



Center for Critical Race Studies in Education at UCLA

Research Briefs

June 2019 • Issue No. 18

UndocuBruins: Critical Race Theory in the Forming of Resources for Undocumented Students

Yadira Valencia, German Aguilar-Tinajero, Eva Amarillas, Joel Calixto, Katy Maldonado, Julio Reyes
University of California, Los Angeles

This research brief hopes to reach institutional agents and advocates who wish to implement research programs and resources for undocumented, first-generation, low-income undergraduate students—through the critical and intersectional lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). By intentionally creating programs through CRT, we can see how students' multiple identities and lived realities impact the research they develop, and the processes needed to support students through their research and graduate school endeavors. Yadira Valencia, was fortunate to be the coordinator for the UndocuBruins Research Program at UCLA from 2014 to 2018. Growing up in a mixed-status family, Yadira witnessed her eldest-sister experience academic road blocks due to her undocumented status. This experience emphasized for Yadira the necessity for academic resources further solidifying her commitment to this work. It is critical to support the trajectories of undocumented scholars; especially when they are still barred from federal and state resources. This brief discusses UndocuBruins and the ways in which using CRT has and will continue to center the lived experiences of undocumented students.

HISTORICIZING UNDOCUBRUINS AND STUDENT ADVOCACY

The advocacy work of undocumented students resulted in the establishment of UndocuBruins in 2014—the first research program to center the research goals and graduate school trajectories of undocumented students. Prior to the 2011 CA Dream Act, undocumented students were barred from research programs since they were not allowed to receive the federal and state stipends (Pérez Huber et al., 2014). Although undocumented students in California can now join programs that receive state or private funds, they remain barred from federally funded programs (e.g., McNair Research Scholars). McNair offers GRE prep courses, a summer institute, and fee waivers for graduate school applications. These resources are not available to UndocuBruins and because of this, institutional support is needed to challenge the marginalization created by these inequities. UndocuBruins trains undocumented students to develop critical research, prepares them to be graduate scholars, and builds a space centered on shared lived realities through a cohort model. UndocuBruins pushes the conversation on how undocumented students can be supported beyond undergrad and critically considers the role educators, practitioners, and scholars have in the development of graduate school trajectories.

A RESEARCH PROGRAM GROUNDED IN CRT: WHAT IS UNDOCUBRUINS?

Structured through a two-quarter timeline, UndocuBruins provides undocumented students the opportunity to

conduct their own research under the guidance of faculty and graduate students, acquire tools to apply for graduate school, a monetary stipend that is indispensable to their livelihood, and a culminating research presentation. As the graduate femtor¹, Yadira guided students in the research seminar and individual meetings. As the first coordinator/femtor, Yadira knew it was crucial to have UndocuBruins' structure and practice go beyond traditional academic programming. Therefore, Yadira turned to a CRT² in education framework that offers five tenets that inform theory, research, and praxis and challenges intersectional inequities such as the ones faced by undocumented students.

By way of CRT, when intersecting race with immigration status we historicize how the undocumented community and Communities of Color have been targets of racist nativism (Pérez Huber, 2016). In the first year of UndocuBruins, Yadira reached out to established research programs for potential collaborations. This led to a hostile interaction with a program director who questioned the necessity of UndocuBruins because their program already offered similar resources to undocumented students. This instance showed institutional agents' lack of knowledge regarding undocumented student advocacy and the challenges these students face.

UndocuBruins is social justice oriented and acknowledges the advocacy that went into creating the program. Furthermore, it challenges the dominant notion of having only "academically prepared" students by deciding not to have a GPA minimum for the application process. Interdisciplinary understandings were strongly needed when running a program that is open to students from different fields. Here, we would like to thank professors who committed themselves as faculty advisors and provided detailed feedback to our students.

CENTRALITY OF EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

Most importantly, UndocuBruins centers students' lived experiences. Students shared that this was one of the few opportunities they had in which they felt a sense of understanding and community in regard to their status. To demonstrate the impact of this program, we share the voices of some of the students who were part of UndocuBruins. Katy Maldonado shares this sentiment of having a support system with a familial essence:

"Besides the amazing academic guidance in understanding research and how to conduct it, what I found to be the most helpful and crucial part of UndocuBruins was the cohort itself...Having this group with me provided a support system

of people that not only understood the struggles of being undocumented but were also in the same boat with you regarding research."

Like Katy, Eva Amarillas had a similar sentiment of community building and connection with the cohort and femtor that continued beyond her time in the program:

"Although sometimes research does not turn out as one would expect, you know you have people to talk to going through similar struggles and with familiar experiences as an undocumented Student of Color at UCLA. Lastly, one of the best parts about this program is that the femtoring and peer support continues beyond the 2-quarter program length."

For Yadira, the coordinator, it was important to reach out to students after the program to remind them of the support they have as they continue on. German Aguilar-Tinajero highlights this as he shares how UndocuBruins provided him the affirmation he needed to pursue his goal of getting a Ph.D.

"Before the start of the program, I didn't believe grad school was as accessible for students who share my undocumented status. After the program, however, the idea of going to grad school became more attainable, as the goal of getting Ph.D. was cemented within me."

Overall, the students that have been part of this program have voiced the importance for having UndocuBruins, a program situated in CRT. Through UndocuBruins, we are able to see how this program offered student cohorts support, validation, and femtorship for their graduate goals and undocumented status.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Intentionality

As the first program coordinator, Yadira took purposeful steps to make UndocuBruins a critical counterspace³. One, Yadira made sure to acknowledge and remain conscious of how her status as a U.S. citizen impacted the dynamic of the cohort. Two, Yadira provided tough love when reviewing their assignments, was understanding of the additional hurdles thrown their way, provided a listening ear to their resilience, and above all heard what they needed and asked for. This meant changing lesson plans, if needed, in order to provide space for dialogue on topics that strongly impacted them.

Funding

The program was originally funded by the UC Office of the President, which provided four years of funding. Since then, the program still continues without

the commitment of UCLA to provide financial support for the program in the future. Past cohort members such as Julio Reyes expressed the need to continue the monetary support and shared that “It would also be good to increase the amount of funding each participant gets since most undocumented students face financial difficulties and limitations compared to other students.” Students are being affected by the instability caused by one-time funding and lack of institutionalized funding.

Building A Community of Scholars

Increasing social justice-oriented research programs for undocumented students empowers their trajectories and goals. Undocumented students can join research labs or programs that are open to all students, but they may not have a connection to other undocumented scholars who are also doing critical research in such spaces. Thus, students need programs that validate their lived experiences as undocumented scholars and center how this identity intersects with others. Joel Calixto shares why it is important to have programs such as these:

“Participating in the UndocuBruins Research Program has left an eternal impact in my character, pedagogy, and intellectual thought as a first-generation Indigenous student... The voice for the undocumented

by the undocumented is imperative as the tensions continue to grow in the political climate. Our research projects will plunge the conversation forward.”

Recommendations

Whether this program can be replicated across institutions depends on the commitment of institutional agents and their willingness to listen to students. For those who wish to push forward a research program that centers the identities and experiences of undocumented students, some recommendations include:

- 1) Turning to a CRT praxis
- 2) Requesting institutional support (i.e., funding, physical spaces, events, workshops, collaborations, etc.).
- 3) Becoming well versed with the opportunities available for undocumented students.
- 4) Building collaborations with established undocumented student centers by starting research/ graduate school components in them.
- 5) Listening to the types of programs/resources students want and recommendations they have in order to evolve programming along with their needs.
- 6) Offering genuine and intentional support at all times by celebrating their accomplishments and being a source of support when needed.
- 7) Above all humanizing them, recognizing that their experiences go beyond their research and into what they are living day-to-day.

Instead of questioning why undocumented students advocated for the UndocuBruins Research Program, institutions need to question why they are not supporting social justice programming and femtorship. We need to turn to CRT to ground these research programs and develop critical praxis. Like Julio mentioned, “The UndocuBruins Research Program is necessary on a campus like UCLA because it provides undocumented students a safe and brave space to conduct research.”

NOTES

¹ The concept of femtor and the practice of femtoring challenges traditional forms and top-down approaches to mentoring. It encourages a reciprocal, vulnerable, and accountable relationship between students and their femtors.

² For further information about CRT please see Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002.

³ For further information on critical counterspaces please see Morales, 2017.

REFERENCES

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7-24.

Morales, S. (2017). Re-defining counterspaces: New directions and implications for research and praxis. *CCRS Research Brief*, no. 8. Los Angeles, CA: Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA.

Pérez Huber, L. (2016). Make America great again: Donald Trump, racist nativism and the virulent adherence to white supremacy amid US demographic change. *Charleston Law Review*, 10, 215-248.

Pérez Huber, L., Villanueva, B. P., Guarneros, N., Vélez, V. N., & Solórzano, D. G. (2014). DACAmended in California: The impact of the deferred action for childhood arrivals program on Latina/os. *CSRC Research Report*. no. 18. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Solórzano, D. G. (1998). Critical race theory, race and gender microaggressions, and the experience of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 121-136.

Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23-44.

YADIRA VALENCIA is a doctoral student in the Social Science and Comparative Education division, at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. Her research focuses on the educational lived experiences of documented Latinas from mixed-status families, in and out of higher education. **GERMAN AGUILAR-TINAJERO** a graduating UCLA student majoring in American Literature and Culture and Chicana/o Studies with a minor in Education Studies. **EVA AMARILLAS** is an undocumented student from Sinaloa, Mexico raised and has conducted various research projects on immigration, the queer Latinx experience, masculinity and self-love, and prison abolition. **JOEL CALIXTO** is an undocumented transfer student from San Bernardino Valley college majoring in Chicana/o Studies and History at UCLA. His research interests include engaging with Nahuatl political history and autonomy. **KATY MALDONADO** is a double major in Chicana/o Studies and Geography and her research interests include highlighting the academic realities of Central Americans. **JULIO REYES** is an undocumented UCLA graduating Psychology student who transferred from El Camino College Compton Center. In the future he hopes to become a community college counselor to increase transfer rates among historically underrepresented and marginalized students.

Center for Critical Race Studies in Education at UCLA

1032B Moore Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095
ccrse@gseis.ucla.edu



MISSION STATEMENT

The Center for Critical Race Studies in Education supports interdisciplinary, collaborative, and policy-oriented research on issues critical to Communities of Color.

Center for Critical Race Studies in Education Briefs. An ongoing series offering research on critical issues facing Communities of Color. Editors: Daniel G. Solórzano & Tanya J. Gaxiola Serrano. Co-Editors: Magali Campos, Gabriela Corona, Cindy Escobedo, Lorena Camargo Gonzalez, 'Inoke Hafoka, Tonia Guida, Brenda Lopez, Audrey D. Paredes, Mary Senyonga, and Yadira Valencia.

This Brief Series was made possible in part through funding from the offices of the Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies (GSE&IS). For more information please visit us at www.ccrse.ucla.gseis.edu