Academic and Career Development of Undocumented College Students: The American Dream?

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Little is known about the academic and career decision-making process for college students with undocumented status. This study used a multiple case study approach to explore how academic and work-related decisions were made for 2 college students with undocumented citizenship status. Participants responded to a series of questions about their academic and career development. Data collected from these interviews were analyzed by a research team. After cross-case analysis, 6 themes emerged: (a) barriers; (b) emotional impact; (c) resiliency, supports, and coping; (d) discrimination; (e) familial and cultural influences; and (f) academic, work, and career factors. Findings suggest that counseling professionals should attend to systemic, academic, and work-related barriers that directly affect the educational and career decisions of students with undocumented citizenship status. Future research could expand on the present study by further exploring systemic and contextual factors that influence how undocumented students make academic and career choices using varied qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Keywords: undocumented students, academic development, career decision-making process

Immigrants uproot their lives based on the belief that migrating to the United States will provide them with increased opportunity for success and a better life—a chance to achieve the American Dream (Hill & Torres, 2010). This hope for a better life, combined with dire and often unsafe circumstances in their homelands, results in some families migrating to the United States without legal documentation (Gildersleeve, Rumann, & Mondragon, 2010). “Undocumented immigrants” include all foreign-born individuals living in the United States who are not “legal” residents and do not possess authorization (e.g., green card, work or school visa) to live or work in the United States (Passel, Cohn, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013). Undocumented immigrants living in the United States face numerous legal, systemic, academic, and vocational barriers as well as cultural and contextual challenges that make life difficult to navigate (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). Despite these unique challenges, very limited research has examined the academic and career experiences of undocumented immigrants.
Therefore, the present study sought to provide an in-depth analysis of the academic and career development experiences of undocumented college students. Specifically, the present study aimed to explore contextual (e.g., supports, barriers) and personal (e.g., interests, values) influences on the academic and career development of two undocumented college students. By gaining a better understanding of how documentation status influences academic and career decisions, counselors may be better equipped to provide culturally sensitive and more effective counseling for such students.

Undocumented Immigrants

An estimated 11.7 million undocumented immigrants currently live in the United States (Passel et al., 2013), and approximately 8.3 million undocumented immigrants are currently employed in the labor force despite limited opportunities for employment (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Undocumented workers may be subjected to unfair labor practices as well as high levels of discrimination. For example, Bauer (2009) found that undocumented Latinos working in the South faced abuse and discrimination at their workplaces. Undocumented immigrants may also encounter heightened levels of discrimination because of the intersection of multiple identities (e.g., immigration status, race, ethnicity, gender, social class; Gildersleeve et al., 2010).

Academic and Career Barriers

Estimates indicate that approximately 1.8 million youth with undocumented citizenship status currently live in the United States (Gonzalez, 2007). Children may immigrate to the United States with their families seeking refuge from violence or extreme poverty, and at times, may not have input on immigration decisions (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). Eventually, these youth become students with undocumented citizenship status and, when placed within American school systems, are often confronted by many challenges and obstacles not experienced by peers who are U.S. residents, such as having a fear of discovery and deportation, discrimination, and limited opportunities for employment and education after high school (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). Approximately 65,000 undocumented students graduate from American high schools annually (Gildersleeve et al., 2010), and between 7,000 and 13,000 undocumented students enroll in colleges throughout the United States (Educators for Fair Consideration, 2012).

For many undocumented students, academic and work choices are limited by confusing or restrictive college admissions policies and lack of access to financial aid or scholarships (Perez, Cortes, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). Furthermore, a lack of documentation paperwork limits students’ ability to find legal employment and obtain a driver’s license, which can directly affect the opportunities available to them on college campuses (e.g., work study, internships, and educational travel; Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010). Financing college is a primary obstacle faced by undocumented students because current government policies restrict students from accessing federal- and state-based financial aid (e.g., grants or loan programs; Perez et al., 2010). Many states classify undocumented students as nonresidents and charge them three to seven times higher tuition rates than legal
residents, thereby severely limiting the affordability of college (Gonzalez, 2007). Undocumented college students may also face numerous obstacles when trying to navigate higher education, including discrimination, lack of support from insensitive staff or faculty, inadequate avenues for social or cultural connections, and limited family support (Perez et al., 2010).

Cultural and contextual factors, such as acculturation challenges, language barriers, poverty, and first-generation college student status, also influence undocumented students’ academic and career decisions (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). For example, Ellis and Chen (2013) found that cultural (e.g., acculturation experiences), contextual (e.g., legal and financial barriers), and personal (e.g., resilience, resourcefulness) factors influenced the career development of undocumented college students. McWhirter, Ramos, and Medina (2013) also found that Latino(a) high school students with undocumented status demonstrated lower vocational outcome expectations and anticipated more barriers to pursuing higher education compared with students with legal documentation. Undocumented college students may also encounter distinct barriers during the career development process, such as limited career opportunities and increased risk of not being able to secure a job in one’s area of education and training as the result of barriers (Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010).

Regardless of qualifications, undocumented students may not be able to legally enter the workforce after graduation (Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010).

**Purpose of the Study**

Traditional career planning models often assume that all individuals possess legal citizenship and have opportunity structures for career development available to them (Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010). However, these assumptions may not be well suited for undocumented individuals because of legal and systemic barriers. Undocumented students may not have the opportunity to select a job that coincides with their self-concept or is based on their interests and goals (Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010). Operating from a traditional career development framework may not fully capture the career development process for undocumented students. Recent career frameworks, such as social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hacket, 2000), argue that it is necessary to explore contextual influences and systemic barriers and supports that both facilitate and deny access to academic and career opportunities. These frameworks contend that in order to fully understand the vocational development for individuals from marginalized backgrounds, including undocumented students, it is necessary to explore social, political, and cultural contexts, which may have a profound impact on academic and work decisions.

Counseling with marginalized populations is a rich part of the heritage of career counseling (Juntunen & Even, 2012); however, in recent decades, the field has been criticized for overlooking some of its core values, specifically research and practice with disenfranchised groups (Blustein, 2006; Flores, Hsieh, & Hung, 2011). Recently, scholars have called for vocational counselors to focus on assisting marginalized populations, such as undocumented immigrants (Flores et al., 2011; Savickas & Baker, 2005). Counseling research examining the academic and work experiences of undocumented immigrants remains largely underrepresented in the counseling literature (Ellis & Chen, 2013), and scholars have called for researchers to use qualitative research methodologies to (a) explore the career development...
processes of immigrant youth and (b) study the depth and complexity of
the work experiences of undocumented immigrants (Flores et al., 2011).
Aligned with these calls to action, the current study used a multiple case
study approach to explore societal, contextual, cultural, and personal fac-
tors that contribute toward the academic and vocational development of
undocumented college students. We were interested in identifying emerging
patterns that contributed to students’ academic and career development to
better understand the interplay between documentation status and academic
and vocational choices. By gaining a deeper understanding of the factors that
influence academic and career decisions of undocumented students while
maintaining sensitivity to their unique contextual experiences, counselors
may be able to work more effectively with such students.

Method

Multiple Case Study Approach

Case study research is the investigation of a bounded system (i.e., a case) or
multiple bounded systems through in-depth data collection from multiple
sources of information (Creswell, 2007). Multiple case study designs allow
researchers to study the phenomena across settings as well as to use multiple
case studies to illustrate the phenomenon under inquiry (Creswell, 2007).
Considering that undocumented students are often “hidden” on college
campuses (Garcia & Tierney, 2011), we used a case study design to gain
a comprehensive understanding of various contextual and personal factors
that contribute to their career and academic development. Creswell (2007)
argued that there is not a set number of cases required for a multiple case
study, but that “the more cases an individual studies, the less depth in any
single case” (Creswell, 2007, p. 76). We used Creswell’s guidelines and
criteria set forth by Stake (2006) to select two cases that were relevant
in investigating the phenomena under inquiry, provided diversity across
two contexts, and provided an opportunity to learn about complexity and
context related to the phenomena. Typically, no more than four or five
cases are investigated in multiple case study research (Creswell, 2007) and,
for good reason, many multiple case studies have fewer than four cases
(Stake, 2006). For the purposes of the present study, we chose to focus
on cases at two distinctly different types of postsecondary institutions to
provide an in-depth analysis of the phenomena in two settings.

Participants

Participants were recruited through student organizations at colleges
and through snowball sampling (e.g., word of mouth). Participants
were selected based on two criteria: (a) self-identified undocumented
immigration status, and (b) enrolled in a postsecondary institution.
Two students were selected to participate in this study using purpose-
ful sampling. Both participants identified as Latina and were raised in
single-parent homes by their mothers, who emigrated from Mexico.
Participant A was in her fourth year of coursework at a university, and
Participant B was in her second year of coursework at a technical col-
lege. Additional identifying information was not collected from the
participants to maintain anonymity because of potential repercussions
associated with their undocumented citizenship status. Participants were
provided $20 in cash compensation to minimize barriers to participation.
in the study (e.g., costs associated with transportation and child care). After discussion, $20 was deemed to be an appropriate amount to offset barriers to participation without being coercive.

**Procedure**

**Research team.** The research team comprised one female faculty member and four female graduate students in the field of counseling psychology. Research team members identified their racial/ethnic backgrounds as African American (1), Asian American (1), biracial (1), and White (2). An additional Asian American faculty member in counseling psychology acted as an external auditor. All research team members identified as documented citizens in the United States. Prior to creating an interview protocol, members of the research team explored their personal biases and preconceived notions regarding immigration, citizenship status, and academic and career development. For example, a few team members noted that they lacked knowledge on the immigration and college application process for undocumented students in the United States. Several team members also stated they believed that undocumented students would have foreclosed career options because of academic barriers. Biases and assumptions were recorded throughout these extensive discussions to continuously assess how worldviews, values, and biases influenced data interpretation.

**Semistructured interviews.** A semistructured interview protocol was developed based on a review of the extant literature on the academic and career-related concerns of undocumented students. The interview protocol included 12 questions asking students to reflect on their academic and career development specifically related to their citizenship status. Sample questions included: “What challenges do you face in your academic and work choices as related to your citizenship status?” “What does having undocumented citizenship status mean to you?” Both interviews were conducted confidentially in English in a closed private office, lasted between 60 and 75 minutes, and were transcribed within 1 week. Each transcription was checked by the interviewer to ensure accuracy.

**Interviewer reaction and response.** Interviewers wrote down their reactions and responses following each interview. Interviewers kept records of subjective (e.g., nonverbal cues and actions) and objective information (e.g., whether clients felt rushed, if they were on time) related to participant responses, as well as described their interpretation of the clients’ emotional experiences in the interview. Interviewers also kept track of their emotional experiences during the interview, and these responses were included in the data analysis to provide context to the interviews and a greater depth of understanding of the phenomena.

**Societal information.** We also gathered societal and legislative information regarding undocumented immigration status in the United States, such as demographic data, current legislative issues, political barriers and supports, and academic barriers and supports for students. Societal data were analyzed to identify major themes related to the academic and career development of this population. Several themes emerged that were integrated into the data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted in three steps. First, societal information and interviewer responses/reactions were examined, resulting in the
development of initial themes. Second, the two interviews were coded for meaning and description independently from one another using a consensual case-by-case analysis (Stake, 2006). Themes emerged from the coding resulting in each interview possessing separate codes. All members of the research team coded each transcript independently and then convened to extensively discuss and reach consensus on the coding of each transcript. Data analysis was conducted over a 6-month time-frame. Third, two members of the team conducted cross-case analyses to identify themes salient across cases by identifying consistencies and patterns (Stake, 2006).

Three validation strategies of triangulation, clarification, and external audit were used to ensure credibility and rigor (Creswell, 2007). Triangulation ensured that the multiple sources (i.e., interviews, interviewer responses/reactions, and compiled societal information) provided corroborating evidence. Clarification involved critically examining researcher biases and worldviews to ensure that individual perspectives did not bias the data interpretation process. An external audit ensured that the interpretations set forth by the research team were supported by the data. The external auditor holds a PhD in counseling psychology and was selected because of her expertise in multicultural counseling, immigration, and qualitative methodologies, including case study design. It was not possible to conduct member-checking because we did not collect participants’ contact information to safeguard their identities.

Results

The cross-case analysis yielded six themes across the two cases: (a) barriers; (b) emotional impact; (c) resiliency, supports, and coping; (d) discrimination; (e) familial and cultural influences; and (f) academic, work, and career factors. Themes emerged in the semistructured interviews, societal data related to undocumented immigrants, and interviewers’ notes. All quotations below are represented in their original wording to highlight participants’ voices.

Barriers

Barriers represented obstacles that prevented academic and career growth for the participants. Both participants reported experiencing a multitude of barriers that hindered their academic and work goals. Perhaps the most striking barrier for both of the participants was their inability to seek gainful employment without breaking the law. Each of the participants reported having to engage in unlawful activities (i.e., using a fake social security number) to find employment that would allow them to access basic needs (e.g., food, shelter) and education. Additionally, both participants described a plethora of systemic barriers that impeded their daily functioning. These included their inability to legally rent housing, obtain a driver’s license, acquire and build credit, receive government services despite paying taxes, and travel for academic and work opportunities. These systemic barriers were identified as strongly influencing the academic and vocational development of the participants. For example, Participant B stated that she was forced to change her academic major because background checks were required to gain practical training in her field of study, thus delaying her academic progress. She stated,
I actually began studying medical assisting and had to switch over to human services just because I got into classes where I wasn’t able to go any farther because of my [citizenship] status. They had to do background checks and they needed certain things that I couldn’t like give them.

Participant B revealed that she was worried that these barriers would continue to arise as she neared completion of her degree and would delay her graduation until she could obtain legal citizenship. Similarly, she expressed concerns about her academic and career future if she does not obtain documentation, as clearly represented in her statement: “But if nothing changes, I really can’t go past a certain level with anything. . . I guess I can only go so far.”

Participants also experienced academic barriers that hindered their development. For example, both participants stated that they had difficulty obtaining financial aid (e.g., scholarships or loans). Without access to these funding sources, they had to apply for private scholarships and other support to attend college. Both participants also reported that they experienced indirect barriers within higher education, such as being unable to rent textbooks or get a parking permit without a driver’s license, or travel for their academic work. Additionally, both participants discussed the large financial expense of applying for residency, including application and lawyer fees. These systemic barriers had a profound impact on the ability of participants to successfully graduate from college, as evidenced in Participant A’s statement:

To me [undocumented status] means having up a wall or [something] you can’t really go through. It means just not being able to do everything that a normal person would be able to do or someone born here would be able to do. Being limited to the resources that are available. . . just having a harder life in general.

Both participants also expressed concern that they may not be able to find employment in the future without immigration reform.

**Emotional Impact**

Participants identified intense emotional and psychological consequences for possessing undocumented immigration status in the current U.S. climate. The emotional impact included psychological exhaustion/fatigue, fear, a sense of hopelessness, a sense of worthlessness, isolation, guilt, a loss in agency, uncertainty about the future, anger, and stress. For example, participants experienced feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of obstacles that impeded their access to higher education. Although both participants expressed some hope that national immigration reform was forthcoming, they also expressed distress related to how much effort was required of them to finish their education, resulting in psychological fatigue or exhaustion. For example, Participant A stated, “It just feels like I have to do extra work. . . I’m so tired of always doing extra. Should I even try anymore. . . you have to constantly be thinking about the extra steps you have to take that other people don’t have to.” Despite still pursuing their academic and career goals, participants expressed feeling emotionally depleted and were weary of putting forth additional effort. Participant A reflected this when she discussed her academic work: “You start off really fast because you have all of the energy in the world but then at the end you’re just really struggling. It kind of feels like that, like I’ve been
just dragging myself and it’s like how much more energy do I have left to keep going?” Likewise, participants referred to observations of other undocumented students leaving college because of the large number of obstacles they faced. As Participant B stated, “[It’s] so overwhelming... and it’s just sad to see so many smart people give up because of so many barriers.” Notably, interviewers also reported feeling overwhelmed by the sizeable barriers experienced by participants during the interviews.

Both participants also expressed a deep sense of worry, fear, and, at times, guilt related to their documentation status being discovered (fear of discovery) by someone in their academic and work worlds. Participants experienced constant fear that they will not receive legal citizenship and that they or their family may be deported. Additionally, their fear of discovery resulted in their inability to trust individuals in authority roles (e.g., professors, administrators), resulting in feelings of isolation on campus. Both participants described instances in which they felt betrayed and lost trust in others upon confiding their status to individuals at their schools. Moreover, Participant B expressed feelings of guilt for needing to falsify information on employment applications to find employment. She stated, “I kind of feel bad because I’m like, ‘God, I know I’m lying’... but, it’s like I have to. I’m forced to.”

Resiliency, Supports, and Coping

Participants demonstrated high levels of resiliency, determination, and perseverance to attain academic, career, and life goals. Participants had to be extremely organized, plan strategically, and work harder than others (e.g., take extra steps to apply for college) to overcome barriers and reach their goals. As Participant A stated, “I was always told in high school that besides being a minority and being undocumented, I would have to work 10 times harder than everyone else so that I could ever stand out. And that’s exactly what I had to just tell myself.” Both participants also identified a desire to persevere despite barriers. As Participant B stated,

If you just sit back and say, ‘Oh well, I’m illegal... I can’t work, I can’t go to school,’ then you’re just not really going to get anywhere... I feel like that’s my excuse to do better and to show people, ‘Well, yeah I’m illegal but guess what... I’m going to do this.’

Combined with their perseverance, participants identified supports and resources that encouraged their academic and career development. Participant A explained that support from college preparatory programs was particularly helpful as she pursued higher education. Participant A also identified her Latina sorority as a source of support and her immigration lawyer as a resource. Both participants identified encouragement from teachers and administrators as important sources of support. Along with private scholarships, participants also disclosed that they received unexpected, informal financial support from people within their community or academic institutions to help them continue their education. For example, Participant B commented, “[My scholarship] ended last quarter... and then one of the deans offered to continue to pay my school... if I didn’t have that I wouldn’t be in school right now.”
Both participants used various coping mechanisms to manage environmental stressors, including self-protective strategies, such as adaptive mistrust, forced risk taking, and flexible learning. Participants engaged in adaptive mistrust by hiding their documentation status, as explained by Participant A: “I never really trusted people... I really need to be aware of who I talk to and what I talk to them about.” Participants also engaged in forced risk taking for basic survival needs, such as applying for jobs that required background checks, providing false information to employers, driving without a license, and using a false social security number to rent housing and find employment. Additionally, participants demonstrated adaptive learning by maintaining a flexible approach to overcoming barriers as they arose.

Discrimination

Participants experienced discrimination based on cultural and societal misperceptions. Participant A reported experiencing microaggressions (Sue, 2010) related to minorities’ and women’s intelligence. One example she provided was when she felt pressure from a high school counselor to take easier math courses: “Why would [she] want to limit me to just being a teacher or something that stereotypically a girl does or a minority does?” Participant A’s experiences reflected a triple minority status (documentation status, race/ethnicity, and gender), which may have contributed to increased experiences of discrimination. Additionally, Participant B shared that she is often viewed as a “criminal” for being undocumented. Similarly, Participant A shared that she felt harassed by a professor because of her documentation status. Participants discussed societal misperceptions that contributed to experiences of discrimination, which included both minority stereotypes (e.g., minorities are not smart or hard working) and stereotypes about undocumented immigrants (e.g., immigrants take American jobs and don’t pay taxes).

Familial and Cultural Influences

The interviews revealed that the participants’ familial and cultural backgrounds influenced their academic, career, and work choices. Both participants identified receiving varying levels of support from family members, particularly their mothers, who were very influential in their academic and career goals. Participant A described receiving substantial encouragement from her mother but also feeling isolated in her experiences as a first-generation college student and having opportunities and barriers that were not understandable to her mother.

[Mom] always has a lot of expectations and that’s probably what keeps me going. At the same time, it just brings me down a little bit. I have to balance everything so I know she’ll be proud in the end but it’s hard to please her sometimes. Just by being [in the United States] she feels like we have an opportunity that not a lot of people have... which is true, but at the same time I feel like she thinks it’s just as easy [for me] as anyone else.

Participant A reported experiencing contradictory expectations from her family, such as having to take care for her siblings and help other family members gain legal residency while also succeeding academically. Both participants stated that they admired their mothers’ work ethic and resilience, but they
also saw their mothers being treated poorly at work. As a result, the participants felt motivated to find meaningful work for themselves. As Participant B explained, “Seeing my mom struggle so much for us to have what we have is one of the biggest things that pushed me to go to college.”

Current family circumstances combined with their undocumented status influenced both participants’ academic trajectories and work goals. For example, Participant A described how portions of her personal life, particularly her marriage and the impending birth of her child, are impacted by her undocumented status. She plans to defer her application for residency until after the birth of her child, partially because of fears of undergoing portions of the residency application process (e.g., having to temporarily return to Mexico) during her pregnancy and the school year, possibly disrupting her academic work. However, the delay of her residency application, in turn, could postpone her plans to go to graduate school. She explained that neither her marriage nor the birth of her child were planned to help her gain legal documentation status; however, she identified that both life events may reduce her risk of deportation and allow her to remain in school. As Participant A explained,

I really didn’t want to get married at 20 but it [may] benefit me and be a way [that] if I were to get some kind of deportation status right now, he [husband] could help me to stay here. Being in college I really want to keep going, so I [don’t] want to have something happen and for me to have to go back [to Mexico] in the middle [of school].

Participants’ cultural backgrounds also influenced their academic, career, and work choices. Participant A identified that language barriers made it difficult for her mother to be fully involved in her academic development. Additionally, Participant A explained that she saw many Latino(a) students drop out of high school to start working. She reported occasionally feeling pressure from her mother to quit school and work, particularly when financial difficulties arose. Additionally, Participant B discussed some of the challenges she experienced because of acculturation differences between herself and her mother. Both participants also demonstrated feeling a collective sense of responsibility. Participant A identified that she worried about others who had helped her (e.g., that they would get in trouble for helping her) and felt responsible for helping her family. She explained that she wanted to achieve to make others proud:

I can’t disappoint [people who helped] so I have to just keep trying. I feel like I don’t try a lot for myself. I feel like I always try for everyone else. . . I have to make them proud. . . I just want to show them that I appreciate all they’ve done.

Participant B also expressed feeling a collective sense of responsibility, particularly wanting to succeed for her mother and her son.

Academic, Work, and Career Factors

Participants identified factors that reflected their academic, career, or work-related aspirations, interests, values, and hopes. Participant A reported valuing education and academic achievement. She explained that she dreamed of graduating from college and hoped to obtain a “good” job. Participant A explained that her career aspirations shifted over time,
sometimes because of personal interests but other times because of the inaccessibility of certain careers (e.g., unable to afford education in architecture). Both participants also identified that they valued finding a well-paying job to support their families and wanted to help others through their work. As Participant B explained, “I like working with people a lot... the right thing for me to do is help others.” Participant B identified that she desired to help others because she had received help in the past and wanted to give back to her community. Participant B also identified that she wanted to find long-term work with regular hours because of a desire to balance family and work needs.

Discussion

Despite an estimated 7,000 to 13,000 undocumented students enrolled in colleges throughout the United States (Educators for Fair Consideration, 2012), very little is known about how undocumented students make academic and work choices. This study used a multiple case study design to deepen career professionals’ understanding of how societal, contextual, cultural, and personal influences have affected the academic and vocational development of two undocumented college students. The findings from this study underscored the powerful role that systemic barriers have on the educational and career decisions of undocumented students. Systemic barriers restricted participants’ ability to find legal employment, rent housing, obtain a driver’s license, receive government services, and travel for academic and work opportunities. Systemic barriers also restricted participants’ ability to complete college application forms, receive in-state tuition, and obtain financial aid from both public and private entities. These barriers had both short- and long-term impacts on work and career-related goals. In the short term, participants had to find work in nontraditional ways to acquire basic needs and fund their education. In the long term, both participants indicated that they changed their academic and career trajectories because of barriers in their career paths. The sheer number of barriers described by the participants aligns with literature (e.g., García & Tierney, 2011; Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010) that sheds light on the various obstacles faced by undocumented students in higher education settings. As Gonzales (2007) argued, these barriers often result in wasted talent and broken dreams for students who have the potential to achieve in postsecondary education and contribute to the world of work.

Additionally, participants reported experiencing discrimination at their academic institutions. Both participants described overt experiences with insensitive staff and faculty and occurrences of harassment and discrimination based on other aspects of their identities (e.g., ethnic minority, women), highlighting the fact that they often feel marginalized in multiple ways. This finding coincides with literature that has argued that undocumented individuals often face a multitude of barriers because of their multiple minority status, which can contribute to early foreclosure on academic work (Perez et al., 2010). Both participants in our study expressed concern that they would not finish their degrees or pursue graduate education because of anticipated future barriers. These findings add richness to quantitative work conducted by McWhirter et al. (2013), who found that high school Latina/o undocumented students anticipated more barriers to pursuing college than did their U.S. citizen counterparts. Combined, these findings underscore the importance of
exploring how discrimination and barriers can affect the career and academic choices of undocumented students.

The emotional and psychological impact of possessing undocumented citizenship status on participants’ academic and career development and overall mental health was striking in our interviews. Participants described feeling psychologically “exhausted” by needing to be strategic to overcome educational barriers. They experienced distress in not knowing whether they would obtain legal citizenship to find gainful employment. Additionally, participants reported feelings of guilt, frustration, shame, anger, and distrust related to their documentation status, which, in turn, affected how they viewed themselves within American society. Participants felt devalued as members of society and consequently felt like they often had to conceal themselves in public. These findings have also been supported in extant literature (e.g., Perez et al., 2010) and research (e.g., Ellis & Chen, 2013; Munoz & Maldonado, 2012). For example, Ellis and Chen (2013) found that undocumented students felt emotionally burdened by their citizenship status.

Despite experiencing numerous barriers in their academic and career paths, both participants displayed considerable resilience and persistence to overcome numerous obstacles that hindered them in attending college. Participants successfully found ways to navigate the policies preventing them from accessing higher education and employment (e.g., background checks). They had to learn to adapt quickly and to do so in ways that would conceal their identities. These reactions included having to change one’s academic major and career path to reduce the risk of being identified. Participants also had to be proactive in seeking resources and support systems because of their lack of knowledge about the processes of applying to colleges without legal documentation and accessing funding and scholarship opportunities. Participants described receiving multifaceted support from people in their lives (e.g., community members, high school counselors, teachers, faculty, higher administrative professionals) who provided them with emotional and financial support as well as knowledge on how to navigate the various systems required to pursue higher education. The participants’ process of seeking and using support services is congruent with theorists (e.g., Enriquez, 2011) who have argued that undocumented students need to use social capital to receive support from family, community members, peers, and teachers to navigate educational systems.

Finally, an important finding from our study emerged in the nonlinear and nontraditional career trajectories of our participants. Both participants changed their academic majors and intended careers because of obstacles that hindered their academic progress. The important role that barriers played in the participants’ career development processes aligns with tenets of SCCT, which asserts that proximal and distal contextual barriers directly and indirectly influence the career decision-making process (Lent et al., 2000). The findings of the present study highlight how external policies (e.g., E-Verify) can act as proximal barriers that drastically and suddenly change career and academic trajectories despite careful planning and preparation. Although both participants continued in majors that were meaningful to them, it is important to highlight that the barriers undocumented students experience can play a powerful role in how career decisions are made. When examining the work-related decisions of undocumented students, counselors should
pay close attention to societal, cultural, and contextual factors that directly influence the opportunity structures available to students.

**Implications for Counseling**

Our study sheds light on undocumented students’ struggles and supports across multiple systems, from individuals who directly intervene in their process of academic development to systemic issues such as institutional policies. These findings highlight the importance of using a contextual framework to better understand the various systemic, contextual, and cultural barriers and supports that play a role in students’ decision-making processes. Considering the large number of systemic barriers experienced by undocumented students, focusing on individual choices without a contextual framework will not provide a full picture of their academic and career development processes. Additionally, counselors employed in education settings can work toward increasing their multicultural sensitivity with this population. A possible first step to increasing multicultural sensitivity is to recognize and build awareness for the unique needs of undocumented students. Career counselors can gain knowledge about federal and state legislation that affects access to higher education for undocumented students as well as policies within the universities and colleges in which they are employed. Counselors can also gain awareness and skills by attending relevant trainings and conferences (e.g., DREAMZone Ally trainings). Moreover, counselors and advisors can work directly with undocumented students to provide them with information on how to complete college applications or private scholarships and programs without documentation paperwork. Counselors can also advocate for institutional changes that result in reduced barriers for undocumented students. Additionally, the role of a counselor can be to act as liaison between undocumented students and advocates within the community who, in turn, could provide mentorship and networking opportunities. Finally, counselors can provide training to counseling center, academic advising, and career center professionals to educate them on resources for undocumented students and provide suggestions for working with these students in culturally sensitive ways.

It is important to note that participants in our study experienced harassment, discrimination, and insensitivity from faculty or staff based on their citizenship status. In order to build a safe, collaborative, and trusting relationship with undocumented students, counselors may need to pay special attention to confidentiality practices within their setting. This could range from simply emphasizing confidentiality practices to being intentional in formal documentation procedures (e.g., not identifying documentation status in case notes) and verbalizing this intentionality to students to build trust. Finally, counselors should be aware of the lack of choice or opportunity that many undocumented students may experience in their academic and career development process. As evidenced in our study, despite having a desire to enter certain occupations, systemic barriers may severely constrain opportunities for students (Blustein, 2006).

**Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Our findings conveyed the experiences of two undocumented Latina college students living in the Midwest and currently experiencing
financial difficulties. Although their experiences may parallel those of other undocumented students, it is important to recognize the lack of heterogeneity in our participants. Considering that gender, race/ethnicity, and social class have all been found to be related to vocational development (Fouad & Kantamneni, 2008), further research could examine a larger number of cases using varied qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Additionally, both of the participants were high-achieving, resourceful students who received admission to postsecondary institutions despite the challenges they experienced. Future research could examine the academic and career development of undocumented high school students or those who did not enroll in college. For example, using an SCCT framework, career counselors could examine how barriers and supports predict or mediate academic and vocational outcomes. Finally, it is important to fully examine the various coping strategies employed by undocumented students in overcoming barriers and obstacles. This would allow for career counselors to gain a better understanding of how strengths can be capitalized on to help navigate educational systems.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to deepen understanding of how students with undocumented citizenship status make academic and work-related decisions. Our findings shed light on factors, such as systemic barriers, discrimination, and lack of access to opportunity structures that can influence academic, work, and career decisions for undocumented students. Therefore, counselors across settings would likely do well to attend to systemic, academic, and work-related barriers that have a direct impact on the academic and career decisions of undocumented students. Despite the deep emotional impact that experiences with systemic barriers and discrimination had on the study participants, it is important to note that participants also displayed great resilience and strength. Counselors can work with undocumented students to capitalize on their strengths when planning for future academic and career directions. It is our hope that these findings will help inform counselors when working with undocumented students as well as generate future research that examines how systemic and contextual factors both assist and prevent undocumented students from achieving their academic dreams, finding meaningful work, and shaping their careers.

References


