional resilience, and CCW. My journey from pre-K to my doctoral studies unveils how the confluence of my identities as a low-income, undocumented immigrant shaped my strategies for *persistencia, crecimiento, y florecimiento*.

I always felt like I was going to get punched, threatened, or called names whenever I dared to show a little bit of who I was. My survival instict forced me to be cautious and strategic in choosing which aspect of myself to unveil. As I navigated through higher education, my broken home, and our society, I began comprehending the significance of intersectionality. Through this lens, I understood how my multiple identities acted as a lifeline, rescuing me from the dangers of our world. My resilience, fostered by the diverse forms of cultural wealth within my community, became my survival guide. This guide allowed me to share my forgotten *recuerdos* about my experiences inside and outside of school, which allowed me to challenge institutional norms while finding ways to empower myself to go against societal stereotypes and stigmas.

El Nino Inocente en Pre-K y Kindergarten

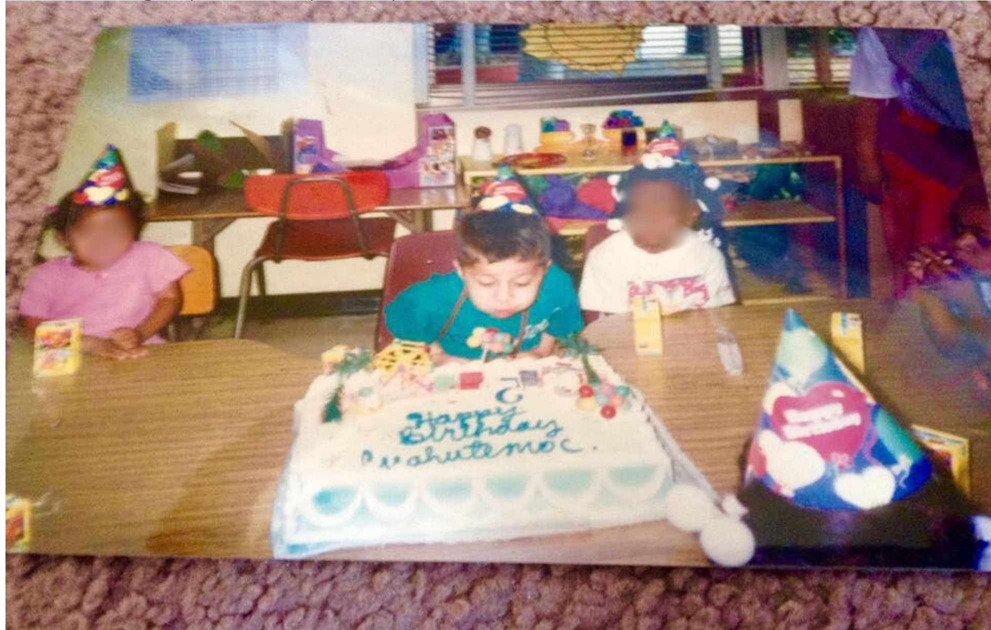
Immigrating to the United States at age 2 and being introduced to a precarious living situation marked my Pre-K and Kindergarten experiences with creative endeavors and familial warmth. Using an intersectionality lens, I recognize that my identity as a young, poor Latino with broken English was a source of stigma and strength. I found early intersections of resilience

through the teachers' recognition of my creativity, transcending linguistic, class, and ethnic barriers. The cultural wealth of my community was evident in the celebrations and support I received, embodying Yosso's (2005) navigational and social capital, which validated my existence within the educational system and society at large.

I knew I was a young, poor Latino before I knew I was an immigrant from Acapulco, Mexico. Despite not knowing my immigrant status, my mother enrolled my older brother and me at an Early Education Center in Los Angeles. My teacher told me that my brain was creative and colorful despite my broken English during my Pre-K and Kindergarten years. My colorful brain distracted me from our living situation, where we lived in a poorly lit, cold garage. My single mom worked multiple jobs, so my older brother and I became adults early. One of my fondest memories was celebrating my birthday with my peers, as seen in Figure 9. Although we did not have much money, my mom made it her goal to celebrate with me at school. Celebrating birthdays as a child was refreshing because it was a sign that I had survived another year of schooling and, most importantly, life. Whenever I blew out my candles, I wished for a better life, stability, and comfort. My teachers and peers would go out of their way to celebrate me, and my mom used her hard-earned money to provide us with temporary happiness. My Pre-K and Kindergarten years were happy despite feeling cold because of our unstable living conditions.

Figure 9

Celebrating My Birthday at My Pre-K School



As an innocent child, I was eager to learn and ready to return to my older brother's comfort and mom's love. Fortunately, I had a mom who prioritized us by picking us up and dropping us off on time. Even if our home was poor, we were rich in spirit because we knew we had each other. I felt comfortable and safe around the hands of my older brother, as seen in Figures 10 and 11. My mom worked hard and ensured that we were combed appropriately, dressed nicely, and celebrated one another despite being poor. My older brother spoke better English than my mother and me, so he became the translator. He also was the voice of our small family, meaning that when other adults and peers mocked us, he would use his assertiveness to speak against the injustices we were facing. Observing him empowered me to use my voice despite being timid and insecure. I felt uncomfortable speaking up and out because I could not communicate my feelings because of my lack of English. However, my brother acted as a temporary shield and guardian.

Figure 10

My Older Brother and I

Figure 11

My Older Brother and I, 1994

Although my mom worked hard, I saw at an early age how unsupportive and hostile U.S. society was towards us. Outside school, our society told me to speak better English, but I did not understand what they meant at the time because Spanish was my English. I also slowly started to realize how our society treated my poverty compared to my peers who had both parents and money to afford fresh clothes, daily showers, and homemade food. This realization was a heavy burden on my young body, and I often felt a sense of shame and inadequacy. Despite dwelling on this burden, I started to realize how my early childhood and my low-income and Latino identities began to shape my adult experiences. My brief Pre-K and Kindergarten years allowed me to utilize navigational and social capital, which taught me the importance of adopting my teachers, staff, and peers as my extended family. Getting introduced to our hostile society while noticing my low-income and Latino identities was one of my first lessons on survival and

resilience. Utilizing my connections with teachers, staff, and peers enabled me to access an elementary school that taught me more about myself.

Los Recuerdos Perdidos en la Escuela Primaria

Transitioning into elementary school, I began to grasp the complexities of my intersecting identities, which exposed me to systemic inequalities. The discrimination I confronted due to my race and perceived gender nonconformity was a hurdle that compelled me to develop survival strategies rooted in intersectional resilience. My family becoming a unit of four transformed my intersectional resilience. Despite my family growing, I found solace in mentors from the school staff and excelled in academics, using my unique insights and resilience to foster environments of acceptance and recognition.

My Latino identity and poverty remained the same during elementary school. However, I was eager to extend my family with new friends, staff, and teachers. I also felt prepared to go to school because my mom would remind me to "*disfruta las pequeñas cosas que tenemos*." Although we had a few things at home, I had to enjoy our scarcity of food and resources because being poor meant being grateful for what you had.

Although my home was poor and began to feel broken, my love and excitement for school grew. During my 1st- and 2nd-grade years, I realized my peers' English level and how differently they acted compared to me. Their vowels and English had a particular flow and smoothness to them. I noticed that the boys focused on the girls, and their mannerisms made me feel different. I did not fit in with the boys because my voice was either too happy or because the way I dressed was too girly. It was during my second year of elementary school that bullying began. I thought, however, that the bullying and gay slurs—mostly being named *maricón*—were

normal because that is how my stepfather, whom I called El Diablo, would treat or name me. Since I had few male friends, I adopted my teachers and staff as friends, mentors, or family members, which added to my survival and resilience. My adoption of them allowed me to develop my survival skills because I could use my charm and smile to lower their guard with me. While my male peers flirted with the girls, I took the time to acknowledge my teachers' and staff's presence by sharing stories of growing up poor and Latino. Our shared similarities and identities allowed for mutual trust and formed unconditional love I did not receive at home. My relationship with teachers and staff allowed me to stay in their classrooms during breakfast and lunch periods, and I used the time to study and read books to complete my homework assignments before their due dates. I used my academic success and determination to avoid being bullied at school as means of survival. I would rather be in the comfort of teachers and staff than be bullied, which made learning and excelling in school feel exciting.

During my 3rd-grade year, surviving marginalization became a fundamental concept of my resilience; however, my academic success and smart brain caught the attention of our school principal. The principal reported my mom and me to their office. I did not know what was happening, but I kept hearing from my various teachers that I was wise, humane, and advanced. After receiving positive words and teachers' recommendations, the principal told my mom, "Your child is gifted and will be placed in our Magnet program." I received awards and certificates of perfect attendance and principal's honor roll. My accomplishments, however, were buried because surviving marginalization became more evident as El Diablo visited our poor home more often. El Diablo slowly started to take away my innocence and happiness. As I reviewed my elementary school pictures, I could see the discomfort in my body language. My

body and voice wanted to become invisible while my dull eyes yelled for help. In Figure 12, I grasped my brother's wrist, knowing that El Diablo was telling us to smile. I also hugged my mom while secretly telling her not to let me go.

Figure 12

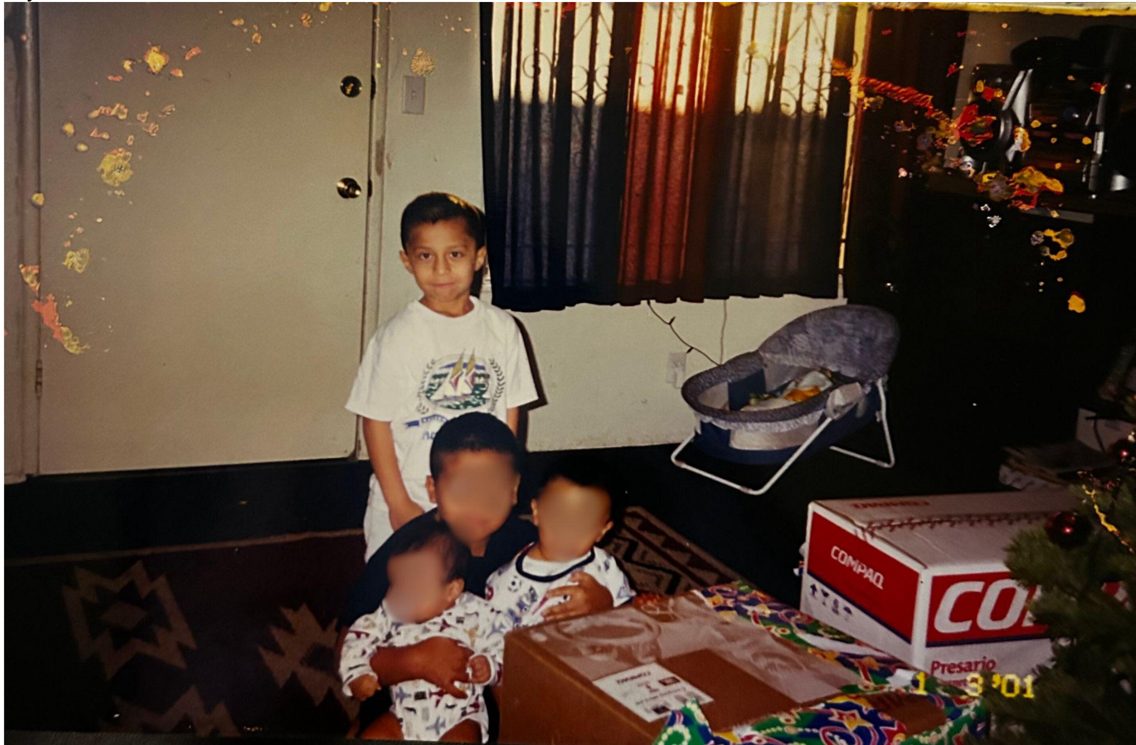
My Brothers, Mom, and I, 2001

El Daiblo made me smile as he took pictures of us in Figure 13. My eyes told others I was scared and needed help, but fortunately, my brothers, mom, and love for school supported my survival and resilience. Since El Diablo had two sons of his own, he did not want to abuse me in front of them, so I always made sure to be surrounded by them. At night, when my mom came home from work, I would stay close to her as she was my temporary blanket. My favorite

time of the day was going to school because I escaped his words, fists, and glares. The survival tactics I learned at a young age allowed me to breathe more easily.

Figure 13

My Brothers and I, 2001



Despite feeling scared at home, my teachers, peers, and faculty praised my intelligence, creating excitement and passion for school. The many compliments comforted and warmed my heart; I realized their nurturing words gave me a reason to attend school every day. My teachers, peers, and faculty were kind to me because I was kind to them. Kindness at home felt rare, so I learned I could grow a kind heart and mind at school and in society because it was easier to love than to hate. I learned that since I excelled in classes and completed homework assignments on time, my teachers felt appreciated because they saw I was eager to learn. My peers showered me with nurturing words because I always made them smile or laugh. The faculty enjoyed my

presence because I valued their commitment to enhancing our school's culture by having one-on-one conversations with them. Their positivity supported my survival, making me a better, humane student.

Being affirmed at school felt like a survival strategy because I knew I would not get love at home from El Diablo. The love I received in school gave my life purpose, as I was excited to see my teachers, staff, and friends every day. My passion for books, excitement about school, and desire to build an external family of peers, teachers, and faculty led me to attend middle school (Grades 6–8) in Gardena, California.

Mi Escuela Intermedia Me Enseñó Que el Agua es Más Espesa Que la Sangre

My middle school years were a testament to the power of intersectional resilience. Amidst silence at home due to domestic challenges, my voice found strength and volume through my advocacy for myself and others. The affirmations I received from educators and my success in honor classes were not merely achievements but reflections of a survival strategy rooted in the intersectionality framework. My academic success was an act of defiance against the marginalization of my identities, showcasing how CCW, in the form of aspirational capital, propelled me forward.

I was constantly silenced at home by El Diablo during middle school, but I was celebrated at school. My silence at home allowed me to shrink and make myself invisible to El Diablo's eyes and threats, giving me the aspirational capital I needed to survive in school. The phrase "silence is golden" resonated with me because I knew being quieter than a mouse would enable me to survive in my home. Although I dreamed quietly of a stable home, my dreams were loud in school. I realized that the less noise I made, the louder my trapped voice grew at school.

The strength in my voice and confidence in my education immediately placed me in honor classes during my first year in middle school. As a 7th grader, I started accumulating various principal honors awards and perfect attendance from the school, and the awards I received validated me. These multiple validations were necessary as they temporarily provided happiness to my older brother, mom, and me. Their hope and joy for me distracted me from our struggles with finances. The school did not know we were suffering at home because my older brother and I always dressed appropriately.

My mom knew that I was not going to get teased about the way I looked because we had modern and up-to-date shoes, fresh uniforms, and smelled like shampoo and conditioner. Her knowledge protected me from the bullying I encountered in elementary school, but I failed to realize how hard my mom had to work to get these materials for us. After discovering how much she worked, I valued my clothes even more. I began to accompany my mom to laundromats and looked for loose change on the floor or inside the dryers and washers to pay to clean our clothes. How I looked was essential to my survival because the school, teachers, staff, and peers were comfortable approaching me and trusted me to lead our classes. Their perception of me prevented me from talking about my low-income status, which is something I always worried about during elementary school. Their assurance in me enabled me to get comfortable with my teachers, so earning good grades and rewarding my intelligence became a seamless process that empowered me to excel in school. As I entered the 8th grade, I did not care how people viewed me. I was proud of being low-income because it made me care for education even more, as I knew that with education came power and community.

One memory I will forever carry is from my 8th-grade award ceremony. For each subject, every Magnet teacher selected one student to not only award a medal but also recognize them as the best pupil in their class. Students who excelled in their courses with good grades and were recognized as leaders in the school and class were given this medal. My name was called over five times by different teachers. The embarrassment of my medals clacking against each other made me feel timid, but one teacher told me, “Let the audience hear your hard work.” During the end of my 8th-grade year, I started to lose my mother’s tender love and care, but I began to make best friends whom I called *mi familia*, as seen in Figure 14. My mom started to fall more in love with El Diablo as he showed her a different kind of love that my older brother and I could not compete with. She neglected us, but the love of my chosen family filled in the missing gaps at home. The lack of love at home became more prominent, but I was excited to go to school because I started to understand the importance of having and selecting a chosen family. My chosen *familia* consisted of my friends, teachers, faculty, and staff, as they taught me about unconditional guidance and support, which supported my survival in middle school.

Figure 14

My Best Friend and I in Middle School

My chosen *familia* taught me about survival strategies that filled my childhood void and nurtured my timid voice. During middle school, not one faculty, staff, or peer knew I was going through abuse, so feeling and being accepted by my chosen *familia* gave me the confidence I needed not to feel alone. Whenever I struggled financially or emotionally, I would walk into my teachers' classrooms or staff offices, and they would feed me their home-cooked meals or talk about the freedom I would have in high school because they knew that my voice and independence would grow. My academic accomplishments drove their generosity, and they wanted me to attend a prestigious high school because they believed in me. They believed in me more than my parents, inspiring me to follow in my older brother's footsteps and get accepted to

a Magnet High School. Their confirmation and affirmation of me allowed me to grow my confidence and survive because I could apply to different Magnet high schools.

Mi Escuela Secundaria Me Enseñó Sobre la Libertad

The high school years are often a critical time of growth and self-discovery. Still, this period becomes a complex tableau of survival, resistance, and self-assertion for someone navigating the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. In high school, the intersectionality of my new-found undocumented status, Latino heritage, and emerging LGBTQ+ identity presented unique challenges and opportunities. I cultivated my intersectional resilience through my leadership and activism roles, which were not just extracurricular activities but essential to my survival strategy.The CCW I accessed through these roles provided me with the aspirational and familial capital needed to challenge the stereotypes and stigmas imposed by society.

As I stepped into the halls of high school, I carried with me the weight of my backpack and the collective weight of my intersectional identities. It was here, in this microcosm of society, that my identity as an undocumented, gay, Latino youth intersected with the throbbing pulse of teenage life. It was not just about navigating the social hierarchy's characteristics of high school life but also about negotiating a space where my voice was loud amidst the cacophony of more dominant narratives. My high school experience delved deep into exploring the layers of intersectional resilience that defined my adolescence and set the foundation for my future academic and personal endeavors.

After graduating from middle school with high honors, a prestigious Magnet high school in Watts, California accepted me. In the 9th and 10th grades, I discovered more of my

intelligence and power, which made El Diablo envious and afraid of my education. My passion instilled authority and respect, which came with student leadership and activism. Through my activism and leadership, I taught myself how to use my voice and the true meaning of the word "stop." I realized that El Diablo feared my education because he knew that with knowledge comes power and protection. Before every school day, El Diablo would remind me, *nadie te creerá*, telling me that nobody would believe that the man who gave us a home was abusing his vibrant and cheerful stepson. When I could not justify my tears, El Diablo gave me punishment, a scar, or a bruise. When I was not in school and alone with El Diablo, he constantly reminded me that he found my silence to be the most beautiful thing about me and that cooperating would only take five minutes. My silence at home, my aspiration and familiar capital, and my emerging student activism and leadership in the 10th grade kept me alive because, at school, I felt like someone. My hunger to succeed not only academically inspired me to also thrive in the athletic world.

For example, at the end of my 10th-grade year, I was recruited to play the libero position (best defender on the team) for our varsity team during our California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) playoffs. After beating Bravo, Locke, and Bell High School to reach the Finals, everyone wondered if a south-central school would claim the CIF championship. I remember the Chatsworth players being White, tall, and arrogant. They mocked us and made disrespectful noises to try and intimidate us. After four nerve-racking sets, our volleyball team made volleyball history and took home our first-ever banner, as seen in Figure 15. This historical change made CIF and other wealthy high schools take south-central schools seriously.

Figure 15

Invitational Volleyball Champions, 2009

I realized that playing volleyball was a hidden survival tactic because it celebrated my gayness. My volleyball coaches nurtured my gayness because I believe they unintentionally knew that I could not express myself at home. Their encouragement gave me the confidence to come out to my peers and school slowly. I also realized that I used volleyball as a protection tactic for my siblings. For example, El Diablo gave me many bruises; however, I told my teachers and peers that volleyball caused the bruises. Although I wanted to report the abuse, my parents told me that if the police got involved, my siblings would be impacted because my

parents would get deported. This fear silenced me; however, it ironically supported my family in staying together, allowing me to play a sport that saved my life and brought me joy. Whenever I return to my high school gym, I still see my name on the banner, which at the time was misspelled. Making history means creating footprints for future students, educators, and visitors, and I started to get excited about creating more change as a student leader and advocate. As I finished my 10th-grade year, my confidence at school gave me the recognition I needed to try and feel loved by El Diablo. I remember placing various certificates on our dining room table and showing him the banner. Even without his love, I wanted him to know I was becoming someone. However, being recognized at school made El Diablo angry at me, which allowed him to manipulate my mom.

As I began to peak in 11th grade, I came home to an envious Diablo and a numb mother who had lost her love for me. My courage to act against El Diablo's abuse gave me the freedom and voice I needed to find a newfound hope. My new light, however terrified El Diablo, which gave him an excuse to banish me from my broken home. I was left homeless in Skid Row, Los Angeles, for a few days and found a home with my best friend, who lived in Torrance, California. My best friend, his mom, and a church member took me in. I slept on a living room couch, and meals consisted of dry pasta or 49-cent burritos. Since we had little money, we often used old clothes as toilet paper, and I saved my school lunches for dinner. Despite living like this and taking the bus to school (over 30 minutes each way), I was excited not to return to El Diablo.

My accomplishments outside my academics made me feel unstoppable until I applied to college. I found out that I did not have a social security number. From age 2 to 16, I had believed I was a citizen. I felt like a fraud and a stranger to a country I thought I knew.

With the college application deadline approaching quickly, I was juggling my newfound immigrant identity. Despite the challenges of being undocumented, facing homelessness, and surviving abuse, I managed to graduate from high school with the most cords on Senior Night, as evidenced in Figure 16. My leadership roles as the Student Body Treasurer, President of the California Scholarship Federation, Senior Mentor, and Peer Mediation, along with my participation on the volleyball team, Academic Decathlon, Mock Trial, and service as a College Peer Counselor, had all made a significant impact on our school and my life.

Figure 16

High School Senior Awards Night, 2011

Each leadership position I undertook was a source of pride but came with its share of survival hurdles. My involvement and student positions often felt like a precarious tightrope

walk, where I had to navigate between asserting my unique identity and meeting the expectations of others who, often without realizing it, wanted to shape me into a more palatable version of a Latino, undocumented, or gay leader. However, each challenge I faced was also a personal triumph, a testament to the strength and resilience my intersectional identity endowed me with. Part of why I was involved in school and obtained various student leadership positions was because it made me feel visible and kept me occupied and distracted from the things happening at home. I did not know that having these positions would prepare me for college, but I did know that my visibility mattered to my peers, teachers, faculty, and staff because they wanted a future for me. My ability to immerse myself in school gave me the survival and confidence to celebrate my accomplishments while prioritizing my self-happiness and resilience.

I realized that my resilience was not a happenstance trait but a crafted response to the intersectional challenges I faced. As Quinn et al. (2022) understood, resilience is more than just bouncing back from adversity; it is about thriving. My activism and student leadership roles had started as whispers in the back of the classroom, the quiet defiance of participating in clubs that championed diversity and equity, and eventually built up to leading school-wide initiatives that addressed the inequities in our education system.

For me, graduation or academic stoles symbolized hard work, triumph, and survival. Having a stole is a token of appreciation from the school, amplifying "we see you." I still have these cords and realize that these artifacts validated the fond memories I had created throughout high school. During graduation, as seen in Figure 17, I had a brief opportunity to scan my body and listen to my thoughts. I had an internal emotional conversation, allowing me to reflect on my accomplishments and survival. I was sad that I was leaving a high school that had provided me

with an extended family and taught me about my many identities, but I felt a cloud of freedom looming above me, telling me that college would be a safe and brave home for me.

Figure 17

High School Graduation, 2011

At times, my survival relied on pulling myself up from my bootstraps, but I questioned what bootstraps I had, as I felt like I had none. This questioning is when I realized that my peers, teachers, faculty, and staff had provided the bootstraps I needed to excel academically and had taught me how to harness the bootstraps properly. The tightening of these bootstraps allowed me to reflect on why my involvement and survival in high school were vital. The cultural wealth of my community had enriched my survival strategies and affirmed my bootstraps. Yosso's (2005) model highlighted the various forms of capital I drew upon: the aspirational capital that kept my

dreams of college aflame despite legal and financial barriers, the social capital found in networks of friends and teachers who believed in me, and the navigational capital that helped me maneuver through the complexities of high school life and bureaucracy. As a reminder, I did not know that I was undocumented until I was applying for college, so I wondered what gave me the purpose to be active while surviving. My answer is that I knew that I was not fully embracing or experiencing life because I was busy surviving. Each day, I made myself someone when I was taught at home that I was a no one. I constantly sought my parents' approval or even craved to hear them say, *estoy orgulloso de ti.* When those survival words did not escape their mouths, I found it within myself and heard it from a diverse, supportive community that one day I would make them proud. To my advantage, surviving in high school made me a competitive and decorative college applicant.

High school presented an environment ripe with opportunities and fraught with challenges. Each classroom, each hallway interaction, and each school event were a crossroads where the dimensions of my identity met. As Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework suggested, the oppressions I faced were both additive and multiplicative. Each aspect of my identity compounded the others to shape my experiences uniquely and complexly. By surviving abuse and homelessness during high school, I knew that I would excel in whatever undergraduate school I selected. My unshakable confidence, along with my newfound identities (undocumented and gay), enabled me to survive in high school and also explore intersectional resilience as a form of survival, as I detail in the following sections. I was excited to take all of me (undocumented, gay, low-income, first-generation Latino) to a college that I knew was going to challenge my brain, soul, and heart.

When I donned my graduation cap and analyzed my identities, I realized that I had not just survived high school; I had reshaped it. My journey through high school was not a tale of mere academic achievement but of transformation and empowerment. During these formative years, I learned lessons, forged friendships, and won battles. These were the first of many steps toward a future in which my intersectional identities would not be a barrier to success but the very foundation upon which it was built. In essence, the survival techniques I crafted from a young age, informed by my intersectionality, enabled me to not only navigate but also challenge and transform the educational spaces I entered. My experiences illuminated the dynamic nature of survival strategies as they intersected with the resilience developed at the margins of society. The lessons I learned from each educational milestone revealed the profound interplay between identity, resistance, and empowerment within the frameworks of intersectionality and CCW. My determination, accomplishments, tender love from *mis angeles*, and grit got me accepted to one of the best public universities in the nation, the University of California, Berkeley.

***Vamos Osos Dorados!* Intersectional Resilience and Survival as an Undergraduate Student**

During my first year at UC Berkeley, I quickly realized how my intersectional resilience and survival as an undergraduate student had challenged and prepared me to excel in higher education. As I attended my first class, I discovered that UC Berkeley did not have representation *de mi gente*. I was not accustomed to the lack of my culture, heritage, or skin color, considering that I was raised mainly in south-central, which is predominantly Black and Brown. From Pre-K through high school, my peers, teachers, and community were either Black or Brown, so adapting to a White institution was interesting and challenging. It was interesting because a lot of my White peers and even professors did not care for my existence. For example,

I remember that while a lot of White professors would give additional office hours, resources, and tools to my White peers, I had to email them for them to acknowledge me. I also had professors and peers question my ability to catch up to the course material, as in my group projects, I was the only Latino. The erasure of *mi gente* empowered me to be proud of my skin color and fight for diversity, equity, and inclusion inside and outside of my classrooms.

At UC Berkeley, the stark underrepresentation of *mi gente*, the lack of cultural familiarity, and the additional effort required to be recognized by White professors brought my intersectional identities to the forefront. My survival strategies in this new context drew upon the community's cultural wealth accrued over the years, utilizing aspirational and navigational capital to fight for equity and inclusion. My resilience was not just a response to adversity but a proactive approach to creating institutional change and accessing opportunities, aligning with Quinn et al.'s (2022) framework of intersectional resiliency.

The truth was that my intersectional resiliency and my pride in being Latino allowed me to survive at UC Berkeley; however, I hid a lot of traumas and secrets from my extended family and friends back in Los Angeles because I wanted to pretend that I was not struggling. I experienced further escalation of my trauma when I could not find professors who looked like me in our classrooms. Only three Latinx professors taught me throughout my 5 years at UC Berkeley, discouraging me from possibly becoming a professor. I wished that UC Berkeley had recruited my Latinx teachers from Pre-K through high school so that they could comfort me and tell me that I mattered. Although only three teachers taught me throughout that time, they cared about my survival by getting to know me outside of the classroom. By contrast, even if my professors cared for me at UC Berkeley, I felt challenged by my peers because I was often the

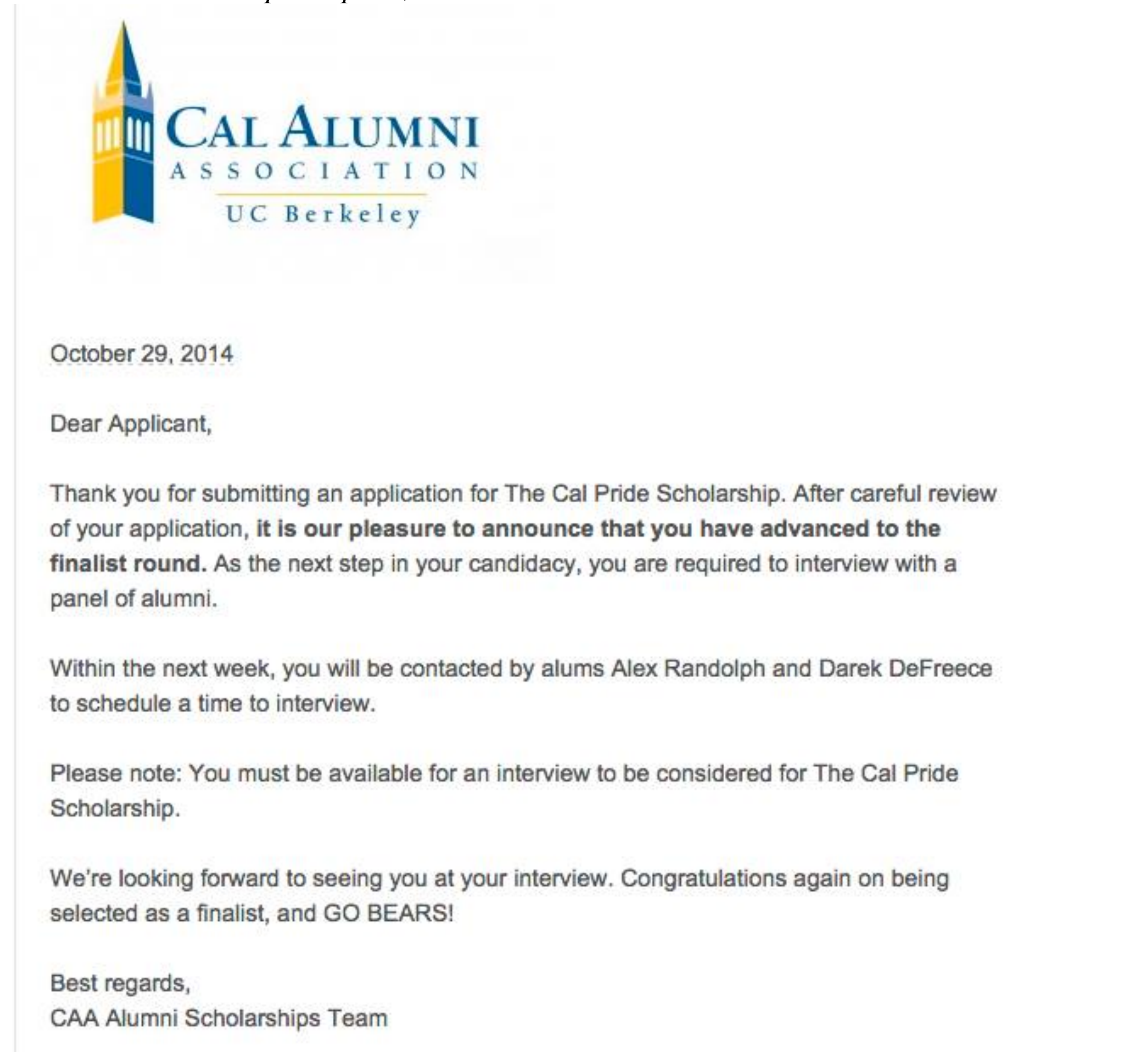
only Latino student in my classroom; however, I did not allow that to intimidate me because I knew that my visibility mattered. I realized that one of the primary reasons I had become a student leader and advocate was because it provided stability, comfort, and survival. Fortunately, I already had the qualities of a student leader and advocate because I had learned them from my broken home and Pre-K through high school experiences. I already had a robust toolkit of skills such as mobilization, community-building, and aspirational and resistance capital. These survival tools enabled me to combat the Whiteness of UC Berkeley but also enhanced my survival and identities by allowing me to change our institutional policies and student organizations.

For example, I led events that catered food, and that resource prevented me from eating a cup of noodles every day. I led retreats that allowed me to leave campus and sleep in a comfortable bed. I was the co-op housing manager and obtained multiple student housing positions to pay and afford my rent. Finally, I self-advocated and fundraised money for my education because being Latino and undocumented limited my opportunities for loans or scholarships. However, I could apply for internal scholarships to help pay my tuition, rent, and food. My advocacy for resources for my UC Berkeley community provided opportunities and scholarships for me. Due to my advocacy, I became aware of and informed of what scholarships I could apply to that would cater to my undocuqueer identity. I was fortunate to apply for internal scholarships and earned the Cal Pride scholarship, as seen in Figure 18. Access to internal scholarships enabled me to survive on campus because it paid my tuition. Fortunately, these scholarships did not require applicants to be citizens, so I applied for as many scholarships as possible to retain myself at UC Berkeley. By receiving this scholarship, I built connections with

those who interviewed me while elevating my resume so that other school departments and organizations knew I was a competitive and investable student.

Figure 18

Cal Pride Scholarship Recipient, 2014



CAL ALUMNI ASSOCIATION
UC Berkeley

October 29, 2014

Dear Applicant,

Thank you for submitting an application for The Cal Pride Scholarship. After careful review of your application, **it is our pleasure to announce that you have advanced to the finalist round.** As the next step in your candidacy, you are required to interview with a panel of alumni.

Within the next week, you will be contacted by alums Alex Randolph and Darek DeFreece to schedule a time to interview.

Please note: You must be available for an interview to be considered for The Cal Pride Scholarship.

We're looking forward to seeing you at your interview. Congratulations again on being selected as a finalist, and GO BEARS!

Best regards,
CAA Alumni Scholarships Team

Note. Personal communication (email) from the Cal Alumni Association, UC Berkeley to Cuauhtemoc Salinas Martell, received October 29, 2019.

Although the interview committee for the Cal Pride scholarship was primarily White, these personal connections allowed me to build allyship, motivating me to apply to other

competitive scholarships. Some committee members are now my Facebook friends who have followed my academic journey and supported me financially by donating their money when needed. Making my allies a part of my extended *familia* and applying for these internal scholarships meant another more leisurely day for survival and another way to explore my intersectional resilience.

I started to realize that UC Berkeley took pride in being a prominent university renowned for its academic integrity and social engagement, which served as a striking backdrop for my multiple identities and efforts to fit in as an undocumented, gay, Latino person. I began to feel ignored in the literature and research I was learning since my classes and the instruction I was receiving were White or heteronormative. Since I felt like I did not belong in my classroom, I became active and busy outside of it. I led multiple organizations and obtained various student leadership roles because I knew I could change our institutional culture to be more inclusive for people like me.

I tested and tempered my intersectional identities as I approached my second year at UC Berkeley. It was here that the struggles unique to my existence as an undocumented, gay, Latino individual came into stark relief against the backdrop of a prestigious institution known for its academic rigor and social activism. During my second year, I was a Raza Caucus Facilitator, Dean of the Students Advisory Council, and Dream House Manager; I developed funding recommendations and wrote grants for a variety of organizations, community spaces, and private foundations to ensure that the production of short- and long-term strategic plans were aiding underprivileged students. I also worked with the Chicana Latino Student Development Office and the Cross-Cultural Student Development Office. I created and provided workshops and

events that gave resources for students to understand the importance of our Latinx and cultural differences and presence on campus. These events reached the greater community, which did not share our identity and sought to build collaboration and allyship. Being responsible for multiple student leadership positions contributed to my survival strategies because I wanted to change the minds of my White peers and professors by proving to them that I could be a student leader while excelling academically. I aimed to combat the stigma that suggested I had lucked into being accepted to UC Berkeley and to show that I belonged in a school that was not intended or built for me. The satisfaction of remaining busy while keeping up with my peers motivated me to continue obtaining various student leadership positions and cultivate my resilience.

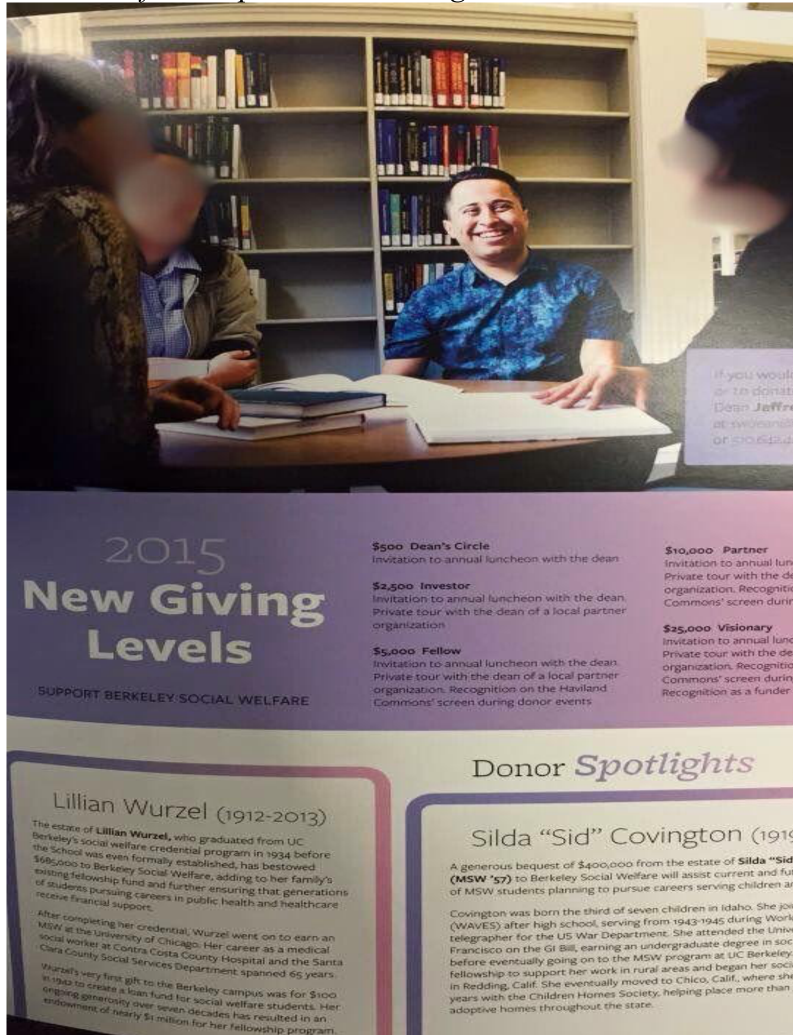
My resilience at UC Berkeley became a portal to a new phase of life where my identities would challenge and enrich my educational pursuits. On one hand, the university represented the pinnacle of public higher education, a place where intellect and innovation thrived. On the other hand, people had to wage the battle for belonging and recognition daily in that terrain. During my third and fourth years, I realized that UC Berkeley received credit for my hard work, activism, and advocacy. I was doing more for UC Berkeley than UC Berkeley was doing for me, as I could see how they used my narrative as a chess piece to move their political and institutional agendas. However, one survival mechanism I adopted was tokenization as a form of intersectional resilience. Although negatively used, tokenization gave me the platform to be visible and to represent my communities and identities. Daisley (2022) defined tokenism as the "practice of substituting genuine efforts to create self-sustaining initiatives that produce representative and inclusive outcomes for those from a place of inauthenticity or malice" (para. 3). There are many instances where higher education and even the media monopolize

tokenization from marginalized and underrepresented members to represent a larger group (Daisley, 2022). This process is unfair as many members may share the same experience but not have the same feelings or educational journeys. I found it ironic that I used tokenization as a survival strategy. I knew that UC Berkeley and my department would indulge in and monopolize my hard work, activism, and narrative, but I found it essential to stay and be visible.

For example, the Social Welfare Department added my voice, identities, and body to its websites, catalogs, and brochures to promote inclusivity and diversity, as seen in Figure 19. While I appreciated their efforts to amplify representation through my words and skin color, UC Berkeley continued to accept Latinx students at low rates. The low rates of Latinx students in each classroom I attended was a microcosm of the broader world, encouraging me to be more involved on campus and survive until graduation. UC Berkeley gave me many intersectional experiences that shaped my personal and academic life. The Social Welfare Department did not question my undocumented status, ethnicity, or sexual orientation; however, it impacted the way institutional structures influenced my undergraduate experiences, making them more challenging. I realized that my resilience grew from a deep well of intersectional awareness, influenced by Quinn et al.'s (2022) intersectional resiliency framework. I learned to anticipate setbacks and proactively create strategies to thrive in my classrooms that often felt unprepared for a student like me. Activism became not just a response but a necessity, a way to assert my place within UC Berkeley.

Figure 19

Social Welfare Department Catalog, December 2, 2015



Note. The image shown originally appeared on the webpage for the UC Berkeley Social Welfare Department Catalog in December 2015 but was subsequently removed from the web during site updates. The photograph of the webpage was taken via phone and posted to my Facebook profile on December 2, 2015, where it is still available (https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=989562701100509&set=pb.100001403647862.-2207520000&type=3).

The cultural wealth of my community, as conceptualized by Yosso (2005), was a treasure trove of resources that I tapped into relentlessly. My aspirational capital found expression in my pursuit of academic excellence and my efforts to carve out spaces for students who shared my background. The familial capital, though not based on blood relations, was found in the bonds formed with mentors and peers who became a surrogate family, guiding and supporting me

through my student leadership roles and advocacy. As someone who participated in Statement of Intent (SIR) committees, I would call admitted students and encourage them to SIR at UC Berkeley. Many Latinx students knew that UC Berkeley was not an inclusive campus for Latinx people, so they applied to other universities. The low rates of Latinx students and my many conversations with prospective Latinx students motivated me even more to continue being "the face" of our Social Welfare Department. Being featured in the Social Welfare Department materials allowed me to connect with faculty and staff. My connections with them allowed me to garner their financial support when I was running low on funds, which allowed me to survive more at UC Berkeley.

As I became the poster student for UC Berkeley, I realized how tokenization made me feel. Daisley (2022) argued that tokenization objectifies individuals and reduces them to props so schools can raise their profiles without uplifting students. Although I felt like a prop, I used tokenization as an advantage because I could represent myself publicly, empowering Latinx students to attend UC Berkeley. I was fortunate to have had positive experiences of being "the face" of my Social Welfare Department because this created many educational and financial opportunities. My narrative and educational journey opened opportunities for other researchers, scholars, and writers. They read my work and wanted to interview me after I graduated from UC Berkeley.

Although my body and voice grew tired, I was grateful to have various platforms to share my narrative, leadership, and identities. As I started to share my journey with the public eye, my leadership at UC Berkeley became more than a role; it was my lifeline to survival. My survival provided a platform to voice the concerns of those often unheard and overlooked. As I took on

roles in student government and advocacy groups, I navigated my educational journey and sought to smooth the path for others. My narrative and educational journey opened opportunities for other researchers, scholars, and nonprofit organizations to connect with me, which gave me the financial support I needed to retain myself at UC Berkeley. For example, many nonprofit organizations offered gift cards and money to me as an incentive to hear about my survival journey at UC Berkeley. Scholars and researchers connected with me on a humane level by ensuring that my story of resilience before attending UC Berkeley was authentic. They invited me to eat, paid for necessities like toiletries, and connected me with professors from different UC schools. Even after experiencing educational survival, I constantly sought ways to enhance my resilience because I knew that our society oppressed my identities. As I finished my third year at UC Berkeley, I realized I had not had time to live because I felt like I was always surviving; however, through this process, I found moments of pause, breathing, and serenity.

Preparing to enter my fourth year, I challenged institutional norms while spearheading conferences, events, and student programming that created brave and safe spaces for undocumented Latinx people. I also found that *mis angeles* were more invested in me because they wanted to support me in my final years at UC Berkeley. They advocated fiercely so I could afford my tuition while giving me part-time jobs to afford my housing. Their guidance and support made my fourth year less stressful, allowing me to focus on my accomplishments. During this time, I discovered I would be the first in my family to obtain a bachelor's degree while undocumented. My hard work allowed me to reconnect with my mom, and I started to heal my childhood trauma. As a fourth-year student, I had an opportunity in 2015 to take graduation

pictures early. I accumulated various graduation stoles and cords to demonstrate my hard work at UC Berkeley, as seen in Figure 20.

Figure 20

Graduation from UC Berkeley, 2015

Throughout my five years at UC Berkeley, I managed over 30 student leadership positions and over 15 jobs while maintaining an excellent academic record. I concluded my fifth-year undergraduate journey by being a student senator on campus, where I accomplished all three senate platforms I ran on. As student senators, we needed to campaign and encourage students to vote for us. In past years (2016 and before), it was rare for independent senators to win, but with hard work and dedication, I won a senate seat. My proudest accomplishment was

collaborating with the University Health Services, Equity and Inclusion, and Student Affairs offices to revamp and reinvigorate the Health Opportunity Fund (HOF), as seen in Figure 21.

Figure 21

Health Opportunity Fund Flyer, 2016

Note. Health Opportunity Fund Flyer created by Lexi Goldwyn and I on October 2016. Flyer posted on my Facebook on October 4, 2016 https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1194299143960196&set=pb.100001403647862.-2207520000&type=3.

I implemented the HOF by challenging UC Berkeley because they lacked free mental and medical services for marginalized students. I realized that when the institution failed to provide the resources I needed, I took the initiative to create and implement these resources for students in similar situations as me. As a low-income first-generation student, I knew that my medical

expenses were a problem as I could not rely on my family to rescue me with medications and support. Being far away from my extended family, I knew I had to create institutional change so that I and my community could survive at UC Berkeley by obtaining free mental and medical services. The HOF continues to exist as of June 2024, raising over $1 million and supporting over 65,500 students to offest medical and health charges. My work as a student senator brought me joy, as the HOF has impacted students I have never met. I am elated that this resource has left a footprint at UC Berkeley because it has supported students' survival, enabling them to pay their medical and health bills without using their finances.

As I culminated my studies at UC Berkeley, I realized that my passion for being a student activist and advocate had distracted me from my depression. I often felt alone at UC Berkeley because I was frequently the only *DACA* student in my class and student spaces. This loneliness allowed me to adopt the concept that I was not fully living if I was not fully active, so I knew that being involved in school would give me the survival tactics I needed to retain myself at UC Berkeley. For example, my student activism allowed me to obtain multiple student leadership positions that enabled my peers, faculty, and staff to trust me on decisions to lead student protests and movements across our campus. My student advocacy allowed me to speak with our directors, faculty, and staff on how we could set up student programming to impact the lives of undocumented students by providing them with housing opportunities, scholarships, and funds to support their tuition costs. I realized that my peers' survival was my survival because I felt comfortable knowing I had someone on campus with whom I could speak and empathize.

My peers' experiences showed that mere survival was never an option. The student leadership roles coerced us, often impeding our happiness. Our shared struggle and resilience

underscored the urgent need for better support and resources for undocumented student leaders. Our retention and lived experiences allowed me to survive on a campus that made my undergraduate career difficult. UC Berkeley was the most challenging school I had graduated from; however, I am thankful for it because it prepared me to excel professionally and at other institutions. Nevertheless, I thank my advocacy, innovation, *mis angeles*, chosen family, and survival experiences at UC Berkeley because they gave me access to apply to competitive jobs. Upon reflection, my time at Berkeley was as much about academic learning as it was about life learning. My social welfare degree was proof of my intellectual mastery and symbolized the barriers I had overcome. The strategies I developed at UC Berkeley were not just about surviving but redefining what it meant to be an undocumented student, a person of color, and a member of the LGBTQ+ community in higher education.

There were other traumatic stories that I have chosen to keep sheltered to protect my emotional or mental well-being; however, I thank my UC Berkeley degree because it gave me the social and intellectual capital to apply to my first professional job. In addition, my social work degree and my lived experiences gave me the knowledge and resources to serve vulnerable communities. Waking up to my UC Berkeley degree made my tears and trauma worth it because I knew my survival meant more than just me surviving. It meant giving hope to all undocumented gay Latinos, showing them that they could attend prestigious institutions and overcome institutional challenges. UC Berkeley taught me how to cry, fear, laugh, smile, and wish and dream for a better life. Most importantly, I was no longer afraid to love my brown skin, share my immigrant narrative, and embrace my gayness. I was only scared of not being proud of being an *oso dorado*!

***Vamos Azul!* Intersectional Resilience and Survival as a Master's Student**

Transitioning from undergraduate to graduate school was more than a shift in academic intensity; it was a step into a realm where my multiple identities could clash and harmonize in new, profound ways. UC Berkeley taught me that graduate school is a microcosm of society, where we replicate and sometimes challenge structures of privilege and power. As an undocumented, gay, Latino student, I faced distinct challenges and opportunities, often relying on the intersectional toolkit I had been building throughout my life. I knew that my graduate experience would allow my narrative of survival and resilience to continue. Still, it is vital to share that before accepting the University of Michigan (UMICH) offer, the Student Services Department flew me to Michigan for free. They knew I had other competitive offers or master's programs to choose from, so I believe UMICH flew me in so that I could visit the campus and connect with faculty, staff, and potential peers. After careful review, I decided Michigan would be my new home. However, since I had visited the campus for only one day, I failed to see the lack of diversity among the students, faculty, and staff.

My lack of awareness and many of my Latinx peers not being invited to visit UMICH made graduate school more challenging. Attending UMICH tarnished my love as I journeyed through intersections of my identities and navigated exclusive institutional student spaces. At UMICH, my graduate experience was about asserting my presence, seeing staff and faculty inclusivity, and carving out a space for myself and others like me. At UMICH, three Latinx professors taught me, which reminded me of my experience at UC Berkeley. Although three Latinos taught me, they all provided me with gentle care, love, and support, giving me the survival I needed to graduate on time. Seeing their faces and skin color made me a proud

graduate student because it gave me the empowerment I needed to become a faculty member potentially. During this time, I realized the power of representation and how I could rely on it for survival. As I began my first year, I realized that my skin color was not represented inside and outside of my classrooms. So, I mirrored my student activism, advocacy, and survival from the experiences I had obtained at UC Berkeley by getting involved at UMICH.

As I stated earlier, since I had had the opportunity to connect with faculty, staff, and peers before enrolling at UMICH, I had already built rapport with the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Director, which gave me a competitive edge to apply to one of their student roles. As the Program Assistant for the DEI Office, and having been nominated by my peers, faculty, and staff to apply for the school's DEI Student Advisory Board (Dean of Students Office), I had the opportunity to lead multiple race equity conversations with students, staff, and faculty while leading and organizing our DEI efforts and strategic plans. I identified social change policies at the university level to create cultural shifts. In addition to the roles above, I was the Leadership Development Graduate Coordinator at the university-based Spectrum Center; I was in the Share, Explore, Engage, Discover Planning Committee, a member of Common Roots, President of the Latinx Social Work Coalition, and I was on the UMICH men's volleyball team. Although I was excited to obtain various leadership positions at UMICH, I realized how difficult it was to navigate higher education based on the state I was living in.

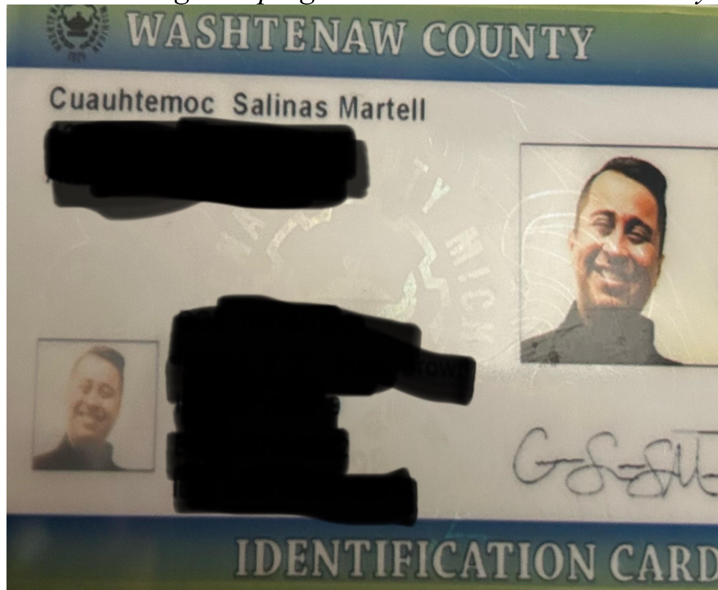
California is known to be an undocumented-friendly state; however, Michigan affected the way I managed my graduate studies because of its politics and state laws. Since 2008, Michigan has required proof of legal residency for driver's licenses and state IDs (Lobo, 2023). This can make it difficult for undocumented students to travel to campus or file for state funds,

scholarships, or educational support. Allowing individuals to obtain proper identification, regardless of documentation status, would remove barriers to healthcare, financial services, and housing (Lobo, 2023). The plan would also extend the ability to obtain identification for *DACA* recipients (Lobo, 2023).

This state injustice prompted a collective effort, leveraging my roles as a DEI Program Assistant and Latinx SW Coalition President and working alongside the Student Union, First Generation Subcommittee, Office of Global Activities, and Office of Student Services. Together, we orchestrated the Letter Writing Campaign on July 16, 2019, a decisive event where we penned letters to Michigan state and national representatives, advocating for humanitarian reform in our immigration system. We also partnered with the Washtenaw County Clerk's office, facilitating the application process for a Washtenaw ID. This initiative aimed to improve the lives of community members who relied on it as their primary form of identification, even if they did not require a second ID. The impact of this event was tangible, as I experienced a sense of security upon receiving my Washtenaw County ID, as depicted in Figure 22.

Figure 22

Letter-Writing Campaign and ID Event Hosted on July 16, 2019



This event was challenging to host and spearhead because only a few citizens of Washtenaw County were aware of undocumented students. My role was not only to provide educational resources and opportunities to build community but also to utilize my voice and share my experiences as an undocumented student with the community of Washtenaw County. Despite the many challenges we encountered, we were able to offer IDs to our community while educating our faculty, staff, and students on the importance of supporting undocumented students.

As the State of Michigan and I tried to support undocumented people and students, UMICH had an Undocumented Student Center that aimed to support undocumented students. In October 2015, the Rackham Graduate School (2024) adopted a resource guide that supported undocumented and *DACA* graduate students. In addition, students with *DACA* (2012) could receive stipends and be appointed to graduate student job opportunities (Rackham Graduate

School, 2024). Although there was limited UMICH need-based financial aid for undocumented undergraduate and graduate students, the Undocumented Student Center and the graduate program still supported their undocumented students in pursuing higher education (Rackham Graduate School, 2024). Aside from receiving a full ride, I also selected UMICH for its intentional focus on supporting graduate students.

My leadership roles and the comfort of the Rackham Graduate School distracted me from the seasonal depression I was going through. I also utilized this distraction to connect with faculty, staff, and peers outside my social work program. For example, faculty and staff from other departments and student centers nominated me to work at the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good, which aimed to redefine and interconnect the immigration and educational access issues within comprehensive immigration reform, working with its nationwide network of partners. This could impact how the larger national policy discourse addressed these issues (University of Michigan Marsal Family School of Education, 2024). In this role, I saw how higher education impacted immigrant students in Michigan and how we could create a resource guide and toolkit to support students in pursuing higher education.

I was also selected to be my major's student representative, as only one student per major was selected to meet with faculty and staff to discuss the School of Social Work's fall orientation, department needs, and how to recruit and retain more students of color. These roles and responsibilities enabled me to have a significant impact at the university level and on the State of Michigan. I was recognized and given external scholarships because of my student and community activism, as seen in Figure 23. This scholarship impacted my survival by allowing me to pay an outstanding medical bill when I got severely sick.

Figure 23

State of Michigan Recognition/Scholarship, October 2019

STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
LANSING

GRETCHEN WHITMER
GOVERNOR

JEFF DONOFRIO
DIRECTOR

Dear Cuauhtemoc Salinas Martell,

CONGRATULATIONS we are pleased to inform you that you have been selected for one of nine $1,000 scholarships to be awarded by the Hispanic Latino Commission of Michigan. We congratulate you!

You are required to attend our annual event to accept your scholarship. You will be introduced along with the other Scholarship Recipients from all around the state on October 10, 2019, at 6 pm at the "Statewide Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration" at the GOEI Center, 818 Butterworth St SW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504

Note. Personal communication (email) from the Hispanic Latino Commission of Michigan to Cuauhtemoc Salinas Martell, received September 30, 2019.

Although I was a student, community leader, and activist, I also had to prioritize being a full-time student. While at UMICH, I took an Integrative Seminar in Child Welfare course, which taught me how to integrate social justice frameworks to develop interventions for child mistreatment. The seminar further explored how socioeconomic status and cultural practices impact mistreatment. In addition, I enrolled in a course on Child Welfare and Maltreatment, which equipped me with methodologies that focused on child welfare practice and child maltreatment. These courses allowed me to reflect on the importance of creating stable homes for children so they could become healthy adults.

After completing a rigorous 16-month program, I realized I did not have time to live because I was busy surviving and educating people on what a *DACA* student was. I would go to

the financial aid department and teach them the registration requirements for a *DACA* student and what paperwork was needed to complete my student profile. Navigating UMICH was easier because I acquired the necessary tools and education from UC Berkeley to survive. I realized that the student services office was one of the main reasons I survived at Michigan. They offered me financial support to not only afford my housing but also my tuition. They protected and loved me while ensuring my identities were valued and seen. Whenever I had a depressive episode, I knew that *mis angeles* would provide comfort. They did not know that I was going through seasonal depression. I never spoke aloud about my challenges because they only saw a happy, energetic, and hard-working Salinas. *Mis angeles* at UMICH treated me like family because they knew that my multiple identities were too tricky to navigate at times.

One incident that I will never forget was the day of my graduation. My mom, along with my extended family, celebrated my graduation. As we ate in a restaurant, my mom whispered to me *¿Por qué nos miran así?* I did not notice other people's gaze until my mom pointed it out. Interestingly, my mom felt the White gaze before I did. I usually ignored or adapted to it because it felt routine. The gaze seemed to heighten and become more robust as people seemed perplexed and shocked that a Latino had graduated with a master's from the University of Michigan. As the White families celebrated their relatives, I was thankful to share my accomplishments and graduation with my Latinx family. What I concluded was that I had become desensitized to racism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Through my undergraduate and master's journeys, I had to normalize or numb these different phobias and isms to survive. My complacency with these feelings allowed me to stay focused on my studies despite feeling depressed or exhausted. Although surviving UMICH was easier than surviving UC Berkeley, it was still complex.

Nevertheless, I graduated with a 4.0 GPA while receiving awards, graduation stoles, scholarships, and recognition from UMICH; these accolades gave me the confidence and edge to apply for doctoral programs, as seen in Figures 24 and 25.

Figure 24

University of Michigan Graduation Ceremony, December 2019

Figure 25

Inaugural DEI Impact Awardee, December 2018

Note. Image of the DEI Impact Award issued by The School of Social Work, University of Michigan, to Cuauhtemoc Salinas Martell, December 2018.

My resilience was not static but grew in complexity and depth during my time at UMICH. During that time, I lived and felt the theoretical concepts of intersectionality I had studied, which informed the strategies I used to thrive academically and personally. It was a community that provided cultural wealth in various forms that enriched my graduate experience. My familial and social capital bolstered my aspirational capital in new relationships and connections. This network was vital to my survival strategy, providing a safety net and a springboard for my academic and extracurricular endeavors. The activism and leadership roles I adopted during graduate school were extensions of my identity. Each initiative, whether aimed at

campus policy or broader societal change, was a platform to advocate for issues intimately tied to my experiences and those of my community. As I reflected on my graduate journey, I saw it as an essential period of growth that shaped me into an advocate for change. The conclusion of my studies at UMICH was not just an academic milestone but a declaration of my preparedness to utilize my education, resilience, and CCW to make tangible impacts in our society, and it gave me the empowerment I needed to pursue my doctoral studies.

***Vamos Leones!* Intersectional Resilience and Survival as a Doctoral Student**

Pursuing a doctorate is a transformative journey that often transcends academic rigor to become a personal odyssey of self-discovery, resilience, and impact. At Loyola Marymount University (LMU), the path to my Doctorate in Educational Leadership for Social Justice became a mirror reflecting the intersectionality of my identity and the complexity of navigating academia as an undocumented, gay, Latino man. Entering the doctorate program at LMU was not just a continuation of my educational journey but a reaffirmation of my commitment to social justice. I recognized that undertaking this highest academic achievement would mean confronting systems of privilege and advocating for transformative change from within. I knew that at LMU, my intersectional identities would interact with the academic world more profoundly and with more nuance. I grappled with advanced theoretical constructs and the institutional and societal structures these theories sought to critique and change. I reflected on my undergraduate and graduate experiences and how my survival experiences provided a unique lens to view and address educational inequities. However, as an undocumented, gay, low-income, first-generation Latino, I hesitated to apply to LMU because I knew my intersectional resilience and survival as a doctoral student would present me with more heartache, trauma, and pain.

First, I knew that LMU was a private institution, meaning that tuition and schooling would be expensive. Second, I knew that it was a Jesuit institution, so I was not sure how supportive and welcoming this school would be toward someone who identified as gay. Lastly, after reading some of the demographics of the doctoral students, I knew that this school was a PWI. However, knowing I could succeed and survive in the face of these negative factors, I got a doctorate in Educational Leadership for Social Justice (EdD) because it embodied my roots and survival.

LMU was a challenging and numbing experience because I had to prioritize my survival yet again. Although some faculty and staff were terrific, their relationship with me and others in my cohort could have been more authentic. Since I could not find a home in some of the faculty, I relied on Cohort 19 to create memories I will cherish forever. My cohort was also one of the primary reasons why I survived LMU. They took care of me when I was in the hospital, when my coach passed away, and when the world felt dark. We shared a collective trauma of surviving LMU that no one will take away from us. Despite feeling loved by my cohort, being the only *DACA* recipient in my cohort felt lonely and scary, especially in my first 2 years.

At LMU, my plea for support and help went unnoticed. For example, it took me about 2 years for the dean of our program to listen to my voice. After exchanging over 30 emails and finally receiving faculty support, I was granted internal scholarships to afford my tuition. Multiple *angeles* advocated, allowing me to retain myself at LMU. I needed to find out how *mis angeles* advocated for me because there were moments when my self-advocacy and energy felt short. After all, people constantly told me that LMU would not provide the financial support I was promised when I enrolled at LMU. Although my survival was running thin for the first time,

mis angeles believed in my resilience, voice, and purpose. Because of *mis angeles* (including some of my dissertation committee members), I continued my studies to become the first doctor in my family.

However, my work as a student activist and leader still needed to be completed as my peers also had tension with LMU. As the founding president of my cohort, LMU reminded me that institutional change is student-led and that difference must come from us. Through my doctoral journey, I realized how vile our school systems are because they intentionally or unintentionally force us to struggle. However, it is through this struggle that we share a collective trauma that allows us to create fond memories that we can share. We created these fond memories through social events and gatherings and by utilizing our in-person classes to celebrate and learn from one another, as seen in Figure 26. These get-togethers improved our LMU experience and gave me an extended family that helped me survive at LMU. Although my cohort members became my family, I still felt excluded, worried about paying for my tuition, and did not feel satisfied or proud to be an LMU student. Most of my disappointment came from LMU feeling too White, rich, and disconnected. I did my best to get involved, just as I had done at UC Berkeley and UMICH, but I did not feel the same love and passion, as my doctoral experience felt forced and unwelcoming.

Figure 26

LMU Cohort 19, December 2021

My negative feelings towards LMU were rooted in our program, which disconnected me from my struggles. I felt like I needed to cry or speak out loudly to make myself heard. Yes, *mis angeles* supported me; however, LMU as a school neglected me, which made me feel unwelcome. I also encountered faculty who claimed to love and support me as their own, but that love was only temporary or false, which explained why I always felt forced or tensed. I also realized that our program was social justice-centered but that LMU focused on something other than the experiences of marginalized individuals. Despite my many concerns at LMU, I was fortunate to have built a family that loved my identity.

My extended family expanded when I decided to play for the men's volleyball team. I was eager to return to the court and show my talents, but I was nervous about how I would be perceived. Despite feeling nervous, our program director informed me that I was the first-ever graduate athlete to play on an LMU team. This news made me want to represent my communities more because I only saw one of me whenever I stepped onto the court. As explained earlier, volleyball was a hidden survival tactic I had used to get through school, so I knew I did not want to give up on my inner child because volleyball had saved my life. I also had an angel in heaven (Jean Morgan) cheering me on. However, I realized in my first year playing that my teammates could not connect with me, and I could not connect with them. As the only undocumented, Latino, low-income, gay player, I could not find a home on the court; however, I still attended practices, games, and tournaments so that other students who shared my identities could feel empowered to be involved in the athletic world. After finishing my season, I discovered that I had been nominated for Male Athlete of the Year.

My nomination gave me the motivation to play one more year for LMU, which presented me with more anxiety, trauma, and hurt because I still could not connect with my teammates. I concluded that this disconnect stemmed from my gayness, age, and class. As a seasoned player, I could not help but think that ageism, classism, and homophobia played an apparent role in why I could not connect with my teammates and other players on different teams. Most, if not all, of my teammates, were young, had supportive and wealthy parents, and identified as straight. I was excluded from going on outings with them at times, and they would not notice my efforts to have one-on-one conversations because I could see their discomfort in talking to me. In addition, most players had experience playing for clubs or had private coaching lessons and coaches. I was self-

taught and could not afford athletic resources or tools to support me playing on the men's team. I think that what helped me survive in the athletic world was my talent, some of my teammates and parents' understanding of me, and my high school coach's belief in me. Whenever I wanted to give up playing on the team, I would remember how people praised my skills, energy, and authenticity.

As I was embracing myself on the court, others saw the value I brought to my academics. On April 29, 2024, I received an email from the Senior Director for Academic Communications saying that I was the first School of Education (SOE) and LMU *DACA* doctoral student to graduate. Although excited, I was also sad that someone like me had taken this long to be the first. However, I realized that being the first meant that I could be a beacon of hope for other undocumented students. This historic moment was not just a testament to my resilience; I hoped it would empower those wanting to pursue higher education. Blazing a trail as the first in any endeavor is a testament to the time, energy, and personal sacrifices invested. My LMU journey reminded me that, as pioneers, we are not just setting a precedent but also creating a foundation for us to claim our existence and power. On May 5, 2024, only three students had the opportunity to meet the commencement speaker Janelle Monae. I not only met her in person (as seen in Figure 27), but she also said my name during her commencement speech. After realizing the history that I was making, I received love, care, and hugs not only from my committee members and mom (Figure 28), but I could hear my ancestors, hidden figures, and community cheering for me. Although LMU did not feel safe, these moments of accomplishment combatted all my negative feelings about LMU.

Figure 27

Janelle Monae and I, May 5, 2024, at the LMU Commencement (2024)

Figure 28

Dissertation Committee, Mom, and I, May 5, 2024, LMU Commencement (2024)

As I culminated my doctoral studies and reflected on my survival at LMU, my goal never wavered as I desired to write children's literature about the experiences of undocumented and *DACA* students who are abused and neglected. Naming the abuse at home was difficult for me because I did not read about abuse when I was younger, so I did not know how to name it. At 16, I started to name my abuser by El Diablo and began to write about my survival secretly. When finishing this dissertation, I hoped that writing children's literature would provide children with a foundation of love, acceptance, and grit. I hoped that they would be able to change their home or schooling circumstances if someone was abusing them.

The doctoral program tested my resilience in ways I had never experienced. It demanded intersectional resilience informed by each layer of my identity and every challenge I had overcome. I leaned into the resilience framework, recognizing that my journey was shaping me and contributing to the larger narrative of resilience in higher education. Throughout my doctoral studies, I continued to draw upon the community's cultural wealth, which was instrumental in my prior achievements. Each form of capital—whether aspirational, navigational, familial, or resistant—was vital in my doctoral research and the advocacy work accompanying my academic pursuits.

As I immersed myself in doctoral work, I realized that my impact extended beyond academics. I engaged in advocacy that aimed to shape policy, inform practice, and ultimately transform the educational landscape for marginalized communities. This work was not just an academic exercise but a practical application of my life experiences and scholarly research. As I concluded my time at LMU, I reflected on how the doctorate was more than a degree; it was a testament to my survival and a platform for change. This degree was not the end but the

beginning of a new chapter where my research, informed by intersectional resilience and cultural wealth, could lead to meaningful change within the educational system and beyond. Before concluding this chapter, I must discuss the lessons learned from my survival and intersectionality in higher education.

Discussion of Themes: Lessons Learned from My Survival and Intersectionality

Mi Identidad Gay Me Enseñó Sobre Persistencia

My gay identity taught me about *persistencia* and how beautiful it is to play with all the rainbow colors. At times, people do not take my feminine gay body seriously because they perceive me as eccentric, too dramatic, or too charismatic. To be more specific, throughout the undocuqueer movement, the expression "coming out twice" has been used, and it has applied to me, as I have had to come out of the shadows as an undocumented person and come out of the closet as a gay male. Coming out twice was tiring, traumatic, and heavy on the body; however, it was vital for me to say I was undocuqueer because it was rare to find undocuqueer peers.

Although this spoke to my undocuqueer experiences, it was vital for me to shed light on how my gayness and immigrant identity coexisted with one another. My gay identity made me reflect on the mistreatment I felt at school and home. There were many times when I questioned my gay identity and became depressed because I did not feel accepted by some of my peers and family. During my depression, I started to realize that my LGBTQ+ community did not have the support system they needed to survive in school or at home. The Trevor Project (www.thetrevorproject.org) estimated that more than 1.8 million LGBTQ+ young people (ages 13–24) in the United States consider suicide each year, and at least one attempts suicide every 45 seconds (Mowreader, 2023). The Trevor Project's 2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental

Health of LGBTQ Young People also found that 41% of LGBTQ+ young people considered suicide in the past year, including transgender and nonbinary youth (The Trevor Project, 2023) I was fortunate to have survived my mistreatment and depression. Still, I felt saddened that many members of my LGBTQ+ community consistently feel unheard or not fully accepted by their family, friends, or society. As I maneuvered through higher education, I learned how my gayness taught me about *persistencia* while allowing me to understand how my Latino identity taught me about *crecimiento*.

El Maricón

I knew I was gay before I came to know that I was undocumented. In the 3rd grade, I remembered having a crush on a boy, but I had thought that it was not normal because I often saw a cis man and woman together. On top of that, my stepfather disapproved and introduced me to a vibrant green plastic belt he had in the closet. I often heard the men in my life saying that I was a *maricon* and that they took advantage of me when I was sleeping or when my mom or siblings were not at home. I kept my gayness silent from 3rd grade until high school, but my peers and teachers frequently encouraged my gayness during many moments. I remember that during high school and even middle school, I hated going to my physical education class because that meant changing in the locker rooms. I remembered having an entire row to myself because none of the men wanted to change in front of me. The slurs and bullying did not damper my witty and eccentric spirit because I knew that the women in my life would protect me. This protection is why my chosen family was vital to my survival. They knew that I was gay before I accepted myself. The women in my life taught me how tender it was to live in a gay body, while the gay men in my life taught me how essential it was to have men of color in higher education.

Although I was harassed and bullied, my gayness gave me the strength to speak up about the injustices I faced as a gay person, as seen in Figure 29. I spoke about my gay identity on *Splinter* (Clock & Pandika, 2017) and my LGBTQ+ advocacy. As someone who took up space in hetero and White spaces—such as club sports, academia, and even my professional jobs—I knew I had a duty to live my authentic life and not care about how people would perceive my colors. As a gay, short, feminine-presenting person, I often got treated with disrespect, and I heard the whispers that my vibrancy and creativity were too much, especially at professional jobs. Because people did not take me seriously, my feminine gay body did not grant me any male privileges. The way I dressed, the way I talked, and the way I acted impacted the way administrators, institutions, and professional careers addressed me. Sometimes, I felt invisible and found myself being or getting loud to make myself heard. My gayness, coupled with my undocumented identity, made me even more resilient because I had to use my voice, even if that meant feeling scared about speaking up or out.

Figure 29

LGBTQ+ Rally at UC Berkeley, October 11, 2016

At home, my family abused me because they thought my colors were too loud, and in my professional career, the colors I used often turned black and white because my style had too much flavor. At school, they celebrated my gayness at times, but they found my presence too noticeable. My gayness prevented me from being on a more competitive volleyball team or getting a job that I qualified for because the idea of a cis man was more important than I was. Despite being closeted multiple times, my gay identity had to be in this study because it was an identity that taught me to survive. If I did not exist as a Latino student, I knew I could rely on my gayness to talk for me as a survival tactic. My identity as a low-income, first-generation undocumented student has had different layers that need further exploration.

Mi Identidad Latino Me Enseñó Sobre Crecimiento

At an early age, I did not have my Latino identity challenged because many of my schools catered to minority students. For example, in the 2024 data the Early Education Center shows that 66% Latinx students attended that school (Donors Choose, 2024). According to Partnership LA (2017), in 2017 my elementary school was ranked the fifth highest need of all 492 elementary schools in the district, and 88% of its students were Latino, 95% qualified for free and reduced-price lunch, 30% were classified as English Learners, and 15% qualified for special education services (Partnership LA, 2017). In 2024, my middle school was 63.3% Latinx, and 86% of students were economically disadvantaged (U.S. News, 2024). In 2021 my high school was among the top 59 high schools for Latino students (Munoz & Manthey, 2021). It served 58% of Latinos and had a graduation rate of 80% (Munoz & Manthey, 2021). These statistics and data are relevant as they show how my Latino identity did not feel foreign as I navigated the Pre-K to high school educational system.

When I applied and attended UC Berkeley as a freshman in 2011, it was fourth in the nation, with more than 52,900 admissions, resulting in an admissions rate of 21% (Gilmore, 2011). Only 12.6% of Latinx students got admitted, compared to 31.6% of White students. Of the total students enrolled, 21.8% were first-generation, 24.6% were from Los Angeles County, 18.9% were out-of-state students, and 11.3% were international students (Public Affairs, 2011). These numbers are significant because it is rare for Latino students to get admitted to UC Berkeley. Moreover, I was not lucky to have gotten admitted; I was more fortunate that I survived UC Berkeley while being Latino and first-generation.

After graduating and surviving UC Berkeley, I realized that Latinx students were rare diamonds in prestigious institutions. As the President of the Latinx Coalition at the University of Michigan (2018-2019), I discovered we only had about 40 Latinx students among the 400 students in the Social Welfare Department. In 2021, at LMU, the enrolled student population, both undergraduate and graduate, was 41.3% White and 25.3% Hispanic/Latino (Data USA, 2024). As I continued to pursue higher education, I started to realize that my Latino identity felt silenced and not visible. I also learned that prestigious universities did not welcome someone like me, so I had to rely on my Latino identity to define *crecimiento*. *Crecimiento*, for me, meant growth. I overcame the pain and struggles but found tangible solutions to retain myself at these prestigious universities. This meant obtaining multiple jobs and student leadership roles and elevating those roles to promote DEI.

El Orgulloso Latino

My family was big but also toxic in that their Latinx roots grew deep. I wrote this because my grandparents were homophobic and came from a generation where the man had to be a man, and the Latino could not show a sign of weakness, vulnerability, or Whiteness. Since my biological father shared my first and last name and my grandparents and family did not like my father, I always felt like I was the least-loved one. I also feel like I was the forgotten child because my family called me Guero. They gave me that nickname because Acapulcanos are known to have brown, darker skin. When I was younger, I never knew the significance of being called Guero. Usually, nicknames are terms of endearment, but later, realizing why I was named Guero, I knew that it had a deeper meaning that I disapproved of. My family often whispered, "Here comes the White, educated boy." Many of my family members resented me because I

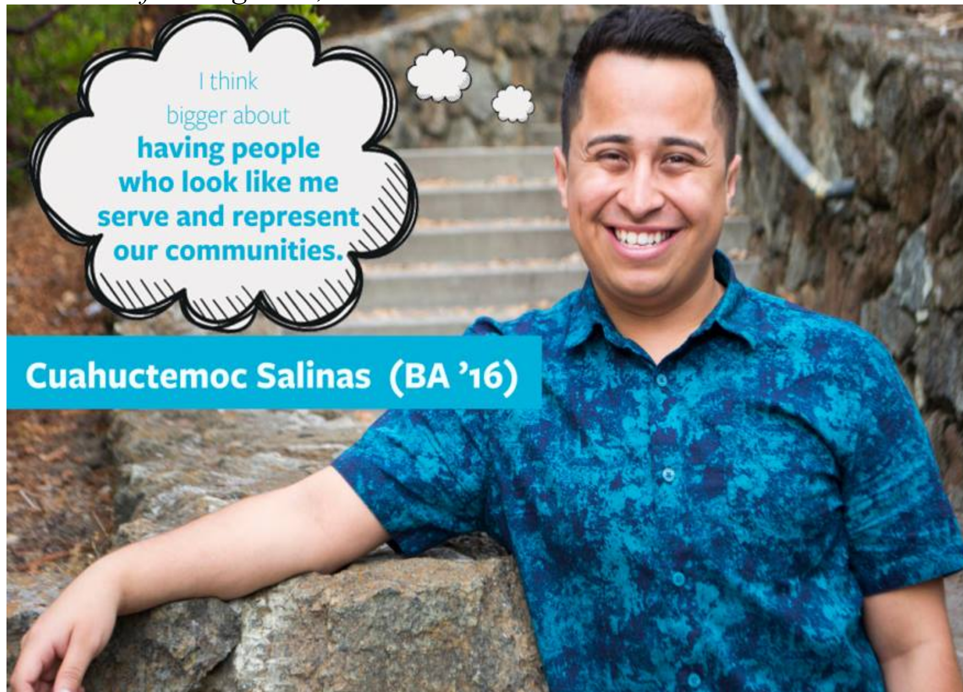
quickly adopted the English language, allowing me to excel in school. They thought I had a chip on my shoulder, which scared my family because they thought I would forget my roots. Despite my family's disapproval of me, I was Guero at home, but my proud Latinx name is Cuauhtemoc Salinas Martell at school. School was usually my safe place, but the kids were mean. My peers mocked my name and laughed at my broken English, but their words motivated me to excel in school. During Pre-K–8th grade, the school system tried putting me in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, but my teachers went against the school system and recommended me for honors English courses. Their belief in me and their advocacy gave me the confidence to understand English; however, I was slowly losing my Spanish tongue.

Despite losing some Spanish, I started understanding my Latino identity because this was what people first saw. My brownness and Latino identity were common in my Pre-K to 12th-grade schools and communities. My Latino identity never seemed challenged because the schools I attended were for low-income and communities of color. The many homes I created from Pre-K to the 12th grade felt safe and brave because I saw people who looked like me. However, my skin became a conversation at UC Berkeley rather than a celebration. I had to justify or explain my acceptance constantly, which made me angry and encouraged me to become a student activist and advocate.

Even as a student leader, I felt that UC Berkeley did not care about my Latino body, but the institution valued and cared about my pictures in brochures to show how diverse the campus was. For example, the Social Welfare Department or the student services offices invited me to be the face of their outreach materials. Figure 30 shows how they used my words to promote diversity and wanted me to encourage people to donate to UC Berkeley.

Figure 30

Social Welfare/Big Give, 2015



Note. The image originally featured on the UB Berkeley Social Welfare website November 16, 2015, but was subsequently removed from the web during site updates. The image was posted on my Facebook profile on November 16, 2015, where it is still accessible (https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=982549278468518&set=pb.100001403647862.-2207520000&type=3).

Even if I felt tokenized, I wanted to show other Latinx people that they could pursue higher education. There were many student-centered spaces where I held leadership positions that promoted the recruitment and retention of Latinx students; however, the number of Latinx students stayed the same. The constant feeling of disapproval and conversing with the admissions office staff about recruiting and retaining more Latinx students became central to my student leadership position. Even after providing presentations on the importance of recruiting and retaining Latinx students, I saw more White students getting admitted than Latinx students. Despite feeling discouraged, I continued speaking to families at recruitment events about how pursuing higher education as a Latino had changed my life.

When pursuing higher education, one leaves the comfort of their home. Many of my peers got homesick, but fortunately, I did not share their sentiments because I had no home to return to. After every school break, I returned to Los Angeles, and I was welcomed with "*y ya se cree gringo",* which means "he thinks he is White now." Pursuing higher education intimidated my family, and I learned that being educated meant having a "higher" status in society. Nevertheless, *mi piel* has always followed me and, at times, has presented unwanted challenges; however, I am thankful for *mi piel* and how I have used my skin to connect with my Latino identity and survive.

As a Latino undocumented student, I saw and experienced many prestigious institutions limiting our opportunities to pursue higher education. Attending prestigious institutions and graduating from them was strenuous; however, I quickly realized that prestigious institutions needed to have adequate tools, resources, or financial aid to support my survival on their campuses. I found that many admission staff and directors lacked the financial resources to support me while I was trying to select a master's program. For example, I remember going to Columbia University and speaking to the director about whether there were any internal scholarships that I could apply for as a Latino or undocumented student, and he told me no. I wanted to be the first in my family to attend an Ivy League university, but their bias, callousness, and lack of empathy prevented me from attending their school. I realized that every decision I made was for my survival and retention. I took it upon myself to make bold life changes even if prestigious universities told me it was impossible. As a child, I frequently heard "no," so as an adult, I have come to reject the use of that word in my vocabulary. Every time I received a college degree, I saw fewer undocumented and *DACA* Latinx students in both graduate programs

and prestigious institutions. This was alarming and sad because I could not share my excitement and experiences with people like me. There were moments when the only friend I had was the darkness because no one understood my struggles or survival; however, I never allowed that to erase my pride in being Latino.

I realized that the prestigious institutions I attended did not care about my Latino pride because they were deeply ingrained in their Eurocentric and rich traditions, cultures, and ideologies (Martinez, 2018). It was easy to feel alone, especially in the classroom, having to acclimate to a predominantly White environment where most of my undocumented peers did not qualify for financial assistance (Martinez, 2018). Throughout my undergraduate and master's journeys, my classes were larger but whiter. It was hard to share classroom space with my White peers as I realized that my White professors ignored objectionable remarks made by my White peers regarding the wealth gaps in non-White communities or when the professors themselves invited the few students in the class who might identify as members of a "minority" group to speak about issues that impacted their communities (Martinez, 2018). Due to continuously going through these experiences, I started to value my Latino identity, survival, and resistance.

Integrating into these White systems while managing my multiple identities was an additional challenge. Layering onto the challenges I faced, such as legal uncertainties or the lack of financial aid access, the typical pressures of advanced studies magnified my Latino identity. This is why I loved being Latino and why my family and friends who did love me commended me for navigating Eurocentric schools. To be candid, I did not face imposter syndrome because I knew how hard it was to exist at home and in schools. My purpose at every school meant more to me than focusing on imposter syndrome. I was so attentive to surviving in our society and

throughout my education that I did not have the time or the energy to worry about my belonging at these prestigious institutions. I did see and hear, however, how my peers talked about imposter syndrome and how it impacted their emotional and mental well-being. These conversations with them allowed me to create events focused on the sense of belonging of students of color at every institution I attended. My sense of belonging, confidence, and Latino pride grew when I finally had an opportunity to return home (Acapulco, Mexico) after 28 years.

Después de 28 Años El Orgulloso Latino Regresa a Acapulco, Mexico

As a *DACA* recipient, if you go "back home," you not only risk your *DACA* (2012) protection but also risk not being able to return to the United States. Fortunately for me, after 28 years, I applied for Advance Parole and returned to Acapulco, Mexico. This visit was emotional and came at the perfect time, as I wanted to understand more of myself and where my roots started. Figure 31 is the last photo I took in Acapulco, Mexico, before immigrating to the United States. It was taken at my grandmother's house.

Figure 31

Child Salinas at Grandmother's House in Acapulco, Mexico

Figure 32 shows my return to Mexico as an adult while getting reintroduced to my grandmother's home. These two artifacts reminded me of my youth but also my roots. These artifacts were relevant to this study because, as a *DACA* recipient, the only way to return home was to apply and get approved through Advance Parole.

Figure 32

Adult Salinas at Grandmother's House in Acapulco, Mexico

As happy as I was, I did not understand how difficult living in the United States would be. I needed to return to Mexico after 28 years because I could tap into my inner child and joy there. Getting the opportunity to return home gave me the purpose of finishing my doctoral program and writing more of my story. I wished I would have had the privilege to return home at my leisure; however, I did not want to risk getting deported or not having the opportunity to return to the United States. After reuniting with my motherland, I felt my accomplishments finally validated as my people in Mexico knew I would become a future doctor in education. Their pride and joy for me were why I wanted to write about my life. It was during this reflection

that I started to realize how my gayness also impacted my life in higher education and how it made me work harder than my peers.

I demanded respect, authority, and value for my presence at every school I attended. My chip on the shoulder stemmed from my understanding that verbal assaults are just as damaging as physical attacks. Although some of the racism and xenophobic remarks did sting, I never allowed people to wash my Latino identity away. One of the most common remarks I received was, “Go back to where you came from.” Still, as a *DACA* recipient, I felt like it was impossible to return to my motherland, Acapulco, Mexico, unless I applied for Advance Parole. It took me 28 years to return home and fully understand why I was so proud of being Latino. As I embraced my Latino identity more, I realized that my survival evolution as an undocumented low-income student had taught me about *florecimiento*.

Mi Identidad Indocumentada y Pobre Me Enseñó Sobre Florecimiento

My undocumented identity was the most challenging; however, it taught me about *florecimiento*. *Florecimiento*, for me, meant thriving and succeeding in ways I still did not know how to explain at the time of writing this dissertation. For example, I discussed that there were moments when I had to overcome being the only undocumented and Latino student in my classrooms, faced xenophobia, challenged our harsh immigration politics and laws, and more. Cisneros (2013) noted that undocumented students encounter numerous legislative challenges, including financial and immigration limitations, but lawmakers are not moving the needle fast enough to support undocumented students. Despite our political figures’ lack of support, many undocumented students continue to pursue higher education; to be more specific, one in every 50 students enrolled in higher education is undocumented (Toledo, 2023). Unfortunately, many of

the newer undocumented students are not protected by *DACA* (2012), which poses new challenges for campus faculty and staff (Toledo, 2023).

Another barrier in higher education is the need for more career or experiential learning opportunities for undocumented students (Toledo, 2023). Many employers must be friendlier toward undocumented students and learn how to hire them. Many employees ask undocumented students for a social security number, not aware that they do not have one. Employers can employ undocumented students as independent contractors using a taxpayer identification number (Toledo, 2023). This is one tactic employers can use to hire undocumented students, but they must be willing to hire them while educating themselves on how to support them. Although I have the privilege of having *DACA* (2012), which allowed me to work and granted me better access to higher education, I sometimes wondered where I found the courage to keep going. I also wondered why being undocumented and low-income did not stop me from pursuing an education despite all of the hurdles I had to overcome.

As I reflected on these difficult questions and felt uncertain, I was proud to have survived school while being undocumented and low-income. I realized that through my suffering, my undocumented identity had transformed the way I looked at my survival. Even while suffering, I knew I had to be optimistic because that was a survival mechanism. Going back to 2017, when Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced President Trump's decision to terminate the 2012 *DACA* (2012) policy (Pandika, 2017), although I was worried, I could not help but feel empowered and optimistic. When Melissa Pandika interviewed me on September 6, 2017, I stated:

> I don't know if I'm being overly optimistic, but with the pressure a lot of us *DACA* recipients are going to put on Congress, I think Congress will definitely have our backs. I don't know why I'm so positive. I think all of my life I've had to be positive. But then again, I'm tired of feeling like things are getting taken away from us. It's making me more vigilant in terms of fighting for my community. I definitely want to attend rallies and make sure my voice is heard. I feel like many *DACA* people are trying to heal right now, and that is extremely valid. I am trying to heal, as well. *DACA* [(2012)] didn't make me, I made it—so I'm not going to stop the activism I did before *DACA* [(2012)]. *DACA* [(2012)] was just a Band-Aid that could easily be removed. Now that it [could be] removed, it's just building this fire in me to strengthen my voice even more. Yes, I'm scared about the future. However, right now, what Trump has caused me to do is be strong and have this mindset of, "You're not going to defeat us." (para. 1)

This interview dates back to 2017, and my sentiments remained the same seven years later when writing this dissertation. I constantly advocated for my community, whether pursuing higher education or not. Outside the classroom, I was an activist and advocate for myself and my community. Inside my institutions and classrooms, I was a student leader and survivor. Merging both worlds enabled me to stay politically engaged while finding survival mechanisms and tools to retain myself on campus. As I was finding these survival tools, I realized that my undocumented status would challenge me even more in our society and political world.

El Beaner Sin Papeles

As mentioned, I joined the Dream Summer Internship Program in 2012 after getting accepted to UC Berkeley. On June 15, 2012, I linked arms with other undocumented activists

and leaders, and we put our bodies on the streets. Our undocumented community was inside deportation buses, but our collective bodies and actions halted the buses from shattering their hard work and dreams. On this date, President Barack Obama announced the implementation of *DACA* (2012). With this new privilege, pursuing higher education became more accessible, but I still faced institutional oppression, xenophobia, and racism.

After President Obama implemented *DACA* (2012), I realized how vital it was to pursue higher education. When I was protesting, organizing, and advocating for *DACA* (2012), I did not realize how impactful my on-the-groundwork would be in inspiring my undocumented identity. When I first received my temporary social security number, I had six part-time jobs as a full-time student. Knowing this privilege was temporary, I wanted to exhaust my work permit to afford food, toiletries, and rent. *DACA* (2012) was my safety blanket that provided warmth; however, I could not apply for external scholarships or loans because that required a real social security number. These challenges impacted my higher education journey, and the harsh immigration policies and immigration laws continue to impact our *DACA* community.

For example, on September 5, 2017, I woke up to terrifying, life-changing news. The rescission of *DACA* (2012) had a profound impact on my world and dreams, causing an upheaval of emotions. I sat in bed while friends tried to comfort me and tell me I mattered. I was thinking about what would happen to all the people I loved while feeling crushed by the reality of that present. On the same day, my heart was broken, but the fire within me to fight for and protect our *DACA* community burned brighter than the flames outside. The value I had to offer to our country and my existence brought into question the past efforts and hard work I had done to obtain *DACA* (2012). We were seen as invisible and incompetent, even though we shared the

same classrooms as citizens and worked the same jobs. We faced societal pressures, oppression, and a lack of scholarships and resources that made it difficult for us to access higher education. However, outside of my classrooms and jobs, I continued to be a *DACA* recipient who was constantly fighting for my survival and fighting for opportunities for people who did not have *DACA* (2012).

I used my student activism to revisit my community activism by being featured in multiple articles and on nonprofit organization s' social media platforms, as seen in Figure 33. After being validated outside the academic world, I started to realize that *este beaner sin papeles* defied becoming a statistic; however, my survival was not an individual effort. The support of people I did not know, including extended family, faculty, staff, peers, and community, allowed me to prosper in higher education, and they deserved their flowers, as I explain later. Next, I want to talk about the stress of always being the first while being low-income.

Figure 33

Featured on the Informed Immigrant Instagram Page, June 15, 2022

Note. Informed Immigrant [@Informedimmigrant] (2022, June 15) Informed Immigrant Instagram Post https://www.instagram.com/p/Ce1OeTIlp36/?img_index=1, copyright by Informed Immigrant 2024.

My immediate family did not invest a penny towards my higher education journey. I was not only undocumented, but I was also a first-generation low-income student who found these identities to be challenging. I had to rely on the generosity of my chosen family to combat my poorness. For example, Jennifer Davis, as seen in Figure 34, paid for my registration at UC Berkeley, and many of my friends and community members donated their money and time so that I could survive my UC Berkeley experience. I relied on people outside my family to save me throughout my education.

Figure 34

With One of Mis Angeles (Middle) at High School Graduation, 2011

Weirdly, I was grateful that I was low-income while being the first in my entire family to pursue higher education because it taught me about grit, code-switching, and adaptation. Some friends and family did not know this, but during my first year at UC Berkeley, I felt scared and alone because I would go hungry for weeks. However, my peers would share their meal points and food with me because they wanted me to stay at UC Berkeley. I wore my low-income and first-generation identities with pride because not many of us can challenge rich and well-endowed White institutions. Being low-income meant I had to be creative and wise about eating, sleeping, and breathing. Seeing my affluent peers made me envious, but it did not make me spiteful because I knew that one day, I could afford a wealthy heart and brain, which is what school did and has done for me. Being a first-generation student meant learning the educational

system independently while teaching myself about creativity, innovation, and hustle. I was thankful that being low-income and a first-generation student taught me about surviving because I would have felt lost without these identities. However, being an undocumented student has remained the most challenging identity because it has presented more hurdles in my higher education journey.

In essence, education became my language for processing the abandonment I felt as a child. With the support of various communities and undocumented friends and mentors advocating for me throughout my adolescence, I accumulated the survival tactics necessary to succeed academically, at home, and in our society. I have been proud to have been raised by resilient undocumented youth constantly fighting to change our educational system. I am incredibly proud of giving voice to my multiple identities that were silenced for three decades. I realized there was no guide or literature on how my identities taught me about survival; however, I have been grateful to share the lessons I learned through this love letter.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter delves into the results of this research study. The autoethnography addressed the following two research questions: What survival strategies did I employ to pursue higher education that equipped me to persevere and embark on doctoral studies? How can my intersectionality experiences as an undocumented, gay, low-income, first-generation Latino enrich our research and literature and the work of higher education faculty, staff, and administrators? The findings revealed a poignant reality: undocumented and *DACA* students, often the pioneers in their families to tread the path of higher education, face a significant hurdle. They do not feel welcomed, accepted, and safe on campus (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020), yet their resilience shines through.

The following three themes emerged from this study: (1) *mi identidad gay me enseñó sobre persistencia*, (2) *mi identidad Latino me enseñó sobre crecimiento*, and (3) *mi identidad indocumentada y pobre me enseñó sobre florecimiento*. This section connects the findings and lessons learned from my survival and intersectionality to the existing body of research, provides recommendations and suggestions for future research, and closes with a concluding reflection.

Reflexiones Sobre Identidad, Interseccional, y Supervivencia

As my academic journey unfolded into broader life experiences, I paused to reflect on the intricate tapestry of my various identities. This chapter is not merely a retrospective but an introspective examination of survival through the relentless undercurrents of intersectionality. It captures the essence of a lived experience that defied the boundaries of normative expectations and thrived on the margins of societal constructs. My layered and complex identity was both a

shield and a battleground. The lessons learned through navigating the terrains of race, legal status, sexuality, and socio-economic challenges imparted wisdom that went beyond academic theories. This conclusion delves into the heart of intersectionality, where survival is not about endurance alone but flourishing in defiance of systemic barriers.

La Metamorfosis de la Supervivencia

Survival was a transformative process, not a static state. It evolved from the visceral struggle of childhood through the rebellious defiance of adolescence to the strategic activism of my adult life. Each phase of survival, informed by the previous, shaped a resilience that was as intersectional as the identity it served.

La Supervivencia Como Sinfonía Colectiva

While my journey was personal, it was far from solitary. It was a collective symphony of voices—of my mentors, peers, family, and community members—whose support and sacrifices were instrumental in my pursuit of higher education and personal growth. This section reflects on the community's cultural wealth, a lifeline and a wellspring of empowerment.

La Interacción de la Identidad, la Defensa, y el Poder de la Resiliencia

My advocacy reflected my identity; each action, initiative, and campaign I led resonated with the multiplicity of who I was. Here, I explore how my narrative intersected with my professional endeavors, shaping a brand of advocacy that was authentic, empathetic, and unapologetically rooted in my experiences. The stories we tell about ourselves and the world around us hold power. My narrative, replete with themes of survival and resilience, was a testament to the strength of embracing one's full identity. In this chapter, I highlight the

significance of storytelling as a means of reclaiming agency and a tool for social transformation, which connects to the CCW model (Yosso, 2005).

No Puedes Avanzar Hacia el Futuro Hasta Que Visites el Pasado

Reflecting on my journey, I recognized that survival was not a closed chapter but an ongoing narrative. This final section is a forward meditation on how past experiences informed my future paths. It contemplates how the intersection of my identities continued influencing my pursuit of life goals, professional ambitions, and social justice.

My intersectionality played a crucial role in my survival. In this study, I have wanted to give voice to every identity I have had and provide better content on how I used my different identities to navigate higher education, my home, and our society. In the following sections, I discuss, in more detail, the role that my different identities played while still connecting them to my RQs. Throughout my higher education journey and outside the academic world, there were boundaries and challenges that I had to address to amplify my narrative while ensuring that my identities were respected and claimed. In my survival, I learned that I used my identities to create change at every institution and beyond my academic journey so that I could feed my brain and heart. Each identity deserves to be celebrated, as it gave me the survival tools and resources needed to write this chapter. Knowing that I always felt muted and empowered by my multiple identities, I had to work tirelessly to feel heard and seen as a student and as a human being in our society.

Connections to Existing Research Literature

Concerning the findings of this study, it is imperative to focus on fostering brave and safe spaces at institutions that focus on students with multiple identities. For example, most

universities now have LGBTQ+, low-income, first-generation, and undocumented centers, and our immigration laws or institutions must provide financial support to these centers so that they can support students with marginalized and multiple identities. More money means more resources, tools, and services to support these institutions' student retention and graduation rates. In fact, during the *DREAM Act* (2001) movement, and according to Terriquez et al. (2018), young leaders openly discussed their intersectional identities and used intersectionality as a framework for collective action to help young people understand their identities and related challenges to motivate high levels of political activity, and to guide their actions. Undocumented youth have used intersectional frameworks to develop links with efforts in LGBTQ+, civil rights, education, and health justice. Undocumented students who previously participated in adolescent youth organizing may have adopted intersectional thinking because they were predisposed to think about their numerous identities in politicized ways (Terriquez et al., 2018). LGBTQ+ undocumented people were able to explain how their identities and legal status worked together to form the obstacles they faced by using intersectionality as a diagnostic framework (Terriquez et al., 2018).

The intersectional framework played a pivotal role in the undocumented youth movement, encouraging participants to confront oppression inside and outside their groups. Most importantly, these scholars highlighted how intersectionality was instrumental in identifying and changing immigration laws to better support students or people with multiple identities. This underscores the potential of intersectionality to influence policy and institutional change and its ability to support and benefit students with marginalized identities despite their oppression.

Terriquez et al. (2018) concluded that adolescents who identify as LGBTQ+ and undocumented have taken the lead in advising mainstream members on how to evaluate their many intersectional identities' advantages and disadvantages. Undocumented activists used intersectionality as a collective action framework to influence social movement dynamics in a few ways during the height of their struggle in 2010 through 2012. Young activists in the immigrant youth movement used intersectionality as: (1) a diagnostic framework to help them understand their own identities that are marginalized on multiple levels, (2) a motivating framework to spur action, and (3) a prognostic framework that directed how they created inclusive organizations and connected social movements. Fostering brave and safe spaces at institutions that focus on students with multiple identities while identifying and addressing undocumented students' institutional challenges can empower these students to pursue higher education.

Lessons Learned From My Survival and Intersectionality

Even if one is not an undocumented student, surviving higher education can be difficult; however, based on the research, literature, and my lived experiences, I hope I have demonstrated how difficult it can be to be undocumented, gay, low-income, and a first-generation Latino. My multiple identities presented different and unique challenges but allowed me to create and mold survival tactics to pursue higher education. At an early age, or when students discover that they are undocumented, they realize how oppressive societal structures can be and how difficult it can be to pursue higher education (Paniagua-Pardo, 2022). Paniagua-Pardo (2022) expanded on this difficulty by stating: "For undocumented students, the conscious awareness of oppressive structures from an early age leaves students of color disproportionately equipped with actionable

tools and strategies to solve inequitable problems within structures of society (e.g., postsecondary institutions)" (p. 17). As a result, undocumented students are motivated or empowered to elevate social and racial justice issues while challenging inequitable educational systems (Paniagua-Pardo, 2022). In addition to surviving, resiliency has been a pivotal tactic for undocumented higher-education students.

Paniagua-Pardo (2022) used Quaye et al.'s (2019) definition of resiliency to elaborate on how resilience is not only related to traumatic experiences but also serves as a coping mechanism for people to find supportive pathways by obtaining growth and empowerment from lived adversity (Paniagua-Pardo, 2022). Undocumented students must create and find different forms of survival and resilience as they pursue higher education. Paniagua-Pardo (2022) stated that undocumented students thrive in hostile learning environments and overcome institutional, political, legal, and social challenges by using or discovering hidden sources of capital. These survival tactics are something I adopted or created myself throughout my educational journey; however, it was thanks to my multiple identities that I learned how to cope with my survival.

According to Cisneros (2019), intersectionality:

> Has the power to articulate how possibilities are proliferated and foreclosed for individuals based on their identities and the systems of domination, privilege, and oppression that shape the environment in which they operate. Individuals should not be forced to privilege one aspect of identity at the detriment of another. (p. 75)

Although my identities were oppressed, intersectionality allowed me not to separate my identities, as many of them gave me access to different forms of power. Even while writing this dissertation, I was amazed at how my multiple identities gave me the strength to survive because

I could easily have given up. There were many times when I wished for more money or to wake up as a straight cis-citizen man because maybe that would solve my problems. However, the truth was that my identities were a part of me, and I had to figure out how I could utilize my identities to benefit my struggles. My struggles, coupled with my resilience, supported and gave purpose to my multiple identities. I could now connect all my identities without losing my sense of self. Even after receiving my doctorate, I knew I would continue to face xenophobia, homophobia, and racism. Still, I was grateful to have the institutional knowledge and lived experiences to combat these phobias and isms. However, combatting the many challenges I had faced was never an individual effort; it was always a collective effort full of *angeles* who guided me to success.

The Challenges and Empowerment of Intersectionality

Having multiple identities presented me with many challenges that impacted my life. My identities affected how I navigated the educational world and our society. Although my body and spirit grew tired of combatting multiple isms and phobias, I was still able to use my various identities as a tool of empowerment. The truth was that being gay taught me about reinventing the term survival while being confident in myself. My LGBTQ+ community and being a gay activist introduced me to the term undocuqueer. On March 23, 2017, I had the opportunity to speak about my undocuqueer identity . Clock and Pandika (2017) interviewed me, and I stated:

> As beautiful as it is, being undocuqueer is a very tricky identity because you always have to come out of the closet twice, being undocumented and gay. Many people do not focus on intersectionality. When they create spaces for LGBTQ folks, they do not think about undocumented or even trans folks. Alternatively, frequently, you go into an

> undocumented space, and when people say homophobic remarks, you are taken aback. You think, "I thought this was a safe space." I have never been in a space where I felt completely comfortable. Even before the election, I remember being on the bus and someone shouting, "Go back to where you came from!" And my response was, "This *is* where I came from." (para. section 2)

In 2017, research showed that an estimated 267,000 undocumented adults identified as undocuqueer and faced stigma within their communities (Clock & Pandika, 2017). Clock and Pandika (2017) stated that some "immigrant rights community members view LGBTQ identity as undermining the traditional, wholesome, 'good immigrant' image so often used to advance reform" (p. 1). Undocuqueer people have felt overlooked by their White, cisgender gay rights community, and have had to advocate for themselves as a result (Clock & Pandika, 2017). Although there were times I felt overlooked, I made sure I was seen inside and outside of my classrooms, and I was able to do that by sharing my voice with external entities that supported my survival.

For example, I knew I had limited opportunities to apply for loans or scholarships; however, thanks to my *DACA* (2012) status and multiple identities, I could apply for prestigious scholarships. Money was a constant barrier to pursuing higher education; however, I was encouraged by my undocuqueer peers to apply for scholarships from the Hispanic Scholarship Fund (Hispanic Scholarship Fund, 2024) and Point Foundation (Point Foundation, 2024). I received these scholarships with hard work and perseverance (seen in Figures 35 and 36). Thanks to these undocuqueer-friendly nonprofit organizations, I got the funds to survive on campus. I hope other nonprofit organizations can support students who do not have *DACA*

(2012) and thus have no social security number. My undocuqueer narrative allowed me to obtain these scholarships and retain myself at my institutions, and I am grateful to have shared my voice and survival.

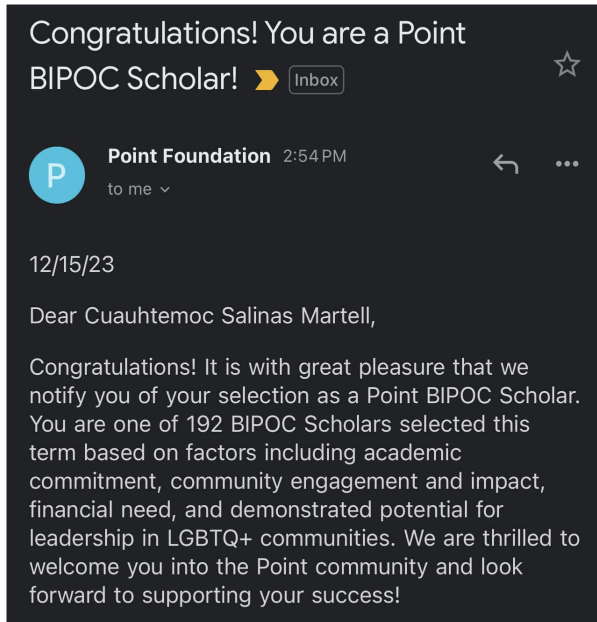
Figure 35

Recipient of Hispanic Scholarship Federation, 2018

Note. This scholarship provided by Hispanic Scholarship Federation (https://www.hsf.net) on July 25, 2018. The image was posted on my Facebook profile on July 25, 2018, where it is still accessible (https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1867539849969452&set=pb.100001403647862.-2207520000&type=3).

Figure 36

Recipient of the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) Point Foundation Scholarship, December 2023


Congratulations! You are a Point BIPOC Scholar! Inbox

Point Foundation 2:54 PM
to me

12/15/23

Dear Cuauhtemoc Salinas Martell,

Congratulations! It is with great pleasure that we notify you of your selection as a Point BIPOC Scholar. You are one of 192 BIPOC Scholars selected this term based on factors including academic commitment, community engagement and impact, financial need, and demonstrated potential for leadership in LGBTQ+ communities. We are thrilled to welcome you into the Point community and look forward to supporting your success!

Note. Personal communication (email) from the Point Foundation (https://pointfoundation.org/) to Cuauhtemoc Salinas Martell, received December 15, 2023. Screenshot posted on my Facebook profile, December 15, 2023, where it is still accessible (https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=7086274588095926&set=pb.100001403647862.-2207520000&type=3).

Survival Strategies for Pursuing Higher Education

I realized how implementing various survival strategies throughout higher education, in my home, and in our society would lead me to write this dissertation. I provided various examples of tactics I used to survive; however, most of these strategies came from my resilience, innovation, student and community leadership, and advocacy. In school, I had to use my activism, charismatic involvement, and identities to challenge institutional norms. At home, I had to use silence, accommodation to El Diablo's routines, and grit to survive. I acknowledge that my survival strategies in higher education may differ from those of other undocumented students, but our academic world usually silences our survival stories. Despite all of the survival

I did throughout higher education, I knew I had a responsibility to excel in whatever way I could because higher education meant freedom.

Vega (2018) noted that, despite experiencing high levels of adversity (such as low academic expectations from teachers, poorly run and occasionally violent schools, difficulty learning English, and limited resources), immigrant students typically outperform their peers who were born in the United States. Outperforming my peers and exceeding our institutional staff's expectations of me allowed me to think of ways to share my survival journey with my community so that they could have the tools and resources needed to pursue higher education. I found myself constantly finding or creating ways to survive in higher education, even if it meant going against the grain. I also realized that I had to sacrifice my well-being to empower the students around me, a crucial aspect of my journey. The idea of surviving, as mentioned previously, was not an individual effort. My higher education *familia*, which I called *mis angeles*, supported my resilience by allowing me to utilize all my identities to survive and reach my doctoral studies.

Mis Angeles

As noted in the acknowledgments section, many *angeles* protected me from El Diablo. They gave me the survival tools and resources to succeed in my schooling and life. As mentioned, not many *angeles* knew I was being abused at home; however, their patience and guidance always supported my multiple identities. It is interesting how one person in your life can consume your happiness and love. I say this because El Diablo tried to retain me in his darkness while many *angeles* showed me the light. His possession of me impacted how I interacted with joy, so I felt guilty when *mis angeles* showed me how love should feel. There

were many moments when good things would happen to me, but I felt undeserving because happiness felt foreign or rare. *Mis angeles* helped me embrace and nurture the good moments in my life, allowing me to breathe better. Without disclosing the abuse that was going on at home, every time I received a punch or a yell, I could trust *mis angeles* to affirm my homework assignments or projects that I had completed.

Mis angeles gave me the motivation to excel academically and in life. Whenever I felt like giving up, I felt the clouds, sun, and stars emerging. The power of having unity within the community allowed me to rely on my chosen family to get through the most challenging moments of my life. Some lessons I learned from my survival and intersectionality were rooted in every hand, listening ear, and shoulder I crossed paths with. Even the hidden *angeles* who did not know me but who decided to donate their funds to me meant another day of survival. Their support helped me identify the recommendations I had for this study.

Surviving my challenges allowed me to focus on my academic journey despite the initial resistance from the institutions I attended. I took pride in my accomplishments, particularly in graduating from prestigious universities like UC Berkeley and the University of Michigan. The LMU doctoral program at the country's second-best Jesuit school of education further bolstered my sense of achievement. I realized I had become a hidden gem and an asset to the higher education system. My journey was a testament to my resilience, and I am proud to have overcome the odds.

My journey as a proud survivor was one without a survival guide. Being the first in my family to pursue higher education and from a broken home, I knew I could not rely on my family for guidance. As an undocumented, gay Latino, resources were scarce, and I had to get creative

to sustain myself at the various institutions I attended. My proposal for better support for undocumented students is that institutions should have a pool of funds allocated to every undocumented student's profile before they attend that school. This would enable these students to assess the affordability before committing to a school, potentially increasing their retention and allowing them to choose the best school.

Recommendations for Higher Education Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

Despite the challenges I had to overcome, the recommendations in this section stress the importance of creating a supportive environment for undocumented students. They start by urging higher education institutions to allow more undocumented students with multiple identities to share their experiences and voices with the public eye if they feel comfortable. Many undocumented students do not want to come out of the shadows. However, some are forced to, as they must report themselves as undocumented when they apply or attend their school of choice. There should be more resources and tools for researchers, scholars, educators, reporters, and allies to support undocumented students better so that undocumented students can feel comfortable in sharing their experiences on how they survived and navigated higher education, their homes, and society. Sharing my voice allowed me to fund my education and connect with people who read my story on social media or websites. Although I had fear and anxiety about sharing my undocumented voice, I knew that sharing my experiences in the public eye would allow me to expand my family and community. This expansion allowed me to be a competitive student for external scholarships that I could apply for.

Employing faculty, staff, and counselors who are empathetic and knowledgeable about undocumented students' needs can support them in pursuing higher education (Cisneros, 2013).

These figures are vital to an undocumented student's sense of belonging as they can ask for help or support without feeling judged or marginalized by their immigration status (Cisneros, 2013). In Cisneros' (2019) later research, the scholar noted that higher education practitioners must recognize that oppression also happens beyond campus, which can affect how students experience campus environments. Cisneros (2019) asserted the need to understand the impact of institutional and societal systems on identity development, personal growth, and individual experiences to transform society's understanding of the complex and fluid intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and immigration status. Institutional employees are vital in supporting undocumented students in pursuing higher education. Having educated institutional employees who know how to support undocumented students with multiple identities can enhance and encourage students to learn more about themselves. Most importantly, if every educator knows what resources are available for undocumented students, the undocumented centers could primarily focus on obtaining external scholarships so that students can afford their tuition. As stated earlier, many undocumented students (including myself) have done most, if not all, of the on-the-ground work to educate faculty, staff, and administrators; however, institutions should be doing the work of giving our educators the adequate tools and resources to support our educational experiences better.

Institutions and their employees can be vital in providing full-ride scholarships and institution resources for undocumented students. Drawing from personal experience, I always had to fight and advocate for scraps of funding throughout my higher education journey. For example, I relied on external and internal scholarships at UC Berkeley because, from 2011 to 2016, UC Berkeley did not have the scholarships I needed to pay for my tuition. Even after

having multiple conversations with the dean, the president, the faculty, and staff over 5 years, I still did not receive the financial and housing support I needed to alleviate my stress. At the University of Michigan, I was able to tap into their endowment and relied on the admissions office staff to support me; however, I still had to send countless emails and visits to their office to provide me with a full ride. At LMU, my experience was also traumatizing as it took me 2 years to get a full ride finally. I recommend that institutions have scholarships and institutional resources to support undocumented students.

This recommendation is not impossible, as some institutions already support and provide undocumented students with internal scholarships or institutional resources that can cover their tuition or housing costs. For example, many private colleges accept undocumented students as domestic students (Appily, 2024). Undocumented students may have to compete with other international students for a small financial aid pool because many universities view them as international students. However, an undocumented student has a better chance of receiving a sizable financial assistance package if the college views them as domestic (Appily, 2024). The public policies of the private universities listed below address whether or not undocumented students may enroll as domestic students. These universities include Pomona College, Oberlin College, Tufts University, Emory University, and Swarthmore College (Appily, 2024). Some colleges have a 100% financial need for undocumented students.

College Greenlight has listed over 30 universities fully supporting undocumented students' stated financial needs (Appily, 2024). The universities below promise to provide grants, jobs for students, scholarships, and student loans to cover all of their costs. How the schools on this list address the proven financial requirements of undocumented students differ.

Some examples of schools that offer a 100% financial need are Amherst, Brown, Cornell, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Princeton, Rice, Stanford, the University of Chicago, and Yale (Appily, 2024). With the support of these institutions, undocumented students are in better hands in affording their tuition or housing costs. This recommendation is promising as it can help undocumented students pursue higher education.

My journey as a proud survivor was one without a survival guide. Being the first in my family to pursue higher education and from a broken home, I knew I could not rely on my family for guidance. As an undocumented, gay Latino, resources were scarce, and I had to get creative to sustain myself at the various institutions I attended. My proposal to better support undocumented students is that institutions should have a pool of funds allocated to every undocumented student's profile before they attend that school. This would enable these students to assess their affordability before committing to a school, potentially increasing their retention and allowing them to choose the best school.

In addition to providing funds, institutions should be responsible for providing a comprehensive survival guide with every resource and tool they offer so that they can support every undocumented student, regardless of their degree level and various identities. For example, if a school does not have an undocumented students' survival guide, they must state that on their website and application page. If schools offer a survival guide, it must be attached to their websites or application pages. This will allow undocumented students to know if that school supports them. As I pursued higher education, I never found an institutional survival guide I could refer to. This led me to create a survival guide, a process that was both challenging and empowering. I now call my survival guide *surpowerment*. I coined this term because it

encapsulates the dual aspects of survival and empowerment. Surpowerment is a person's ability to apply and adopt empowerment tools to ensure survival. Unfortunately, some of my peers, educators, family, and community were unaware of the survival tactics I used to navigate my educational journey, leading to exhausting and stressful explanations. I strongly advocate for all allies (professors, lawyers, political figures, etc.) to collaborate on implementing survival guides, as they might have connections or resources that undocumented students do not know about but need.

I acknowledge that undocumented-friendly schools might already have survival guides; however, they might primarily focus on undocumented undergraduate students, or they might need guides that support students who have multiple identities. The recommended survival guide that all schools must have should also include the CCW model, as I used these different forms of capital to survive in my schools, home, and society. The CCW model can yield significant benefits when integrated into all centers that serve marginalized students, such as Early Opportunity Program (EOP) offices, undocumented centers, and even the admissions office. It can also be effectively taught in classrooms and serve as a platform for students to host events, conferences, and workshops. By instilling a deep understanding of the CCW model among students, faculty, and staff, we can foster empathy and empower individuals to identify and utilize effective survival strategies. In essence, higher education faculty, staff, and administrators should be able to support all students, regardless of their identities or status, at all their educational levels and degrees.

In addition to higher education employees and institutions playing a role in supporting undocumented students in pursuing higher education, state leaders have the power and

opportunity to pass institutional policies that make college more accessible for undocumented students (Toledo, 2023). They also have the agency to appropriate annual funds, train educators, and hire designated staff to support undocumented students (Toledo, 2023). Meanwhile, and most importantly, the U.S. Congress can provide a pathway to citizenship for all undocumented students and youth (Toledo, 2023). As someone who participated in the *DACA* (2012) movement, I know our aim was to get citizenship; unfortunately, *DACA* (2012) fell short. Despite the disappointment, I am grateful that we were able to change our immigration system to provide comfort to some undocumented students. If we can get institutions and our political world to work together, we can provide tangible and concrete solutions to support undocumented students in pursuing higher education.

Another recommendation is encouraging more inclusive and committed nonprofit organizations to provide scholarships for undocumented students. By investing in these students' education, organizations could support individual students' success and contribute to a more diverse and equitable society. For example, when I received the Point Foundation scholarship, the Program Associate Manager contacted me to include me on their website. I encouraged other students to apply for their scholarships and represented their organization well because of the accomplishments and challenges I had overcome to earn them.

In addition to expanding the support of nonprofit organizations, charities, institutions, and forprofit organizations could support undocumented students by providing or limiting restrictions on who can apply for scholarships. Many organizations or institutions can positively elevate their image by allowing undocumented students to apply for scholarships. Moreover, more financial support for undocumented students can elevate an institution's or organization's applicant pool,

making their space more inclusive, welcoming, diverse, and equitable. I also believe that these different spaces can support undocumented students' survival in pursuing higher education.

Lastly, these findings and recommendations are relevant to people in different fields and occupations. For example, I was temporarily placed in the Social Services system. I wished that my social workers, therapists, and even psychologists had the necessary tools, lived experiences, cultural humility or competence, and resources to support my emotional and mental well-being. I also wished that my doctors and nurses, whom I saw at schools or hospitals, believed me when I informed them that I was being abused at home. Legal service employees such as lawyers and attorneys can also help undocumented students navigate the legal world. When lawyers and attorneys became involved in my Social Services case, they did not flag our home as unstable because El Diablo acted humanely in front of them, so they did not believe me about the abuse. These legal service providers can legally protect undocumented people while serving as voice agents to protect others from troubled homes or from society.

Depression, fear at home, and anxiety at school impacted the way I navigated higher education and society. Hence, it is imperative that other scholars, researchers, and experts from different fields also have the knowledge to support undocumented students with multiple identities. Their support could have aided my survival at home and school. Regardless of which level an undocumented student decides to reach, or if they choose not to pursue higher education, they are still making significant contributions to our society. That is why it is recommended that institutions have adequate personnel and employees to better support undocumented students. Institutions must also do a better job of hiring educators with multiple identities, as such educators can support someone like me in pursuing higher education. It was powerful for me to

see Latino professors teaching my courses, but it was even more impactful when they came from immigrant backgrounds or were gay. As someone who has been studying for over three decades, I have realized that institutions must be able to fix what is going on internally before combatting the external factors of the higher education system.

Future Research

Countless examples have shown how undocumented students have succeeded against all the social, legal, financial, and even psychological challenges they face in the United States (Cisneros, 2013). Undocumented students are seen as role models and institutional leaders for their communities because they have empowered their minds and accomplished their goals in an environment where they have not felt secure, motivated, supported, or have felt judged (Cisneros, 2013). Although I have wanted to celebrate our accomplishments in this study, future research, which has the potential to inform policy and practice, requires collecting qualitative and quantitative data on how undocumented students navigate and survive higher education. Interviewing students who did not pursue higher education can be insightful and valuable research in developing institutional tools and resources for undocumented students. If they are not sitting in our classrooms or attending our colleges, we must find out why and when they decided not to pursue higher education. This data and interview collection can provide further insight into undocumented students who chose or who were forced to work rather than pursue higher education.

It will also be interesting to read narratives about students who could not attend prestigious universities and were forced to attend colleges that our educational system does not consider prestigious. Some vibrant and talented undocumented students do not attend UCs, Ivy

League, or competitive institutions but still deserve to be celebrated and recognized. Undocumented students in community colleges and California State Universities are hidden gems with unique struggles in pursuing higher education. They must also have a platform and voice in future research as they are also pivotal members of our society who have changed our institutional landscape for the better. Since *DACA* (2012) provides undocumented students with more privileges, it is vital to focus solely on undocumented students' survival at these prestigious institutions. The limitation, however, is how many undocumented students get accepted to doctoral programs and whether they even want to disclose their immigration status to our academic world, as they are not protected from deportation or immigration policies.

While this study did not delve specifically into how undocumented students utilize different forms of capital (linguistic, familial, aspiration, and resistance capital), it did hint at their presence (Paniagua-Pardo, 2022). These forms of capital, when further explored, can provide invaluable insights into the survival and resilience mechanisms of undocumented students. They can offer a unique lens through which readers can understand the diverse survival conditions and innovative strategies undocumented students employ to thrive inside and outside their classrooms. This research is about understanding their experiences and appreciating the unique strengths and resources that undocumented students bring to higher education.

Conclusion

Mi Definición de Supervivencia e Intersecionalidad

When concluding this chapter, I was still transforming my definition of survival and intersectionality. Although we have defined these two terms, their nuances constantly change and expand. Surviving and intersectionality looked and felt different for me. For example, my

survival narrative primarily focused on my survival at home and school, but it did not highlight the details and process of surviving. This was intentional, as surviving at home was gruesome, and surviving at school felt lonelier, so I did not feel comfortable disclosing too much. The higher education system and society did not give me the space to breathe, pause, and grieve. I had no choice but to survive while holding multiple identities that our society does not accept. I not only survived at home and on the streets, but I also survived an abusive higher education system that saw me as lesser than others. Maybe I was not surviving; perhaps I was thriving, excelling, or transcending. My multiple identities defined my survival, or my survival defined my various identities. In essence, while writing this conclusion, I realized that my numerous identities and my ability to survive still need further exploration as I still feel that my voice and narrative have been trapped when I remember the survival process at home and school.

Remembering the Survival Process at Home and School

Reflecting on what I did to survive at home and school, I realized my body was afraid of El Diablo. I assumed that wearing layers of clothing restored my purity, I thought my unsure mother would protect me, and I assumed that my unknown biological father would rescue me. All of these assumptions created a false narrative of my safety, and at times, I wished I had my biological father to support my survival. I also wanted my childhood memories full of hope, joy, and happiness. My social work degrees, classes, and experiences taught me that a person's childhood can dictate or influence adulthood. Recent studies and research have shown that childhood experiences affect individual health in adulthood (Johnson, 2023). Adults who experience numerous adverse childhood experiences early in childhood are more likely to develop behavioral disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and other detrimental health behaviors

(Johnson, 2023). Although I experienced depression and anxiety, I learned to be a parent to my siblings, and I also was my own parent. I attended parent and teacher conferences independently while attending school obligations, such as volleyball tournaments, debate practices, and mandatory student presidency meetings.

Being a parent at an early age taught me about independence, strength, and grit. My responsibilities as a parent assured me that I would be free and fine as I navigated higher education on my own. What was more interesting about navigating higher education and my home was how oppressed I was but how I used that oppression as an empowerment or motivator to succeed. As an undocumented, gay, low-income, and first-generation Latino, it was challenging, but I felt like surviving was worse. I had to find solace in the fact that, although I was being beaten at home, I was thriving in school. Even though I had received multiple awards and recognition, I realized that it had made El Diablo angrier and that my mom's eyes and heart had started to grow resentful as she had wanted to celebrate with me but knew that she could not because El Diablo would disapprove. My inner child (Figure 37) craved love at home, but luckily, I found pieces of love outside my home. Surviving for me only existed in my vocabulary once I had realized that I was not living. I thus conclude this study with *el carta de amor*, which I wrote while hiding from El Diablo.

Figure 37

Me Before the World Got Dark, 1995

Dear Cuauhtemoc Salinas Martell,

I am sorry I could not protect you from him and from those who took advantage of your innocence. I am sad that you are unaware of your undocumented status and that you had to struggle. Although your gayness defends you at times, I am sorry for all the slurs and painful words. I am sorry that you could not afford food or necessities because you were poor. I am sorry you had to navigate higher education as the first. Just know that when you grow up, you will find happiness surrounded by many *angeles*, and that you will not have to worry about wishing to see the sun and moon because waking up or going back to sleep feels rare. That forced smile and hurt in your eyes will go away. Although the

internal bruises and trauma will still exist, you will be loved. Before I let you go, thank you for surviving so I can write these words.

Sincerely,

Salinas

EPILOGUE

Reflecting on what I did to survive in higher education, in my broken home, and our society, I realized that I gave too much power to El Diablo. However, I was thankful I could claim my body, voice, and story through this study. When I was younger, I assumed that wearing layers of clothing would restore my purity. I thought that my unsure mother would protect me, and I assumed that my unknown biological father would rescue me. All of these assumptions created a false narrative of my safety, and at times, I wished that I had my biological father to support my survival. Although my childhood memories were limited, I am glad that my mom kept some artifacts so I could use them as *recuerdos*. My social work degrees and classes taught me that a person's childhood can dictate or influence adulthood, so we must invest in our younger generation. My childhood depression and anxiety tried to merge into my adult life, but my mind was strong enough to prevent that from happening.

Being a parent at an early age taught me about independence, strength, and grit. My responsibilities as a parent assured me that I would be free as I navigated higher education without the support of my immediate family. What was more interesting about navigating higher education and my home was how oppressed I was but how I used that oppression to empower and motivate me to succeed in life. As an undocumented, gay, low-income, and first-generation Latino, it was challenging to breathe, but I felt like not surviving would be worse, so I forced myself to live. I had to find solace in the fact that, although I was being beaten at home, I was thriving in school and our society. I concluded that maybe I was not just surviving; perhaps I was thriving, excelling, and transcending.

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