This article examines undocumented/DACAmented status competency (UDSC) centered on the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary for higher education institutional agents to support undocumented and DACAmented students. Forty-five community college professionals from four states (California, Connecticut, Georgia, and Wisconsin) were interviewed to determine how UDSC was incorporated. A tripartite framework (awareness of undocumented and DACAmented students and their needs, opportunities that contribute toward UDSC knowledge, and UDSC skills) is presented to inform higher education practitioners’ work.

In 2012, the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States was estimated at 11.2 million (Passel & Cohn, 2014), with over 2.5 million of those individuals eligible for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA; Migration Policy Institute, n.d.). Undocumented immigrants are individuals who are not U.S. citizens, do not hold current permanent resident visas, and have not been granted admission under rules for longer-term residence or work permits (Passel & Cohn, 2014). DACA refers to President Obama’s executive action announcement in 2012, which grants some undocumented immigrants a reprieve from deportation, the ability to receive a Social Security number, the capability to work, and lawful presence (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.). The immigration status of individuals who have received DACA is often referred to as DACAmented.

The before-mentioned figures, coupled with the numerous federal, state, and local policies enacted in recent years (Institute for Higher Education Law and Governance [IHELG], 2015a, 2015b; Nienhusser, 2015) that impact undocumented and DACAmented students’ college access, make the higher education policy implementation environment for these students a timely phenomenon to examine. While undocumented and DACAmented students are often grouped into one category, we deliberately mention both to highlight the importance of examining their individual group needs. Policies affecting these groups involve a complicated and interconnected web of federal, state, and local actions left to higher education institutional agents to interpret and implement in areas such as admission requirements, residency requirements, academic/certification requirements, and counseling.

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among others (Nienhusser, 2014; Olivas, 1988, 2012; Oseguera, Flores, & Burciaga, 2010). The term “higher education institutional agents” refers to college administrators (e.g., admissions staff, financial aid officers, recruitment staff) who are “high-status, non-kin, agents who occupy relatively high positions...and who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1066) to students. In the implementation process, undocumented students may encounter higher education institutional agents who are uninformed of or insensitive to undocumented students’ needs (Contreras, 2009; Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010; Muñoz, 2013; Nienhusser, 2014; Nienhusser, Vega, & Saavedra Carquin, 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Student affairs associations, perhaps most notably NASPA, the largest association for student affairs professionals, have made efforts to educate institutional agents through national and regional conferences, webinars, and other resources for addressing the needs of undocumented/DACAmented students. Gaps still exist between knowledge and practice, which might be related to higher education administrators’ limited knowledge of and skills that address the needs of these students. Examining community college institutional agents’ practices is important since it can be surmised that the majority of students without permanent legal status who enroll in postsecondary education are likely to enroll at this type of institution due to narrowed college opportunities (Nienhusser et al., 2016) and reduced tuition rates (Szelenyi & Chang, 2002).

This study is part of a larger investigation, which examined the factors that influenced the extent to which 45 community college institutional agents implemented policies that affected undocumented/DACAmented students in four states (California, Connecticut, Georgia, and Wisconsin). The purpose of this article is to provide a critical examination of higher education institutional agents’ awareness, knowledge, and skills related to addressing undocumented/DACAmented students’ needs and to propose a form of practice—a concept we term undocumented/DACAmented status competency (UDSC).

Institutional Agents and Undocumented Students

Researchers have begun to examine the role of higher education professionals in shaping undocumented and DACAmented students’ postsecondary education experiences. The National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good (2012) concluded that environmental factors, such as the presence of equitable public policies for undocumented students, shape the manner in which policies are implemented for this population. Colleges located in states with equitable policies (e.g., in-state resident tuition [ISRT] eligibility) tended to have more accessible admissions policies for undocumented students. With regard to staff knowledge, the more informed institutional agents were of access-oriented policies for undocumented students, the more likely they were to admit and offer these students financial aid. Lastly, diversity office staff often assisted students in navigating administrative processes, which helped to mitigate lack of staff knowledge and negative attitudes.

Nienhusser (2014) examined how policy ambiguity affected higher education institutional agents’ abilities to implement policies for undocumented students in the City University of New York (CUNY). This study described the role of community college institutional agents in the implementation of policies that affect undocumented students. While the CUNY systems-level office administrators made efforts to ensure similar implementation strategies across campuses, institutional agents took slightly different paths. This research also revealed the manner in which policies were implemented for undocumented students could vary even within the same college system.

In terms of how institutional agents have implemented policies for undocumented students, Contreras (2009) found these students encountered staff in areas such as admissions and financial aid who ranged from supportive to racist. Undocumented students described administrators who
often exhibited negative attitudes towards them. Beyond differential treatment, undocumented students encountered staff who were not knowledgeable of institutional policies and had limited professional development related to undocumented student issues.

**Conceptual Framework**

UDSC is framed using two theories, multicultural competency and informal theories, which will be described in this section. Student affairs professionals are required to demonstrate helping skills in areas such as listening, problem solving and decision making, empathy and compassion, self-awareness, advocacy and awareness, and multicultural competence (Reynolds, 2011). These abilities are developed and/or enhanced through interactions with students, graduate coursework, professional conferences, independent professional reading, and online resources, among others (Reynolds, 2011).

While many professional associations emphasize multicultural competency and practice, this is a relatively recent concept in student affairs practice (Pope, Mueller, & Reynolds, 2009). The concept of *multicultural competency* is rooted in the field of counseling and describes the need for counselors to gain awareness, knowledge, and skills to address a diverse array of clients (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). In the early 1990s, the field of higher education, particularly student affairs, began paying closer attention to the integration of multicultural competency into practice in an effort to enact “a more thoughtful, deliberate, and integrated approach . . . to enhance equity and inclusion on campuses” (Pope et al., 2009, p. 647).

Pope and Reynolds (1997) identified seven core competencies intended to inform each other within student affairs practice: helping and interpersonal skills; assessment and evaluation; teaching and training; ethical and legal experience; theory and translation; administrative and management skills; and multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. The tripartite model for multicultural competency consists of multicultural awareness, which includes student affairs professionals’ attitudes, beliefs, values, assumptions, and self-awareness necessary to serve a diverse student body (Pope & Reynolds, 1997). Multicultural knowledge is the information student affairs professionals have of diverse cultures, and multicultural skills are those abilities student affairs professionals perform when working with diverse cultures. This model emphasizes first-order change efforts at the individual level, which are often content-driven and comprise information on various cultural groups that enhance awareness and knowledge of others (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2014).

While there has been a call to incorporate aspects related to immigrant and refugee populations in multicultural counselor education and practitioners’ work (Villalba, 2009), the same has not occurred in the field of higher education. We contend this is due, in part, to the privileging of formal theory, which neglects the importance of informal theory and experiential knowledge (Love, 2012). Informal theories are defined as “theories that individuals carry around in their heads about all aspects of their work” (Love, 2012, p. 180). Scholars have argued how both formal and informal theories are useful and central in the work of student affairs professionals (Love, 2012; McEwen, 2003) and student affairs professionals should recognize how informal theory “serves as the bridge between formal theory and practice” (Love, 2012, p. 177). Life experiences and personal development, elements of informal theory, can inform higher education professionals’ work with diverse populations (Landreman, Rasmussen, King, & Jiang, 2007).

While the development of formal theories in the area of undocumented/DACAmented students is still in its infancy, scholarship exists (e.g., Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010; Gildersleeve, Rumann, & Mondragón, 2010) that has offered higher education professionals ways to consider the needs of these student populations. Given the paucity of scholarship in the
development of formal theories regarding immigration status, higher education professionals’ work with undocumented/DACAmented students has likely employed the use of informal theories. Examining informal theories used by higher education institutional agents is imperative to understanding how they currently work with these students.

Methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a basic interpretive design was employed. The primary research question that guided this investigation was: In what ways do institutional agents’ practice reflect the tripartite model of UDSC (i.e., awareness of, knowledge of, and skills regarding undocumented/DACAmented students)?

Positionality

Our personal and professional experiences, knowledge, and social identities played important roles in building rapport with participants and analyzing data (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). We are both former student and/or academic affairs administrators who were trained in student affairs focused master’s programs and then earned our doctorates in higher education. Our research interests focus on how higher education institutions implement policies that affect undocumented/DACAmented students and other underrepresented minority groups.

Sample

In order to select the participant sample, we believed selecting states with contrasting public policies was important: those states that permitted undocumented students to receive one or more postsecondary education benefit(s) and those that denied or did not explicitly grant benefits to undocumented students. Contrasting state policy environments could provide a rich understanding of how institutional agents become aware of, acquire knowledge about, and exhibit skills in working with undocumented/DACAmented students.

Selection of States. In the spring of 2012, when this study was conceptualized, there were 13 states (California, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, and Washington) that comprised the category of equitable states, which provided either ISRT or ISRT and state aid to undocumented students (IHELG, 2015a). Of these 13 states, at the time this study was designed, only 3 states (California, New Mexico, and Texas) had truly equitable policies, since they provided both ISRT and state financial aid eligibility to undocumented students. The remaining 10 states only provided ISRT eligibility. This study was conceptualized before the initial DACA announcement and collection of data occurred when institutional agents were developing and implementing policies for DACA recipients. We chose to examine California because (a) at the time this study was initiated, it was one of only three states that had passed two equitable policies for undocumented students (ISRT and state aid eligibility), and (b) the state had recently passed (in 2011) an equitable policy, state aid eligibility. Connecticut was chosen for the following reasons: (a) the state recently passed (in 2011) an ISRT-eligibility policy and (b) the state is located in a region of the country that, at the time of its ISRT passage, had started enacting policies that provided postsecondary education benefits to undocumented students.

Thirty-seven states could be classified as exclusionary, since they did not have any policies that guaranteed a postsecondary education benefit to undocumented students. Exclusionary states have policies that barred undocumented immigrants from enrolling in some or all of the state’s postsecondary institutions, did not permit this student population to pay ISRT in some or all of its public
postsecondary education institutions, and/or failed to ensure postsecondary education benefits for undocumented students (IHELG, 2015b). Some states (e.g., Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Wisconsin) had taken extraordinary measures to enact restrictionist laws that prohibited undocumented students’ access to higher education benefits. We selected Georgia due to the presence of two exclusionary policies for undocumented students (bar ISRT eligibility in all public higher education institutions and ban enrollment in the top five most selective institutions). We chose Wisconsin because of changing dynamics in state higher education policies toward the undocumented population and geographic location (inclusion of a state in the Midwest). In 2009, Wisconsin enacted a policy that permitted ISRT-eligibility in all its public institutions for undocumented students and then rescinded this benefit two years later.

**Selection of Community Colleges.** We preselected institutions using student demographic data as reported via the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Since most higher education systems or institutions do not publish their undocumented student enrollment figures, we used two alternative data sources (percentages of non-resident and Latino students enrolled). These proxies were selected since undocumented students are not born in the United States, and nearly 80% of undocumented immigrants are Latino (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). Scholars have used proxies such as these to estimate the undocumented students’ enrollment share at individual higher education institutions (e.g., Flores & Oseguera, 2009; Nienhusser, 2014). The institutions from each state with the highest percentages were invited, which resulted in a total of eight community colleges. To honor the anonymity of institutions, we do not include the sum of these percentages or their rankings.

**Interview Participants.** Participants were identified based on their likely involvement with the implementation of policies that affect undocumented/DACAmended students. At some institutions, we had to secure permission from the community college president before we could contact potential participants. A total of 45 institutional agents were interviewed over eight months (between April 2013 and November 2013; see Table 1 for a listing of participants by position held and state). Due to the controversial nature of the topic, in-person interviews, whenever possible, were essential to build rapport with participants. The majority of the

Table 1

*Breakdown of research participants by category and state*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Equitable</th>
<th></th>
<th>Exclusionary</th>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>GA</td>
<td>WI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior administrator (e.g., president, vice president of academic affairs, vice president of student affairs)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admission</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community outreach</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic affairs (e.g., director of English as second language services)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g., director of finance and administrative services, director of records)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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interviews (37 out of 45) were conducted in person. Due to scheduling conflicts, eight interviews were completed over the phone. The face-to-face contact allowed for a more personal connection with interviewees, which included a brief conversation before the start of the interview about a topic not related to the study (e.g., how they got interested in the field of student affairs). Interviews were approximately 40 minutes in length. The interview protocol examined the following areas: an understanding of undocumented/DACAmented students’ needs, the role of formal and informal learning opportunities in guiding institutional agents’ practice, and skills that community college staff (should) have employed when working with undocumented/DACAmented students.

**Data Analysis**

Coding was completed in NVivo 10—a qualitative analysis software program—to allow for thorough coding, analysis, and interpretation of the data. Thematic content analyses of interviews by the researchers in conjunction with the major theorizing constructs drawn from the literature review were conducted. A codebook was created to standardize codes and as a reference in the case of discrepancies between coders. The first author coded half of the transcripts as the primary coder and the second author coded those same transcripts as the secondary coder. With the second half of the transcripts the coder roles were switched. Multiple coding allowed for checking each other’s coding (e.g., failing to code some data). Data were then placed into data analysis matrices that had 4 main codes and 11 subcodes to facilitate further analyses. The researchers, subsequently, did four iterations of eliminating and combining codes and/or themes to develop the themes presented in the findings section.

**Limitations**

While this study is one of the first studies to examine higher education institutional agents’ practice in relation to undocumented/DACAmented students, some limitations exist. This study explored a limited number of states, and the inclusion of others would provide richness in how higher education institutional agents address undocumented/DACAmented students’ needs. During recruitment of participants, we encountered issues that limited the number of administrators we were able to recruit, especially from exclusionary states. When we contacted preselected participants at one institution, several chose not to respond despite multiple emails and phone calls, while others declined to participate because they did not believe they worked directly with undocumented/DACAmented students and/or were uncomfortable interviewing with us. In addition, some colleges restricted those staff we could contact, therefore, in some instances, we were unable to contact entry-level personnel and mid-management staff who could have provided more information on the day-to-day implementation of policies for undocumented/DACAmented students. Senior administrators, as such, are overrepresented in our investigation.

**Findings**

The findings are divided into three sections: awareness of undocumented/DACAmented students and their needs, opportunities that contribute toward UDSC knowledge, and UDSC skills.

**Ojos Que No Ven, Corazón Que No Siente (What the Eyes Do Not See, the Heart Cannot Feel): Awareness**

This theme describes community college administrators’ perceptions of undocumented/DACAmented students’ needs compared to other students and how they made meaning of these student populations.
While nearly all participants described how the undocumented and DACAmented student populations had affected their work as higher education practitioners, a limited number defined specific practices geared toward these students. Thirteen participants described how they neither considered nor treated undocumented/DACAmented students differently than other students, including other underserved student populations. A registrar from Georgia stated, “I don’t really see the undocumented student as different from any other student. . . . they’re a student, not specifically undocumented.” Similarly, a vice president of student services from California stated, “Whether they are documented or not is irrelevant; they are human beings that we are trying to educate.”

Nine research participants, conversely, believed undocumented/DACAmented students have unique needs. A counselor from Connecticut explained:

A lot of [helping these students] is understanding the dilemmas undocumented [DACAmented] students [face] . . . trying to just survive, but also get educated. . . . It is important to have a sensitivity of how isolating and alone that can feel.

A vice president of academic affairs from Georgia made meaning of undocumented/DACAmented students’ presence:

The student body is changing, and part of the student body changing is the undocumented student issue. . . . What [higher education professionals] used to think of as a normal [or traditional] student body is different now, and it’s important to take note of that and be sensitive to it.

Few participants acknowledged their own inadequacies with regard to awareness of undocumented/DACAmented student needs but could readily point out colleagues who seemed to overlook these students’ issues. A vice president of academic affairs from California suggested the need to discuss undocumented/DACAmented student matters more openly:

People are afraid to talk about things that might be a little taboo, and when they do . . . they beat around the bush so to speak. [Instead,] let’s be blunt and talk about it . . . and listen to people’s experiences so that we can have an open and candid discussion; rather than [saying], “Oh well . . . those students I think they might be illegal.” Let’s just talk about it. Get it out in the open.

A community outreach official from the same college expressed how some institutional agents were “blind” to undocumented immigrants’ struggles:

There’s a saying in Spanish . . . ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente, because people are not seeing [undocumented immigrants’] struggles, they’re not seeing what they are going through. . . . I think as human beings the majority of the people are good people . . . but because they don’t see it every day, they don’t have necessarily a need to help.

While there was recognition undocumented/DACAmented students had affected institutional agents’ work, the issue was still largely out of sight. A majority of participants did not recognize how undocumented/DACAmented students’ needs are different from those of other underserved student populations and require specific awareness on the part of institutional agents.

**Opportunities That Contribute Toward UDSC Knowledge**

Participants described formal and informal learning opportunities that contributed toward their UDSC knowledge. Formal learning opportunities are typically college-sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Informal learning is generally unstructured and usually self-directed by the learner.
Formal Learning Opportunities. The vast majority of participants received their master’s degree over 15 years ago in fields such as counseling, higher education, human services, and social work. As a senior administrator of student services from Georgia said in reference to formal training, “Until now, nothing has prepared me for [working with undocumented/DACAmented students].” Because the plight of undocumented/DACAmented students is a relatively recent phenomenon no participant was exposed to any classroom-based instruction on the topic of undocumented/DACAmented students. As a senior administrator of student services from California shared, “I graduated with a BA in 1976, and my master’s in education in 1990, and so at that time there wasn’t a whole lot of discussion in [this] area.” While absent in previous training, many participants mentioned working with undocumented/DACAmented students should now be included in professional preparation programs such as student affairs and higher education. A senior administrator of academic affairs from a Connecticut college shared: “If you’re teaching new practitioners how to work with a diverse population, then being an undocumented student is one of the pieces that should be [included in] . . . a curriculum.”

Interviewees also mentioned how preparing professionals to handle psychological factors associated with undocumented/DACAmented students’ immigration status is an essential skill to possess. A counselor from California said:

It might have been more helpful to have more depth on the topic [of the psychological impact of immigration status]: identifying this population as a high-risk population and provide appropriate strategies for dealing with them on maybe a social/emotional basis, looking at their social/emotional needs that might be impacted or influenced by their undocumented status, and paying attention to their mental health issues.

Beyond the classroom, respondents shared the presence of professional development activities (e.g., presentations, workshops) and the role of professional associations (e.g., workshops, listservs) were essential to building their knowledge on the topic of undocumented/DACAmented students, yet such opportunities were often lacking. As a counselor from Georgia shared:

I really wish there was some special training that was designated to help understand the realities of individuals who are undocumented, and what that reality is in the American system, and trying to figure out how to navigate that. I haven’t had or seen any specialized training on that.

Participants from one Connecticut institution spoke of how a systems-level official provided workshops on how staff should classify undocumented/DACAmented students for ISRT eligibility.

Participants, overall, described how professional associations had not offered significant opportunities to build UDSC knowledge. The exception, notably, were state-level financial aid associations in California that have offered training and/or written information about policies and best practices when working with undocumented/DACAmented students.

Informal Learning Opportunities. Informal learning opportunities mainly entailed one-on-one interactions between institutional agents and undocumented/DACAmented students. Personal relationships and interactions undocumented/DACAmented individuals helped shape professionals’ understanding of what it means to live with a precarious immigration status. These informal learning opportunities were instrumental in higher education institutional agents’ development of informal theory. An academic affairs professional from a California community college shared, “When you have a personal relationship with somebody [who is undocumented] . . . it kind of breaks down a barrier instead of just a concept. . . . it’s kind of
real and tangible.” An outreach professional from California shared experiences of coming from an undocumented family:

The fact I came from an undocumented family … obviously that has a big influence about the way I feel about things. … When I look at that I feel like it’s my story all over again, and it’s still the same story 20 years later.

Other interviewees mentioned how interactions with undocumented/DACAmented students helped inform their practice. A counselor from Georgia shared:

[It is] best to get connected with some students who are undocumented so they can build on [professionals’] cultural and contextual understanding. [As higher education professionals we] believe in immersing ourselves as much as possible and whenever possible, so that you can serve the population better.

An admissions professional from California similarly shared: “working with [undocumented/DACAmented students] you learn from them and you understand where they are coming from. The more you work with them…the better understanding you will form working with this population.” While formal and informal learning opportunities existed for higher education institutional agents, room for improvement also existed.

**UDSC Skills**

This section identifies specific skills respondents described they have employed in their practice with undocumented/DACAmented students.

**Multicultural Competence.** While research participants were not prompted to speak about the topic of multicultural competence, 24 interviewees, more than half of the research participants, brought up how they equated it with their work with undocumented/DACAmented students. The majority of these respondents believed being a multiculturally competent practitioner equipped them to better address undocumented/DACAmented students’ needs. One counselor from Georgia explained how she employs her multicultural competency training, while still believing some room for growth exists, to work with these students.

I’ve had multicultural training … so I feel pretty confident in the way I deal with [undocumented/DACAmented students]. I could definitely have a little more awareness about … some contextual situations. Then, I would have a better awareness of the reality of [these] students, but I think I would approach [undocumented/DACAmented students] the same [as other multicultural groups].

When a counselor from a Connecticut community college was asked about her training for working with the undocumented immigrant population, she responded with the following:

Not specifically [related to] undocumented [students], but I’ve taken cross cultural counseling and … classes like that in terms of my counseling degree so that I’d like to think that I’m attuned to working with students … from different cultures [and] populations.

**Considering the Needs of a Population in the Shadows.** Undocumented/DACAmented students unlike other groups face the ever-present danger that comes with their precarious immigration status, mainly the threat of deportation for them and their families. This fear also affects their interactions with postsecondary education institutional agents. One community college president from Connecticut described:

That fear is there. Already to come into this institution, we’re a state of Connecticut agency. Already people have had to bring down that fear and trust us enough that they can come in here and say,
“Okay, I’m undocumented. But I will still give you my name, my address, my contact information.” Having a record here that basically shows you’re undocumented.

Considering the needs of a population in the shadows has compelled some higher education institutional agents to address this reality into their practice. Many of the professionals we spoke with understood the importance of assuring undocumented/DACAmented students their information is confidential.

Another area interviewees mentioned was important to consider was not all undocumented students knew they are undocumented. A community outreach official from Georgia stated how, a lot of times they didn’t know they were [undocumented] until they came into my office or to the admissions office. They didn’t even know what that meant. They didn’t know the implications they’re in. They still don’t understand fully why. “I’ve been here since I was 2, why?”

Understanding Policies that Impact Undocumented/DACAmented Students. Nearly half of participants discussed how knowing public and institutional policies surrounding undocumented/DACAmented students was an essential skill that higher education professionals should possess. An admissions professional from California stated the importance of “getting information. … What are the regulations? What are the policies? And finding out how that particular campus or school deals with it.” Similarly, a senior student services administrator from Georgia described, “One of the main things is being familiar with whatever particular policies that are influencing your potential students and then being able to look outside that policy in regards to other opportunities.” Policies deemed to be especially important to know were undocumented/DACAmented students’ eligibility for state postsecondary education benefits—admissibility to enroll in higher education, eligibility for ISRT, and ability to receive state aid.

Five higher education professionals spoke of the need to have a basic understanding of federal immigration laws (e.g., eligibility for and process to receive residency and DACA status) in an effort to best serve these students. A financial aid officer from California described this as the following:

I hesitate to say legal aspect because you don’t ever want to be giving a family legal advice. But maybe understand the basics yourself. … Then, you can make the family feel more comfortable or the student feel more comfortable. We can’t give legal advice of any kind, but we can tell a student what they’re eligible for and what we’ll do here.

Empathizing with Undocumented Population. A total of 19 research participants described the importance of empathy in working with the undocumented/DACAmented student population. Empathizing with these populations also entailed treating them with respect. A community outreach representative from Connecticut shared the following:

Look at them as human beings. Don’t just look at them with [their precarious legal] status. Give consideration to what their story is. And as best as possible from your role, and even outside it, ascertain how you might be of assistance. Realizing at the end of the day there are some things beyond your control. … Do them the justice of advising them or working with them in a way that their humanity hasn’t been discarded or demeaned.

Many respondents shared how counseling, psychology, and/or human services training skills were the best to tap into to assist the undocumented/DACAmented student population. A counselor from a Georgia community college shared:

I have certain training in [counseling], so coming in and having an opportunity to work with undocumented students, I have an opportunity to build on my contextual understanding of that
lived reality and what the struggle looks like and what the challenge looks like, how to help students cope, and adjust systems that sometimes feel unfair.

Empathizing with students’ undocumented/DACAmented status, however, did have an effect on them as individuals—they felt helplessness in being able to assist these students. A community outreach official from a Georgia community college revealed:

I’m not going to lie; it’s heartbreaking. The amount of times where I’ve had a young man or young woman here just in tears. I had a psychology professor . . . once tell me, “You have to have an invisible mirror that you put in front of you. Because if it gets though you, you can’t go on.” I will say I have become hardened to it . . . you have to become hardened to the stories, because it’s devastating.

Advocating for Undocumented/DACAmented Students. Lastly, higher education professionals discussed the important role advocacy had in working with undocumented/DACAmented students, which was mostly in relation to maximizing these students’ ability to receive higher education benefits. An academic affairs professional from a Connecticut institution revealed how a colleague advocated for a student to become eligible for ISRT.

I had [an undocumented student] who came directly from high school and at first [the college wasn’t] going to cover her under the Dream Act [ISRT policy] because she only spent 3 years in high school and the Dream Act calls for 4 [years of high school enrollment]. . . . She started a couple years earlier in middle school, and she was able to get enough credits in those 3 years so she didn’t need the 4th year. And they wanted to disqualify her on that basis, so someone . . . straightened it out for her.

A senior student services official from Georgia shared how institutional agents at his institution advocated for the interpretation and implementation of the state’s exclusionary policy in the most accessible way possible:

In every law, obviously it is open to interpretation. And one of the things that were not clarified when the law came out, it indicated that students enrolling from such and such date forward, so we did not interpret that as we have to go back and look at any previously enrolled student. So any student that was currently enrolled at the institution that was undocumented, we obviously did not charge them the out-of-state tuition because our interpretation of how the law was written only applied to new students coming in.

In another example, several respondents from one community college in Connecticut shared how the institution’s leadership advocated for and enacted an institutional policy that permitted undocumented/DACAmented students to be eligible for institutional aid. This decision was significant since undocumented and DACAmented students in Connecticut have been denied access to state financial aid.

Discussion

This investigation examined how higher education institutional agents have incorporated elements of UDSC in their practice. Table 2 presents the beginnings of a UDSC practice framework we argue should be systematically incorporated into higher education professionals’ practice in an effort to better address undocumented/DACAmented students’ needs. This model, which should be conceptualized as interdependent and non-sequential, was categorized along the three UDSC tenants described earlier (awareness of undocumented/DACAmented students and their needs, opportunities that contribute toward UDSC knowledge, and UDSC skills) in tandem with this study’s findings.
Implications

Practice. Many higher education institutional agents are uninformed of how to address undocumented/DACAmented students’ needs (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010; Contreras, 2009). The UDSC framework, while not exhaustive, could help highlight more and different potential avenues for practical application, presents examples of practices higher education professionals should incorporate into their work with these students. This framework, for example, could be integrated into formal learning opportunities (e.g., graduate preparation program curricula, professional development opportunities) in an effort to prepare current and future higher education professionals to better address undocumented/DACAmented students’ needs.

Table 2

UDSC in higher education institutional agents’ practice framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of undocumented and DACAmented students and their needs</td>
<td>Understanding undocumented and DACAmented students have specific needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional agents’ understanding of undocumented and DACAmented students’ particular needs</td>
<td>Identifying public and institutional polies that may affect undocumented and DACAmented students’ postsecondary education access and success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities that contribute toward UDSC knowledge</td>
<td>Developing, integrating, and attending formal learning opportunities (e.g., graduate preparation programs, workshops) that inform institutional agents of policies that affect and/or practices that support undocumented and DACAmented students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occurrences that inform institutional agents’ understanding of undocumented and DACAmented students and their needs</td>
<td>Fostering informal learning opportunities between undocumented immigrants and undocumented/DACAmented students and institutional agents that inform practitioners of these populations and their specific needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UDSC skills</td>
<td>Utilizing knowledge (e.g., multicultural competency, informal and formal theories) in considering undocumented/DACAmented students’ specific needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills institutional agents employ in their practice with undocumented and DACAmented students</td>
<td>Demonstrating a comprehension of basic federal immigration laws, policies, and concepts (e.g., DACA [renewal] procedures, lawful presence, lawful status)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Applying an understanding of state higher education and institutional policies that affect undocumented/DACAmented students’ access and success (e.g., state aid eligibility, procedures on ISRT eligibility)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Exhibiting an understanding that a population that lives in the shadows requires specific practices (e.g., ensuring confidentiality, exhibiting sensitivity)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Empathizing with undocumented/DACAmented students and treating them with respect, while understanding numerous barriers they encounter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advocating for undocumented/DACAmented students’ postsecondary access and success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Incorporating UDSC in the practice of all higher education institutional agents and not just a small number of staff as is often the case is important. Similar to multicultural competency, UDSC is something that takes continuous education and reflection but should be an absolute requirement especially for those who are implementing policies that affect undocumented/DACAmented students’ postsecondary education access and success.

Higher education institutional agents should also be able to distinguish the distinct needs of undocumented/DACAmented students. Many states have begun to offer some higher education benefits (mostly in the form of ISRT eligibility) to DACA recipients. Understanding the differences across these two groups can make significant differences in these students’ college access and experiences with higher education professionals.

**Research.** Further studies are needed to understand higher education institutional agents’ awareness, knowledge, and skills in relation to UDSC. Investigations could explore how these three areas help inform each other and how they contribute toward undocumented/DACAmented students’ access to and experiences in postsecondary education. Second, examining UDSC in other settings (e.g., other states and four-year institutions) in an effort to see how context shapes professionals’ UDSC would be important. Lastly, the role of informal learning opportunities was found to be an important factor in higher education professionals’ practice in working with undocumented students. Further examining the role of informal theory and learning opportunities in relation to higher education professionals’ work with these students is essential.

**Conclusion**

This study highlights the important role UDSC has in higher education institutional agents’ daily practice and the need for the inclusion of UDSC into higher education institutional agents’ daily practice. By addressing higher education institutional agents’ UDSC, higher education professionals can help create more welcoming postsecondary education environments that address undocumented/DACAmented students’ needs in an effort to expand their college access, enhance their experiences while enrolled in postsecondary education, and increase their college graduation rates.

**References**


