The previous chapters have examined how the legal status of undocumented students restrains their access to higher education, exacerbates their academic and emotional stress, and limits their career opportunities. However, individually none of these challenges captures the real struggle of these students. Only through understanding undocumented students’ total experience can student affairs professionals be prepared to respond to their needs.

Sharing Their Secrets: Undocumented Students’ Personal Stories of Fear, Drive, and Survival

Susana Hernandez, Ignacio Hernandez Jr., Rebecca Gadson, Deneece Huftalin, Anna M. Ortiz, Mistalene Calleroz White, DeAnn Yocum-Gaffney

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that 11.9 million undocumented immigrants from around the world reside in the United States. Although the data show a measurable decline in the total undocumented population since 2007, the group has grown 40 percent since the millennium (Passel and Cohn, 2008). This rapid demographic shift presents a series of complex challenges for student affairs professionals. Colleges and universities often serve as the primary method of socialization for immigrant communities, especially for undocumented students who attend and earn diplomas from secondary schools. Nationally, approximately sixty-five thousand undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools every year (Oliverez, Chavez, Soriano, and Tierney, 2006). These students receive honors, make it to the dean’s list, and are class valedictorians. Although their stories offer a glimpse into their struggles, much of what undocumented college students endure remains just that: undocumented.

Enrolling in college as an undocumented immigrant often means living a life with two identities. On campus the students have no obvious insignia conspicuously declaring their citizenship status, and most often they do not disclose this information with higher educators. Although most student affairs professionals have a genuine concern and interest in
students’ well-being, generally undocumented students will reveal personal and private information with only close friends and confidants. At home, undocumented students often must convince their families that their college attendance is worth the risk of being detained and possibly deported. Ironically, since many undocumented students were brought to the United States at a very young age, they have no memory of the “native” land to which they would be deported.

The previous chapters have highlighted the financial, academic, emotional, and career challenges undocumented students face in pursuit of their higher education goals. However, an analysis of these issues cannot begin to convey the tremendous stress and anxiety these students endure every day as a result of their illegal status. This chapter provides insights into their experiences from their own personal perspective. The stories of five undocumented students demonstrate how they face their unique challenges with remarkable persistence and admirable determination.

**Ariana**

Ariana stands out among the crowd, not only because of her physical stature but because of the air of confidence she exudes. Rarely does this striking woman with bright eyes enter a room without a confident stride and a sincere smile. She can work a crowd with her polished appearance and magnetic personality. Some may dismiss her as a pretty face. But they would be remiss not to notice the way she studies her surroundings and listens to people for what they are really saying—not simply the words coming out of their mouths. One wouldn’t imagine this young woman had worked with her parents in the fields before arriving in the United States nine years ago.

Her family arrived in the United States through her grandfather’s work in the Bracero program (1942–1964), which allowed Mexican farm laborers to come to the United States to work the fields. Her father moved back to Mexico in 1985, but returned to the United States fourteen years later with his family. Ariana remembers the exact day she arrived in Phoenix: Saturday, October 22, 1999, one month before her fourteenth birthday. She started school forty-eight hours later.

Thrust into a foreign environment where she did not know the surroundings, the curriculum, or the language, Ariana quickly realized she was alone in navigating the school system. She had completed sixth grade but had then worked in the fields for two years and had not attended school. She was keenly aware of the grade she was supposed to be in, so she lied and said she was ready for the eighth grade.

Having to rely on the only girl in her class who spoke “Spanglish,” Ariana felt “handicapped,” she said, by her inability to communicate. She also noted with disdain that her interpreter was ashamed of speaking Spanish, and that seemed to further propel Ariana to make a change. The nuns
at church volunteered at the local community center, and they offered to help her learn English. At the end of each school day, Ariana started reading kindergarten books, answering quizzes afterward to help with comprehension. She began volunteering at church, constantly looking for ways to learn and practice English. She was intent on learning and intense in her method; her teachers noticed, and it was reflected on her transcript. Five months into her eighth-grade year, she was selected as student of the month. Her first semester at the American school reflected C's; every semester thereafter, she earned all As.

During her freshman year, the school sponsored a trip to the local university. It was here that Ariana envisioned a different path for herself. She was still in the bilingual program, and knew she needed to shift out of that program to earn scholarships and attend the university. She connected with a university admission officer and, as a sophomore, asked him the best way to get into the university. His answer, “Take AP English,” stayed with her. By her junior year, she was out of the bilingual program, and by senior year she was in Advanced Placement English. Even at a young age, she seemed to understand the systemic nuances that could be hurdles. On her first day in AP English, she approached her teacher, saying, “I’m not stupid. I just have a language barrier.” She convinced the teacher to work with her and earned an A in the course.

In contrast to Ariana’s aggressive pursuit of education was her father’s mediocre interest in it. His two older daughters had not completed their education in Mexico, and he failed to see the long-term benefit of education. There was no money in it, he thought, and, in fact, everything that Ariana wanted to do in school—sports, groups, clubs—cost even more money. So Ariana took a job at a fast-food restaurant for two reasons: she could make her own money, and she could continue to strengthen her English. When she won a trip to Washington, D.C., at school, her father initially refused to let her go, saying, “If you get caught, don’t call.” However, her mother supported the trip. Ariana ultimately made the trip to D.C., but she was baffled by her father’s fear of traveling; she saw it as hypocritical: “He brought us all here to the United States. That was the biggest risk of all. So if he did that, why couldn’t I go on a trip?”

Ariana continued to perform well in high school, and it paid off in the form of four major scholarships that covered her entire cost of attending college. In the United States, she had never questioned whether she would go to college; it was something she pursued relentlessly. Higher education had not been an option for her in Mexico. It was a dualistic social class system of those who had money for education and those who did not, and Ariana belonged to the latter group. She felt that college was a way to transcend those socioeconomic boundaries. “In Mexico, even if you were smart, you were looked at badly [because of your socioeconomic class]. But in the U.S., when I found out that now I could actually go to college?!? It was an opportunity here, and it was mine.”
Ariana’s success continued in college, and she participated in business organizations, nonprofits, and scholarship programs. Her high level of involvement and achievement was matched by only a handful of other students at her college. When asked if her undocumented status played a role in college, a bittersweet smile comes to her face:

Oh, yes, it was an issue all along in college. As a Latina in accounting—I was rare. I ran into a lot of people who were impressed and wanted to hire me. I had a different problem than other students. I had to come up with all kinds of excuses to not work: “I had to focus on school.” “I was really involved.” “I had too many commitments.” I had a list ready.

In Ariana’s junior year of college, Arizona passed a law that prevented undocumented students from receiving in-state tuition and financial aid, and she lost all of her scholarships. She has been able to continue her education through a private scholarship; she has off-the-book jobs like babysitting, yard sales, and catering; and she shares a two-bedroom apartment with three other women. She considers the hours she spends doing community service her “job.” Indeed, she spends approximately thirty hours each week doing community service for the Latina and Latino community. Her honors thesis is the creation of a college-preparation model for young Latinas and their families to increase enrollment in higher education and prepare families for what it means for both their daughters and them. She is creating a curriculum not only for the young girls, but also, in Spanish, for mothers and fathers.

Her education has equipped her with many skill sets, among them a keen business mind and fact-based approach to problem solving. She has established a postgraduate plan and appears to be prepared for any direction the wind blows. When asked how she felt about her situation, especially since the implementation of the Arizona law, she shrugged her shoulders: “I was coming to the university knowing that the next day I may not be here. I’m prepared if I have to leave.” She says matter-of-factly that she is prepared to get a job. “I’ve gone to one of the best business schools in the nation. I’ve taken all the classes needed for an accounting degree. I didn’t take the fluff classes. You won’t find a salsa class on my transcript.”

Ariana expresses frustration with the “people who cry about” the situation. She does what she can—research, awareness raising, community involvement—but feels there is a limit to what can be done. She speaks with a slight edge of anger: “Some of my friends are crying to people who really can’t do anything about it. And honestly, if they even had papers to be here legally, they’d still find something to cry about.”

Ariana does not pretend the situation is easy or comfortable. Besides the obvious circumstance of not having papers and feeling fearful about being deported on simple trips to the store, she also has had doors shut on her. She is out of the communication loop for opportunities and is often
ineligible for opportunities when she does know about them. Despite the situation, Ariana perseveres to function as any other student does: “Having papers is not enough anymore to get a job. You need to work on the other stuff.” She states with simple clarity, “Look, if I just went to class and that’s it, I might as well stay at home and read a book. I make a point to get to know my professors, to meet people, to get involved.”

When asked if she has any advantages over other students, she says without hesitation, “Yes. I think I have a unique ability to think outside the box and find a solution. I’m not limited by narrow blinders; I can see other ways to do things. I feel I have . . . well, the ability to survive.” Yet Ariana goes on to admit that this position is not for everyone, and that others in this situation must “do it well and with integrity.”

And that is precisely what Ariana has done. She is the consummate university student leader, engaged and active on campus; students, staff, and lead administrators know her by name. She has provided a new option for her family. She paved the way for her younger sister, who was involved in high school because of Ariana’s trailblazing, and now attends the same university as her sister. Her father has started to come to her university award ceremonies, and though he is still unfamiliar with and uncomfortable in the university environment, he is proud of his daughter. She has achieved one of her many dreams. She will graduate with honors from one of the nation’s top-ranked business schools, and her honors thesis was selected for special recognition from the Honors College. When asked if she would move to Mexico on graduation, she pauses and then says with a smile, “No, there is still so much I haven’t done here in the United States.”

Maria

Maria is twenty-three years old. She was born in Durango, Mexico, and has lived for fourteen years in Santa Ana, California, where she attended elementary school, middle school, and high school. She was an honors student from sixth grade and continued to perform well all the way through her junior year in high school, taking several Advanced Placement courses. When she was a freshman in high school, Maria joined the Associated Student Body, the school’s student government and major leadership organization; her senior year she was its president, one of her biggest accomplishments in high school.

Although Maria has lived in the United States for many years, she is undocumented. Her undocumented status started affecting her when it was time to enter college. She applied to California State University, Fullerton, and was accepted but did not attend. The university was a bit far from home, and Maria did not drive because she was not able to get a driver’s license; furthermore, she did not have the money for tuition and was not able to receive financial aid other than private scholarships. At that time, she felt a bit ashamed; despite working so hard in high school, Maria was
going to attend community college when she knew she deserved to be at a four-year school.

Maria went to Santa Ana College, which turned out to be one of the best experiences she has ever had. She joined the Associated Student Government (ASG) on campus and also was part of University-LINK, a partnership between Santa Ana College and the University of California, Irvine. Through ASG and U-LINK, Maria learned to network and use her resources. She met people who later would help her when she transferred and then again when she applied to graduate school. Maria also took advantage of the field trips, summer programs, and other events that were offered, all of which all helped her grow as an individual. Although U-LINK required Maria to see her counselor only once a semester, she was always in his office, and this interaction helped her in transferring to a four-year school within two years. She is proud of this accomplishment; she had seen how many of her friends from both high school and Santa Ana College got stuck in community college for more than two years. In addition, she knew many people who had dropped out because of the lack of guidance.

After Santa Ana College, Maria transferred to the University of California, Irvine (UCI), where she believes her experience was affected because of her residency status. She completed UCI in a year and a half because it was expensive to stay longer than she needed. Although she received some private scholarships, Maria still had to pay some money out of pocket; as a result, she could not afford to take classes other than the ones she needed. She did not drive, so she had to take an hour-long bus ride to UCI and back home. Because of the bus, she would go to school only for her classes and then home return right away. She was not able to take evening classes. If she had had the money, Maria could have lived on campus and possibly had a better experience at UCI.

Maria majored in sociology and minored in education. Before graduating from UCI, she asked herself what she wanted to do next. Maria was not sure about what her next step would be until she learned about a graduate program from a colleague at the high school where she volunteered. This program, Student Development in Higher Education (SDHE) at California State University, Long Beach, would enable her to become a community college counselor. At that time Maria did not know what it was she wanted to do; however, her experience at Santa Ana College motivated her to give back to her community by helping minority students attend four-year schools instead of getting “stuck” in community college or dropping out completely. Maria applied to the program and was accepted.

After graduating from UCI, Maria quit her ice cream parlor job that she had held for six years; she thought she could earn more money now that she had a bachelor’s degree. However, she soon realized that it did not matter how many degrees she had: she still would not be able to get a good job because of her residency status. Maria searched for a better job but knew her options were limited because she did not have a social security
number. Maria recalls, “I had a really hard time accepting reality, and it kind of got me depressed.” She finally found a job as a receptionist that paid nine dollars an hour. Maria felt this was a “slap on the face” because she had a degree from a good school but could not get a better job “because of nine digits.” Nevertheless, she looked on the positive side and told herself that she was fortunate to have had the experience of receiving her degree and attending a good university. Maria’s parents had not gone to school past sixth grade, so simply having the opportunity to earn a bachelor’s degree was something she was very proud of.

Maria has completed one year of her graduate program and is grateful to be part of it. After she completes the remaining two years, she will be able to be a community college counselor once she resolves her residency status. Maria says she still gets down at times when she hears her classmates talk about their salaries, knowing she does not make even half as much as they do. Although she says it is not always about the money, she knows if she had a social security number, she could be making a higher salary. Furthermore, she recently learned that she was pregnant and is saddened to think that she will not be able to give her baby everything he or she deserves.

Maria still hopes to work at Santa Ana College as a counselor and to make a difference by helping more minority students attend four-year schools. However, she concedes it probably will be a long time before she is able to be a counselor—and perhaps she never will. One thing she does know is that no matter what happens, her education and experiences will never be taken away from her.

Cecilia

Cecilia was only a year old when her family left South America and moved to Salt Lake City. She and her siblings went to public school and had dreams of attending a major university. She was a great student and loved learning. By the time Cecilia graduated from high school, two of her older siblings were already in college, and the high cost of tuition made it difficult to fund a third. Cecilia decided to attend Salt Lake Community College, which offered lower tuition and an opportunity to earn an associate degree before transferring to the University of Utah.

When it came time to complete the application for admission, Cecilia left blank the question of citizenship. She knew if she checked she was a citizen, she would be lying. And yet she had lived in the United States for eighteen years. It was, in fact, the only country she knew. Although the state of Utah would later pass legislation that allowed undocumented students who had graduated from a Utah high school to pay in-state tuition, at this point Cecilia would not benefit.

Cecilia learned early on about a President’s Leadership Scholarship available through the student activities office on campus. She was surprised
that the application form did not ask about residency status, so she completed it and turned it in. Cecilia was selected as a President’s Leadership recipient, and as a result earned tuition and fees for two years of service as a campus leader. Cecilia became highly involved, led many strong student projects and activities, and maintained a solid grade point average. She came out of her shell, and her self-confidence was strengthened. After two years of board and committee work, Cecilia decided to run for student body office.

At Salt Lake Community College, student body officers earn free tuition and are also paid a stipend for their work. The administrative assistant in the office began preparing the necessary paperwork for Cecilia’s monthly payment. When she asked for hiring documents, Cecilia didn’t know what to do. She knew she had to tell her story, but it was extremely painful for her to open up. In addition, by sharing her story, she was jeopardizing her family. She also was concerned that her position would be taken away from her.

After much discussion with her parents and a friend, Cecilia entrusted her story to a staff member in the student activities office. This was one of the hardest conversations she had ever had, and she hoped that the staff person would treat the information as confidentially as possible. She felt that she was risking her family by sharing her secret but knew she had no choice.

Cecilia’s undocumented status made it impossible for the institution to pay her for her work. Although some of the tuition costs were offset by private scholarship monies, Cecilia ended up paying tuition on her own and volunteering her time as an officer rather than getting paid. She was happy to do that because she truly did not care about the money; what she wanted was the opportunity to learn and grow as a student leader.

Cecilia’s experience illustrates the varied and unique limits that undocumented students encounter on college campuses. Although she was able to serve out her term as an officer, Cecilia did not reap the same financial benefits for the same amount of work as her colleagues did. In addition, she felt limited in her ability to enter conversations around immigration or bilingual issues. She is worried about transferring to another college or university and how she will navigate that system as an undocumented student.

Cecilia loves the opportunities she has been given and is grateful for them; however, she is constantly reconciling how to “find her place here.” She says people tell her “she’s not American,” but she certainly cannot claim the identity of a country she left at the young age of one.

**Oscar**

Oscar’s life is encapsulated in his own truism: “I will not allow my status to get in the way of opportunity.”
Oscar's family is different from some others in that he, his brother, and his parents came to the United States not fleeing strife but simply seeking opportunity. At the time Oscar was five years old, and his brother was eight. His parents were business owners in Mexico, but his father wanted a better life for his sons. He believed if his sons could learn English, they would be able to find better jobs in Mexico. They came to California on a tourist visa and stayed; much of his mother's family was already here, and they saw the opportunities. Their original plan was to spend a few years in the United States until the boys became fluent; then they would return to Mexico where the boys would finish school with the advantage of knowing English. Because of all the opportunities that were available in the United States, they ended up staying permanently.

Oscar's parents worked at menial jobs as the boys began school and quickly learned the language. Oscar in fact was unaware of his undocumented status until he was in junior high. He does recall having to prove to teachers and administrators that he was fluent in English and felt that many of them regularly underestimated his academic skills.

During high school, Oscar developed a love for music and pursued it with a passion. He played in the bands and music programs offered at his school and planned to study music in college. While finishing high school, he began to look for music programs.

Not only musically talented, Oscar is gifted academically and graduated from high school with a 4.3 GPA. He knew he could get into many colleges with his academic credentials, but his status meant he would be paying out-of-state tuition. By this time, the family's financial situation had improved: his brother had begun college at UCLA, and his mother had started her own business, which was doing well. However, out-of-state or private tuition for two sons in college would be a stretch. So Oscar applied to a music program at a California State school and received a talent scholarship; he was excited about this but quickly learned he would not be able to accept the scholarship because of his status. His search for a college continued.

Oscar needed to find a college with strong academics that also offered a financial aid package he could use. He originally had not considered Chapman University in Orange, California, but a friend, also with an undocumented status, had applied and received a generous financial aid package. Oscar decided to apply to Chapman.

He originally applied to Chapman to pursue a degree in music, but also considered studying computer science and mathematics because he had always loved math. He received his financial aid package and was happily surprised that everything had worked out. Although he received both a talent scholarship and an academic scholarship, he quickly discovered that students are not permitted to have more than a single scholarship, so he had to choose between them. Because the academic scholarship was larger than the talent one, he decided to pursue a degree in math and
computer science. During Oscar's sophomore year, the California legislature passed AB 540, which allows undocumented students to pay in-state tuition for state-supported colleges and universities if the students are graduates from a California high school and meet certain residency criteria; as a result, his brother was eligible for in-state tuition, relieving part of the financial burden for the family.

Oscar did very well academically at Chapman. He was involved on campus in the math club and with MEChA (El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlan) and had many friends. He thoroughly enjoyed his experience. He also worked as much as he could at a local coffee shop. He was close friends with his coworkers and manager and liked his work. However, after Oscar had worked at the coffee shop for a few years, the company outsourced its payroll department, and shortly after that, the company implemented a policy that all employees must prove their residency status or be terminated. Oscar hoped that this policy would not be enforced strictly, but he eventually had to tell his manager that he did not have legal residency status. His manager was shocked, but there was nothing he could do, and Oscar was forced to leave his job.

Oscar was concerned about how he could support himself because there were few employment opportunities for him. He had begun to tutor the child of a former high school teacher whose child was struggling in math. His former teacher encouraged him to pursue private tutoring to earn the money he needed. He received referrals from his former teacher and others, and his tutoring business began to grow.

In the meantime, Oscar completed his bachelor's degree and went on to obtain a master's degree in mathematics as well. For both Oscar and his family, education is a privilege, an ideal, and a deeply held value—indeed, a way of life. When he was growing up, his mother told him that he would not be a man until he had a college degree; these high expectations encouraged both Oscar and his brother to continue their education.

Oscar also has continued to develop his tutoring business, which has turned out to be a lucrative and rewarding career for him. His dream is to make enough money in consulting and the private sector to support his family, then retire from that business and someday teach calculus in a California high school. He would like to help students with backgrounds similar to his. His brother also has completed a master's degree and has a consulting business.

Oscar has entered a Ph.D. program in biostatistics at a prestigious California university. He was offered an assistantship that almost would have paid for his doctoral program, but because of his status, he was unable to accept it. He is determined and no doubt will find a way to finish his terminal degree.

When asked to identify the most difficult challenges he has had to face, Oscar pauses thoughtfully and then struggles to find an answer.
because he views all challenges as opportunities. He says that many people have told him he could never accomplish the things that he has; these comments, likely intended as a dose of realism, only have spurned him on.

Oscar cannot get a driver’s license and finds public transportation an incredibly slow, ineffective way to get around in California. He had too much difficulty accomplishing everything, so he has elected to drive. Each time he gets in his car to go to a tutoring appointment, he risks being arrested and having his car impounded. Although he has gotten used to this fear, it remains in the back of his mind.

He also confronts prejudice or ignorance—he is never sure which—when he goes out with this friends or on a date. When he orders a beer or glass of wine, he uses a Mexican passport and a Matricula Consular (an identity card issued by Mexico) as proof of his age. Although he knows the Matricula Consular is deemed by the state an acceptable form of identification (he has seen the binder issued by the state liquor licensing boards), he still is denied regularly. Managers are either uninformed or have negative views about undocumented individuals.

Although he is a very positive person, Oscar is somewhat cautious. He has shared his residency status with some friends but intuitively knows he cannot share it with others. He says there always is a fear in sharing this information because the other person now will have incredible power over him and possibly his family.

He also is frustrated with the stereotypes of undocumented individuals. One of the major misconceptions he wishes to correct is the belief that undocumented individuals do not pay taxes and are a drain on public benefits; he has a government-assigned tax ID number and states quite passionately,

I pay my taxes. My parents pay their taxes. Each month, I look to see how much of my money goes to social security and other programs that I will never be able to utilize. We own our house. I am not a drain on the system.

He wants others to know about the vibrancy of the AB 540 community. He says that there are doctors, lawyers, accountants, and every kind of professional in the AB 540 community ready and willing to work. It is deeply frustrating that the professionals in the AB 540 community are willing to practice at lower rates to help low-income families, a largely underserved community, but are not allowed legally to do so.

Camila

Others often tell Camila that she seems driven yet, at least initially, guarded and even unapproachable. University administrators see her on campus in multiple leadership roles, participating in campus committees, and as a regular at community service projects and events. Most assume she is an international student, and she does nothing to correct this assumption.
When she was eight years old, Camila and her family moved from Vera Cruz, Mexico, to a small community along the Mexican side of the U.S.-Texas border. Her mother began working for a small restaurant, which her family later purchased. She and her older brother, Josué, attended the local school. At the end of ninth grade, her brother graduated from high school. Josué had the option of going to a university in Mexico but dreamed instead of receiving a college education in the United States.

The family supported Josué’s decision, and Camila decided that she too would pursue an education in the United States. They applied for student visas to enter the U.S. school system as international students. But they were told that they would not be eligible for student visas without first having twelve thousand dollars each in their savings accounts, and so their applications were denied. Deflated but undeterred, the family applied for tourist visas. A tourist visa allows a person to spend three days at a time in the United States and provides refuge from questions and suspicion when crossing the bridge from Mexico to the United States. Camila's and Josué's parents helped them move across the border and rented an apartment for them. Camila, at the age of fourteen, and her brother, at the age of eighteen, began their lives in the United States separate from their parents.

They entered the public school system by taking classes in the English as a second language program. Prior to the classes, neither had ever spoken, written, or read English. Because of the language barrier, Camila had to repeat eighth grade, and her brother started his education as a ninth grader. Josué was prepared to repeat his entire high school education so he would be eligible for in-state tuition when he enrolled in college.

Each morning Josué took Camila to the middle school that she attended. After dropping her off, he would return the car to the apartment complex in time to catch the school bus to his high school. Josué’s car had Mexican plates, and he did not have a U.S. driver’s license; consequently, he was unable to obtain a school parking permit. Logistical concerns, however, were minor compared to the cultural and social challenges Camila and Josué experienced. Camila vividly remembers other schoolchildren throwing rocks at her and her ESL classmates while they chided *mojados*, which she knew meant “wetbacks.” She found herself incapable of finding words to communicate, ill equipped to defend herself, and fearful of drawing attention to herself.

At the conclusion of their first academic year, both Josué and Camila returned to Mexico to be with family. That July, Josué was with his high school sweetheart at a park near her home. While in the car, they were confronted by four armed men who held guns to their heads. Josué willingly gave up the only items of value: his car, wristwatch, and fifty pesos. However, the men wanted more money and after a momentary struggle, Josué was shot and killed instantly.

Filled with shock, grief, and the burden of seeing her brother’s dream come to fruition, Camila, now fifteen, returned to the United States to
begin high school just one month after her brother was killed. Josué's and Camila's tourist visas finally arrived in the mail, nearly one year after applying for them, which served as another reminder of the loss of her brother and their shared plans.

Camila’s parents found and rented an apartment two blocks from the high school that she would attend that fall. At the end of each school day, Camila would return home and complete her homework, prepare dinner for the family, and do laundry and other chores until her parents arrived each night. Her parents managed their family business by day and would commute to the United States each evening to spend it with her. They would leave early each morning to return to Mexico. The family kept her brother’s car and would alternate using it and the family vehicle every two days so that they would raise less suspicion when crossing the border.

At the end of ninth grade, Camila had earned enough credits to skip to the eleventh grade the following fall, allowing her to complete high school in three years. She accelerated the completion of her high school requirements by taking after-school classes and attending summer school. In her junior year, Camila made a request to take Advanced Placement and college preparatory classes; however, her teachers refused to recommend her because they felt that her English skills were too poor. After much convincing, she was allowed to take college preparatory English and one Advanced Placement math class. She excelled in both.

At the conclusion of her junior year, Camila had only two classes left to take. She met with her high school guidance counselor to request the opportunity to take concurrent-enrollment classes—classes that would count for both high school and college credit. Despite her prior exemplary performance, her counselor’s reply was, “Mi hija, you are not ready and cannot afford the international tuition.” Her counselor assumed that her family was too poor to afford the opportunity and that despite her proven academic performance, she would not be able to succeed in college-level courses. Fortunately for Camila, her senior year a new guidance counselor began working at the school who allowed her to take two concurrent-enrollment classes. She received an A in computer information systems, a B in college algebra, and scored high on the AP exam for Spanish, thereby successfully earning nine hours of college credit. She became the only student from her ESL cohort in middle school to graduate high school.

In addition to maximizing her academic opportunities, Camila took advantage of extracurricular activities. She played soccer, wrote for and later edited the student literary magazine, and was inducted into the National Honor Society. Camila expressed that her drive for success was fueled by a desire to honor her family, brother, and herself.

Despite being involved in high school, Camila never felt that she belonged. The relationships she made with peers were not deeply connected friendships but superficial in nature because she feared that others would learn of her status. Instead, she focused on planning for college.
Camila’s college of choice was close to home so that she could continue to be near her family. Her ties to her parents are strong, and the weight of their having lost one child kept her near. When Camila submitted her college application, she was required to submit a notarized affidavit indicating that she would file an application to become a permanent U.S. resident at the earliest opportunity that she was eligible to do so. After completing her undergraduate education, she knew that she wanted to pursue graduate school; however, she felt that her options were limited.

Having completed high school and her undergraduate degree, Camilla felt paralyzed once again. She now was equipped with words to advocate for herself, but she could not change her tourist visa to an international student visa because she had completed her high school and undergraduate career in the United States. She knew she would have very little opportunity to visit her family if she attended a graduate program north of the checkpoint, a border patrol station that checks the residency status of all northbound highway travelers. Camila chose to remain at the same institution and pursue a master’s degree in public administration.

Upon completing her graduate school application, she was almost denied admission because she had not yet resolved her status according to the affidavit she had submitted three and a half years earlier. After several conversations with the office for graduate studies, she was able to convince the college to transfer the affidavit to her graduate school application since she was merely continuing her education.

Blinking back tears, Camila expressed that it is difficult to discuss her status. Her self-described double life has been a burden and weight. She has made purposeful decisions regarding involvement with friends and participation in campus trips and has avoided romantic relationships; her main reason for not dating someone in the United States is due to her fear of disclosing her status and having her feelings and intentions questioned. Furthermore, she does not want to love a Mexican man who could not understand her desire to have a life in the United States rather than Mexico.

To help protect Camila, her family has put their home and family business under her name as a precaution should she ever be detained when crossing the border. They believe that this will offer proof that she is living in Mexico should she be questioned. Camila feels that she cannot be “normal” because she does not have the same rights and privileges that other students enjoy.

The choice to continue the pursuit of a graduate degree has caused strain on her relationship with her family. Her family now resides solely in Mexico and she in the United States. Although the distance is mere miles, the emotional tension has begun to create a great division between them. Her parents find it increasingly difficult to understand why she would choose to continue her education in the United States instead of returning home. Although they still provide financial assistance, they fail to offer
emotional support and understanding. Camila feels a sense of emotional isolation and separation from her parents.

At the age of twenty-three, Camila feels as if she is in the same place as she was when she was fourteen years old. In spite of her accomplishments, the paralysis she feels now is greater than ever. There are no other family members in the United States to petition on her behalf. The only way to gain citizenship is through marriage or passage of the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act). Although she enjoys the educational experience, she feels trapped. To qualify as a conditional permanent resident under the DREAM Act, she must be a student residing in the United States when it is enacted. Throughout Camila’s life, she has been inundated with messages that portray Mexicans as lazy and wanting everything for free. Camila feels indebted to a government that provided support during middle school, high school, and most of her undergraduate and graduate education. She wishes to be able to give back and contribute to society. And although she meets educational, interpersonal, and skill qualifications, she is ineligible for employment and pursuing the life for which she has been planning.

Lessons Learned

It is critical to understand that undocumented students are not homogeneous. Students come from diverse ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds. While undocumented students can share similar challenges and encounter parallel experiences, it is essential to understand each individual’s story. With these precautions in mind, the following are lessons learned from the cases presented here.

Creative Use of Available Resources. The students in these cases took a proactive approach to their higher education experience. They were intentional about their learning and took maximum advantage of the opportunities available to them, recognizing that the experience itself was a chance for further learning. Although some students need an incentive to participate or engage in activities that were not required, the undocumented students profiled in this chapter are intentional learners open to challenges and new opportunities for personal and professional growth. In fear of being asked for a social security number, some participated in activities on a volunteer rather than paid basis, illustrating their intense commitment to their development.

This uncertain process of obtaining internships requires students, as one student stated, to “think outside of the box” in determining creative ways to approach their unique challenges. Students approach situations critically, analyzing possible situations they may encounter that could jeopardize their migratory status.

Secrets. Identifying an undocumented student on a college campus is not possible at first glance. Undocumented students look like their peers
and may be found in residence halls, student unions, classrooms, and student organizations. It is a self-disclosed identity that a student must feel comfortable sharing. The students selected to share their secrets with individuals with whom they believed they could feel less reticent. Students who choose to disclose are trusting the listener to provide honest, direct, and informed advice while protecting their confidentiality.

It is critical to understand how and why a student chooses to disclose such a delicate secret. The challenge perhaps is not solely in understanding the undocumented student’s reasons for disclosing; it also is important for faculty and staff to identify ways to create opportunities for students to feel comfortable disclosing. University faculty and staff cannot serve students well when they are not aware of the often chronic, sometimes acute circumstances and challenges that undocumented students meet head-on. The fear that a university administrator will not be receptive and empathetic to their status can result in students’ unwillingness to trust educators when asked to reveal significant impediments to their educational experience.

**Giving Back.** The educational experience of undocumented students can vary by family circumstances, financial status, and type of institution attended (Ortiz and HeavyRunner, 2003); however, a common thread woven into the fabric of the undocumented student experience is the notion of giving back. Undocumented students often report that their pursuit of a higher education serves to honor the sacrifice and struggle of their families, friends, and an educational system to which they feel indebted.

This sense of indebtedness results in a quandary for undocumented students, educators, and institutions of higher learning; while undocumented students feel indebted for the education they have received, repayment of that debt remains elusive because gainful employment in their field of study is not legally possible under current immigration policy. Student affairs professionals can serve as facilitators in shaping undocumented students’ perceptions of giving back. While they may not be able to give back in the traditional monetary sense, these students often serve as institutional agents within their communities, sharing their experiences, both positive and negative, with other undocumented persons seeking a college education.

**Involvement and Agency.** The profiles presented here highlight an active level of involvement in undocumented students’ educational experience. A majority of the students profiled served in student government and student organizations while in high school and entered colleges and universities seeking the same level of agency in their new milieu. The sense of indebtedness they feel is another example of their desire to be contributing members of U.S. society. Student affairs professionals have the opportunity to craft creative educational interventions whose learning outcomes focus on student involvement and self-authorship.
Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

Based on the lessons learned from the stories of these undocumented students, we recommend the following strategies, adapted from an exemplary initiative at California State University, Long Beach, for student affairs professionals:

- **Create a welcoming and supportive campus environment for undocumented students, integrating them into campus life.** The students in these stories highlight the need for institutions to create safe and welcoming environments for them. The students who took advantage of campus resources felt that the opportunity to develop personal and professional skills outweighed the risk of jeopardizing their identity. Creating campus environments that foster and promote these students’ growth is of utmost importance. All students need an environment that promotes development, yet for some, these opportunities are limited by a social security number—or rather the lack of one. Student affairs professionals should educate students on their rights and responsibilities under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act; however, students also should be clear that faculty and staff are advised not to offer students immigration advice, given that immigration laws are complex and often changing.

- **Increase faculty and staff knowledge and effectiveness about the needs, concerns, and issues of undocumented immigrant students and their families.** Creating opportunities that are sensitive to students who do not have social security numbers is important to consider in working with this student population. While many of them were not deterred from seeking these opportunities, it is important to allow all students the opportunity to take advantage of campus resources. When developing campus internships, scholarships, or other opportunities, student affairs professionals should work with faculty to be sensitive regarding eligibility criteria. Advocating for increased opportunities that do not discriminate or segregate undocumented students is crucial and imperative.

- **Keep faculty and staff current on immigration laws and other issues that affect undocumented students.** It is critical that campus faculty and staff be informed about the policies and regulations affecting undocumented students. Taking the initiative to be informed and staying up-to-date on campus, state, and federal policies is one way for student affairs professionals to be prepared when approached by an undocumented student with a question or concern. In addition, some college campuses are developing campuswide initiatives to educate faculty and staff so they are able to support this unique student population. Campuses also are creating campus-specific resource guides to help students navigate their educational experience at that campus. Many of these efforts are a
direct result of active student leaders’ calls for campus initiatives to address their concerns.

References


Susana Hernandez is a doctoral student in educational leadership and policy studies at Iowa State University.

Ignacio Hernandez Jr. is a doctoral student in educational leadership and policy studies at Iowa State University.

Rebecca Gadson is assistant dean of students and director of student involvement at the University of Texas–Pan American.

Deniece Huftalin is vice president of student services at Salt Lake Community College.

Anna M. Ortiz is professor of educational leadership at California State University, Long Beach.

Mistalene Calleroz White is dean of student affairs at Arizona State University.

Deann Yocum-Gaffney is assistant vice chancellor for student affairs and associate dean of students at Chapman University in Orange, California.