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## **AB 540: Tuition Waiver Policy in California: How Student Services Professionals Influence College Access for Undocumented Students**

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### **Abstract**

This was an exploratory qualitative study utilizing tenets of phenomenology to examine the lived experiences of front-line student services professionals in Admissions and Financial Aid and their dilemmas in interpreting and implementing California Assembly Bill 540 (2001) in their interactions with undocumented students. Front-line student services professionals are often the make-it or break-it persons for undocumented students to realize their dreams of attaining a postsecondary education because they determine whether students can pay in-state tuition and receive financial aid. California law AB 540 (2001) was created with the intention of providing a fair tuition policy for all California high school graduates entering college in California. AB 540's (2001) purpose is to allow all California high school graduates, including undocumented immigrant students who meet the requirements, to be exempt from paying nonresident tuition at California public postsecondary institutions. An undocumented student is classified as someone who entered the U.S. without proper immigration documents or someone who entered the country legally as a nonimmigrant but later never exited the country (Internal Revenue Service, 2014). Twelve student service professionals, both part-time and full-time, at public two-year and four-year higher education institutions shared their experiences regarding management of difficult and sensitive conversations with undocumented students, as they attempted to translate state legislation through institutional policies. Many times, these front-line professionals in Admissions and Financial Aid were the first and only people to interact with incoming undocumented students before they set foot in the classroom. These professionals utilized their knowledge, resources, and networks to help students navigate the college-going process. However, unclear and/or non-existent campus policies, departmental silos, along with a lack of professional development, adequate resources, and appropriate guidance, often limited their capacity to help.

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## Introduction

Latinx and Mexicans made up over 50% of all undocumented immigrants in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2014). Undocumented students, particularly Latinx students, are not accessing higher education at the same rate as documented students and native born students (Abrego, 2006). Factors such as immigration status, race, ethnicity, family income, family structure, parental expectations, college/university policies, as well as federal and state level legislation, influence the possibility of postsecondary education attainment for undocumented students (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Chavez, Soriano, & Oliverez, 2007; Contreras, 2009). Politically, many United States (U.S.) citizens believe that undocumented immigrants impose high costs in health care, welfare assistance, and public education (Watson, 2017). Therefore, in some states, it is not favorable to financially help undocumented immigrants with the cost of college attendance. Prior to the passage of AB 540 in 2001, California student services professionals worked in secrecy to help undocumented students gain access to college by providing financial and emotional support. For many years, student services professionals who worked closely with undocumented students endured the same secrecy about their role due to the political climate at the time (Lopez & Lopez, 2010).

The majority of the undocumented population does not attend college due to cost (Lopez & Lopez, 2010). Undocumented immigrants have had access to free K-12 education since the *Plyer v. Doe* ruling in 1982. The ruling stated that charging a fee to attend public schools violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment; therefore, undocumented students under the age of 18 were allowed to attend school (Perez, 2009). Although undocumented immigrants can attend K-12 schools for free, undocumented students over the age of 18 have little protection against high college tuition. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) (1996) “prohibits states from providing undocumented immigrants with in-state tuition at public colleges or universities unless the same benefit is provided to all American citizens” (Erisman & Looney, 2007, p. 20). IIRIRA outlined that: (a) if public colleges offer in-state tuition to undocumented students, they must offer in-state tuition to all legal citizen students, and (b) the defining of state residency is the respective state’s obligation. IIRIRA did not provide a definition for what constitutes a resident; therefore, each state created its own definition of state residency. Some states argued that granting undocumented students an in-state tuition waiver and legal state residency are violations of IIRIRA (Hyun & Newburn, 2010).

California was one of the most undocumented student friendly states prior to the passage of DACA (2012). In addition to having an in-state tuition waiver policy, undocumented students also had access to state-level aid, including student loans, through the California Dream Act (2011). Student services professionals in Admissions and Financial Aid interact with undocumented students more frequently post-AB 540 because of the access to in-state tuition and state-level aid (California Dream Act). Having the ability to access state financial aid and reduced tuition rates, more undocumented students are returning to school. Now more than ever, Admissions and Financial Aid professionals exercise self-discretion in interpreting AB 540, while attempting to remain fair to all students.

Providing financial aid for undocumented college students is losing its stigma nation-wide (Harris, 2015). The inception of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012, an executive action that allows undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. as children to legally stay in the country and work, has made it easier for colleges to provide undocumented students with aid. Having a federal policy addressing the needs of the undocumented population has allowed college leaders to become more comfortable in providing financial assistance to undocumented youth (Harris, 2015). Furthermore, in California, community colleges are tasked with carrying out the objectives of Student Success and Support Programs (SSSP) and the Student Equity Plan (2012). The goals of SSSP are to ensure that all students complete their college courses, persist to the next academic term, and achieve their educational objectives through the assistance of admissions, orientation, assessment and testing, and counseling, and encourages student follow-up. Through the Student Success Act (2012), each college needs to address the success outcomes and create actions to address disparities between race, ability, and income levels that are discovered. With the demands of these outcome driven bills, student services professionals are now more than ever, involved with the college success of undocumented students.

DACA (2012), California Dream Act (2011), and AB 540 (2001) are often confused with the federal DREAM Act (2010). The Federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act of 2010, or DREAM Act of 2010, would have provided a pathway to legal status for the thousands of undocumented students who graduate from high school each year. The Senate blocked the Bill in 2010, ending the possibility of gaining a pathway to citizenship for many undocumented youth. With many conversations around multiple federal and state bills: federal

DREAM Act (2010), DACA (2012), AB 540 (2001), and the California Dream Act (2011), student services professionals and undocumented students are often confused about the differences between and eligibility requirements for each program. With multiple programs being available and acronyms being used, oftentimes, undocumented youth and student services professionals cannot distinguish between the purposes of these bills.

Unfortunately, most front-line professional staff are often tasked with supporting undocumented students without formal introduction and training from their institutions on the complex needs of this population. Admissions officers can either aid or inhibit undocumented students' access to higher education based on their knowledge of and interpretation of campus-specific institutional policies and practices. Chen (2013) stated, "Psychological stress is exacerbated by campus personnel who are unfamiliar with policies regarding undocumented students" (p. 31). Admissions officers may not be well acquainted with relevant policies that allow undocumented students to attend college with in-state tuition. Financial aid advisors may not know that undocumented students have access to state funded financial aid and may unintentionally turn students away because they lack a full understanding of current practices and policies. Oftentimes, student services professionals attempt to cope with changes in the student population and campus policies by developing their own practices and procedures to meet students' needs (Lipsky, 2010).

Although administrators and upper management have authority when it comes to providing structure and creating policies, front-line student services professionals who work as street-level bureaucrats exercise self-discretion that can provide or deny undocumented students access to higher education. This study examined the experiences of these front-line student services professionals who are "first responders" working with undocumented students in a time of rapidly changing laws, public perception, and cultural context. Although AB 540 intends to assist undocumented students with access to postsecondary education, in reality, postsecondary education attainment is still difficult.

### **Literature Review**

Current literature shows that barriers, such as finances, K-12 academic preparation, college counseling, family familiarity with the college-going process, and inconsistent admission policies, affect undocumented students' pursuit of higher education (Gildersleeve, 2007). Field

(2011) stated that over 70% of higher education institutions do not have an admission policy that specifically denies undocumented students. However, only 36% of higher education institutions have a defined admission policy used to admit undocumented students (Field, 2011). Undocumented students often cannot find accurate admission policies online or through admissions representatives because there are limited defined practices adapted by higher education institutions (Oliverez, 2006). For example, a student mentioned in Chen's (2013) study shared that the student was told by an admissions officer: "You know, we're a legal institution, but you're not so there's nothing we can do" (p. 91). Unlike their documented peers, undocumented students choose their colleges based on financial, legal, and familial factors (Lopez & Lopez, 2010). Therefore, undocumented students are mostly going to attend an institution where they can receive in-state tuition, state financial aid, private scholarships, and specialized resources.

Student services divisions typically include enrollment management, financial aid, housing, counseling, student activities, student academic support, and more. Student services professionals have expanded their professional interests in student development and are making an attempt to be an integral part of the academic programs on campus (Sandeem, 2004). Student services professionals have frequent contact with students; therefore, they are expected to know and understand the diverse academic and personal backgrounds of their students so they can be effective when advocating for their students. Research findings on undocumented students suggested that there is a "general sense that 'front-line personnel' such as Admission and Financial Aid counselors, and records officers are not trained to handle the unique issues undocumented students bring with them" (Oseguera, Flores, & Burciaga, 2010, p. 41). Student services professionals influence student success or failure. Front-line practitioners play an important role in improving student success because they are knowledgeable in their field of expertise and have the capacity to interact with students and make students feel valued, appreciated, and respected.

Bensimon (2007) pointed out that current scholarship on student success often lacks the viewpoint from practitioners. More specifically, "[p]ractitioners are only present indirectly and that we lack a theory of student success based on the characteristics of practitioners" (p. 463). Bensimon (2007) urged practitioners to become researchers and assist with the process as facilitators so that they can contribute to the scholarship on student success based on actual practice. While significant research exists on undocumented students and their experiences

(Badger & Yale-Loehr, 2002; Gildersleeve, 2010; Oliverrez, 2006), there is a gap in research on the experiences and roles of student services professionals who implement policies and procedures related to AB 540 and whose role it is to provide resources and information to undocumented students.

Adopting Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucracy theory, Ayon (2009) interviewed child welfare workers to assess the paths to services based on their clients' documentation statuses and language abilities. Undocumented and non-English speaking families experienced additional barriers to services, which affected their compliance with court mandates. However, aside from the clients' immigration status and their language proficiency, frontline workers' "knowledge of the welfare system, available resources and their willingness to help families played a role in families' process of accessing services" (Ayon, 2009, p. 612). Consistent with Lipsky's (1980) findings, child welfare workers were selective in choosing the cases that they spent extra time on because of their large caseload and a lack of resources. Spanish speaking and undocumented families were often viewed as extra work; therefore, they were unlikely to receive additional support from welfare workers (Ayon, 2009). This study suggested that although child welfare workers wanted and intended to help every family, a lack of the proper resources needed to help non-English speaking and undocumented clients made it less likely that child welfare workers would go above and beyond their duties with these clients.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to understand the lived experiences of front-line student services professionals who interpret and implement AB 540 related campus policies in Admissions and Financial Aid and their interactions with undocumented students. Understanding the experiences of those on the campus who have the most interactions with undocumented students is crucial in order to gain a better understanding of the practical outcomes of AB 540. Tenets of phenomenology are woven throughout these research questions to ensure appropriate representation of the lived experiences of those being investigated. To examine this issue, the following research questions were developed:

1. How do current student services professionals in Admissions and Financial Aid describe their experiences in interpreting and implementing California Assembly Bill 540?

- a. Describe how they interpret and implement AB 540 on their campuses.
- b. Describe how they have dealt with changes in campus policies and procedures over time.
- c. Describe their management of the demands and changes of the interpretation and implementation of AB 540.

For this study, it was assumed that these student services professionals had experienced dilemmas and exercised self-discretion when working with this student population through the theoretical framework of street-level bureaucracy as developed by Lipsky (1980). Lipsky (1980) claimed that policy implementation cannot be fully understood until one focuses on street-level service providers. Lipsky (1980) argued that the street-level providers' individual decisions and discretion to choose become the adopted and implemented bureaucratic policies. AB 540 was created to increase access to higher education for all California residents, and yet the law does not provide the necessary guidelines, information, and resources that are required for student services professionals to respond properly to individual cases. Lipsky (2010) stated, "The decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressure, effectively become the public policies they carry out" (p. xiii). For undocumented immigrants seeking access to education, these decisions made by front-line professionals can define their academic experiences and outcomes.

### **Methodology**

As a theoretical construct, Lipsky (1980, 2010) defined street-level bureaucrats as public service workers who interact directly with people in the course of their jobs and exercise self-discretion to execute their work. In higher education, street-level bureaucrats can be defined as full-time and part-time, front-line student services professionals. This theoretical framework also influenced the data collection process. Research participants needed to have at minimum six months of experience working in the front line and with undocumented students as student services providers. Lipsky's (1980) theory influenced the design of this study. Therefore, this study did not address the experiences of undocumented students. Rather, it focused on the "street bureaucrats"—those who serve as front-line student services personnel.

A qualitative research methodology with a phenomenological design was used (Creswell, 2012) to gain knowledge of the front-line student services professionals who work directly with

undocumented students while interpreting and implementing policies and procedures related to AB 540. This study will help to identify the significance behind the human experience of front-line student services professionals and their work with undocumented students. Front-line workers are defined as those who work at the counter or those who have first contact with students in their department. Purposive and snowball sampling were utilized in this study. Participants were referred by directors in Admissions and Financial Aid at two four-year universities and one community college. The average years of experience in student affairs among the participants was over eight years. Additional participants were referred by those who had already participated in the study.

Rocky College, a public, two year community college, and Metropolitan University and Valley University both of which are public, four-year universities, were selected because all of these institutions are defined as Hispanic Serving Institutions, which at least 25% of their full-time undergraduate students are Hispanic (Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities, 2017) . California community colleges remain the most cost-efficient option for undocumented students. Mendoza (2009) revealed that there are over 34,000 undocumented students enrolled in community colleges as oppose to 3,600 undocumented students enrolled in California State Universities. After interviewing twelve participants utilizing semi-structured phenomenological interviews, which lasted 45-60 minutes per person, the researcher determined that saturation had been reached. One of the limitations of this study is that the interview data from participants may not reflect the experiences of all student services professionals who work with undocumented students across the country. Table I provides descriptions of the research participants.

Table 1  
*Description of Research Participants*

Participant Name	Gender	School- Position	Years in Student services	Ethnicity
Cecilia	Female	Rocky College- Financial Aid	6 years	Asian Pacific Islander
Diana	Female	Rocky College- Financial Aid	9 years	Latina
Madison	Female	Rocky College- Admissions	33 years	Latina
Vanessa	Female	Rocky College- Admissions	11 years	Latina
Gwen	Female	Metropolitan University- Financial Aid	11 years	Latina
Jenny	Female	Metropolitan University- Financial Aid	10 years	Latina
Lisa	Female	Metropolitan University-Admissions	8 years	Latina
Victoria	Female	Metropolitan University-Admissions	3 years	Latina
Sherry	Female	Valley University- Admissions	9 years	Asian Pacific Islander
Yvette	Female	Valley University- Admissions	8 years	Latina
Mindy	Female	Valley University- Financial Aid	12 years	Latina
Tina	Female	Valley University- Financial Aid	8 years	Asian Pacific Islander

*Note.* Pseudonyms were used for participants and data collection sites. Ethnicity was based on visual identification.

This research focused on the Office of Admissions and the Office of Financial Aid because these offices are integral parts of college campuses in providing services and resources to undocumented students, specifically on accessibility and affordability. The Office of Admissions is responsible for determining residency status for tuition purposes at the California State

Universities and the California community colleges. As stated in the admissions handbook, “each campus’ Admission Office is responsible for determining the residency status of all new and returning students based on the Application for Admission, Residency Questionnaire, Reclassification Request Form, and, as necessary, other evidence furnished by the student” (California State University, 2014, p. 27). The Office of Financial Aid is important to undocumented students’ educational attainment because the office is responsible for disbursing financial aid and advertising and administering scholarships.

Tenets of Moustaka’s (1994) transcendental phenomenology were selected to analyze the data because it focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on the descriptions of participants’ experiences. Street-level bureaucracy also influenced data analysis. Themes were centered on the experiences, challenges, and solutions delivered by street-level bureaucrats—those who work as front-line student services personnel in higher education. Themes were generated by keeping the most significant information and statements from participants (Moustaka, 1994). Peer review was utilized to check for researcher bias (Creswell, 2012). Peer reviews were conducted during each stage of the coding process. An initial peer review was conducted once open coding was completed. A peer read through the initial coding for accuracy. A second peer review was conducted after axial coding and the last peer review was completed after the selective coding process.

It is not uncommon for personal feelings and perspectives including biases and experiences related to the study to be experienced by the researcher; therefore, I utilized transcendental phenomenology to analyze the interviews to highlight the importance of these participants. As a community college counselor, I often assisted students with their academic, financial, and emotional challenges. Although I am skilled in counseling techniques, I still feel least competent when working with students resolving personal and social needs, because these needs can vary from one student to the next. Providing personal and social counseling is challenging in an academic setting because of the time constraints placed by the institution and the fact that most counseling appointments are brief. I can relate with the difficulty experienced by front-line professionals when addressing the academic and non-academic needs of students in a limited amount of time. Similarly, I have felt the pressure to provide students with solutions in a rushed environment. With this lens, the study was limited by the assumption that front-line student

services professionals faced challenges every day due to the lack of structure, information and resources when working with undocumented students.

### Findings

One major theme was found from the data analysis of the twelve semi-structured individual interviews—front-line work is complex. Four sub-themes were further determined: (1) front-line work is rewarding but challenging, (2) front-line work and the front counter do not allow the participants to pay attention to students' individual needs, (3) front-line professionals are limited to what they can do to help undocumented students through their affiliated program and the state's infrastructures, and (4) front-line professionals want to learn more about their students, but there is no time allotted for professional development. Findings suggest that front-line staff is challenged by (a) having to probe and ask multiple questions, (b) feeling caught in the middle between campus policies and students, (c) having their hands tied, (d) not having all of the information and resources needed to help, and (e) dealing with irate students with little to no privacy.

More than 66% of the participants shared how happy and empowered they felt after helping students. As a community college student services professional, Madison (Female, Rocky College, Latina) who has worked in Admissions and Records for the last 33 years explained, "It's been very rewarding seeing that some of those students have completed their degree and graduated, and even some of them have gone to UCs, CSUs, have come back and say thank you."

Although working with students can be rewarding, front-line Admissions and Financial Aid professionals talked about how the set-up of their work space can be off-putting to students. From the participants' perspective, undocumented students may be less likely to disclose their immigration statuses at the front-line due to the lack of privacy. The out-in-the-open interrogations became a part of the unintended implementations that may result in the gathering of inaccurate information to determine eligibility for AB 540. Mindy (12 years of experience, Latina) from Financial Aid at Valley University shared, "I find myself having to distance myself because it's hard to get personal with each of the students, because, again, we serve so many. And in order to do your job, sometimes there has to be a line [drawn]." Similarly, another front-line Financial Aid staff talked about the series of probing and questioning at the front counter. Although the intention for the probing and questioning was to better assist the students, the

location and the sensitivity of the questions being asked sometimes led to students feeling interrogated and therefore withholding critical information.

Despite the challenges at the front-counter, many student services professionals intrinsically want to help undocumented students. However, due to their responsibilities and the need to follow regulations and policies, professionals have to distance themselves in order to help everyone equally. Although front-line Admissions staff want to help students, Sherry (Valley University, 9 years of experience, Asian Pacific Islander) explained that she could not look the other way, “I always state to these students, if they don't qualify for this because maybe they're missing a semester of high school,. . . it's a statutory law; I cannot make any changes to it.” Similarly, at Metropolitan University, Lisa (Female, 8 years of experience, Latina) who works in Admissions and Records stated that it is not up to her to decide if adult school qualifies as years of schooling needed to meet the in-state tuition exemption, it is up to their campus' legal counsel: “If they approve it, great, we can process. If not, it's not up to me to say, adult school is fine; adult school is not fine.”

With limited guidance from their supervisors, front-line student services professionals resorted to self-education through research and making connections on their own time, in order to manage the changes in policy and the demands from students. Sherry (Female, 9 years of experience, Admissions, Asian Pacific Islander), who is a residency specialist at Valley University, noted that she read the Codes of Regulation on her own, and after reading through the educational codes felt more confident about her decisions regarding AB 540. Although some departments had trainings, these trainings were not consistent and most of the trainings covered technical knowledge on the AB 540 affidavit and the California Dream Act (2011) application; however, none of the trainings were about the experiences of the undocumented student population.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of student affairs professionals working in the Office of Admissions and Financial Aid. By understanding their motivations, daily routines, and interactions with students, the researcher gained insight into the roles and functions of these front-line professionals. Some front-line professionals functioned as gatekeepers for in-state tuition and in-state financial aid while others

took on the roles of being advocates to improve campus policies and procedures for increased access to higher education for undocumented youth. Echoing Gildersleeve's (2007) literature, finances and inconsistent admission practices continue to affect undocumented students' access to higher education.

Accompanied by limited guidance from their supervisors, front-line student services professionals resorted to self-education through research and making connections on their own time. Without proper knowledge of the undocumented population, a major way of coping with the demands of being on the front-line is to treat everybody the same. According to the participants in Admissions and Financial Aid, as students arrived and approached the front counter for the first time, the students' immigration statuses were not known. Immigration status is not a topic front-line personnel automatically address. It is through the series of questions and deductive reasoning skills that student affairs professionals eventually discover students' immigration status. Additionally, the initial contact focused on the tasks that needed to be resolved rather than the individual. Moreover, the interview data confirmed Oseguera, Flores, and Burciaga's (2010) study on staff training. They explained that student affairs professionals face difficulties serving undocumented students due to the lack of training. In this study, front-line professionals indicated that they had minimal institutional trainings specifically focused on the undocumented student population.

## **Implications**

Mirroring Lipsky's (1980) theory, front-line Admissions and Financial Aid personnel functioned similarly to the bureaucrats in other public sectors such as social services and other governmental agencies described by Lipsky (1980). These front-line people created their own coping strategies to work with the diverse student body. Front-line Admissions and Financial Aid professionals also dealt with the lack of resources and the increased demands of work that occurred once undocumented students became eligible for in-state tuition and state financial aid.

Front-line student services professionals who participated in the study also varied in their skill sets, years of experience, and personal backgrounds. Some front-line staff were student workers who only had six months of working experience and others had 30 plus years of student services experience. Technical skill levels, personal life experiences, and student service training and exposure influenced their interactions with undocumented students. Some front-line staff

were knowledgeable and aware of the needs of undocumented students because they conducted their own research, attended workshops related to undocumented students, and knew someone or was related to someone who was undocumented. Others did not have the opportunity to attend professional development workshops, and, therefore, had little knowledge about the undocumented student population. Culturally appropriate staff development opportunities for front-line student services professionals are crucial.

Currently, our front-line student services providers do not have the support from their supervisor and/or institution, space, and knowledge to effectively work with undocumented students; hence, they are not providing equitable services. All students deserve equitable student support services. Equity takes into consideration that some students have unique needs and demand unique attention (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001). Front-line professionals will need to recognize students who are going to be comfortable in embracing their identity as Dreamers, and those who may never “out” themselves as Dreamers, and those who are working on their development of the “coming out” process (Villazor, 2013). The spectrum of students’ needs covers a broad range, thus there is no one “right” way of interacting and working with undocumented students. Therefore, it may take a longer period of time to serve an undocumented student, similar to Ayon’s (2009) findings with welfare workers and non-English speaking and undocumented families.

## **Recommendations**

### **Acknowledge and Appreciate Front-line Workers**

The majority of the interviewees enjoyed working with students. Being in the front line means they have seen it all. Most front-line staff had the intention to help undocumented students with their needs; however, sometimes they do not have the skills and/or authority to accommodate these students and their requests. Front-line, classified staff do not often receive acknowledgement and appreciation from management, faculty, or students for the work that they provide. In higher education, faculty and administrators are appreciated through various ceremonies and accolades; however, front-line, classified student services professionals often are overlooked. Administrators and faculty should provide support, encouragement and symbolic ceremonies to highlight the tireless work these front-line professionals render.

### **Create Easy to Understand Policies**

AB 540 opened the doors for many undocumented students to pursue affordable postsecondary education. The lack of clarity on the law creates inconsistent policy interpretations and implementations by front-line personnel across various systems of higher education. Many undocumented students have to “shop around” between multiple front-line professionals because they may get different feedback and answers from these individuals. Increased communication across systems and campuses is vital.

### **Create Space or Allow Individual Appointments**

Many participants shared their frustrations with the probing and asking of sensitive questions at the front counter. As a best practice, for some campuses in California, Dream Centers are designed to provide undocumented students with academic and emotional support, referrals to financial and legal assistance, information on programs and services designed to improve retention and graduation rates, and a comforting environment where students can connect with one another. Every Dream Center provided a safe space for undocumented students where they can lower their defenses, which means student service staff can obtain accurate information in a sensible manner. If creating a Dream Center is not possible on a campus, having access to private meeting rooms or having the ability to make individual appointments with Admissions and Financial Aid staff can ease the fear and anxiety undocumented students experience when disclosing their immigration status out in the open.

A handful of Dream Centers have developed programs to include connecting undocumented students with mentors and providing ally training and workshops in an attempt to shift the culture on their campuses to become “Dreamer” friendly. Spaces like Dream Centers can assist with providing equitable student services because their staff have the ability to focus on creating a space where education, advocacy, and student development can flourish. According to Stanton-Salazar (2007), institutional agents can add value to low-status youth’s empowerment.

### **Prioritization on Staff Development**

Many front-line staff, including part-time and temporary employees, did not have training on student service etiquette, cultural sensitivity, ethical decision-making, identity development for undocumented college students, consistent policy interpretations and implementations,

community outreach, rapport building, and self-care. Instead of seeing each student interaction as a business transaction, staff should see individual interactions with students as opportunities to develop, engage, and educate students. Culturally relevant professional development on immigration laws, identity development, and current events can also benefit front-line professionals.

### **Prioritization on Departmental Collaboration**

This study suggests collaboration amongst Admissions and Financial Aid as critical in order for undocumented students to make college a reality. When departments work in silos, undertrained staff cannot assist undocumented students properly; therefore, undocumented students suffer the consequences of being left alone to navigate the college-going process.

### **Conclusion**

Many times front-line professionals in Admissions and Financial Aid are the first and only people who interact with undocumented students prior to the first day of class. Front-line professionals may be the make-it or break-it people for undocumented students to attain their dreams of acquiring postsecondary education. It is evident that many front-line professionals enjoyed student interactions and found their careers rewarding. However, front-line professionals had to balance their roles as advocates and policy enforcers. This study serves as a foundation for further research on the tireless work front-line student services professionals provide for undocumented students. It also adds knowledge to the complexity of front-line work.

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