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Critical Junctures along the Chicanx/Latinx Educational Pipeline: Interdisciplinary and Intersectional

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**An Undocumented Student's Quest for Acceptance: A Testimonio Analysis  
Traversing the Chicax Educational Pipeline**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the educational trajectory of a multiply marginalized undocumented Latinx student. Utilizing a Critical Race Quantitative Intersectional + *Testimonio*, this article brings to light the experiential knowledge often not visible in quantitative data approaches, helping to contextualize educational pipeline numbers. This study draws on a *testimonio* methodology revealing challenges and illuminating educational pathways from high school to the doctorate. The findings show important considerations for policy and practice that account for social instability, consider the importance of mentorship, and offer implications for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion leaders to create greater belonging across campuses throughout the educational pipeline.

*Keywords:* undocumented, graduate students, educational pipeline, Latinx, *testimonio*

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*I had fear and was emotionally affected because I remember being depressed, anxious, and nervous about not knowing what would happen next. How am I going to live? [This question] was constantly [on] my mind. But I always [found] the right people at the right time.*

-Joaquín

In the epigraph above, Joaquín alludes to the state of fear he experienced, which forced him to flee his hometown in Mexico, leaving behind everything he had known in his 15 years of life. As an unaccompanied minor, his *testimonio* of migration to the United States is one of persistence and resistance in search of liberty/freedom and acceptance of his intersectional identities as a gay, working-class, undocumented Mexicano who was the first in his family to attend a university. Each step of his migratory and educational journey was taken in a perpetual state of uncertainty around employment and housing. Joaquín's story of navigating the U.S. educational pipeline is revelatory of the power of serendipitous moments and the generosity of numerous caring institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) who made his journey possible. Having reached near completion of a doctoral degree in 2011, Joaquín's case helps illuminate how students' sharing their identities struggle and resist across the educational pipeline and where and to whom they turn for support.

Over the last decade, several research studies (Covarrubias, 2011; Covarrubias & Lara, 2014; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Huber, et al., 2015) have examined the educational attainment of Chicana/Latina students at different junctures across the educational pipeline, highlighting the dismal numbers of students that ultimately attain higher education. Yet, there is limited research on undocumented students like Joaquín who achieved high levels of formal education before the 2012 passage of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals<sup>1</sup> (DACA) or who don't meet the eligibility requirements (Lara, 2014).

Building on the work of educational pipeline scholars (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2006; Pérez Huber et al., 2006), this paper applies a Critical Race Quantitative Intersections + *Testimonio* (CRQI + T) analysis, and seeks to answer the following research question: How can the educational *testimonio* of an undocumented, unaccompanied

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<sup>1</sup> The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals is an Obama era policy that grants administrative relief from deportation to those that qualify and apply for it. Eligible immigrants are able to receive protection from deportation and are also provided with a permit.

minor help expand analysis of the educational pipeline as a conceptual tool? This article draws on a larger ethnographic research study conducted over two years examining the life journey and educational trajectory of a Chicana undocumented graduate student enrolled in a Ph.D. program at a research-intensive institution on the East Coast.

### Literature Review

#### *The Educational Pipeline*

The educational pipeline has been utilized as a tool to highlight educational attainment across different racial and ethnic groups. By utilizing census data, educators and researchers have highlighted the pivotal points in education where students depart, calling attention to the importance of retention and support for Latinx students at all levels of the educational pipeline. More importantly, the educational pipeline literature has prompted further exploration of different junctures and different experiences for various racial and ethnic groups. The initial pipelines (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano et al., 2005; Pérez Huber et al., 2006; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006; Rivas et al., 2007) utilized the 2000 decennial Census data to illustrate educational inequities through completion rates for an education at the high school, community college, four-year college or university, and graduate school (master's and doctoral) levels.

In a novel approach to the educational pipeline, Alejandro Covarrubias and Argelia Lara (2014) extended prior articulations by focusing on what they term Critical Race Quantitative Intersections (Covarrubias, 2011; Covarrubias & Velez 2013; Covarrubias & Lara, 2014). Covarrubias and Lara employed this Critical Race Quantitative Intersections (CRQI) framework to examine the educational outcomes of people of Mexican origin. Using 2010 Census data, they developed an innovative methodology to estimate the number of undocumented people of Mexican origin to reveal significant differences in educational attainment outcomes associated with legal status.

Building on CRQI, Covarrubias and colleagues introduced CRQI + *Testimonio* (Covarrubias, et al., 2018). Here, the authors argued for the importance of incorporating the stories of those at the margins to fully understand the intersectional experiences of student access to education and related opportunities. They addressed the importance of marshaling evidence from statistical data to quantify how patterns of educational inequality are compounded for marginalized students of color.

Most recently, the work of the educational pipeline has been extended to the state of Texas, where Aleman and colleagues (2022a) have applied its function as a critical race heuristic. They utilize the pipeline as a visual representation and instructive tool to inform their pedagogy, leading educators to attain a conscientization about the factors contributing to disparities within the educational system. Additional pipelines on the state of Texas have begun to emphasize the importance of middle school as a key transition point for Latinas/os and Chicana/os (Aleman et.al., 2022b). While these are important contributions to the literature, no additional pipelines have been published examining educational outcomes for Latinx undocumented populations.

#### *Undocumented Students in Higher Education, DACA, and Its Limitations*

The Plyer v. Doe 1982 case was instrumental in providing access to a free public education for undocumented students in the K-12 school system. Access to higher education, however, remained limited. It was not until 1985 that the case of Leticia A. v. UC Regents and CSU Board of Trustees supported the right of undocumented college students to pay in-state tuition. This case was overturned in 1990 by Bradford v. UC Regents, once again blocking their eligibility for in-state tuition. In 2001, Assembly Bill 540 (AB540) was established, reinstating the eligibility of undocumented students in California for in-state tuition.

Student activism (Gonzales, 2008; Negrón-Gonzales, 2015; Escudero, 2020; Terriquez et al., 2018) and resistance movements (Buenavista, 2018; Pérez Huber, 2017; Rodriguez, 2022) were instrumental in demanding equitable opportunities and resources for undocumented students, drawing significant attention and leading to policies like DACA that temporarily widened access to employment and higher education. A recent report by the President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2021) found that there were approximately 427,000 undocumented students, with about 181,000 of them who were DACA-eligible. The literature on undocumented college graduates and their employment opportunities is limited and needs to examine further the experiences and perspectives of students who, for example, do not meet the age requirements of DACA, come from mixed-status families, or do not meet the high school requirements for eligibility.

Recent studies on undocumented graduate students found that they face challenges obtaining funding and finding support networks (Lara, 2014; Lara & Nava, 2018; Escudero, 2020) in their respective graduate programs, often drawing on familial savings to fund their studies

(Escudero et al., 2019; Lara & Nava, 2022). When navigating the graduate school process, undocumented graduate students were found to rely on their peers and mentors for guidance and were motivated by justice concerns (Lara & Nava, 2018). Undocumented graduate students who are not eligible for DACA continue to be marginalized and find it extremely difficult to take on paid opportunities, or secure financial assistance, given that most fellowships are limited to students who have access to DACA (Freeman & Valdivia, 2021).

Therefore, how most undocumented students navigate exclusionary education structures remains an important research area. The practices and strategies utilized by the student population in navigating higher education can help inform the development of institutional support systems focusing on this group—ultimately creating a more inclusionary campus.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work is informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) and seeks to contextualize the lived experiences of a Mexican-origin, undocumented student across the educational pipeline. CRT is a theoretical tool that “challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism as they relate to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups” (Solórzano, 1998, p. 122). Over the last three decades, CRT scholars (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano 1997) in the field of education have sought to disrupt social, political, and educational inequities in part following the inadequacy of multicultural education reforms of the 1980s in addressing forms of marginalization. Building upon the work of scholars in the legal arena (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), critical race theorists have actively sought to create social change by improving the lived conditions of marginalized groups.

Solórzano and Yosso (2001) have outlined five guiding tenets that form the basic perspectives of CRT in education. The first tenet asserts that *race and racism are a central and defining feature of U.S. society and intersect with other forms of social oppression* (Solórzano & Yosso 2001). The second tenet *challenges the dominant ideology* that the “educational system and its institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (p. 472). The *commitment to social justice* is the third tenet, which proposes a transformative response to race, class, and gender-based oppression and offers a context of empowerment for racially minoritized groups. The fourth tenet is the *centrality of*

*experiential knowledge*, framing the knowledge of students and communities of Color as “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education” (p. 473). The fifth tenet is *the transdisciplinary perspective*, which draws from across the fields and disciplines of study and “insists on analyzing race and racism in education by placing them in both an historical and contemporary context” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p.473). In what follows, I detail how a Critical Race Quantitative Intersectionality Framework (Covarrubias & Velez, 2013) is grounded in CRT and how it extends CRT.

### Methodology

I utilized Critical Race Quantitative Intersectionality + *Testimonio* (Covarrubias, Nava, Lara, Burciaga, & Solórzano, 2018) as an analytical framework for this study. I begin by building from Covarrubias and Velez’s (2013) CRQI framework and methodological approach that seeks to “account for the material impact of race and racism at its intersection with other forms of subordination (p. 276). I also draw here from qualitative methods to be able to ground the quantitative data from the educational pipelines. I borrow from the work of Chicana Feminists (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012) who define *testimonio* as an “approach that incorporates political, social, historical, and cultural histories that accompany one’s life experiences as a means to bring about change through consciousness-raising. In bridging individuals with collective histories of oppression, a story of marginalization is re-centered to elicit social change.” (p. 364). Cruz (2012) reminds us that *testimonio* “is a story of a subject who has experienced or witnessed great trauma, oppression, forced migration, or violence” (p. 461) that pushes back against erasure. In what follows, I draw on my prior co-authored work (Covarrubias et al., 2018) to name the four tenets guiding CRQI + T.

#### *CRQI + T Tenet #1: Disrupting dominant data mining – toward an intersectional approach*

While prior educational pipelines lent themselves to centering a racial analysis, CRQI+ T began as a framework seeking to “do more” at the intersections (Covarrubias, 2011; Covarrubias & Velez, 2013). A CRQI + T framework acknowledges that “educational experiences [are] mediated by how racialization interact[s] with gender, social class, citizenship, and other social constructions” (Covarrubias et al. 2018, p. 256). Even with the limitations stemming from using US Census data and the narrowness of specific categories, “the large-scale nature of the US Census allowed us to create reliable portraits of educational (in)opportunity

for Communities of Color at varying scales of geography” (p. 257). The educational pipelines used in this article all pull from data that examines intersecting variables of race, gender, and citizenship status.

*CRQI + T Tenet #2: Numbers do not speak for themselves*

This tenet emphasizes that a CRQI+T framework calls for “quantitative analyses to be critically contextualized, and challenges claims of neutrality” (Covarrubias et al., 2018, p. 257) often associated with quantitative approaches. *Testimonio* can play an important role in critically historicizing and contextualizing quantitative findings to disrupt deficit interpretations of leakage points in the pipeline. Similarly, Carbado and Roithmayr (2014) remind us that “language and theoretical method used to frame an inquiry shape not just the observer’s interpretation of facts, but also what the observer perceives to be a fact in the first place” (p.158).

*CRQI + T Tenet #3: Experientially and materially grounding data*

Critical race scholars employing CRQI+T framework begin with the lived experiences of People and Communities of Color, “[as it] is not only valid and relevant for understanding inequality in American education, but necessary” (Covarrubias & Vélez 2013, p. 279). In this way, *testimonios* highlight the localized knowledge of multiply marginalized students, providing for a more grounded and contextualized analysis of statistical educational outcomes and offering what Covarrubias and colleagues have termed *experiential significance*

*CRQI + T Tenet #4: Commitment to structural transformation of intersectional subordination*

This fourth tenet highlights a commitment to research that is “purposeful in engaging a praxis of structural transformation that is deeply committed to social justice” (Covarrubias et al. 2018, p. 258). CRQI+T, in its dealing with intersectionality, goes beyond merely examining differences in identity but is most concerned with understanding and critiquing how oppression and domination are deployed through the various isms.

*The Chicana Educational Pipelines: U.S.-Born and The Undocumented*

For this study, I selected two pipelines from my previously published work with Alejandro Covarrubias (Covarrubias & Lara, 2014), which I reproduce below. Data from these pipelines come from the Census Current Population Survey March 2010 Supplement<sup>2</sup>. I selected these pipelines because they align with Joaquin’s *testimonio*, which was collected during

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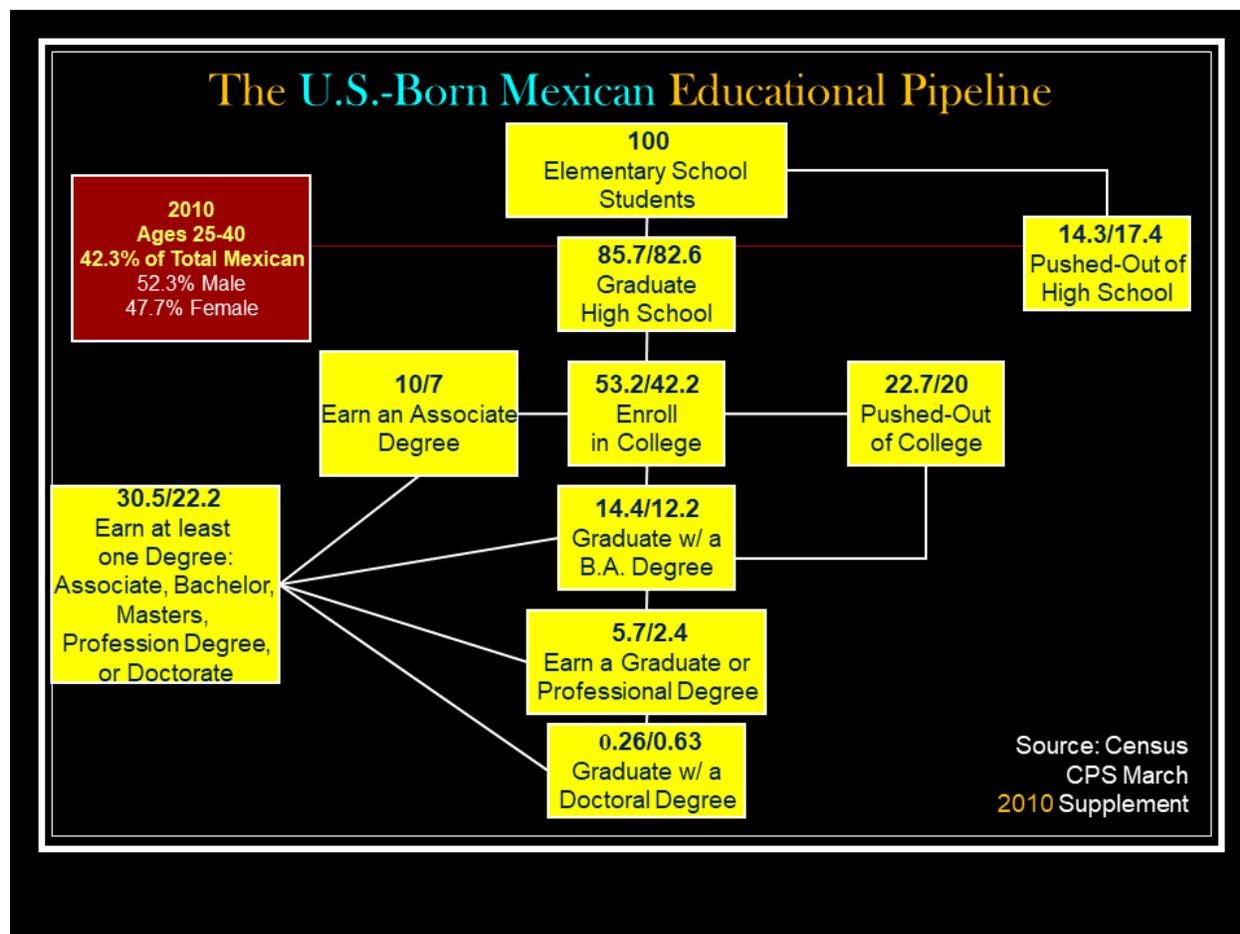
<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the methodological approach used to create these pipelines please see my co-authored publication (2014) with Alejandro Covarrubias.

the 2010 academic year towards the end of his doctoral journey. During the telling of Joaquin’s *testimonio* I present educational outcome data at critical junctures from each of these educational pipelines.

**Figure 1**

*The U.S.-Born Mexican Educational Pipeline*

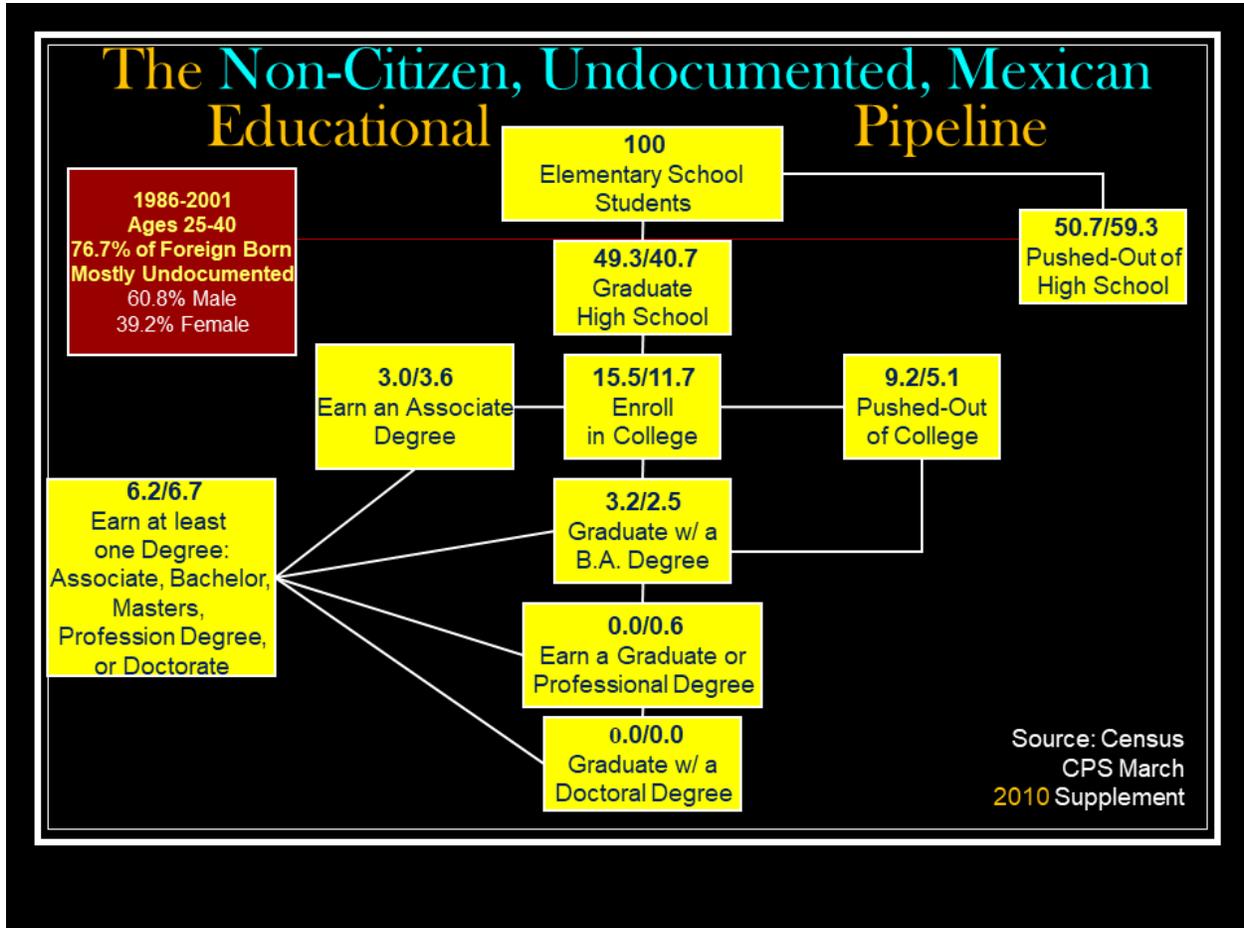
Adapted from "The undocumented (im)migrant educational pipeline: The influence of citizenship status on educational attainment for people of Mexican origin.," by A. Covarrubias, & A. Lara, 2014, *Urban Education*, 49, (1) 75-10 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912470468>). Reprinted with permission.



**Figure 2**

*Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline*

Adapted from "The undocumented (im)migrant educational pipeline: The influence of citizenship status on educational attainment for people of Mexican origin.," by A. Covarrubias, & A. Lara, 2014, *Urban Education*, 49, (1) 75-10 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912470468>). Reprinted with permission.



In the next section, I provide a CRQI + T analysis to understand the above educational outcomes. I utilize Joaquín's *testimonio* to highlight critical junctures in his trajectory across the educational pipeline and identify key factors that made access to education possible despite his many challenges as an undocumented student.

### **The Pipeline in the Context of Joaquín's Testimonio**

*Joaquín's Early Elementary Schooling in Mexico and Sexual Identity*

Joaquín grew up in Michoacán, Mexico as an only child in a conservative catholic family. He described living in a society, a small community, and a family where he regularly heard homophobic remarks. His mother was the main provider for the family, as Joaquín's father was often away, constantly migrating to the U.S. for work. Joaquín has powerful memories of his father always going to the U.S. and returning to Michoacán. Joaquín grew up knowing he was different from other kids and, simultaneously, that he had to find ways to present himself as "normal." He recalled:

So I grew up knowing that I was different and that at the same time that I was different, I had to find ways to pretend that I was normal, to pretend that I was accepted there (in Michoacán, Mexico). You find that you have to protect yourself from them in the way you act, in the way you react to things, in the way you behave, in the way you treat them. I was pretty much growing up in this environment where I was exposed to pejorative comments, bad treatment. It wasn't pleasing.

Early in his schooling, Joaquín felt that people saw something different in him that they did not accept. In elementary and high school, he frequently experienced rejection by his classmates, who made fun of him and called him hurtful names. As a child, he often wondered if moving to another town or a large city where no one knew him could lead to people treating him like any other kid and bring an end to the name-calling and hostile treatment. Relocating would allow for a new opportunity for him to be in a new place where people would treat him differently; they would accept him in that community and in that society.

Joaquín's family eventually relocated to a large city, but he nonetheless continued to experience marginalization. His peers treated him badly, the name-calling continued, and some kids even threw rocks at him. He shared one memorable and terrifying incident in which he was threatened by a classmate's friend who put a knife to his throat. Joaquín explained the incident this way:

I remember one time, *uno de los compañeros de los otros estudiantes me puso una navaja aquí* (one of the other students placed a knife here) (grabs throat), telling me, *dime que* (tell me), *cabrón*, *dime si eres joto* (tell me if you are gay), *joto* is maricon, it is a pejorative word for homosexuals there. Oh my God, it was this kind of behavior you see, and again knowing that I was homosexual and that I couldn't go back home and tell my

family. This is what I'm experiencing, they would discriminate against me more. So my experience was one of sexual discrimination there.

As Joaquín shared his *testimonio*, his reasoning behind his decision to migrate became apparent. This pivotal moment informed Joaquín's decision to leave his community to seek refuge away from home.

His feelings of not belonging and needing to go somewhere else became a reality when he met a group of young people who coincidentally expressed a desire to migrate to the U.S. He clarified:

I needed to go somewhere, whatever that place is, might be the moon, might be wherever, I don't want to live, I don't want to go hide, I have to go somewhere. I just want to run away, and life brought me here like that.

Joaquín had been working an assortment of jobs, having saved money and migrated to the U.S. with the intent to find something better— the safety and acceptance he longed for. His border crossing was a matter of survival as his life had been threatened, and he might not be alive had he not decided to leave for the U.S.

**Table 1**

*High School Graduation Outcomes: Comparison of U.S. Born and Undocumented Pipelines*

<b>U.S. Born Mexican Educational Pipeline</b>	<b>Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline</b>
Start Elementary: 100	Start Elementary: 100
Women 85.7/ Men 82.6	Women 49.3/ Men 40.7

*Escaping Violence as an Unaccompanied Minor into the United States*

As an unaccompanied minor at the age of 15, Joaquín attempted entry into the U.S. three times before he succeeded. He was able to settle temporarily near San Diego, where he worked distributing flyers for a small tax business and ultimately obtained a job at a Ross department store. After four months of working and surviving, he reached out to his aunt in Central California, who convinced him to live with her and enroll in school to at least complete high school. Joaquín shared:

I couldn't open up. *So, uno crece así con este*, feeling this way inside, feeling uncomfortable, feeling that if you open up you will probably lose people that you love or

that you are going to be discriminated against once more because you don't know what to expect.

Joaquín described living with his aunt and family in California in similar ways to his immediate family in Mexico, as not being accepting of his sexuality as a gay adolescent. Due to this, he was unable to open up about his sexual identity and did not enjoy his high school experience because he did not fit in. At times, Joaquín felt like he was a burden on his family and had to tolerate living there because he had nowhere to go. A key challenge for Joaquín entering high school was having to learn English. He described this period in his life as a time of “adapting, readjusting to something new.” Although he experienced numerous “internal emotional problems,” he did have some positive experiences in high school.

I had good teachers in high school that inspired me, Ms. Dee, I remember she was an English teacher and was really strict. Oh, but I loved her! She was one of the best teachers that I've had, and she inspired me to continue going to school.

When Joaquín finished high school, he did not feel prepared for the next steps in life and was unaware that he could continue on to higher education. He knew he was ineligible to apply for federal financial aid, but he did not know of other sources of support for which he may have been eligible. Nobody ever told him that he could attend a college or a 4-year university. Joaquín just went with the “flow.” He knew that if he had been documented, he would have been made aware of more opportunities, and he would not have been overlooked by his counselor and likely would have received greater guidance around the next steps of his educational journey. Despite the limited information he received, he enrolled in a local community college.

When the Chicax educational pipeline is disaggregated by “US-Born” in comparison to “Non-Citizen, Undocumented,” we see a 40 percent difference in those that graduate from high school. The secondary school years are foundational for identity development, as well as career and occupational explorations. Having safe spaces inside and outside of schools where students can explore their identities without feeling reproach or judgment is of critical importance. While Joaquín was fortunate to find family members to live with, it came at the cost of not being able to be his authentic self as a gay adolescent.

**Table 2**

*Enter College: Comparison of U.S. Born and Undocumented Pipelines*

<b>U.S. Born Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100	<b>Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100
Women 53.2/ Men 42.2	Women 15.5/Men 11.7

*Entrance into Community College*

Joaquín's pathway into the community college became clearer to him when a friend gave him a ride to the local community college to ask and learn about enrollment. The friend played a vital role in Joaquín's entrance into higher education, given the limited access to public transportation in rural communities in Central California. During his visit to the community college, he met with a counselor who provided course selection guidance and assisted him with registration and enrollment.

I remember it was really, really cheap. So, first semester I paid tuition and later on I did some research about organizations, and I got into an organization where they paid my tuition and they gave me books [for my class]. Then I found out about a pre-service teacher program and since I didn't want to work washing dishes or anything like that, I figured I better work in something else. I applied for the teaching program and they accepted me, and through my relationship with the teaching program and this organization that paid my books and tuition, I lived like a king you see, my life was a lot better.

At the time, Joaquín aspired to become an educator. The organizations he participated in that offered him support pointed him toward a career in teaching, which promised a good wage, mentorship, and professional development. His first year at the community college came with a degree of stability, creating an opportunity to move out of his aunt's house to live with roommates closer to campus. That would not last long, as by the end of his second year, Joaquín discovered his roommates were involved in illicit activities arriving one day to a ransacked apartment where everything was thrown around and destroyed. Fearing the perpetrators would return to hurt him if he remained in the apartment, he left his roommates

and sought refuge elsewhere. Once again, Joaquín faced the uncertainty of where to turn next. He recalled one particular day feeling immense sadness and described, by happenstance, running into one of his community college professors on campus. He shared:

*Un día* (One day), I was taking a class and this professor approached me. *Estaba tomando una clase de francés y mi profesora Marie G n reuse* (I was taking a French class with my professor), I don't know how she realized that I was sad or something was wrong. So she came to ask me, 'Hey what's the matter, why are you so sad?' and I told her what happened to me. "I don't know what I'm going to do and life is miserable, I don't know what to do. I don't have a place to go." She responded and said, 'Why don't you come to live in my house.' *Y all  empez , y era mi profesora de franc s* (And everything started there, she was my French professor). *Entonces* (Then), she welcomed me in her house, *me dio un cuarto, y me dice* (she offered me a room and said), you don't have to pay rent, your job is to go to school, finish what you have to do.

Joaqu n's French professor, Marie G n reuse, provided him with a space to live at a critical time of need. Additionally, she also guided the next steps of his educational trajectory. With her support, Joaqu n made a realistic and informed choice to attend the local California State University (CSU). Given his undocumented status, professor G n reuse informed Joaqu n that he would need a lot of money to attend Boston College and that a more realistic choice would be to transfer to the CSU. Joaqu n credited Professor G n reuse for sharing this sobering dose of reality while connecting him with key institutional agents at the CSU who could support him as an undocumented student. Joaqu n described Professor G n reuse as a loving grandmother with whom he has remained connected over the years.

Joaqu n's decision to attend a community college was logical given the universal access, proximity to where he lived, and affordability as an undocumented student. Like Joaqu n, 80% of Latinx students begin their postsecondary education in community colleges. Due to various factors including course placement in developmental education, finances, and immigration status, less than a third (32%) of Latinx students transfer to a 4-year university (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021). Joaqu n's participation in a support program coupled with living with roommates, comparatively speaking, given his precarious financial status, left him feeling "like a king,"

**Table 3**

*Graduate with a B.A.: Comparison of U.S. Born and Undocumented Pipelines*

<b>U.S. Born Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100	<b>Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100
Women 14.4 / Men 12.2	Women 3.2/ Men 2.5

*Undergraduate Desires of Teaching & Serendipity*

Joaquín's undergraduate experience was one of living in constant fear of what was to come. He was emotionally drained and in a state of depression as his mental health suffered due to anxiety at the thought of the uncertainty each subsequent semester brought. He shared the worry he experienced after paying his first semester and seeing the specific costs for it.

How am I going to pay the next semester? And how am I going to buy my books? How am I going to pay rent? How am I going to live? So it was constant in my mind, it went on and on and on. But there was always something, I tell you that I always find the right people at the right time. I remember I always looked for scholarships and programs, and I got into the Future Teachers Program in the school of education, where if you wanted to be a teacher, they used to pay your tuition.

The ongoing stress Joaquín experienced required him to always be on the lookout for different types of support. A navigational strategy Joaquín relied on was remaining persistent even in circumstances when individuals constantly told him no job opportunities existed. He elaborated on how he managed to get hired by the Future Teachers Program by going to the employer's office every day. He stated:

I remember *que yo iba a hablar con la señora todos los días y la señora decía no, que no, que no, que no, que no* (I would go speak to the lady every day and the lady would say no, no, no). "We don't need Spanish or French teachers, we don't need them." *Y una vez iba caminando con un señor por allá y yo fui corriendo y le dije* (One time she was walking with a man over there and I went running and told her), guess what? *El señor era su jefe*, (The man was her boss) and I said, "Oh Ms., I just wanted to ask you, because I'm really interested in your program and I want to be a teacher and I'm really worried that I don't

know how I will pay my tuition, I really want to be a part of your program. I have good grades and I'm dedicated, I'm an excellent student." She replied, "I've told you so many times, ask him, he'll tell you, we don't have any position." And guess what the man said? He said "Didn't you hear that at this school, they want a Spanish teacher, they do need language teachers." And I said to myself "*¿No qué no?*" (So, no jobs, huh?) [laughs].

Joaquín's persistence paid off, as he was hired by the Future Teachers Program. Working as a teacher for the program provided Joaquín with the added benefit of having tuition paid for two years. Following that period, Joaquín participated in an exchange program where he spent a year at a state college on the east coast. Upon his return after a year away, Joaquín learned the Future Teachers Program he previously worked for could no longer support him, leaving him unsure of how he would pay for the last year of his undergraduate studies.

A few weeks later, he was walking across the street, full of worry, asking God for help. As he crossed the street, he saw his friend Maria, who greeted him from afar. She yelled "Joaquín, *¿Cómo has estado?* (Joaquín, how have you been?). *I haven't seen you in such a long time.*" She shared with Joaquín that she had applied for a scholarship, and she encouraged him to apply for it as well. Based on that serendipitous conversation with his friend Maria, Joaquín applied for, and, shortly after, received notification that he was awarded the scholarship. This scholarship provided him with the financial support needed to complete the rest of his bachelor's degree.

Prior research on undocumented students has shown that being a *sin vergüenza*, or without shame, is an important resistance and navigational strategy for self and community advocacy (The S.I.N. Collective, 2007). Joaquín exemplified this through self-advocacy by remaining persistent and refusing to take no for an answer until he was able to transform a situation of hopelessness into one of possibility, ultimately leading to his employment in the Future Teachers Program. Undocumented students in the undergraduate segment of the educational pipeline typically struggle while having to work multiple jobs, dealing with mental health issues, in part due to lack of clear policies and limited forms of structural support. Negron Gonzales (2017) has referred to this process as one of *constrained inclusion*, where recent policy changes offer a degree of inclusion while the reality of citizenship status continues to restrict the type of access these students have. Joaquín became one of the 11% of Chicax

students overall and less than 3% of undocumented students who are able to obtain a bachelor's degree at this stage of the educational pipeline.

**Table 4**

*Earn a Graduate or Professional Degree: Comparison of U.S. Born and Undocumented Pipelines*

<b>U.S. Born Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100	<b>Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100
Women 5.7 / Men 2.4	Women <b>0.0</b> /Men <b>0.6</b>

*Leaving California for Graduate School*

Joaquín's trajectory into graduate school was again supported by a French professor, this time at the CSU. He was intrigued by the professor's way of being, the way she interacted with her students, and her pedagogical approach. At the time, Joaquín wanted to pursue a master's degree at Boston College or a state university in Michigan. The state of Michigan was high on Joaquín's list of graduate school destinations partly because of his desire to obtain a driver's license. At that time, the state of Michigan allowed undocumented people to obtain a driver's license with alternative forms of documentation, prompting his decision to attend graduate school there. The same week Joaquín arrived in Michigan, new restrictions were implemented by the state legislature that no longer allowed the undocumented to apply for a driver's license.

Despite being unable to drive in Michigan, Joaquín's graduate education was guided by his intuition that better things awaited. Joaquín described the time in his master's degree program as one of his best experiences.

*Fue una de mis mejores experiencias. (It was one of my best experiences.)* I applied for a fellowship and they gave me a fellowship for the first year, so I didn't have to work. I didn't have to do anything, I was living like a king. Woohoo! I'm so grateful about it, and then I had to teach the next year as a T.A. and how the university pays you, gives you a waiver, a tuition waiver, and they pay you like a monthly payment, and that's why I survived.

For the first time in his educational trajectory, Joaquín did not have to worry about the financial aspects of his education. The first year he was supported by a fellowship that provided him with

a degree of financial stability that he had not experienced prior to that. While he was required to work as a teacher assistant (TA) during his second year, his TAship came with a tuition waiver, which involved much less work than what he was used to.

Another key aspect contributing to Joaquín's positive experiences in Michigan was that this was the first time felt he could come out as a gay man.

*Yo empecé a sentirme ya más cómodo* (I began to feel more comfortable), like, nobody knows me here. You see I'm a new me. *Entonces me sentía más cómodo* (Well, then I felt more comfortable), and little by little, at this point, I'm comfortable, I feel very okay with who I am.

This was an important juncture for Joaquín, as he was, for the first time, being offered institutional support that lessened his anxiety and improved his mental health. Similarly, being in a new environment provided him with an opportunity to start over and build the confidence to be his authentic self, contributing to his overall well-being. At this juncture in the educational pipeline, only about three out of every 100 Latinx students graduate with a Master's or professional degree, whereas less than 1 out of every 100 undocumented students achieve the same.

After completing his master's degree, Joaquín applied to several Ph.D. programs and ultimately decided to attend a program on the East Coast.

**Table 5**

*Earn a Graduate or Professional Degree: Comparison of U.S. Born and Undocumented Pipelines*

<b>U.S. Born Mexican Educational Pipeline</b>	<b>Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline</b>
Start Elementary: 100	Start Elementary: 100
Women 0.26 / Men 0.63	Women 0.0 / Men 0.0

In becoming a Latinx doctoral student, Joaquín represented less than 1% of students enrolled in doctoral programs (Solórzano et al., 2005; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). The Ph.D. program Joaquín enrolled in was in the humanities, allowing him to teach a variety of language courses. During his first year in the program, he taught Spanish classes to first-year university students. Joaquín planned to work as a teaching assistant during the entirety of his program of study. However, he was informed by his department of some inconsistencies existing across his documentation. However, the university was no longer able to offer him financial support,

as he was now expected to pay his tuition and all other expenses to continue as a doctoral student. This immediately impacted his housing situation, and he could no longer afford the room that he rented through a social network when he initially started the program. To Joaquín's surprise, the faculty at his doctoral institution rallied to support him and strategized to find a solution to his dilemma. He shared:

I had to move out because it was too much money for me to pay. So I tell you again that I meet the right people at the exact right time. I was waiting for the bus across the street *de donde yo vivo* (from where I live) and there was this old guy, *así un ancianito, bien viejito* (a little old man), *y me empezó hacer plática* (and he started to chat with me) (laughs). *Y yo también le hago plática* (I too responded and chatted with him). I guess he realized that I had an accent, *y me empezó hablar en español cositas de que hay cómo estás?* (He started speaking to me in Spanish little things like how are you?) *Resulta que bueno pues allí lo conocí y es el señor donde yo vivo ahora* (Well that's where I met him and that is the man where I live now). It works out really, really fine because he's British, so he goes away a lot during the year, and I'm able to watch the house while he's away. *Como, por ejemplo, la semana que viene se va a Inglaterra* (Like for example, next week he is going to England), so I have to watch the house *y cuando* (and when) I have to watch the house, I don't pay rent. So that's good.

This serendipitous moment that led to dialogue with a stranger at a bus stop, transformed into a mutually beneficial agreement to support one another. Joaquín's role in the agreement consisted of house-sitting initially and then extended into him supporting the British man with chores around the house. Joaquín paid the old British man by working around the house, washing dishes, cleaning and vacuuming the floor, taking out the trash, and keeping the house clean. In exchange, Joaquín was not expected to pay rent. This, along with employment at a neighboring university that came with a tuition waiver at his university, allowed him to help his mother rebuild their home in Mexico, which had deteriorated over time. This action alone brought Joaquín a great deal of joy and happiness

Joaquín completed his doctoral studies in 2011, a year before the then President of the United States, Barack Obama, issued an executive order known as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). For undocumented immigrants who experienced DACA, several studies indicate positive outcomes associated with the policy, including increased wages

(Gonzalez, Terriquez, & Rusczyk, 2014), greater employment stability (Pope, 2016), improved mental health outcomes (Patler & Pritle, 2018), and a reduction in the number of DACA-eligible household heads in poverty (Amuedo-Dorantes & Antman, 2016). Despite these positive outcomes associated with DACA, the policy was challenged in the courts by Republican state officials across the country, and is presently allowed only to renew the applications of immigrants currently in the program. Similarly, it was still several years prior to same-sex marriage bans across several states being struck down with the Supreme Court ruling of 2015. These two significant policy changes would positively impact the quality of life for immigrant students with similar social locations as Joaquín.

According to the educational pipeline, Joaquín became one out of every 670 Chicax students who obtained a doctoral degree. As for the undocumented Foreign Born Chicax, the number is not statistically visible for undocumented Chicax. Following the completion of his Ph.D., Joaquín would go on to accept a postdoctoral opportunity at a university in the Midwest for one year before heading to Canada. He departed to Canada in hopes of pursuing career opportunities and to be able to legally marry his partner.

### **Discussion**

I began this paper by asking the following question: How can the educational *testimonio* of an undocumented unaccompanied minor help expand the analysis of the educational pipeline as a conceptual tool? Examining Joaquín's *testimonio* across the educational pipeline reveals several important insights. In this section, I discuss Joaquín's experiences navigating three critical junctures of the educational pipeline through a CRQI +T framework, which illuminates challenges at the intersections. They are (1) K-12 schooling and his intersectional identities, (2) undergraduate education and finding his path forward, and (3) graduate school and pursuing new interests.

#### **Entering K-12 and Joaquín's Intersectional Social Locations**

First, Joaquín's arrival and entrance into US schools is important to look at from a critical perspective. As scholars conducting CRQI research remind us, there is a need for "interventions into quantitative studies that wrestle with the importance of localized knowledge and experiences" (p. 258). As an undocumented gay immigrant entering a small rural high school of less than 500 mostly Chicax students, Joaquín's *testimonio* offers important lessons that shed light on his experiences through the educational pipeline. For example, Joaquín's not

being able to feel comfortable coming out of the closet during high school in a politically conservative area in California raises important questions about the homophobic culture of the school he attended, the broader community, U.S. society in general, and his “home life” living with a relative. This is significant, as extensive research associates more positive mental health outcomes when LGBTQ students feel trust and care in the community and in their schools (Diaz & Fleming, 2021).

However, enrolling first at a school with high percentages of Latinx students who are immigrants or children of immigrants and Spanish speakers allowed him, in all likelihood, to have a better linguistic and cultural “fit” than he might have in a different demographic context. Joaquín likewise reported that he was able to connect with a few teachers who were supportive of him while he learned English as a newcomer student. Joaquín received little support from his school counselor, leaving him without guidance to figure out a postsecondary pathway forward (Lara & Nava, 2022).

When comparing the U.S. born Chicanx and non-citizen undocumented pipelines, Covarrubias and Lara (2014) found that:

Across most points in the pipeline, U.S.-born citizenship and the privilege it commands is associated with the statistically highest level of educational attainment, and being undocumented, with the least level of legal and social status, is most associated with the lowest educational attainment rates, even when holding gender and Mexican origin the same. (p. 95)

The “citizenship privilege” the authors above refer to results in high school graduation rates that are for US-born Chicanx male students in comparison to their Non-Citizen undocumented counterparts double (82 out of 100 vs. 40 out of 100). Joaquín’s *testimonio* highlights the greater degrees of social instability typically associated with undocumented students than their U.S.-born Chicanx counterparts. These are significant contextual factors that reveal how “opportunity was mediated by [his] occupation of multiple and intersecting social locations” (Covarrubias et al., p.257).

### **Undergraduate Education and Finding a Path Forward**

Joaquín entered the higher education segment of the educational pipeline through the community college system without the needed guidance and support. While he was fortunate to have Professor Génereuse, a faculty member, offer him a place to stay during a critical time

of need, he still experienced excessive stress given his precarious status. Institutional support programs at community colleges and 4-year universities can make a difference in supporting students to have a smoother transition. For multiply marginalized students, these campus resource centers can often provide a range of services such as tutoring, mentoring, counseling, affinity grouping, and, by extension, a strong sense of community and belonging.

For undocumented students like Joaquín, additional services and support that are responsive to their financial and mental health needs are necessary. Over the last 10 years across the state of California, community colleges and 4-year public and private institutions have begun to create “Dream Resource Centers” to support undocumented students. While the addition of these campus centers is a welcomed addition, more substantive support is necessary. A 2019 survey of the state’s community colleges showed that only 35 out of 111 colleges had dream resource centers, and 16 of those centers had no dedicated support staff (Jimenez, 2019). The centers, when well-resourced and staffed can play an essential role in outreach to students in partner high schools to raise awareness of supports and services, and with appropriate support, can lead the way in marshaling key campus and community stakeholders, offering mental and emotional health services, while providing necessary training and professional development to all campus faculty and staff (Jimenez, 2019).

When Joaquín transferred to the CSU, he was connected to various foundations and organizations that offer services specifically for migrant communities. A variety of paid internships and work assignments in K-12 educational settings as an educator put Joaquín on a path to becoming a teacher. Ultimately, following rich exposure to curriculum and theory Joaquín was exposed to a professor's humanizing and caring pedagogy in his humanities courses. Joaquín decided to pursue graduate studies focusing on languages and culture. Joaquín’s experience as an undergraduate student brings to light the role of caring and supportive faculty as catalysts for student success during this critical juncture of the educational pipeline.

### **Graduate school and Pursuing New Interests**

The narratives of immigrant students like Joaquín reveal the path toward citizenship can be a long, winding, and elusive road. Across the United States elements of immigrant-friendly federal, state, local, and university policies can bridge<sup>3</sup> components on the road that can lead

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<sup>3</sup> Similar to Christine Vega’s deployment of the term Bridging in this special issue, I also borrow from Gloria Anzaldúa’s (2002) notion of bridging to suggest connections and transitions of possibility.

toward greater degrees of belonging. For Joaquín, his decision to pursue graduate school in the state of Michigan came at the time when a promising policy—one that would have allowed him to obtain a driver's license when other states had begun to tighten requirements—was ultimately revoked. However, the move allowed him to reinvent himself to “come out” as his authentic self and immerse himself in studying and learning curricular content that spoke to elements of his lived experience as an immigrant and gay student.

Over the last decade, a flurry of undocumented immigrant-friendly policies have been implemented in states and university systems nationwide. Presently, 23 states offer in-state tuition benefits for undocumented students, and 17 of those also provide “comprehensive access” by offering some financial and scholarships (The Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). Furthermore, 19 states, including California, presently offer undocumented students the option to obtain a driver's license. These policies serve as bridging components for undocumented students, allowing them a greater degree of belonging within the ecosystems of higher education institutions. During this same time-frame, there has also been an increase of Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) centers throughout campuses across the country tasked with creating more inclusive campus environments for students from marginalized communities, including undocumented immigrants in some cases. Anything short of legalization will remain a challenge to undocumented students seeking higher education; however, current mobilization efforts around DEI present an opportunity for advocates to create structures and policies across organizations to include these students into the campus fabric meaningfully.

### **Conclusion**

The Chicana educational pipeline is a powerful tool to help visualize educational outcomes. The evolving nature of the educational pipeline through using quantitative data to explore inequities at the intersections has led to a more sophisticated display of educational outcomes. Joaquín's *testimonio* and the use of CRQI +T framework allow for greater contextualization and grounding of these outcomes. Future research on the educational pipeline should examine the educational outcomes of DACA-eligible students and their completion rates. A CRQI +T framework can illuminate the unique ways that these students resist, survive, and thrive in an anti-immigrant national context.

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