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MARGINALIZED WITHIN THE BORDERLANDS: THE UNDOCUMENTED CITIZEN STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS-PAN AMERICAN

A Thesis

by

CHRISTIAN V. RAMIREZ

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

May 2012

Major Subject: Sociology

MARGINALIZED WITHIN THE BORDERLANDS: THE UNDOCUMENTED CITIZEN STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS-PAN AMERICAN

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May 2012

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ABSTRACT

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The Rio Grande Valley, geographically located on the southernmost tip of Texas and north of the Mexican State of Tamaulipas, is far removed from the social and cultural centers of both the United States and Mexico. Within this geographically and socially marginalized space lives a group of citizen students who lack legal documentation to reside in the U.S. This ethnographic study will seek to convey the perceptions of undocumented citizen students, their families, and the background assumptions through which they understand their current and future state of social place. The University of Texas-Pan American is home to over 19, 000 students of which 89% are Latina/o's. As means of exploring the experiences of this sub-cultural population, this thesis will include and analyze their narratives, which will help gain insight into their sense of social place where institutions shaped their citizenship and form their legal and sociocultural exclusion.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the DREAMers of the Rio Grande Valley.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to several people for the help and guidance they provided throughout this research project. Their assistance, both direct and indirect, facilitated and shaped my train of though and overall writing. I would like to acknowledge the debt I owe to Dr. Jesus Garcia for his time, patience, and direction. I am truly appreciative for your interest my development as a graduate student. I could not have competed this task without a mentor that, without a doubt, cares for the progression of his pupils. Many thanks to the Garcia family who embraced me as their own and at times provided a home cooked meal. I am thankful to you.

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I want to express my gratitude to my friends, family and colleagues, whose support kept me going through my final year as a graduate student. Your kind words, encouragement, and positivity gave me new found energy when I most needed it. To the members of the Minority Affairs Council, you are an inspiration to me and others. Your efforts and diligence towards the equal treatment of all people regardless of race, class, gender, or citizenship is what gives me great pride to call you all my friends.

To the undocumented citizen students of whom I have created lasting relationships, this work is your work. I am proud of each one of you for your daily contributions to our community. Your story is the new American story and it will end in success. You motivate me day after day as I see your commitment towards social justice. We are in this together and will see that our integrity is valued.

Not least, I should thank my parents and younger sibling for their continuous support. You are the examples I seek to emulate every day. I am very fortunate to have an extremely loving mother and father who have sacrificed many things to give my brother and me the opportunity to progress academically. Your hard work and dedication has paid off and will continue for generations to come. To you, I owe everything.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The borderlands of the Lower Rio Grande Valley is among the most impacted regions to experience the effects of immigration laws established in Washington D.C. Current policies affect life trajectories and produce an individual's sense of social place. The highly charged debate over immigration often raises the issue of undocumented citizens. Fundamentally, the question of their access to citizen-based entitlements has become highly politicized through policy formation and sociocultural definitions that contribute to the marginalization of this immigrant subgroup. Undocumented citizen students have become the focus of recent political debates in many states as the nation continues to see a demographic increase in Latina/o communities.

Students involved in this research are comprised of UTPA undergraduate and graduate students defined as undocumented citizen students. To further explain the term undocumented citizen student this study will review the social construct of citizenship and examine how researchers in the field of sociology and education define the selected group of students. Sociologist Evelyn Glenn (2011) conceptualizes the construction of citizenship and describes it as a fundamental matter of belonging that includes the recognition by other members of the community. She continues by describing citizenship as not simply a fixed legal status, but a fluid status that is produced through every day practices and struggles. Citizenship, therefore, includes the daily interactions undocumented citizen students have with their professors, peers, academic

advisors, and other individuals within the university. Amidst their social and cultural citizenship, citizen based entitlements restricted from this population includes federal financial assistance such as the federal Pell grant, student loans, and work study opportunities.

The intent in categorizing research participants as citizens is an attempt to establish their social and cultural citizenship within the community of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. In addition, humanizing them through social and cultural citizenship despite their lack of legal documentation emphasizes how their identity and values reflect mainstream U.S. orientations. Depriving them of their full capacity to contribute to society and as important members of the U.S. pushes undocumented citizen students to the margins of society. The inclusion of the term citizen, within this context, is essential in order to provide a space of empowerment for this group of marginalized students for self-advocacy.

Participant students reside in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and attend the University of Texas-Pan American. These students construct their identities against the background of living within a society in which they are intricately a part of yet excluded socially and culturally. Undocumented citizen students in practice are recognized as members of their ethnic communities, acknowledged by educational institutions as undocumented Texas residents, but formally denied rights to federal financial aid, access to the formal economy, and ascribed as “illegal” and deserving of their exclusions. The term undocumented immigrant alone is problematic for these students due to their involuntary migration as all were brought to the U.S. at an early age by their parents. Viewed as informal citizens, both socially and culturally within their local and university and communities, undocumented citizen students are integrated in some respects and excluded in others. Through their voices this research explores their sense of

identity and place that social and cultural marginalization on the borderlands of the nation and society produce.

Engaged in similar efforts William Perez, Richard D. Cortes, Karina Ramos, and Heidi Coronado (2010) examine the socioemotional and academic experiences of undocumented Latina/o college students. Perez et al. found that undocumented students construct their identities as undocumented Latina/o college students and focused the research on how interactions with others and communities trigger anger, anxiety, aggressions, assortment, joy optimism, fear and other emotions. These feelings of shame, despair, marginalization, and uncertainty often derive from experiencing anti-immigrant sentiment, fear of deportation, and systemic barriers that exclude undocumented Latina/o students. Thus, this example highlights that the situation for immigrants in this marginal category experience a social "sense" of exclusion based on their ascribed immigrant-based identity.

The term undocumented Latina/o college students distinguish their ethnic identity as well as their legal status. Defined as Latina/o college students serves to differentiate between other groups of immigrants but does not fully capture their citizen status within their communities. Their categorization as undocumented Latina and Latino students by Perez et al. captures a social image constructed from the narratives of Latina/o students that describes their social place within the United States but lacks their incorporation into a more compassionate and inclusive context.

Researcher Laura Enriquez (2011) makes important progress towards conceptually extending the terms used by Glenn and Perez and uses the term undocumented immigrant Latina/o college students. Seeking to uncover the ways in which social capital is used to successfully navigate K-12 and pursue higher education; Enriquez asserts that social capital is

dictated by a collectivist framework of empowerment. Educational success for undocumented immigrant Latina/o college students is related to their ability to develop and utilize social capital in order to secure the resources needed to navigate the educational pipeline (Enriquez, 2011). In her study, immigrant parents and communities have been found to transmit stronger educational values through familialism. The collective social capital of the ethnic community encourages their children to value and take advantage of educational opportunities found in the United States (Enriquez, 2011).

Similar to the students interviewed by Enriquez, undocumented citizen students at UTPA stated having received emotional and financial support from multiple family members, peers, and teachers. Conceptualizing an identity that encompasses immigrant status and ethnic composition, the term undocumented immigrant Latina/o college student incorporates a better description of this group than that offered by Perez et al. However, integrating the term citizen to the existing terminology can further contribute to current literature on undocumented students because it provides a recognized place and a ground for inclusion as they have acquired values of mainstream society needed to be included. The term "citizen" recognizes both their marginalization and inclusion both in and out of the university campus, culture, society, and in this case geography and citizenship.

Uncovering daily realities, practices, and counter narratives of undocumented youth, Ricardo Castro-Salazar and Carl Bagley use the narratives of undocumented Mexican students in Arizona to examine the context in which these students survive and achieve educational advancement. Similarly, most of the undocumented citizen students enrolled at UTPA are of Mexican descent and reflect parallel experiences of educational achievement as their Arizona counter parts. Categorizing students as undocumented "Mexican" students narrows the

description to a specific nationality. Exploring the counter narratives and life-histories of undocumented college graduates of Mexican origin is used to acknowledge the academic achievements of Mexican-Americans. In this study, undocumented Mexican students are understood to possess what Tara Yosso (2005) terms as community cultural wealth and materializes into cultural capital as the support students receive from networks of significant others (Castro-Salazar, Bagley, 2010).

This community cultural wealth represents an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized as dynamic forms of capital (Yosso, 2005). They act as a much needed support network not often described in the literature but explored here. Often unrecognized, this type of informal support and capital cultivation towards mainstream culturally valued goals turns past inequalities into strengths that can be utilized by minority students to succeed within hegemonic social institutions (Yosso, 2005).

From a critical and empowering stance, using undocumented Mexican students' narratives as methodology also intends to provide a means through which to legitimize, empower, and promote marginalized voices. This methodology explores the aspirations, institutional navigation, social networks and other dimensions of related experiences of undocumented students in Arizona (Castro-Salazar, Bagley, 2010). However, what differentiates the students in the Arizona study from students at UTPA is that both undergraduate and graduate students were used in this study and all but one of the participants identified as Mexican. Nevertheless it is precisely the community wealth described by Yosso, also found in my study, which drives the incorporation of the term "citizen" as defined by the dynamics of socialization and cultural orientations towards mainstream society and its goals that promote citizenship, inclusion, and benefits.

By way of conceptual extension, utilizing the term undocumented citizen student seeks to further humanize and provide a means of inclusive empowerment to students lacking legal documentation that contests the ascribed, and often pejorative labels that marginalize and exclude. As social and cultural members of the university and surrounding community who share the same educational ambitions as their native-born and documented peers, undocumented citizen students in this study consistently construct their identities as "American." The term "undocumented citizen students" is an attempt to humanize, center their voices and experiences, and resist an environment in which they are continuously pushed to the margins.

The borderlands existence for the undocumented citizen students of UTPA occurs within the four counties composing the Lower Rio Grande Valley; Star, Hidalgo, Willacy and Cameron County. This ethnographic study seeks to explore the perceptions and background assumptions with which undocumented citizen students and their families understand their current and future state of social place within the United States. Living within a physical and cultural space that is not fully Mexican or American yet both at the same time, these accomplished students and their families are marginalized by immigration policies, labor barriers, and social cultural ascriptions. Criminalized by Federal law, students lacking legal documentation are often times forced to work in marginalized service sectors and other informal economic options. Despite their marginalization, these undocumented citizen students see themselves as acculturated "Americans" and seek the same socially valued goals of their native-born peers. Isabel gives an example of culturally valued goals when she states:

> "I decided to go to college to prove to myself that I can do better in life. I aspire to establish a non-profit organization or work for the Organization of American States. I

have so many things that I want to do and I know that my education can help me attain these goals."

Through an ethnographic approach, this research will illustrate how counter narratives can provide direct insight into the particular social experiences from the subjects' point of view. Using this framework, anthropologist D. Soyini Madison (2005) examines ethnography as a commitment to fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and empirical methodologies that become the foundation of investigation. Undocumented citizen students are often times categorized under umbrella aggregates that include all undocumented persons as one group. However, documenting and analyzing their counter narratives can help unveil the social ascriptions and self-distinctions that shape their sense of social place. All students interviewed were brought to the United States before the age of fourteen without knowledge of their immigration process. The context of their involuntary migration makes their experience different from that of undocumented adults who make a conscious decision to leave their country of origin. U.S. Immigration laws restrict and segregate undocumented citizen students in the Lower Rio Grande Valley into a situation where their acculturated ambitions are prevented by institutional constraints. However, through an experienced based perspective, this study provides a perspective that challenges dominant ascriptions of undocumented citizen students as criminals undeserving of social inclusion and full citizenship.

Elisa Facio (1993) illustrates how ethnography can be used to rediscover lost, and often silenced, voices. Fieldwork uses the technique of observation, making field notes, analyzing the data, and finally writing a report on the observations (Facio, 1993). In her analysis, she uses ethnographic methodologies to explore the lives of older Latinas, the conditions they live in, and how they felt about aging. In my attempt to conceptualize the experiences of undocumented

citizen students, ethnography has allows for counter narratives to be used in order to address the social inequalities in U.S immigration policies, labor restrictions, and social ascriptions of a particular group of Latina/o students. Facio (1993) elaborates on traditional qualitative research methods stating that these techniques are dispassionate and detached from those persons providing critical insight. Studying groups in a disconnected manner marginalizes individuals who are allowing the researcher to explore and explain their social conditions. Using ethnography as an engaged practice, Sofia Villenas and Douglas Foley (2011) define ethnography as a well theorized account of a subgroup that exposes oppressive relations of power. Ethnography has to begin breaking the conventional scientific ethnographic practice of being a detached neutral observer (Villenas and Foley, 2011). It is this methodological approach that enables this study to explore the lived experiences of undocumented citizen students residing in the South Texas borderlands. It is vital to use ethnography in a way that connects to the individuals being interviewed to give an authentic voice to this group of Latina/o youth.

Borrowing from historian Juan Mora-Torres's definition of borderlands, the Lower Rio Grande Valley will be examined as a location in which broad and living processes of modern state-building, emergent global capitalism, and growing immigration-linkage to the United States with the potential to transform localities, identities, and shape class struggles (Mora-Torres, 2001). This transformation of physical space creates a distinctive experience for undocumented citizen students that are common along the borderlands. In the eyes of sociologist Chad Richardson (1999) thousands of Mexicans who cross illegally often remain in the border zone because legal requisites are harder to get past the second checkpoint seventy miles to the north of the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Falfurrias, Texas. For many, the United States starts about 60 miles from the border. Perceived as an unacknowledged highly surveillanced area that is

demarcated by immigration check points or document revision facilities. This materializes their marginality into a conscious recognition of marginalization. One student gives an example of what it is like to be marginalized by the secondary border to the north by stating:

"You know, I'm a dreamer. I used to believe that being undocumented can't stop you from your dreams. In reality it does. When I was 16 I was in cross country. I qualified for state my junior year but couldn't travel to Austin to compete. We had to take a van with only my coach and I so it was then that I realized my status could prevent me from certain things."

Thus illustrating the reality through which this group of individuals are prevented by law from being mobile and taking full advantage of earned opportunities. Simultaneously, within the border zone legalities limit access to labor markets which relegates them to service-sector low paying jobs and therefore, lower-classed social economic status. Using Mora-Torres's and Richardson's contextual reference to describe the marginalized regional space of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, helps to add description and context to how structural forces in the form of legal and immigration restrictions, create the restricted social space of undocumented citizen students.

CHAPTER II

MARGINALIZATION

Yolanda Estes (2000) describes marginalization as a mode of creating and maintaining social identities and individual self-definitions affecting individuals. Sociologist Tara J. Yosso (2010) takes a critical race theoretical approach in the analysis of campus culture centers and examines students of color who experience marginalization at historically White institutions. In her study, Yosso argues that traditional discourse about diversity in higher education helps maintain negative racial climates across institutions of higher education within the U.S. Students of Color are often confronted with subtle and sometimes stunning microaggressions that aim to remind them of their marginality and "their place" within the university (Yosso, 2010). Similar to these students, undocumented citizen students living in the margins construct their identities out of the culturally driven goals provided by U.S. educational environments and yet confront institutional barriers that remind them of their limited access to rewards of educational achievements. They are reminded of "their place", directly or indirectly, by their legal status in addition to their ethnic background. Growing up within the United States and socialized to believe that education is the path to success and inclusion; these students are pushed to assimilate mainstream valued culture throughout their schooling only to find out they are not welcome to the full benefits of citizenship.

Researchers Daniel Solorzano and Octavio Villalpando (1998) also utilize Critical Race Theory to understand the construct of marginality and to better comprehend the experiences and

conditions of Latina/o students in higher education. They describe marginalization as a complex and contentious location and process whereby ethnic minorities are subordinated because of their race (Solorzano and Villapando, 1998). Constructing a dominant social identity against the background of exclusion, undocumented citizen students construct their identity according to the cultural standards associated with U.S. citizenship. In contrast, socially popular portrayals of undocumented immigrants shape their definition and sense of social place as undeserving of citizenship based entitlements. Undocumented citizen students construct their identity in contrast to pejorative labels and images such as “illegal” or “anchor babies” as they have positioned themselves within an institution of higher education, aspire for professional positions, and continue attending school despite a lack of favorable odds.

Solorzano and Villapando (1998) contend that many Latina/o students who were interviewed in their study shared how these students felt marginalized because of the stigmas associated with their ethnicity. These designations establish boundaries for exclusion and undeserved inclusion which establishes the in-group out-group boundary. In the process of rejecting harmful labels they develop an awareness of social place which includes the insecurity of potential deportation and physical removal from the only space known as “home” to them. Their lived experiences, acculturated goals, and the rejection of pessimistic labels form their identities and self-definitions of socio-cultural marginalization. Abrego and Gonzalez (2010) emphasize this notion when stating that after having been educated in U.S. schools, undocumented citizen students speak English, envision their futures within the U.S., and powerfully internalize “American” values and expectations of merit.

Educational marginalization of young Latina/o students has endured within the U.S. as this group of students has, and continues to experience, institutional inequality. Richard Valencia

(2011) gives example of how school failure has been shaped by educational inequality for Latina/o students, and how such inequality is indeed a form of oppression. There are three fundamental conditions in which Latina/o students experience exclusion in their educational process. Valencia (2011) notes that personal attitudes or cultural values ascribed to Latina/o students marks them as deficit thinkers. Alongside this type of approach, institutional processes such as segregation and curriculum differentiation also contribute to the low academic achievement and high push out rates of Latina/o students (Valencia, 2011). Undocumented citizen students in the Lower Rio Grande Valley find themselves facing similar circumstances of segregation. There is a separation between who can travel freely north of Falfurrias, who can obtain a job in the formal economy, and finally who belongs. This form of marginalization is at the center of the inequality that currently persists regarding undocumented citizen students.

Part of the institutional context is the contradictory rules between federal and State policies concerning undocumented students. In 1996 congressed passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act [IIRIRA] which is relative to this highly contentious issue. Section 505 of the IIRIRA states that: "An alien who is not lawfully present in the United States shall not be eligible on the basis of residence within a state for post-secondary education benefit unless a citizen or national of the United States is eligible for such a benefit without regard to whether the citizen or national is such a resident." As a means of illustrating the convoluted nature of the institutional rules that govern their experiences, States may allow undocumented citizen students in-state tuition and financial resources. The act continues by stating: A State may provide an alien who is not lawfully present in the United States eligible for any State or local public benefit for which such alien would otherwise be ineligible (Frum, 2007). The contradiction of federal and state laws in regards to the educational benefits of

undocumented citizen students is unequivocally convoluted. Stella Flores (2009) summarizes the convoluted nature of federal and state laws stating that U.S. policy towards undocumented citizen students could be characterized as bipolar; it has aspects that simultaneously help and hinder their life chances.

Texas was the first state to enact supportive legislation for undocumented citizen students. In June 2001, Texas passed House Bill (H.B.) 1403 that allowed undocumented citizen students to pay in-state tuition for a postsecondary education. Under specific requirements of H.B. 1403, students must have resided in Texas for three or more years, graduated from a local high school or obtained a GED in Texas, and signed an affidavit stating their intent to apply for legal status at the earliest opportunity they are eligible to do so. This law was revisited and renamed Senate Bill (S.B.) 1528 by the 2005 Legislature. (Jauregui, Slate, and Brown, 2008). The state benefits accessible to Texas residents illustrates the bipolar nature of immigration policy continues to exist between federal and state jurisdictions as well as across state levels (Flores, 2009). For many undocumented citizen students of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, these bills granting the right to in-state tuition makes UTPA a possible gateway to higher education and professional opportunities. UTPA offers one of the lowest tuition rates in the state, making it one of the most affordable and possibly "safest" spaces for undocumented citizen students ("Cnn money:10," 2011).

One interesting tension in the policy is that the incentives for undocumented citizen students to enroll in higher education has often been characterized as an irrational investment given current limitations to apply those benefits towards an earned college degree to the formal U.S. labor market as a result of unresolved citizenship status (Flores, 2010). According to the U.S citizenship and immigration services, students must provide a passport, permanent residence

card, a driver's license or ID card issued by a state agency, or a social security number as part of their application in order to obtain an employment authorization card ("U.s. citizenship and." 2011). Obtaining the required documents are difficult for students who have overstayed their visas, as were most of the cases in this study, and further challenges students to make ends meet in the informal economy. The evidence shows that undocumented citizen students, when given the opportunity, are likely to take advantage of policies that work to improve their human capital potential (Flores, 2009). It is critical to explore their exclusion from the formal labor market as it is a central component to their experiences and the context of their understanding of social place.

Beyond the adversity and structural constraints, undocumented citizen students optimistically use UTPA as a stepping stone to attain the aforementioned goals. Nevertheless, introduction to possible strategies for enrollment and financial resources are left largely up to the individual efforts of the undocumented citizen student. Their experiences with institutions, such as UTPA, are expressed in their counter narratives. Estes (2000) emphasizes the importance of marginal group perspectives by stating that in order to increase theoretical comprehension of marginalized individuals, it is essential to relate first person descriptions. This is why it is critical to gain insight into this group of marginalized students and their quest for mainstream "American" cultural goals of attaining professional positions, social inclusion, security, and stability for a promising future. Counter narratives explore their experiences with institutional agents such as college counselors, teachers, and mentors.

Changing Demographics

As a means of providing context to their circumstances and educational attainment, comparisons between immigrant and native-born students are highlighted in this section. Senior

researcher for the Pew Hispanic Center Richard Fry (2010) stated, among Latina/os, there are significant differences between the foreign born and the native born in high school diploma attainment rates and GED credentialing rates. Some 21% of the native born Latina/os have a GED, compared with just 5% of the foreign born. Furthermore, Fry (2003) claims that undocumented Mexican Americans possessed the highest volume of the attrition rate. This is important to note as Fry's description reflects the ethnic composition of the undocumented citizen students at UTPA.

What is also critical to the college enrollment process for undocumented citizen students is their age at which they came into the U.S. According to the Pew Hispanic research center, 49% of high school graduates ages 18-24 who are undocumented immigrants are in college or have attended college. Among those who arrived before age 14, 61% are in college or have attended college. Those students who were brought at an early age, much like the undocumented citizen students at UTPA, have shown to enroll at a significantly higher rate. All participants in this study arrived to the U.S. before the age of 14 and reflect the statistical description provided. Despite institutional obstacles presented as daily realities and reminders, undocumented citizen students enroll in a college or have attended an institution of higher education. Their attempts to enroll and pursue promising careers are social and cultural characteristics valued by mainstream society. In spite of efforts to enroll at a college or university, foreign-born members of the United States remain less likely to enroll in a four-year university or acquire a bachelor degree to the same measure of the native born population. The Pew Hispanic research center reports that although college continuation rates are higher for undocumented citizens who arrive as young children, it continues to be at a considerably lower rate when compared to native born and documented citizens. For U.S. born residents 71% attend college while 76% of documented

citizens are enrolled in a college or university. Despite the relatively low number of undocumented youth enrolled in a college or university, this group of accomplished students have managed to navigate through the educational pipeline by obtaining the resources necessary to enroll at a four year university in spite of their legal status. Against the multiple barriers imposed on them, undocumented citizen students become model students and often times out thrive their documented Latina/o counterparts (Perez, 2009). Because of their shared social and cultural aspirations towards higher education undocumented citizen students deserve inclusive and equal access to federally restricted opportunities that marginalize some students and not others.

Relative to the national sample and the local context, the United States Census Bureau supports that Texas now has a Latina/o population of 37% with 15% being foreign born. UTPA is located in Hidalgo County where persons of Latina/o origin equal 90%. Hidalgo County has a relatively low percentage of persons ages 25 and up with a bachelor's degree. Only 15% have attained at least a bachelor's degree compared to the rest of the state of Texas of 25%. Those living below the poverty level as of 2009 were at an overwhelming 35% compared to 17% for the rest of Texas. The per capita income for those residing within Hidalgo County from 2005-2009 was $13,130 ("U.s. census bureau," 2012). The majority of students, therefore, come from one of the poorest areas in the nation. Students in the Lower Rio Grande Valley heavily rely upon State and Federal grants to pay for their cost of attendance at UTPA. That cost ranges from $14,000 to $18,000 per year, according to the office of student financial services, well exceeding the per capita income of the county ("The university of," 2011). Living in a region marked by these characteristics, it has become increasingly important to include the experiences of those who are some of the most marginalized along the borderlands, undocumented citizen students.

Dreamers of UTPA

Fry (2003) states that the bulk of the additional college students will be minorities, including a sizable and growing number of Latina/o students. The growing number of Latinos in the United States over the last two decades has resulted in great concern to the preservation of a uniquely "American" identity based on whiteness (Saenz, Filoteo, Murga, 2007). These population trends have helped fuel antagonistic feelings towards Latinos and often times criminalizes this group by means of popular portrayals in mainstream media as "illegals" despite their integration into American culture. Harvard professor Samuel Huntington claimed that Latinos, Mexicans in particular, are not integrating into the mainstream culture or learning the English language (2004). He proclaimed that this was threatening the core values of "American" identity. For both documented and undocumented citizen students these ascribed values and characteristics shape their identities and self-definitions of social cultural marginalization. All students interviewed attended school in the United States, are proficient in English, and describe themselves as American citizens. Demonized by nativist scholars, such as Huntington and media outlets, undocumented citizen students are socially and culturally marginalized in ways that shape their sense of social place. The interviewed students recognize how they are perceived and reject such negative claims. Americans fearing the threat of losing their culture to this talented group of undocumented citizen students fail to realize the immense contributions they can make in our society and how their acculturated identities are linked to the United States.

As noted here, the changing demographics and current immigration policies have created a marginalized space in which undocumented citizen students live their everyday lives not knowing if their accomplished educational goals will lead to the promised future associated with higher education. Through ethnographic investigation we can gain insight into their sense of

belonging and marginalization by hegemonic practices. Despite their vulnerability of being deported and enrollment statistics, this group of talented youth has surpassed what has been ascribed to them as undocumented immigrant students. Their goals of attaining a college degree, professional position, and security fuel their relentless efforts to continue the path of higher education. In addition, family expectations and a sense of obligation to their families are mentioned through their counter narratives as key determinants of their continued efforts at the university. Undocumented citizen students often credit their parents and family members as instrumental in emphasizing the importance of education. Students seek to use their university degrees, aside from social and cultural reasons, to economically assist their parents and become upwardly mobile. The despair associated with not knowing if their educational accomplishments will fulfill the goal of supporting their parents is one of the lived experiences of marginalization for this group of students.

Counter narratives of undocumented citizen students and their families reflect aspirations of reaching beyond the confines of the limited educational opportunities in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Despite economic and institutionalized barriers, undocumented citizen students seek opportunities in Law and Medical schools but are unable to access the loans that are provided to documented citizens. Academically qualified to hold positions in out-of-state internships and merit based leadership programs, undocumented citizen students are rejected on the basis of their legal status as their counter stories will illustrate. The students involved in this study have shown to be highly involved in community service, civic engagement, earn scholarships, and are awarded prestigious positions in national student organizations. Earning merit based awards and being involved in community efforts speaks to their exceptional efforts to better themselves and their communities in which they live. The so-called “American” values

to contribute ones talents for the betterment of one's' self, community, and nation are clearly demonstrated by one of the nation's most marginalized group of students.

Undocumented citizen students have become the focus of current political debates in many states as the nation continues to see a demographic increase in Latino communities. The narratives of this little-explored population describe and livingly contextualize the experiences of rejection and exclusion, but also tell us of their ingenuity and highly intelligent strategies to maneuver through the institutional barriers they are confronted with and thus reflecting their aspirational capital. Their stories counter the rhetoric of the dominant narrative of unassimilated and unwillingness to contribute to the only society they know. Lastly, despite the negative stereotypes and ascribed labels that criminalize their social place, undocumented citizen students have shown to be civically engaged in their communities and seek the opportunity to be included as full participants in the formal economy.

Data and Statistics

In 2010 the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness at UTPA estimated that some 600 undocumented students were enrolled at UTPA ("Utpa stats at," 2010). Using snowball sampling for this exploratory study, interviews were loosely structured by four questions and used as a primary source of information; how did you get here?, why did you aspire towards higher education considering the real and tangible restriction to your earned credentials?, how do you perceive your situation in light of your undocumented status?, and what are you expectations on your returns from your educational investment? In addition, some parental interviews were conducted to further explore students' immigration process.

Primary data was collected from thirty-two undocumented citizen students at the University of Texas-Pan American. Of the total student interviews, twenty were female. All but two of the female students were undergraduates as two were in graduate school in the fall semester of 2011. Males made up a smaller sample of twelve students total. In this group, two were in graduate school and ten were undergraduates. Because of the sensitivity of this issue initial efforts for participation showed to be difficult. Through personal acquaintances and snow-ball sampling a significant amount of students were able to be reached for participation. All but one of the students was a Mexican. The sole participant of non-Mexican descent emigrated from Honduras. Similar questions were asked to eight parents of undocumented citizen students. Five of the parents were married and lacked legal documentation. The three parents who were the single head of house hold also lacked legal documentation and had overstayed their temporary visas.

Secondary data was used to review and analyze immigration laws, state policies, and university rules for admission and financial resources to higher education. In addition, census information was also used to obtain demographic information of this population. In the year 2000, the Urban Institute estimated that between 50,000 and 65,000 undocumented immigrants graduate from U.S. high schools every year (Frum, 2007). There are approximately 1.1 million undocumented school-age children in the United States translate into 2% of the total student population. Many undocumented citizen students living in the Rio Grande Valley contribute to this growing number of students excluded from federal programs. Often times students were not exposed to the possibility or their state right to attend a college or university. Secondary data will help uncover the role immigration laws, state policies, and social expectations play in shaping their sense of belonging.

Loosely structured questions give context to their immigration process, the source of their ambition, their goals, and expectations for the future. Guided by their narratives this study will gain insight into their perceived obstacles with immigration laws, labor policies, and social and cultural ascriptions. Parental interviews supplement the student narratives giving further detail to their social place within the United States. The group of undocumented citizen students in this study clearly provides a counter narrative to a perceived group of threatening individuals to "American" culture and counters anti-immigrant discourse such as that described by Huntington and others.

CHAPTER III

RATIONALE FOR STUDY AND METHODS

Yolanda Estes (2000) provides reason and rational in that utilizing the embedded narratives of subjects themselves provides a platform to the individuals whose voices have been misinterpreted, usurped, or stifled by dominant voices. Mainstream perspectives, politicized by the immigration debate, often focus and validate the exclusion of undocumented citizens. The anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States frequently describes undocumented persons with pejorative labels and scornful attitudes. Embedded voices represent an empirical perspective that reveals the personal and social implications of the process of marginalization. Approaching the subject from an external perspective fails to incorporate individual experiences and overemphasizes the pain, victimization, and powerlessness of marginal populations (Estes, 2000). In addition, it is important to analyze their comprehension of their own situation and assume their rightful place within the social and cultural mainstream.

Providing space for empowering marginalized groups is grounded methodology linked to real life experiences (Madison, 2005). This methodology supports the idea of intervening on hegemonic practices by exposing the effects of marginalization. Voices that are in opposition to dominant discourse and practices, including the media and anti-immigrant sentiments, give credit to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice. By providing individual humanizing descriptions of the experience of social alienation and ethical criticism of marginalization, we can begin to address the processes of unfairness within the lived experiences of undocumented

citizen students. Allowing this group of students to describe their experiences, according to Madison, empowers them by permitting silenced voices to be heard as they often remain on the margins of dominant discourse.

It is vital to incorporate and provide narratives from the parents' perspective of the given population. Parents provide invaluable information on the immigration process that has shaped the social place and expectations for the future of their children. Moreover, as stated earlier, one of the dominant characteristics of the students counter stories is the motivation to pursue higher education as they seek the opportunity to assisting their parents' economic upward mobility. Counter narratives of undocumented citizen students and their parents will also contribute to the limited research surrounding the topic of immigration law and undocumented youth. Their knowledge of living within a marginalized space, culturally and socially, can give insight and empower them through the recognition of their not so uncommon situation. Recognition of their social place defines who they are but does not limit their efforts to belong.

By studying undocumented citizen students living on the margins of society we can gain a clearer sense of how they can become part of the center both socially and culturally. Exploring this population is the nexus of understanding the inclusion of some students and exclusion of others; in this case differentiated by citizenship that allows only some the access to much needed resources for inclusion and security in society. A possible means towards understanding this critical issue of inclusion can be understood through what Emile Durkheim identifies as collective consciousness. Durkheim (1984) describes that collective consciousness is needed to assure overall coordination and integration in the society as a whole. In today's society, inclusion of this talented population can benefit the entire community and further strengthen the economy with professional individuals committed to utilizing the skills they developed in college.

Durkheim (1984) continues by stating that the sharing of common values is a constant feature of all systems at any level of differentiations. Student narratives suggest that undocumented citizen students at UTPA internalize cultural values and expectations of post secondary education and aspire to obtain professional positions. These common values between native born, documented, and undocumented citizen students are collectively shared and represent a common community of self driven students.

Counter narratives link our understanding of marginalized realities. They also serve as counter discourse to the ascribed status given by dominant voices of the majoritarian culture. Pizarro (2005) examines the lived experiences of Chicana/os in schools and contends that the complex role of immigration status must be analyzed in the context of their unique epistemologies. For Latino students this unfixed boundary is experienced in both their everyday lives outside of the university setting and during their educational experiences. Citizenship for students at UTPA is then produced by their daily interactions with their peers, educational advisors, and other members of the university community as Glen (2011) supported. When the dominant epistemological framework is applied to the study of a group that functions under a different way of thinking, researchers force themselves to employ tools that cannot begin to comprehend the issues and processes involved in what is being studied (Pizarro, 2005), in this case Latina/o students along the South Texas border. Viewed as citizen in some respects but not in others, Latina/o students struggle to attain culturally valued goals that are available at institutions of higher learning. Pizarro (2005) emphasizes that the gap between Chicana/o and white students, in terms of access to resources and school outcomes, has remained the same and in many ways have widened, therefore pushing Latina/o students further away from the center and into the margins. Understanding the margins and lived experiences of this group can assist in

creating spaces for empowerment and humanization, and therefore further inclusion of their social place within mainstream culture.

Neglecting their strengths, merits, and narratives further marginalizes undocumented citizen students. For this reason it is important to gain insight into how undocumented students perceive their educational experience and give voice to their positive academic achievements and extracurricular participation and dedication to their university community. Comprehending the phenomenon of marginalization from external perspectives is not sufficient for social change. By utilizing their counter narratives we can begin the process of including a group of marginalized individuals into the social and cultural mainstream. There is not a more effective way to understand the lives and experiences of Latina/o students than to ask them to talk about these things from their point of view (Pizarro, 2005).

Methods

I follow the example of Sociologist Victor Rios (2011) who employs ethnographic methods are used to develop an understanding of Latina/o and Black male youth living in Oakland, California. In order to comprehend their early criminalization by society and negative experiences with the criminal justice system, police officers, and school administrators Rios' immersed himself within their community. By doing this, Rios was able to better understand the experiences of marginalized youth confronted by the institutions that shape their lives, self-identification, and sense of social place. Similar to the experience of potential incarceration, undocumented citizen students face possible deportation in their everyday lives. Borrowing from Rios' methods we can examine the experiences of undocumented citizen students and gain insight into how they perceive their social place within the United States.

Approaching marginal groups through ethnography can provide insight into the lived experiences of undocumented citizen students residing within the borderlands of society, culture, and geography. Emphasizing their assets can empower this group of marginalized students and provide a voice that counters the dominant culture's debilitating deficit driven discourse of undocumented immigrants, their criminalization, and relegated social place. Snowball sampling was used in finding participants that were recognized as undocumented citizen students. Initial contacts were established through personal acquaintances, key participants, and expanded through a process of snow-ball sampling and social scholastic networks. Openly structured interviews were loosely guided by the chronology of their experiences of immigration, perceived status, aspiration towards education considering the real and tangible restrictions to earned credentials, and the expectations on their educational investment. Selected excerpts from subject narratives are utilized to provide general descriptive insight to the particular experiences of this sub-cultural population.

Counter narratives will provide more than a voice, but rather a better understanding of potential social contributions of undocumented citizen students. D. Soyini Madison (2005) describes the critical ethnographer as one who takes us beneath the surface appearances, challenges the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken for granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control. Furthermore, Madison (2005) suggests that ethnography will use the resources, skills, and privileges available to access the voices and experiences of the subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach. This study will, therefore, give undocumented citizen students in the Lower Rio Grande Valley an opportunity to express their social, structural, and cultural conditions. Ethnographic

investigation will illustrate how these students perceive their social space and also the contributions these students have to offer their communities and the nation as a whole.

Providing a similar paradigm, Marcos Pizarro (2005) utilizes ethnographic methodologies to acknowledge the validity and uniqueness of Latina/o epistemologies and worldviews that shape a distinct knowledge system among Latina/o students. Applying this methodology can begin to construct frameworks for understanding and intervening in the social identity formation of Latina/o students based on the complexities of Latina/o life (Pizarro, 2005). By relying on Latina/o students own analysis we can better understand hegemonic educational practices from their perspective and create space for empowerment. It is the daily lives of undocumented citizen students' were knowledge is constructed. Grounded in analyzing their lived experiences of marginalization, ethnography lends itself to legitimizing their voices and further humanizes the experience of undocumented citizen students.

Interviews were scheduled in a number of different locations including local coffee shops, restaurants, study rooms at the university library, and at times at their place of residence. Each location was left to the decision of each student for optimal sense of security. Pseudonyms were utilized for all participants in this study in order to protect their identity and possible harm to their reputation, security, and deportability. In addition to the student interviews, parents of undocumented citizen status also participated in this study. Ten parents were given similar options to meet at safe and local establishments of their choice. All parents in this study were Mexican citizens working on the American side of the border. Their occupations varied from vendors at local flea markets, house cleaners, to personal trainers.

In addition secondary documents related to State and Federal immigration laws, and funding eligibility policies as they relate to undocumented citizen students, are analyzed as a means to contextualize the institutional and regulatory policies that structure and restrict the experiences of the subject population. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act [IIRIRA] section 505 restricts persons who are not lawfully present in the United States from post-secondary education benefit unless a citizen or national of the United States is eligible for such a benefit without regard to whether the citizen or national is such a resident. The IIRIRA confines undocumented citizen students to a sub-standard form of educational benefits. Those undocumented citizen students who aspire to obtain work study positions, which lead to networking within the university and a secure source of income, are barred from accessing this much needed resource. The same law restricts this group of students from utilizing the largest federal educational grant and the option of student loans. Students aspiring towards degrees beyond the bachelor degree feel especially marginalized as exclusionary policies designate additional barriers towards the completion of such credentials.

Guajardo and Guajardo (2004) examine the impact Brown v. Board of Education had on the educational system in South Texas, particularly in the town on Edcouch-Elsa. As former teachers in South Texas, the researchers conducted oral histories of elders and community members and used grounded theory in a theoretically critical framework for data collection (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2004). Comparable to Rios, Madison, and Pizarro ethnographic methodologies are employed to acknowledge and value the epistemologies of Latina/o communities. Using these methodological strategies in traditionally marginalized communities opens firsthand opportunities for both the researcher and community members to engage in the production of knowledge (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2004). This type of research gives privilege to

the knowledge possessed by those being researched and illustrates that undocumented citizen students possess creative, invaluable, and helpful insight into their current and future state of social place and should be valued.

Enrique Trueba (2000) also uses ethnography as his methodological approach in order to understand and describe the leadership at Primavera high school located in the Houston area. This particular school services a mostly Mexican and Mexican American community known to have low levels of student retention, disengaged teachers, and distinct disconnection with the surrounding community. By gathering as much documentation as was made available by the school, Trueba interviewed the principal, teachers, students and parents. In the five months of ethnographic research, testimonies where used to support specific interpretations of social phenomena that helped in the understanding of the unique characteristics of the reform activities taking place at Primavera high school (Trueba, 2000). The insight provided particular insight into how teachers, students, and parents felt was at the core of the educational disparities affecting the educational experience of this Latina/o community. This approach allows the researcher to go beyond the confines of statistical "truths" and can give real life examples of the daily struggles and strategies used by Latina/o students in order to navigate through the educational pipeline. Undocumented citizen students provide life experiences not seen by the majority of Americans. This insight is thus invaluable as it is unique to the "American" educational experience. Like the work of Trueba, this study investigates the lived experiences of a specific population within the Latina/o community along the South Texas borderlands and seeks to expose the effects of marginality.

Providing an emancipating methodological frame, Linda Tuhiwai (2006) affirms that indigenous people in all societies have other stories to tell which not only question the assumed

nature of traditional research practices, but also tell an alternative story through the eyes of the colonized. Counter narratives shared by undocumented citizen students provides, what Tuhiwai describes, a space for further dialogue within a context that privileges the indigenous presence and uses their perspectives to acknowledge their continued existence (Tuhiwai, 2006). Operating ethnographic methodologies grounds a framework that gives marginal voices the opportunity to describe their daily lives directly from their perspective. In doing so, undocumented citizen students gain a powerful form of resistance which are repeated and shared across diverse Latina/o communities (Tuhuwai, 2006). Using these examples and frameworks allows for grounded methodologies to help guide the investigation and exploration of marginalized students. Undocumented citizen students' alternative stories, counter narratives, and lived experiences give a platform to be heard through empirical methodology.

CHAPTER IV

THEORETICAL FRAMWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Utilizing an open theoretical approach the following discussion will borrow concepts from structural-functional and critical theory. This framework will discuss the empirical experiences of undocumented citizen students and their families. It will explore their sense of social place within the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Using an open theoretical framework may shine light on the marginalization of a group of accomplished students by providing empirical paradigms of ignored marginalized groups. Yolanda Estes (2000) states that social exclusion affects the individual's perception of the world. The perception of the external world may be more confused and frightened than warranted, thus resulting in feelings of paranoia or disconnection. This is especially true for undocumented citizen students when faced with the very real possibility of deportation. Also, students lacking legal documentation lose out on well earned rewards such as scholarships, grants, awards, and internships requiring them to travel outside the region because of immigration requirements needed to cross the secondary immigration point 60 miles north of the border and at airports for academic purposes. The counter narratives shared by this marginalized group of students will serve as an empirical basis from which to introduce structurally constructed policies and laws through a critical understanding of their lived experiences with particular emphasis on how they perceive institutionalized obstacles.

Qualitative subject-based research is key when attempting to understanding the experiential awareness of undocumented citizen students' sense of social place. Undocumented citizen students and their families possess invaluable information of being legally and culturally marginalized. Pierre Bourdieu's (1989) structuralist approach provides description and discussion to how institutional structures, education, and culture shape the sense of self and social place of individuals. Borrowing from Bourdieu's description of social place, a construct used by individuals who occupy higher positions in the hierarchies to deny social distance between themselves and others, this research paper extends on this idea by describing the denial of citizen based entitlements to undocumented citizen students and the distance it creates between their social place and that of U.S citizens. Citizenship symbolically represents those groups that belong while denigrating those individuals who lack legal documentation further pushing them to the margins of society. Using Bourdieu's model provides a theoretical framework to describe the social place of undocumented citizen students, their marginalization, and the hegemonic practices institutionalized in exclusionary policies.

Undocumented citizen students are constrained by socially constructed immigration laws structured to exclude their participation in main stream U.S.A. Barred from participating in academic and merit based programs, undocumented citizen students are unable to realize their full potential. Socially popular constructed images and institutional immigration laws symbolically relegate this group to the margins of society on the basis that as "illegal's" they are not entitled to any citizen based entitlements. Using Durkheim's idea of collective consciousness, assuring overall coordination into society as a whole, immigration laws and negative social cultural ascriptions disallows undocumented citizen students' full integration into mainstream U.S. culture. The counter narratives reveal common values held by this group of

students are remarkably “American” in nature as they pursue degrees in higher education and professional positions thereafter.

The changing ethnic demographic of the nation can benefit from the inclusion of all groups of students whose cultural goals are those that are institutionalized by their schooling. Undocumented citizen students at UTPA may serve as the model for other groups of students caught between the confines of criminalization, social and cultural exclusion, and economic instabilities within the United States. Understanding how undocumented citizen students feel about their current and future social position is critically important for all residents of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the rest of the country. Formal education teaches students what is regarded as important for the community and for the individuals’ prosperity in it. (Ballentine, 2001) Undocumented citizen students are institutionalized to seek the culturally valued goals without the regard of their legal status. At the same time, culturally defined as out-siders, these students and their families do not recognize their current social place as inferior or defective position but instead reveal their aspirational capital as they view their opportunity for higher education as a means to better their future socially, culturally, and economically. For these reasons we can safely assume undocumented citizen students place higher education as significantly important as they hope to seek professional positions that will lead to stability.

Allowing undocumented citizen students to narrate their lived experiences of their immigration process, their ambitions towards higher education, and their expectations for the future empowers their ability to be included into the politicized dialogue of immigration. Critical Race Theorist (CRT), Richard Delgado (1988) posits that, the stories of out-groups aim to subvert constructions of their in-group reality. Stories create their own bonds; represent cohesion, shared understanding, and meanings that shape lives and sense of social place and

collectivity. He continues by stating that the cohesiveness that stories bring is part of the strength of the out-group. An out-group creates its own stories, which circulate within the group as a kind of counter-reality. Empirical counter story telling thus allows for marginalized undocumented citizen students to voice a reality within dominant society. Their knowledge and lived experiences critically introduces ideas of "what could be" in place of "what is" and challenges traditional paradigms to transform those oppressive social conditions in which they find themselves (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Undocumented citizen students can be examined from this synthesized frame work as they have shown to be socially and culturally marginalized. Acknowledging their life experiences living in a marginalized space gives undocumented citizen students recognition that their narratives are important, invaluable, and essential to the immigration dialogue to further include their place in the U.S. Their counter narratives give room for further tolerance towards ethnic minorities by acknowledging their experiences as lived realities and in turn serve as a form of empowerment.

Dolores Delgado Bernal (2002) states that Critical Race Theorist acknowledges structures, processes, and discourses that operates in contradictory ways that can oppress and marginalize their potential to emancipate and empower. Because undocumented citizen students live within the margins of American culture, CRT will serve as an important theoretical frame to understanding their social place and the social institutional environments through law. This understanding of their social place will allow us to focus on the potential empowerment through higher education and the cultural rewards upon graduation. Comprehending the structural exclusion and hegemonic processes surrounding undocumented citizen students can help shine light on the process of marginalization and how undocumented citizen students manage to succeed within higher education. Anti-immigrant discourse in the media reference their social

status as “illegal” which acts as a form of oppression. This debilitating label criminalizes and stigmatizes undocumented citizen students without regard to their particular migratory experience or valuable contributions to the U.S. Examining these processes from a CRT lens can lead to what Dolores Bernal claims, the emancipation from oppression and empowerment for marginalized students.

Abrego and Gonzalez (2008) explain that like their documented peers, many undocumented youth have internalized American values and expectations that equate academic success with economic rewards and stability. Ironically, their social incorporation sensitizes them further to the contradiction that despite their academic success, they are barred from the opportunity to integrate legally, educationally, and economically in U.S. society. Undocumented citizen students attending UTPA are no different from the students described in Abrego and Gonzalez’s study. Higher education is highly valued by both the students and their parents despite unfavorable odds to find employment upon graduation. Undocumented citizen students in the Lower Rio Grande Valley persist on attaining the best education available in their region in aspiration of a professional career and a path towards an “American” middle class lifestyle and status.

When examining the literature on this marginalized group of students, we find that the narratives by the undocumented citizen students at UTPA parallel those of other undocumented students across the United States. As acculturated individuals living in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, they seek similar cultural goals as their native born and resident status peers (Abrego and Gonzalez, 2008). Undocumented citizen students view their social place as “Americans” while being bicultural products of their immigration experience and regional location. When navigating through the educational pipeline these students have shown to be tremendously resourceful and

show this by working in low paying sectors of the economy to offset the cost of their education. Some begin their aspiration for a college degree at the community college level as a means to access further development and resources that eventually lead them to a four year institution. Their inclusion to resident based entitlements within the state of Texas and educational access allow processes of acculturation and upward social mobility to take place, however these resident based rights are not equal to the federally restricted citizen based entitlements.

Immigration and education scholar William Perez's (2009) explores the educational experiences of undocumented students in the United States. In his analysis, he discovered that of the 20 undocumented youth he interviewed each student grew up as "Americans", used English as their primary language while retaining their native tongue, identified themselves as American, and were civically engaged in their communities. In addition, most of these students had not returned to their country of origin in over a decade. Undocumented citizen students at UTPA claimed parallel narratives as those examined by Perez. Each student interviewed described and defined their cultural and social place within the context of the United States as they understand it. Equipped as bilingual and bicultural, undocumented citizen students exercise these qualities in their declared majors and will likely utilize these qualities in their professions given the opportunity to do so. Moving back to their country of origin was not a primary option as nearly all aspired towards graduate programs within the United States. Most students interviewed were involved in student government, student leadership roles, fraternities and sororities, and showed to be highly involved both within and outside of the university community. Their experiences living in the Lower Rio Grande Valley show similarities to the population studied by Perez. What is distinctive among the undocumented citizen students along the South Texas borderland

is their regional marginalization living in between two immigration check points and relegated to schools and occupations within the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

The goal of attaining an undergraduate or graduate degree is complex, stressful, but not completely out of reach for this marginalized student population. A study by Diaz-Strong, Gomez, Luna-Duarte, and Meiners (2011) examined how financial aid constrains undocumented students from pursuing higher education. Excluded from obtaining federal funding negatively impacts their educational ambitions and contributes to their experience from a federal context. Their research identified undocumented students paying their education through informal work, family contributions, some scholarships, and strategies such as working more and taking fewer classes. Undocumented citizen students in the Lower Rio Grande Valley have made similar claims when asked about their financial resources and the strategies they use to cope with this obstacle. Although the state of Texas does offer some financial assistance, the cost of attendance exceeds the funds allocated to this population. In order to pay for the additional cost of books, transportation, and tuition, undocumented citizen students work in the informal economy of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Some examples include cutting wood, stocking meat markets, serving for catering companies and food vendors, house cleaning and in one case a birthday clown for children birthday parties. Undocumented citizen students use these, often times minimum wage or below minimum wage occupations, as resources to subsidize their educational costs not covered by state issued financial aid.

Researchers Jauregui, Slate, and Brown (2008) examined the undocumented student population in Texas community colleges. Although UTPA is a four year institution, undocumented students have used South Texas College, a community college in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, as a gateway to a bachelor's degree attainable at UTPA. According to the study,

Texas community colleges have experienced an enrollment increase every subsequent semester since the passing of House Bill 1528, with no undocumented enrollment increase less than 25%. As of the fall 2006 semester, the estimated total number of undocumented students in the state was 5,207 (Jauregui, Slate, Brown, 2008). Using the local community college as a way of accessing higher education has shown to be one of the strategies undocumented citizen students use in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Certainly, some students claimed they have been exposed to financial resources and found emotional support while attending a community college before enrolling at UTPA. Jauregui, Slate, and Brown's study is relevant in examining this marginalized group of students.

Palmer and Davidson's (2011) study on undocumented immigrant students' access to higher education explains that socially inclusive policy will aid in immigrant assimilation into the larger culture through means of social mobility, possibly even reducing poverty through participation in the higher-paid segments of the labor market. The result of not educating a significant portion of the Lower Rio Grande Valley's undocumented population will result in what Palmer and Davidson claim as a "marginalized and uneducated sector and will likely result in an even greater financial burden over time." Undocumented citizen students agree with a more inclusive federal immigration policy that would allow their full participation in the only country they recognize as their own.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS OF COUNTER NARRATIVES

This study seeks to convey the perceptions of undocumented citizen students, their families, and the background assumptions through which they understand their current and future state of social place. Findings suggest that undocumented students seek the opportunity to utilize their college degree as a means to support their household, the desire to fully contribute to their communities, and be recognized as equal members both socially and culturally. This can be seen in every case for the undocumented citizen students interviewed in this study. Navigating through the U.S. educational pipeline has shaped how these undocumented citizen students have come to understand their situation. The following interviews were conducted at various locations throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley and provide further insight into the lived experiences of undocumented citizen students.

The process of immigrating to the United States varied for each of the students interviewed. Almost all students interviewed came into the United States through proper documentation using students or tourist visas. Alex, a senior at UTPA, is a criminal justice major with Spanish as his chosen minor and seeks the opportunity to work for a federal agency. The narrative shared by Alex illustrates his immigration experience into the United States along with his family.

> "We are from Acuña, Coauhila. It is a border town with Del Rio, TX. I was in the 5th grade so I was about 10 years old when I came here. At first I came with my dad and my brother. Six months later my mother and the rest of my family was able to join us. My

> younger sister was born in the United States so she is the only U.S citizen. We had a visa but overstayed our visit, that's how we got here to the Valley. My dad worked in the fields here in the Valley for 5 months and then he would come home to Acuña for about a month, and then go back to the Valley. This was his routine. We would go visit him during our vacation and spend time with him until one day an uncle of ours asked my parents if they would like to enroll us in the schools here. They said yes and that is how I ended up staying here."

Alex's father, being employed for several months as a migrant farm worker in Texas, was able to legally commute between the U.S and Mexico. Immigrating to a new country at the age of ten, Alex did not have a say in this process of international migration. Having an older sister in the same situation helped Alex find the educational resources that were available to him. Utilizing family, in this case his sister, as a resource towards his aspirations of higher education help shape Alex's experience. Not knowing whether he was going to be able to attend college, Alex credits his older sibling and a high school coach who outreached to him.

> "I found out about the resources because of my sister. I would think about working in the fields. That was my future for all I knew. That changed when I received a graduation card from my sister that said that God had a different plan for my life. That affected me in a positive way. From that point on I knew I would not be working in the fields and that I would be going to college. Another person that helped me out was Mr. Cabrera. He was a soccer coach and an English teacher at my high school. He exposed my older sister to the resources that were available to her. I knew what I had to do since we were both undocumented. Not a lot of people know that they have certain resources so I would try to tell my friends who were also undocumented so they would also take advantage of

these resources. Mr. Cabrera was a big help in this way. They were the closest people I could rely on."

Navigating the educational pipeline, Alex sought guidance through family members and an educator who knew of the resources available to undocumented citizen students. Knowing that there wasn't much exposure to their rights as Texas residents, Alex took it upon himself to guide other students who were in his position towards higher education. Empowered by the recognition of his educational rights as a Texas resident, he followed his sisters' example. Alex enrolled in a community college and transferred UTPA within one year. His narrative provides direct insight into the process of immigration along the South Texas borderland and illustrates the means through which undocumented citizen students enroll at a four year institution.

As previously revealed, despite their eligibility to attend a four year university in the state of Texas, undocumented citizen students' face numerous financial adversities upon enrollment. Isaac, who came to the United States from Honduras at the age of eleven, is the oldest of his siblings and is the only person in his household lacking legal documentation to reside in the U.S. Both parents are residents, pay income taxes, and fully support their children aspirations towards higher education. His experience living in the Lower Rio Grande Valley gives direct insight to the perceived and real sense of financial difficulties undocumented citizen students face. Aspiring to become a medical doctor, Isaac tells his story from a first person narrative and explains why he chose to attend a four year university while being conscious of the limited work opportunities upon graduation.

"I didn't want to go to a small school; I was looking for a challenge. I didn't know that I could get financial aid but my parents were very supportive by selling some things off to pay for my education. The biggest obstacle for a lot of us is the money. I want to do pre-

> med but I am going to have to stop at my B.A due to a lack of money. If I could use a loan I would. It would be one form of help in completing a medical degree."

Unable to work in the formal economy Isaac found work at a local restaurant that paid in cash. His occupation as a part time employee was not enough to supplement the cost of attendance and thus lead Isaac to seek scholarship opportunities. The great majority of the scholarships Isaac sought required community service hours, campus involvement, an above average GPA, and a social security number. Isaac held various positions that allowed him to contribute to community service hours and civic engagement. Maintaining a good grade point average and a high level of community engagement, Isaac was selected as president of a national leadership position. However, soon after his selection he was excluded from this prestigious position due to his inability to prove his citizenship.

> "The biggest issue is money. The resources are here at Pan Am but without the Pell Grant or student loans it is harder for us. My parents pay their taxes that go to citizens but I can't use them. I can't work legally either. I'm restricted from internships that allow you to travel to conferences. For example, I was selected for the National Society of Leadership and Success that gave you a stipend of $2,000 a semester and the opportunity to go to conferences in places like Seattle and Washington D.C. Of the 300 applicants I was chosen but couldn't pursue it because of my status so they gave it to the next person after me. "

Amidst his situation, Isaac shows to be optimistic about his future in the United States. Among his goals are to pursue a medical degree, join the Peace Corps, and help repay his parents for their hard work and sacrifices made to keep him in school. Seeking funds and employment is still an obstacle Isaac must face each semester. His persistence to better his community has

allowed him to receive a student leadership scholarship and has encouraged him to be further engaged in what he calls his "civic duty." Seeking the same opportunities as his native born peers Isaac remains positive that his situation will improve. Placing education as one of his most important priorities, aside from his commitment to his family, Isaac reveals his view on his future state of social place.

> "I am a dreamer and still want to contribute to this country even if I can't work. I'm always looking to do better and progress. It would be nice to see the DREAM ACT go through. I could get a loan, a job, help my parents out. That would be great. I could go to medical school."

It is important to center on how undocumented citizen students perceive their current and future state of social place within the United States. Allowing narratives to give insight into their lived experience, the study asked the question to each student how they perceived their situation as compared to students who have residency or citizenship. The responses were all very similar. Most felt their situation was beyond their control and felt bound to limited occupations and educational opportunities. Students held their identity in contrast to mainstream views and pejorative labels as they did not associate their educational ambitions with criminalization or other stigmatizing labels. Sophia, a graduate psychology student born in Vera Cruz, Mexico, was only nine years old when she was brought to the U.S on a field trip with her father and sister. Sophia's grandmother was a resident of San Juan, Texas a small town within the Lower Rio Grande Valley community. Her tourist visa was valid for two days and she had a vague understanding of the immigration process she was experiencing. When asked how she perceived her situation she responded:

"They (undocumented citizen students) may not have the same opportunities in many aspects of their lives. You may get some financial aid as an undergraduate level but at the same time you can't work or have the opportunity to live on campus. It's possible to live there as in there aren't any laws preventing that but you do not have the same financial resources to do so. You get less of the university experience and it takes away the social connections that are made in this process. Your network becomes smaller. You could graduate college only to work as a yard worker. Also, many students do not consider graduate school because they may not be considered for admission or are unable to travel to the schools they desire. In my case, I wish I could get loans and do research full time, I would absolutely love that. The same system that teaches you that "you can be whatever you want" is a lie because you can't. I see a lot of struggle and it just sucks for them. "

The great majority of undocumented citizen students do not have the opportunity to live on campus and lose out on important social and cultural capital that is essential for all college students. In addition, Sophia mentioned her desire to conduct research beyond the institutions of Lower Rio Grande Valley. Unable to legally cross the second check point north of the region, undocumented citizen students seeking graduate school are institutionally denied the opportunity even if they are academically qualified. Perceiving her current social place as a reality in which her academic merits cannot be awarded in the same way citizens' get to benefit from earned credentials, Sophia sees this practice of exclusion to be unfair.

Maintaining her identity counter to ascribed labels and against institutional restrictions, Sophia continues her studies to be able to pursue her Ph.D. In her eyes, her future state of social place can improve with the possibility of obtaining residency and the continuation of her

education. Her contribution to her community and society rests on the ability to practice as a licensed Psychologist while contributing to research and the body of knowledge.

> "I've always wanted to work with victims of human trafficking. I would also like to go to places around the U.S and Europe to do research. I really hope to get my residency. This would help me get loans and eventually into a PhD program. I would like to work with children so my PhD would be in child clinical psychology. I would want to have my own practice you know like a psychological clinic with one or two Physician Assistants. If not, I would like to go to law school but I'm running out of time to do these things as the days go by. Ultimately this would be my way of giving back to my community."

Parents of undocumented citizen students can also offer direct insight into the immigration process, labor experiences, and social ascriptions placed on their families. Similar questions were asked to a group of parents who also lacked legal documentation to live and work within the United States. In the attempt to uncover these processes parents were introduced through personal acquaintances and also by the students involved in the study. Conversation regarding their lived experiences and perceived social place took place at various locations including church gatherings, residential homes, and restaurants in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Arturo, who emigrated from the city of Reynosa nearly fifteen years ago, was fortunate to have a home on both sides of the Rio Grande. Occupied as a medical doctor and owning his own private practice in Mexico, Arturo was able to spend vacations and holiday in Hidalgo, Texas with his wife and three children. In his narrative, he tells of his immigration process that eventually led his son, a Mexican born student, to become an undocumented citizen student.

"Things have changed so much in Mexico. It has become increasingly violent to the point where you fear the safety of your family on a daily basis. This affected us in different ways. We

relied heavily on winter Texans and Mexican-Americans as our main customers. Business began to steadily decline as the cartel violence began to increase. We could not continue to keep the business going and live in danger so we sold everything we owned in Mexico and permanently moved to Hidalgo, Texas. My family's safety comes first."

His family came to the United States under legal documentation but eventually overstayed their visas. Fearing the escalating violence along the U.S.-Mexican border Arturo applied to several positions of equal rank at various medical branches in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Upon the review of his credentials he was only qualified to work as a nurse assistant and had a drastic reduction in income. Arturo perceives higher education as the only option to better their lives within the United States and encourages his children to pursue their bachelors' degree regardless of their legal status. In his own words, Arturo illustrated the value placed on higher education and culturally valued goals parents transmit to their undocumented citizen children.

"I tell my son that he needs to become educated to succeed in this or any country. If he likes music then he should do the best he can to become a great musician and teacher. When you have an education, even if you are not allowed to work, no one will be able to take away what you have learned at the university. He can become more aware of his resources and establish the networks that are going to be important for his future. This is why we think it is wise for him to continue going to school even if he does not have a social yet."

Experiencing labor restrictions can be an obstacle for some parents who do not have the legal documents to work within the United States. The labor experiences along the Lower Rio Grande Valley give insight into how restrictive policies disallow individuals the opportunity to successfully use the skills acquired abroad to the formal economic sectors of the United States. Brothers Omar and Odell emigrated from San Fernando in the North Eastern border state of

Tamaulipas at the end of sixth grade. Their father, a city councilman in San Fernando, had little options but to move his children to the city of McAllen, Texas. His narrative provides insight into his immigration process and also the labor experience he faced as an undocumented citizen.

"Being in a position where I had access to the different departments that run city projects I was approached by members of the cartel asking if I would like to work for them. I didn't want anything to do with that but one day I opened my trunk and found a duffle bag full of American currency. Still I declined and that's when they began to put more pressure on my decision. They threatened to kidnap my sons, they knew where they went to school, how old they where, and where we lived. I had a family friend who lived in McAllen, Texas and asked her if she would be willing to house them until I was able to find a way to cross. This was a difficult process for us but I needed to ensure that my family was not in any danger. When I did find a way into the United States I could not find any work so I started working for a fruit packaging company. Here I earned minimum wage under the table type payments. It was a big change for our family."

Lacking the legal means of acquiring a professional position within the United States he was economically marginalized to a manual labor intensive occupation. Working long hours in rigorous conditions was only enough to cover the basic necessities of food, shelter, and the daily expenses needed for transportation. Omar and Odell perceive their father as a positive role model in his attempt to keep their safety and education as one of his top priorities. Their desire to contribute to house hold expenses was also limited by their lack of social security numbers. They explain the labor practices they experience along with their father.

"We wanted to work and help our dad out but couldn't because we don't have a social. Sometimes we would work on the weekends helping his pack fruit. That job was really tough so we got to see what our dad had to do on a daily basis. That's why for us it is really important to

get good grades, do good in school, and one day get a good paying job where we don't have to just pack fruits. We want to one day be able to support our parents. One day they won't be able to work anymore. They have been very supportive of us so we feel we should do the same in return. All we want is to be able to work at a good paying job with what we learned in school. We want to make our parents proud; we want to be proud of ourselves."

Without immigration pathways that would allow Omar and Odell to obtain legal residency, the United States will essentially lose out on their human capital. Experiencing labor restrictions have deeply affected this family group of undocumented citizens who desire gain access to the formal economy and contribute their professional skills to the United States. Becoming upwardly mobile is a goal for all Americans. Culturally valuing the same goals as their native born peers, this family continues to strive for the best educational opportunities in hopes that one day they will be able to contribute to their community and family.

Socially ascribed as "illegal," many parents and student who live as undocumented citizens have self-distinctions that shape their sense of social place. Faced with pejorative labels undocumented citizens have often sense that there isn't any type of educational benefits for their children who were brought into the country as young children. Their experiences with negative ascriptions have led some students feeling hopeless at times. Exploring the narratives of undocumented citizens who face such labels is vital in understating how they make sense of their social place. The Hernandez family, from La Joya, Texas, explains their daily lived experiences when faced with such labels. Having one child who undocumented and attends the university Mrs. Hernandez responds with the following.

"We hear negative terms all the time. Sometimes you hear it on the news, read about it in the paper, or in casual conversations. You hear people say 'oh those illegals just come here for

benefits.' We knew that when we came we were going to have to adjust to a new way of living and we have always worked very hard to keep our kids in school. Hearing these terms makes you very angry. You feel unwanted and a sense of distrust. We are trying to keep our family together, work for the things we need, and push our kids to try hard in school so they don't have to struggle as much as we do."

Parents and students reported having a difficult time expressing their legal status to counselors, college advisors, and other professionals. Using the term "illegal" or simply stating that did not have legal residency often time's negatively impacted students seeking educational opportunities after high school. Unaware of the educational benefits that were accessible to their children as Texas residents, Mrs. Hernandez explains how social ascriptions serve as a means to deter undocumented citizen students from applying to college and other resources.

"We had no idea that our daughter qualified for financial aid or that she could even go to college. When you hear so many negative things about being here without documents you slowly lose hope in things like that. Michele didn't see the point in filling out college applications or scholarships because for all she knew her senior year in high school was as far as she was allowed to go. Every time she had an application it would ask for a social security number and it was tough having to ask the counselors what we had to do. You risk being exposed and the fear of being reported to immigration service's always exists."

Conclusions

Utilizing an ethnographic approach, the perceptions of undocumented citizen students, their families, and the background assumptions through which they understand their current and future state of social place have been the foci of the selected excerpts. Findings suggest that undocumented students seek the same culturally valued opportunities sought out by their native

born peers and parents have demonstrated, through their own narratives, the importance they place on education. Undocumented citizen students have a strong desire utilize their learned skills as a means to legally work in the formal economy, support their household, and to positively contribute to the only community they recognize as their home, the United States. Socially ascribed by pejorative labels undocumented citizen students construct their identities in contrast to negative ascriptions and have shown to be model students at UTPA. The narratives shared by students and parents have given important insight into their sense of social place and belonging as they view themselves as Americans, their blocked opportunities, but more importantly their desired goals of obtaining highly valued professional positions.

Living in a society where institutions shaped their citizenship and form their legal, social and cultural exclusion, undocumented citizen students continue to seek educational opportunities in order to position themselves as best they can within their situation. Their extraordinary efforts to use their earned degree towards social integration have illustrated their efforts towards inclusion. The daily lived experiences of marginalization along the border have been critical in how they view their future sense of social place. Exclusionary practices of hegemony have shown to restrict access to social, cultural, and economic benefits to some students while marginalizing those who lack legal documentations. Undocumented citizen students at UTPA, empowered by recognizing their social place, use their available resources to navigate the educational pipeline and successfully gain access to what is socially and culturally valued. Their persistence in higher education and culturally driven ambitions demonstrate reasons why undocumented citizen students should be included to the mainstream culture and citizen based rights. Furthermore, the community of the Lower Rio Grande Valley will not be able to access the talents of these accomplished students and will lose the cultural capital they have to offer.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christian Ramirez is a first generation college graduate with an interest in understanding social phenomenon, particularly the social inequalities that surround the communities of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. More specifically his concentration is framed around the different forms of marginalization of undocumented Latina/o youth. As an active participant in social justice, Christian has taken a stand to support the DREAM Act for undocumented citizen students. Coupled with his professional position as a financial aid outreach specialist, his goal is to better serve the community in gaining access to the available resources towards higher education. Christian holds a B.A. (08) and an M.A. (12) in Sociology and also a graduate certificate in Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas-Pan American. He is the son of Valentin and Yolanda Ramirez and has a younger sibling named Misael Ramirez. His permanent mailing address is 2633 Quebec Drive Corpus Christi, TX.