Boston College

Lynch School of Education and Human Development

Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education

Higher Education Program

"WORK OF THE HEART": LIVED EXPERIENCES OF

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT RESOURCE CENTER PROFESSIONALS

Dissertation

by

NATALIE ANSON BORG

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for a degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

APRIL 2024

Advisor: Heather Rowan-Kenyon, PhD
Readers: Gerardo Blanco, PhD, Rebecca Lowenhaupt, PhD

Abstract:

Many postsecondary students in the United States exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, such as race, socioeconomic status, (dis)ability, and legal status. Amidst a tumultuous sociopolitical context, a number of higher education institutions in the United States established Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs), identity-centered student services that provide specialized support for students who hold marginalized legal identities (Ballerini & Feldblum, 2021; Castrellón, 2021; Cisneros & Valdivia, 2018; Cisneros et al., 2021; Gomez & Pérez Huber, 2021; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021). This study, which focuses on the professional employees at USRCs, is ultimately in service of students who are united by their marginalized legal statuses—those who are undocumented, those who are DACA recipients, and those who belong to mixed-status families. This issue is addressed through the following primary research questions: 1) What are the lived experiences of the professional employees who work at USRCs?; 1a) What personal factors inform their experiences in their role?; 2) What are the experiences of USRC professionals when they encounter systemic factors, ranging from the centered to the marginalized? While there is existing literature that recognizes the ways in which USRCs benefit their students, less is known about the experiences of the professional employees who work in USRCs (Cisneros et al., 2021; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021). This hermeneutic phenomenological (van Manen, 1990) study sought to address this gap by examining the experiences of the professional employees of USRCs.

Three intersecting frameworks were used to conduct this research: Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), Tierney's (1988) framework of Organization, and Critical Systems Thinking (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008; Jackson, 2001; Midgley, 1992; Midgley et al., 1998;

Rajagopalan & Midgley, 2015; Raza, 2021; Ulrich, 1983, 1988). The sample consisted of 6

professional employees from 2- and 4-year higher education institutions across the United States.

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, and data was analyzed

using the hermeneutic circle (Dibley et al., 2020; van Manen, 1990). The findings indicate that

the professional employees of USRCs bring untold assets and forms of wealth to their work,

including their commitment to joy and their employment of aspirational, familial, and

navigational capital. Systemic factors within their organization and beyond create barriers to

their work, resulting in mentally and emotionally exhausting experiences, overburdened work

environments, and instances where their identities and offices are marginalized by their

tumultuous sociopolitical context. Implications for higher education practice, research, and

theory are offered.

In loving memory of Grandma, Grandpa, and Bob.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is a testament to the generosity and resilience of the participants and their colleagues who do this work. I hope that you see yourself in this piece and that you find it useful to your practice and wellbeing.

Who I am and what I am possible of achieving is due, in large part, to the love, guidance, and patience of my family, friends, teachers, mentors, and students. Your gifts fuel me and give me hope when I struggle to see the light. I will always strive to be worthy of your generosity.

Thank you to my committee, Dr. Heather Rowan-Kenyon, Dr. Gerardo Blanco, and Dr. Rebecca Lowenhaupt. Throughout this process you have been exceedingly kind and thoughtful in your feedback and guidance, and I feel incredibly fortunate to be among your students. Heather, your support was instrumental throughout my time at Boston College, and I am glad that we got to finish this journey together.

To the ELHE and CIHE faculty and staff, thank you for welcoming me into your classrooms and offices. You have served as marvelous examples of professionals and scholars. In this way, you have helped me learn how I want to grow in this field, and I am incredibly grateful for those lessons.

To my cohort, Kathy, Chris, Katie, Sarah, Jean-Baptiste, I could not have asked for a better group of people to begin this journey. From day one, you were inclusive, supportive, hilarious, and thoughtful. I am glad that we are forever connected by this experience.

There are so many people in the LSOEHD who helped me advance my work, who brought my joy, and who made this department a community. Thank you to the master's students I taught and learned with. Thank you to Venus, Lisa, Patrick, Christopher, Tessa, Kyle. Your smiles and support meant more than you can imagine. I want to express particular gratitude for fellow LSOEHD students Hannah, Nicole, and Kathy. You helped me feel at home in Boston and at Boston College. I would not have made it without you.

To my family, you are my heartbeat. Mom, you taught me to fight for justice and stand up for myself and my people. You taught me that love and compassion will change the world, especially when I direct it towards myself. Most importantly, you taught me how to brew a good cup of coffee. Jim, you told me that my brain is your best investment, and you follow through, time and time again. I am lucky to be loved by you. Tam and Rich, you made a home for me and gave me space and support when I needed it most. There is no doubt in my mind that this dissertation would not have existed without your love. Uncle Joe and Tía Claudia, you mean more to me than I can express. You profoundly shaped the trajectory of my life, as well as this research. Aunt Julie, you taught me to love being a nerd and you made sure I got on that plane so I could get back to Boston and finish this work. Everyone else in my family, I love you, I love you, I love you.

To my sister friends. This has been one of the most difficult journeys of my life, and I would not be here without them. Thank you. Love you.

Finally, Oski. I did not understand what it meant to love until I got to love him. Oski is a living example of Rilke's encouragement for us to be once beautiful and brave. Thank you.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Many postsecondary students in the United States exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, such as race, socioeconomic status, (dis)ability, and legal status. Since the 2016 presidential election, the Trump Administration fueled the fires of racist nativism in the United States when they introduced numerous threats to students with marginalized legal identities, including the dissolution of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy (Ballerini & Feldblum, 2021), President Trump's first executive order, "Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," also known as the federal travel ban (Streitwieser et al., 2020; Todoran & Peterson, 2020), and the introduction of a "zero tolerance" policy that resulted in familial separation and detention that "'shock[ed] the conscience' and violate[d] the constitution" (Jordan, 2021, p. 10; see also American Bar Association, n.d.). While the Biden administration moved to reverse some of these actions (The White House, 2021; The White House, 2023; Ballerini & Feldblum, 2021) and provide recompense for the harm caused (Jordan, 2021), they have allowed continued acts of violence against immigrants and cater to nativist sentiments (Jacobs, 2023; Montelengo Hernandez, 2023). There is much work to be done to support those whose legal identities have been marginalized across the systems in which they exist, from their classrooms (Castrellón, 2021a; Gomez & Pérez Huber, 2021) to the executive office of the United States (McEvoy, 2021). Although the Biden administration provided some support to the DACA policy, Biden's presidency has been marred by poor management of the humanitarian crisis (Chishti & Bush-Joseph, 2023). Amidst this tumultuous context, a number of higher education institutions in the United States established Undocumented Student Resource

Centers, identity-centered student services that provide specialized support for students who hold marginalized legal identities.

This study, which focuses on the professional employees at Undocumented Students Resource Centers, is ultimately in service of students who are united by their marginalized legal statuses—those who are undocumented, those who are DACA recipients (DACAmented), and those who belong to mixed-status families of individuals with different legal statuses. There are approximately 450,000 students across higher education in the United States who are undocumented or DACAmented, and an unquantifiable number of students who belong to mixed-status families (Ballerini & Feldblum, 2021). Mixed status families can constitute individuals who are undocumented, DACAmented, and/or documented. Consider, for example, a hypothetical family named the Madrigals. Cecilia and Adam Madrigal are undocumented migrants who have lived in the United States for almost two decades and they have two college-aged children, Sasha and Andre. When Cecilia and Adam migrated to the United States they brought their newborn daughter, Sasha, who later applied for and received DACA status when she graduated high school, thus allowing her to experience the associated benefits of DACA. Shortly after the Madrigals moved to the United States, Cecilia and Adam had their second child, Andre. Based on Andre's country of birth, Andre is a documented U.S. citizen and has greater and more concrete rights and protections than their parents or sibling, so long as the family remains in the United States. The Madrigals are just one example of a mixed-status family. Some families have more or fewer members who are undocumented and/or DACAmented, and not all DACAmented or undocumented students live in mixed-status families, but all of these individuals navigate systems that are often discriminatory and exclusionary toward their varying marginalized legal statuses.

Federal and national systems impact the educational and lived experiences of college students who hold marginalized legal identities. All of these students have unique challenges associated with their unique legal statuses, as well as shared experiences associated with their marginalization. For example, undocumented students have limited access to legal work opportunities and financial aid which makes it incredibly difficult to afford higher education (Kwon et al., 2020; Marroquin, 2014) while DACAmented students have access to legal work opportunities and thus have more financial security (Benuto et al., 2018; Nienhusser, 2018). Additionally, the nation's hostile sociopolitical climate and history of anti-immigrant and nativist sentiment have contributed to reports that undocumented students, DACAmented students, and students from mixed-status families face discrimination and microaggressions from peers and faculty (Benuto et al., 2018; Brown, 2021; Calle, 2021; Flores Morales & Garcia, 2021; Nienhusser, 2018; Romero Morales & Consoli, 2020; Sanchez, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021).

The day-to-day aspects of one's life, and the local policies that shape it, can vary depending upon whether one lives in a community that is empathetic to and supportive of one's existence (MPI, 2019; Pham & Van, 2019). For example, undocumented students in Texas and California are eligible for state-based financial aid for higher education, while their peers in Alabama and South Carolina are not only ineligible for state-based aid, they are banned from enrolling (NILC, 2022). These compounding challenges and benefits that exist within and across systems can result in mental health concerns for students who are undocumented and DACAmented, difficulties that are compounded for those students of any legal status who belong to mixed-status families wherein the threat to their familial safety can affect their psychological wellbeing and academic performance (Marroquin, 2014).

Much of the research that exists about this population and phenomena focuses on the experiences and needs of the students, and the data informing this research was predominantly collected prior to the COVID-19 outbreak and the coinciding increase of racist nativism in the United States (Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attacks on the United States Capitol, n.d.; Ballerini & Feldblum, 2021). Consistent among the literature that focuses on supporting these students is a recommendation to invest in on-campus support centers, often referred to as Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs), which are specifically tailored to these legally marginalized populations. Existing USRCs are generally the result of student advocacy in response to the growing population of college students who are undocumented, DACAmented, and/or from mixed-status families, and their barriers to inclusion in higher education (Nienhusser et al., 2020). USRCs are physical, on-campus centers that provide institutionalized support to undocumented and DACAmented students and students from mixed-status families (Cisneros & Rivarola, 2020). For example, USRCs have been documented to support the basic needs of students through resources such as meal vouchers and food pantries, mental health supports, legal services, and transportation support via transit passes and parking permits (Cisneros & Rivarola, 2020; Nienhusser et al., 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2020). Additionally, scholars have observed that USRCs enhance a sense of belonging among the students they serve (Salcedo, 2020), alleviate a sense of fear, foster a sense of *acompañamiento*, promote agency and advocacy, and support their socioemotional development (Rosas, 2020).

USRCs generally have one professional staff member whose wide-ranging professional responsibilities include: educating their peers on campus and working to "offer counseling, advising, and mentorship to students," helping them navigate institutional barriers (Nienhusser et al., 2020, p. 9). Students report feeling cared for by the employees of USRCs, which is

particularly meaningful for those students who do not have another caring adult within the campus community (Salcedo, 2020). The literature asserts that USRCs can help institutions adapt to "sociopolitical changes" affecting their undocumented and DACAmented students, as well as those from mixed-status families (Cisneros & Rivarola, 2020, p. 679). While there is existing literature that recognizes the ways in which USRCs benefit their students, less is known about the experiences of the professional employees who work in USRCs (Cisneros et al., 2021; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021).

This study contributes to literature regarding legally-marginalized students, professional employees in higher education, systems in higher education, identity-centered student services, and USRCs. This chapter outlines the study, introducing the problem statement, purpose, and significance of the study, the research questions that guide this study, as well as the theoretical framework and research design, concluding with a list of relevant terms and their definitions.

Purpose of the Study

While there is a growing body of research regarding the students served by USRCs, less is known about the professional employees who are responsible for running these centers. In Tapia-Fuselier's (2021) research regarding the function of USRCs in enhancing an institution's UndocuCompetence, he stated:

> It is evident that USRC professionals have an important perspective and can serve as a valuable population to learn from as USRCs continue to emerge on campuses across the country. Future research might examine the personal and professional experiences of the professionals in these roles (p. 143).

Similarly, in Cisneros et al.'s (2021) research regarding how USRC practitioners served as validating agents for undocumented students, the authors argue that future research should

"explore the needs. . . and identify the professional development needs of practitioners working with undocumented students" (p. 8). Therefore, this study addresses this gap in the literature and focus on the experiences of the professional employees of USRCs.

The purpose of this study was to develop a rich understanding of the experiences of professional employees who work in USRCs. Specifically, I used this study to explore (a) how these professional employees experience their work, (b) what aspects of their personhood inform their experiences as professionals, and how, and (c) what systems influence their professional experiences and how their experiences are shaped by these external systemic factors. The following research questions helped me explore these topics:

1. What are the lived experiences of the professional employees who work at USRCs?

    1. What personal factors inform their experiences in their role?

2. What are the experiences of USRC professionals when they encounter systemic factors, ranging from the centered to the marginalized?*

To answer these questions, I conducted a qualitative study with a hermeneutic phenomenological research design (Converse, 2012; Crowther & Smythe, 2013; Fogueiras-Bertomeu & Sandín-Esteban, 2023; Green et al., 2021; van Manen, 1990). I interviewed 6 individuals who were employed as professional employees at USRCs at 2- and 4-year higher education institutions across the United States. In these interviews, I sought to understand their experiences in their professional roles. My interview protocol was informed by the three conceptual frameworks that I combined in my approach—Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), Tierney's (1988) framework for Organizational Culture, and Critical Systems Thinking (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008; Jackson, 2001; Midgley, 1992; Midgley et al., 1998; Rajagopalan &

Midgley, 2015; Raza, 2021; Ulrich, 1983, 1988). My analytical approach and writing process

was informed by van Manen's (1990) text *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an*

Action Sensitive Pedagogy, which involves an iterative process of reflection, co-constitution with

participants, being with the data, and practicing openness to the data.

Hermeneutic phenomenology was an appropriate methodological choice for this study

because it allowed me to delve deeply into the lived experiences of the participants in a manner

that accounts for their context (Green et al., 2021). One cannot understate the function of context

in relation to this problem, thus reinforcing the value of the ways in which hermeneutic

phenomenology allows the researcher "'to touch the mystery of [a] place' and look "for 'a

glimpse of deeper meanings sequestered in time and cultural distance'" (Green et al., 2021, p. 2).

Scholars of hermeneutic phenomenology separated the field from other branches of

phenomenology in their acknowledgement that their role is not to discern an absolute truth, but

instead, their responsibility is "pointing to what is happening" (Crowther & Smythe, 2013, p.

10). I will expand upon my use of hermeneutic phenomenological methods in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

This study sought to accomplish three goals: 1) create a record of a particular

phenomenon in a unique moment in time that centers a heretofore understudied population, 2)

address a gap in the literature, and 3) understand how the professional employees of USRCs

experience their work and their world. This study has academic and practical implications that

are discussed in Chapter 6. The scholarly community, practitioners, and policymakers will

benefit from an enhanced understanding of a community of professionals that supports a

marginalized population of students.

Given the potential impact that the professional employees of USRCs can have on legally

marginalized students as well as the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the

continued rise of racist nativism across the country, a deeper understanding of the experiences of

the professional employees of USRCs is warranted. Additionally, as practitioners and

policymakers make difficult decisions regarding how to invest in higher education institutions in

the coming years, it is important to contribute to a greater understanding of the function of

USRCs. Ultimately, this study sought to understand how the professional employees of USRCs

experience their work in a turbulent system.

Definition of Terms

DACA

Also known as *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals*, DACA is an executive order that

was announced by President Obama in mid-2012. DACA granted temporary relief from

deportation for qualifying undocumented immigrants. Those who qualify for and hope to obtain

(or maintain) DACA status are required to submit an application for DACA status, which has a

$495 fee, every two years and they must continue to meet the requirements outlined in the

mandate. These requirements include educational and legal stipulations, as well as boundaries

regarding when applicants arrived in the country, and at what age. DACA recipients are granted

associated benefits, including a Social Security number, and work authorization. DACA does not

provide legal status but instead grants prosecutorial discretion to defer one's removal from the

country for a period of time (USCIS, n.d.).

DACAmented Students

DACAmented students are students who are also DACA recipients and thus have access

to the associated benefits allowed by this status. Due to the unique benefits and challenges

associated with each of the legal identities discussed in this piece, it is important to delineate

DACAmented students from their peers who do not have DACA status (Gonzales et al., 2019).

In this paper, the term *DACAmented students* refers to individuals who are currently enrolled in a

2- or 4-year higher education institution, unless otherwise noted.

Legally Marginalized Students

While there are an unfortunately large number of ways in which an individual can be

marginalized by the legal system in the United States (Bea & Taylor Poppe, 2021), this term is

employed in this paper as an umbrella term for students who are undocumented, DACAmented,

and/or who live in mixed-status families. This term is not used to conflate their identities or

experiences, rather it is used to streamline the language used in this discussion.

Mixed-Status Families

A "mixed-status family" is a family whose members include people with different

citizenship or immigration statuses. One example of a mixed-status family is one in which the

parents are undocumented and the children are U.S.-born citizens (NILC, 2014). There are also

instances in which some members of the family may be DACA recipients, others are U.S.-born

citizens, and still others are undocumented.

Undocumented Students

Several legal identities and experiences are encapsulated by the term *undocumented*

students as is used in this paper. It is important to note that the terms *undocumented* and

DACAmented are not interchangeable. While DACA recipients are individuals who were once

undocumented, and who could become undocumented again, the term *undocumented* as used in

this work does not refer to individuals with DACA. Undocumented students are "foreign

nationals who lack proper authorization to be in the United States. These immigrants either

entered the United States without inspection according to immigration procedures, or entered the

United States on a temporary visa and stayed beyond the expiration date of the visa (LII, n.d.). In

this paper, the term *undocumented students* refers to individuals who are currently enrolled in a

2- or 4-year higher education institution, unless otherwise noted.

Undocumented Student Resource Centers

These centers, which are also referred to as USRCs throughout the paper, are

"institutionally supported physical structures on higher education campuses that provide access

to opportunities for undocumented high school, transfer, undergraduate, and graduate students,

as well as students from mixed-status families" (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020, p. 52).

Organization of the Study

In this chapter, I introduced the reader to a phenomena that is prescient and important, as

well as the research questions I employed as I explored the research topic at hand. In the

following chapters, I will introduce the reader to the existing literature that relates to this

particular phenomena, describe the conceptual frameworks that I used in this work, discuss the

hermeneutic phenomenological approach that I embraced, share the research design, then discuss

potential implications for scholarship and practice.

In Chapter Two, I present a thorough review of the literature, as well as a comprehensive

introduction to the conceptual frameworks that I employed in this work. The literature that I

feature in this chapter is that which is related to students who hold marginalized legal identities,

USRCs, and the practitioners who serve them. I will also discuss the three frameworks that I

wove together into a multi-pronged conceptual framework.

Chapter Three contains a detailed description of my methodological approach, as well as

the methods I will engage to prepare, collect, analyze, and store my data. In addition to

discussions of the practical logistics of data collection and analysis, I will explore van Manen's (1990) approach to hermeneutic phenomenological research and describe how that informs my writing, analysis, and data collection processes. This chapter also includes a reflection on my positionality as a researcher.

Chapter Four includes narratives that introduce the participants and their experiences in their physical work environments. Immediately following this introduction to the participants and their USRCs is Chapter Five, which presents the findings from this dissertation. The concluding chapter of this dissertation, Chapter 6, presents a discussion and analysis of the findings, as well as implications for practice and scholarship moving forward.

* Before moving further, I want to acknowledge and explain my use of the term "factors" in the second research question. The literature acknowledges the ways in which systemic factors often serve to further oppress and marginalize populations that have already been marginalized. However, I intentionally chose to frame my second research question using this language for two reasons. First, the framing of this question aligns with Critical Systems Thinking, one of the conceptual frameworks that inform this dissertation. Second, the framing of this question allows for the possibility that there could be systemic factors that the participants view in a positive light, and I do not want to miss the opportunity to collect that data if such experiences exist. I recognize that this word choice may alienate some readers, but I hope that as you read this work, you will understand why I made this choice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Students who are undocumented, DACAmented, and/or come from a mixed-status family have historically faced barriers to access and inclusion in higher education in the United States (Bjorklund, 2018; Marroquin, 2018; Nienhusser, 2018; Shelton, 2020; Teranishi et al., 2015). Within the past several decades, scholars and practitioners have committed resources to the development of identity-centered student services to enhance support for this unique student population, services which are referred to in the literature as Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs) (Salcedo, 2020; Shelton, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021). Identity-centered student services, such as USRCs, are important to the wellbeing of the students whom they serve (Salcedo, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021). The professional employees who work at these centers can serve as sources of support for marginalized students as they embody any number of roles, including that of advocate, counselor, mentor, and supervisor (Salcedo, 2020; Shelton, 2020). In this chapter, I present the state of the literature as it relates to these students, USRCs, and the professional employees who work at these centers.

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the history of institutionalized support for marginalized students in higher education in the United States. Following this, I break down the literature regarding professional employees in higher education. After this, I introduce USRCs, an emerging form of identity-centered student centers that was created to serve these students whose precarious legal statuses are associated with unique knowledges and challenges, then the professional employees who work at USRCs. From there, I discuss potential directions for future research. After this, I discuss literature regarding legally marginalized students in higher education. This chapter culminates with a discussion of my conceptual frameworks.

Institutionalized Supports for Marginalized Students: A Brief History

Identity-centered programs and offices, and the employees who serve them, are vital components of a marginalized students' sense of belonging on campus (Haudley, 2021; Hypolite, 2020; Jones & Williams, 2006; Means & Pyne, 2017; Tachine et al., 2017). Such spaces and groups can provide "students with safe places to be surrounded by others who may have a higher likelihood of shared life experiences." (Sanchez, 2020, p. 139). In particular, Students of Color benefit from the support of "student-centered or identity-affirming faculty members. . . and social identity-based spaces, such as Black cultural centers and multicultural student services" (Means & Pyne, 2017, p. 909). These resources acknowledge the cultural identities of students and their communities as assets, rather than deficits that must be overcome if a student is to succeed (Hypolite, 2020; Shelton, 2020). Across the history of higher education in the United States, there is a tapestry of identity-centered centers and offices that were created to serve marginalized identities in a largely homogenous system (see Hypolite, 2020 and Jones & Williams, 2006 re: Black cultural centers; Miller, 2019 re: the intersection of disability and queer identities; Tachine et al., 2017 re: Native American students). While these identity-centered resources can provide immeasurable benefits for the communities they serve, challenges can exist, such as the difficulty of accounting for circumstances in which there is a nesting of marginalized identities (such as the need for specific supports for Trans students within and LGBTQIA+ student center, see Flint et al., 2019), the intersections of marginalized identities, and how systems should respond when external factors impact who is considered marginalized, as well as when, and how that marginalization occurs. One emerging form of identity-centered offices is the USRC, a concept born of student activism and support by professional employees at a number of higher education institutions nationwide (Shelton, 2020).

Professional Employees in Higher Education in the United States

Literature regarding professional employees in higher education describes a well-educated cadre of caring professionals who often struggle within the bureaucratic confines of their institutions (Harrison, 2010; Marshall et al., 2016). The rate of attrition for professional employees in higher education is, at the very least, an economic problem for an industry that is struggling with its purpose and its future. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, professional employees at higher education institutions in the United States sought to care for their marginalized students while simultaneously navigating environments where they wrestled with conflicts between their personal values, the social justice values of their field, and the conflict that could arise when those values were put in institutional contexts that centered other values (Griffin et al., 2019; Harris & Patton, 2017; Mahler-Rogers, 2017). For example, within the past decade, the professional employees of higher education institutions in the United States have been on the front lines of the nation's rising flood of anti-Black racism (Mahler-Rogers, 2017), racist-nativism (Vigil & Muñoz, 2023), White supremacy (Spencer & Gay Stolberg, 2017), and anti-queer politics (Jaschik, 2022; Olivares, 2022). In these instances, professional employees at higher education institutions were ground-level responders to circumstances that fueled debates over the First Amendment in higher education, the idea of "safe spaces," and how professionals could serve the "whole student" when said student may hold or preach ideologies that can harm members of their community. Amidst this contentious context where employee attrition was already a concern, and where student enrollment has decreased (National Student Clearinghouse, 2023), a greater understanding of the field's professionals could help scholars and practitioners support the employees who devote themselves to centering marginalized students.

Personal Factors

There are numerous studies regarding the experiences of professional employees at higher education institutions in the United States which cross personal identities (Chance, 2021; Coates, 2017; LePeau, 2018; Njoku & Evans, 2022), professional roles and tenure (Dinise Halter, 2017; Shupp & Arminio, 2012; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Wilson et al., 2016), institutional affiliations (Gill & Harrison, 2018; Lamb et al., 2018; Marine, 2011; Strayhorn, 2019), and geography (Kodama et al., 2021). The majority of these studies were qualitative, focusing on a subset of the larger population of professional employees via hermeneutic phenomenological methods (Coates, 2017; Kodama et al., 2021; Marine, 2011), case studies (Martinez Hoy & Nguyen, 2021; Strayhorn, 2019), and other qualitative methodologies including participatory action research (Harrison, 2010), phenomenology (Chance, 2021; Bureau, 2018; Lynch & Glass, 2020; Wilson, 2000; Martinez Hoy et al., 2020), portraiture (Shupp & Arminio, 2012), and longitudinal studies (Renn & Hodges, 2007).

Regardless of the methodologies they employed, scholars found that professional employees across the field were struggling, causing many to leave the profession. Participants recounted facing racial discrimination, microaggressions, and tokenism (Harris, 2017; Chance, 2021), along with unrealistic expectations paired with inadequate compensation (Kodama et al., 2021). Some participants described that their job required them to sacrifice time with and investment in their families, causing them to postpone goals such as marriage or home ownership (Kodama et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2016). Other professional employees struggled with imposter syndrome and "issues of competence and confidence" regarding their roles (Renn & Hodges, 2007, p. 367; see also Chance, 2021). These challenges led some participants to practice unhealthy coping strategies such as substance abuse and unhealthy eating habits or to neglect

their health altogether (Lynch & Glass, 2020). This phenomenon should be concerning—not just

because professional employees are humans who need and deserve healthy and supportive work

environments—but because their wellbeing of professional employees "is critical to supporting

student well-being [sic] and academic performance" (Harrison, 2010, p. 175; see also Chessman,

2021). In this context, some scholars sought to understand why professional employees choose to

stay in a professional environment that has proven to be challenging and harmful for many of

their peers (Chance, 2021). In Chance's (2021) study regarding the resilience of Black women in

leadership positions, the participants expressed several reasons why they continue in the face of

adversity, including their family, spirituality, and friendships. Future research can use this

information to understand how or if personal factors such as these shape the experiences of

professional employees whose marginalized identities can lead to isolation or exclusion, such as

those who work to support legally marginalized students (see Harris, 2017).

In the qualitative-heavy world of scholarship regarding the experiences of professional

employees in higher education, there are several recent large-scale quantitative studies that broke

the mold (Jackson Preston et al., 2021; Lynch & Glass, 2019; Wilson et al., 2016). Wilson et al.

(2016) conducted a nationwide survey of midlevel professionals to explore professional identity

and commitment during periods of instability. Research that centers rocky sociopolitical contexts

was particularly useful to this dissertation, which occurred during a period of tremendous

uncertainty. Wilson et al. (2016) found that resilience was important to respondents during

periods of instability and that there were several factors that were important to their professional

identity, including values congruence with the profession, community connection to their

institution or geographic location, and career contentment. One limitation of Wilson et al.'s

(2016) study was its focus on individuals who self-identified as midlevel professionals who had

worked in the profession for 6 or more years. Given that this dissertation centers on the experiences of professional employees who work at centers that did not exist prior to 2015, it is possible that the findings from Wilson et al. (2016) would be less relevant to this specific group of professionals. The other two large-scale quantitative surveys highlighted in this literature review, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs, included entry-level professionals and midlevel professionals of all tenures.

It is widely acknowledged that there is a mental health crisis among students in higher education and that institutions have struggled to meet the needs of their students, especially those who hold marginalized identities (Francis & Horn, 2017; Jackson Preston et al., 2021). In response, Lynch & Glass (2019) employed scholarship regarding secondary trauma in helping professions to understand the impact of this crisis on professional employees who support students. Lynch & Glass (2019) surveyed 617 professional employees and graduate assistants who worked in student affairs at private and public four-year institutions nationwide. For the purposes of this dissertation regarding professional employees, it is useful to note that, of the 617 respondents, only 56 were graduate assistants. Lynch & Glass (2019) found that 87% of respondents supported students through trauma "at least a few times a year" (p. 9) and only 3% of respondents indicated that they had not supported a student through a traumatic experience at any point in their career to date. Participants were asked to indicate what types of traumas their students experienced and for which they provided support, and more than 66% of respondents indicated that they supported students "through the death of a loved one; sexual violence; suicidal ideation, attempt, or completion; severe mental health episode; and/or hate crimes and discrimination" (p. 9). Notably, Lynch & Glass' (2019) instrument did not include any indicators of trauma that are associated with legal marginalization, and which the literature has identified as

particularly harmful for legally marginalized students, such as familial separation, deportation of

self or a loved one, or the revocation of DACA (Bazo Vienrich, 2021; Benuto et al., 2018;

Daftary, 2020; Flores Morales & Garcia, 2021; Kwon et al., 2020; Lopez, 2005; Marroquin,

2014; Montiel, 2016; Nguyen & Martinez, 2015; Schmalzbauer & Andrés, 2019; Shelton, 2020;

Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020; Rosas, 2020). Future development of this tool, or future research

that centers professionals who support legally marginalized students, should account for these

specific elements.

Jackson Preston et al. (2021) expanded Lynch & Glass' (2019) work via their assessment

of "the health impact of professional quality of life and self care" on professionals who

supported students in higher education. The professionals included in this survey worked as

faculty and staff who had "a formal role in at least one indicated student service area" including

academic advising, counseling and psychological services, and housing and residence life

(Jackson Preston et al., 2021, p. 166). The majority of respondents in this survey worked in

counseling and psychological services (Jackson Preston et al., 2021). Rather than focusing solely

on secondary trauma, Jackson Preston et al. assessed professional quality of life (burnout,

compassion satisfaction, and secondary traumatic stress), mindful self-care practices (including

self-compassion and purpose, supportive relationships, and supportive structures), and health-

related quality of life (as defined by the HRQOL-14 from the Centers for Disease Control).

While Jackson Preston et al.'s (2021) assessment included 559 respondents, a number almost

equal to Lynch & Glass' (2019) work, their sample populations varied. Rather than casting a

nationwide net, Jackson Preston et al. narrowed their focus to 22 regional comprehensive

institutions in the western United States. Similarly to Lynch & Glass (2019), Jackson Preston et

al. (2021) fielded responses from students, who also represented a nominal portion of the total

respondents (in this case, just 26 respondents). Respondents were asked to indicate in what

student service area they worked, a list that included centers supporting undocumented students.

While the inclusion of this indicator is a step forward for those who are interested in

understanding the unique experiences of the professional employees who support legally

marginalized students, Unfortunately, Jackson Preston et al. (2021) did not break down their

findings by participant profession. Hopefully the researchers will offer future publications that

isolate the data and/or findings in a manner that allows readers to identify information related to

professional employees who support legally marginalized students.

Research regarding professional employees in higher education offers a concerning

reflection of an overworked, underpaid, undersupported, group of caring professionals who do

their best with what they have.

Systemic Factors

The systems in which professional employees operate can shape their jobs in grand and

minute ways. Some scholars explicitly discussed systems in their work (see Harris & Patton,

2017; Shupp & Arminio), while others discussed concepts of systems (such as power,

hierarchies, minoritized, and marginalized) in their research design or findings (see Anderson,

2021; Garcia, 2015; Harrison, 2010).

Garcia (2015) explored how professional employees experienced their campus racial

climate at a Hispanic Serving Institution. Rather than using the term "system," Garcia discussed

the concept of a "microclimate" that varies from person to person. Using the Multicontextual

Model for Diverse Learning (MMDLE), Garcia conducted semi-structured interviews of six

professional employees, the majority of whom were Latina/o. Garcia (2015) found that distinct

microclimates impacted how professional employees experienced racial microaggressions. At the

time of its publication, Garcia's (2015) work filled a void in the research by "providing a nuanced description of their experiences" (p. 29). Garcia's work supports the purpose of this dissertation, which aims to develop a nuanced understanding of how a particular group of professional employees experiences the systems in which they operate.

Briscoe (2021) continued this conversation in their exploration of how professional employees experienced and made meaning of the campus racial climate and racialized instances at Predominantly White Institutions. Similar to other scholarship regarding professional employees, eleven of the twelve participants were female and seven of the participants were White. The participants described the explicit and implicit effect of the national socio-historical and political climate on their professional experiences. Although this particular research centered the issue of racism, it is still relevant to the professional employees who lead USRCs, who operate within the same national context. Briscoe (2021) found that the external sociopolitical systems, and the Trump era in particular "diabolically altered not just students experiences on campus but also staff members' ways of knowing" (p. 8). Regardless, the participants described that their White colleagues and students were often ignorant or indifferent to these challenges, even when there were racialized incidents on campus. Briscoe (2021) recommended that scholars should explore how professional employees experience and make sense of the current socio-historical and political climates within the United States—a recommendation that this dissertation will address. While Briscoe (2021) and Garcia (2015) centered on the racial identity of their participants, other scholars employed other boundaries to explore the role of systems in the experience of professional employees in higher education.

One example of this bounding is evident in research wherein scholars focused on professional employees who worked in particular offices or functional areas (see Anderson,

2021; Harris & Patton, 2017; Pryor & Hoffman, 2021). For example, Harris & Patton (2017) examined the experiences of the directors of Black culture centers. In their research, Harris & Patton (2017) identified systemic challenges at the micro and macrolevel. Macrolevel challenges included a lack of funding and the persistence of postracial ideologies among their colleagues, a challenge that was not unique to the participants centered in this work (see Anderson, 2021). Harris & Patton (2017) recommend two macrolevel resolutions, cross-campus collaborations and the fostering of relationships with alumni networks. While these suggestions could be useful to the professional employees of USRCs who are facing similar challenges, the alumni networks of USRCs are likely smaller than those of the Black culture centers featured by Harris & Patton (2017), due to the USRCs' comparatively younger age.

Separately, Anderson (2021) focused on 18 professional employees at a university "who provided direct services to students of Color, LGBTQ students, and first-generation students" (p. 362), all but one of whom were people of Color and/or LGBTQ-identified. While Anderson's (2021) work does not address undocumented students, this research can be useful to understand, broadly, how professional employees who hold marginalized identities describe their professional experiences and institutional systems. Participants discussed how their efforts to enact change were limited due to their position within the university's hierarchy, leading to feelings of burnout. Anderson (2021) placed responsibility on those who hold power in their systems to "address the structure, policies, and cultures that foster burnout" (p. 369). Anderson (2021) called the phenomenon of burnout among professional employees in higher education, a "vital concern" that is "particularly salient…amidst a global pandemic and international protests against racial police violence" (p. 368). This work turns the concept of burnout on its head,

transitioning the responsibility from the individual to the system that "burned through" these professional employees by taking advantage of their trauma and emotional labor.

The concept of an institution "burning through" marginalized employees aligns with struggles that professional employees have shared and can explain high rates of attrition in the field. For example, professional employees have expressed disappointment and frustration with their supervision experiences (Lamb et al., 2018; Marshall et al., 2016; Shupp & Arminio, 2012), and scholars have called for institutions to make systemic improvements to the supervisory experience (Shupp & Arminio, 2012). Another systemic challenge for professional employees is the lack of investment in adequately trained, accessible mental health professionals to support students (Lynch & Glass, 2018). The systemic marginalization of professional employees who bear the brunt of this burden "is a real, and potentially severe, byproduct of college student affairs work" (Lynch & Glass, 2018, p. 16). Given the important work performed by these professionals, it is worth commitment resources to understanding their lived experiences in their professional roles.

The majority of research regarding professional employees in higher education is informed by data collected from participants who identified as Women (see Jackson Preston et al., 2021; Lynch & Glass, 2019; Marshall et al., 2016; Martinez Hoy & Nguyen, 2021; Martinez Hoy et al., 2021; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Shupp & Arminio, 2012; Wilson, 2000; Wilson et al., 2016), White (see Jackson Preston et al., 2021; Lynch & Glass, 2019; Marshall et al., 2016; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Shupp & Arminio, 2012; Wilson et al., 2016), and heterosexual (see Jackson Preston et al., 2021; Lynch & Glass, 2019). Gaps arise when marginalized populations are excluded from research because marginalized students "are more likely to turn to student affairs professionals who reflect their background for support" (Jackson Preston et al., 2021, p. 174).

Scholars have found that this trend can lead to difficulties for employees who share marginalized

identities with the students they serve. Oftentimes professional employees who hold

marginalized identities carry the burden to provide emotional labor for no or little compensation

because they feel a "personal and professional obligation stemming from their identification with

students' experiences" (Anderson, 2021, p. 365). In this context, a number of researchers are

devoting their resources to conducting research with professional employees whose identities or

professional affiliations have otherwise been marginalized within the literature, including Black

women (Chance, 2021; Njoku & Evans, 2022), employees at community colleges (Gill &

Harrison, 2018; Lamb et al., 2018), queer professionals (Weiser et al., 2019), and employees

who support legally marginalized students (Martinez Hoy & Nguyen, 2021; Martinez Hoy et al.,

2020). In the following section, I will introduce the literature about Undocumented Student

Resource Centers and the professional employees that serve them.

Centering Legally Marginalized Students: Undocumented Student Resource Centers

USRCs are physical, on-campus centers that provide institutionalized support to

undocumented and DACAmented students and students from mixed-status families (Cisneros &

Valdivia, 2020). The specific focus of USRCs is important, as these students are often lumped in

with international students who have experiences and needs that vary widely from those of the

students served by USRCs (Shelton, 2020). Existing USRCs are generally the result of student

advocacy in response to the growing population of college students who are undocumented,

DACAmented, and/or from mixed-status families, and their barriers to inclusion in higher

education (Nienhusser et al., 2020; Shelton, 2020). The majority of institutions that have USRCs

are in California and, among all 59 USRCs nationwide, there is an equal distribution of these

offices between public 4-year (29) and public 2-year (29) institutions, with only one office

located at a private 4-year institution (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020).

USRCs have been documented to support the basic needs of students through resources

such as meal vouchers and food pantries, mental health supports, legal services, and

transportation support via transit passes and parking permits (Cisneros & Rivarola, 2020;

Nienhusser et al., 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2020). In addition to these needs, students report that

USRCs helped with the facilitation of college access, the breaking down of barriers (financial,

academic, and legal), the alleviation of fear, the fostering of *acompañamiento*, the promotion of

agency and advocacy, and the pursuit of postgraduate education and professional opportunities

(Rosas, 2020). Furthermore, USRCs have been shown to contribute to students' "persistence and

their feelings of belonging" (Sanchez, 2020, p. 139), thus allowing students to practice

vulnerability and manage mental health concerns with university employees they trusted (Brown,

2021).

The literature asserts that USRCs can help institutions adapt to "sociopolitical changes"

affecting their undocumented and DACAmented students, as well as those from mixed-status

families (Cisneros & Rivarola, 2020, p. 679), and can advocate for and support as they live

through crises—such as the coinciding pandemics of COVID-19 and the growth of racist

nativism and xenophobia worldwide (Hilhorst, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lai

(2020) argued for the importance of investing in school counselors for our nation's K-12 students

because their livelihood and wellbeing were upended over the course of an unimaginable year.

Similarly, the literature encourages that institutions increase their supports for and investment in

USRCs, positing that USRCs are especially valuable in uncertain or hostile policy environments,

"as changes in law, policy, and popular culture threaten to impose additional barriers to [legally

marginalized] students' already limited access to higher education" (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020, p. 63). USRCs, and the professional employees who serve them, can serve as ports in the storm for legally marginalized students who are struggling to weather the effects of marginalization amidst compounding crises, and are thus worthy of investment (Brown, 2021; Martinez Belmontes, 2020).

Professional Employees of USRCs

Most USRCs have only one professional employee and, if they have the financial resources, a graduate student employee or undergraduate student employee(s) (Tapia-Fuselier, 2021). The small staff size, which is similar to other identity-centered student services such as LGBTQ+ student centers, can limit programs and services, inhibit student outcomes, and serve to push the office and its staff to the margins of the institutional system (Pryor & Hoffman, 2021). The work performed by the professional employees of USRCs can be challenging and is not for everyone "as it requires critical care, out-of-the-box thinking, strategy, and an investment in the academic success of undocumented students" (Salcedo, 2020, p. 152). Professional employees who work at USRCs have the ability to change the narrative regarding negative and, at times, traumatic experiences that these legally marginalized students have reported in their interactions with faculty and staff (Baaz Medina, 2020; Brown, 2021; Shelton, 2020). In some instances, these negative and traumatic experiences can impact the lives of students who are undocumented, DACAmented, and/or who live in a mixed-status family for "many months and in some cases years" (Brown, 2021, p. 111). It is fitting, then, that scholars report that interactions with institutional staff, including professional employees, are more impactful than a students' interactions with their peers (Brown, 2021). Thankfully, professional employees of USRCs are in a position to provide direct support that can account for the nuances present in the

similarities and differences associated with being undocumented, DACAmented, and/or coming

from a mixed-status family (Shelton, 2020). In fact, in their case study of a particular USRC,

Salcedo (2020) found that students who interacted with the professional employee of USRCs

expressed gratitude for the ways in which the employee "cared about and listened to them. The

students felt they could always count on the [professional employee] to support them" (Salcedo,

2020, p. 148).

These professional employees have myriad responsibilities that range from educating

their peers on campus regarding the needs of students who are undocumented, DACAmented,

and/or come from mixed-status families, offering "counseling, advising, and mentorship to

students," and helping potential and current navigate institutional barriers (Nienhusser et al.,

2020, p. 9). USRC staff are generally more knowledgeable regarding the unique needs of their

students than other campus employees, a fact that, when combined with an ability to effectively

listen and empower their students, is vital to the success of students who are undocumented,

DACAmented, and/or from a mixed-status family (Brown, 2021; Martinez Belmontes, 2020;

Tapia-Fuselier, 2021). When the professional employees of USRCs perform their work with care

for the whole student and intentionally advocate for and provide moral support for their students,

they can help "move students from isolation and shame into pride and developing advocacy"

(Shelton, 2020, p. 2; see also Baaz Medina, 2020). On an individual scale, students report the

importance of positive interactions with the professional employees of USRCs, wherein the staff

celebrate students' achievements, have sincere conversations with students in an effort to better

understand their experiences, and practice empathetic listening in good times and bad (Salcedo,

2020; Shelton, 2020). It is especially important that the professional employees of USRCs have

highly developed listening skills, engaging their entire being in the process, which can make

these oft-marginalized "students feel like their problems were worthy of being heard" (Salcedo, 2020, p. 158). In response to research that centers on what students need and want from the professional staff of USRCs, there have been recent efforts to understand the experiences of the professionals (Cisneros et al., 2022; Tapia-Fuselier, 2022).

One example of such work is a study from Cisneros et al. (2022), who used phenomenology in an attempt to "center the perspectives of USRC practitioners to evidence best practices in student affairs and contribute to the development of undocumented student support services across institutions of higher education" (p. 1). This article establishes a precedent for the value of the inquiry at the heart of this dissertation. However—important distinctions exist between Cisneros et al.'s (2022) work and this dissertation. First, Cisneros et al. (2022) used Moustakas' (1994) iteration of phenomenology, which starkly contrasts with van Manen's (1990) iteration of hermeneutic phenomenology that I used in this dissertation (Dowling, 2007). Significantly, Moustakas (1994) preaches the practice of bracketing—believing that it is possible and beneficial for the researcher to separate themselves from the world so they can become an unbiased observer during the research process (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Neubauer et al., 2007). I embrace van Manen's (1990) approach, which "requires the researcher to acknowledge the role of history and social influences on the interpretive description of the individual's experience" (Lauterbach, 2018, p. 2885) and acknowledges that it is not possible or beneficial to separate oneself from the research and that no research can be unbiased (Neubauer et al., 2007). Secondly, the data for this work was collected in 2018, whereas the data for this dissertation was be collected in 2023 and 2024, and include experiences during the pandemic. Another example from the literature is a study from, Tapia-Fuselier (2022), who constructed an exploratory qualitative study that centers the professionals who run USRCs. Tapia-Fuselier's (2022) work

centered on the following research questions: "How do USRC professionals describe their professional role and responsibilities?" and "What sustains USRC professionals' motivation to serve, support, and advocate for undocumented students?" (p. 3). While there are overlapping interests between Tapia-Fuselier's research and my dissertation, there are differences in our methodology and research design. For example, Tapia-Fuselier's study intentionally recruited only those professionals who worked at 4-year institutions, while I am intentionally recruiting from both 2- and 4-year institutions. Additionally, Tapia-Fuselier's piece was vague regarding its methodological choices and research design—which I acknowledge could be a natural limitation of the publisher. However, the dissertation format allows me to be specific and detailed about my methodological choices and research design, which contributes to the field of scholarship. Lastly, Tapia-Fuselier did not address when their data was collected, which is significant due to the fluctuating socioeconomic and sociopolitical climates in which USRCs operate.

As previously stated, the existing literature regarding USRCs and their professional employees includes data that was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, there is a limit to the functionality and applicability of the existing findings and recommendations. In the conclusory section of this review, there are recommendations for how scholars can frame future research to account for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations: Exploring The COVID-19 Context

As of June 2023, the United States is still feeling the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and an impending economic crisis (Ball et al., 2022; Bernanke & Blanchard, 2023). Students who are undocumented, DACAmented, and/or come from mixed-status families are among the multitudinous marginalized communities whose livelihoods have been threatened due to the socioeconomic upheaval caused by the pandemic (Kantamneni, 2020). For example,

undocumented students and those students who rely on the support of undocumented family members were excluded from federal financial supports that were made available to their peers (Carlos Gomez & Meraz, 2021; Krauze, 2020). Given the fact that many of these students and their families already lived in a state of financial precarity, this exclusion during a time of dire need was particularly painful.

As scholars are able to invest resources into new research, those with the expertise and/or the passion to work with and serve legally marginalized students have myriad areas to explore. There is a need for research that focuses on USRCs and the professional employees who serve them. The nature of work in higher education was transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and there is much to learn about how professional employees have adapted (Kim, 2020). Such work could prove valuable in a climate where institutions are making difficult decisions regarding funding, in the wake of declining enrollment and increased operating costs (Friga, 2021). Regardless of how scholars focus their energies, new research regarding students who are undocumented, DACAmented, and/or come from mixed-status families, as well as the institutional supports that serve them, has the potential to provide an immediate impact on these students and the field. In the following section I discuss the conceptual frameworks that I use to inform my dissertation, which addresses this gap in the literature.

Conceptual Frameworks

This study presents three different frameworks that, when woven together, account for individual, organizational, and systemic influences that can shape how professional staff members experience their work at Undocumented Student Resource Centers. One of the frameworks is Community Cultural Wealth, an identity-centered theory that accounts for the individual skills, identities, and strengths that the professional staff bring to their roles that can

impact their day-to-day experience (Yosso, 2005). However, this approach focuses on the individual and neglects the role of external factors in one's experiences. The second framework is Tierney's (1988; 2008) framework for organizational culture. Tierney's (1988) framework presents six components of organizational culture that reflect "what is done [at an organization], how it is done, and who is involved in doing it" (p. 3). The six components of organizational culture presented by Tierney (1988) are environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership. While Tierney's framework accounts for the local, organization-level factors that can impact the experience of these professionals, the framework neglects the larger external context. The third framework is Critical Systems Thinking, a system-level framework that, while new to the world of education, has been applied to questions regarding organizational change in other fields (Muñiz et al., 2023). Critical Systems Thinking allows one to critically reflect upon a social system, its boundaries, and the role of power and marginalization in maintaining or challenging societal values. This framework is useful because research has shown that USRCs and the students they serve are immensely sensitive to the whims of those with power as well as to external socioeconomic and legal contexts (Sampaio & Fernández, 2023; Tapia-Fuselier, 2023; Vigil & Muñoz, 2023). By using CST in combination with Community Cultural Wealth and Tierney's theory of Organizational Culture, this research design accounted for some of the unique contexts that may inform the experiences and perceptions of the professional employees who work at USRCs and allowed for a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Fixsen et al., 2020). In particular, I adopted and incorporated the following strengths from each of the frameworks. From CCW, I embraced its asset-centered perspective and incorporated its conceptualization of capital into my interview protocols, analysis, and presentation of findings. From Tierney's (1988) framework for organizational culture, I

embraced its intended function to examine the internal mechanisms of an organization, the values of organizational decision-makers, and the culture that the organization creates and exists within. Lastly, from CST, I embraced its conceptualization of power and marginalization, the practice of boundary critique, and the space it creates to reflect upon systemic influences.

Although there is not a record of scholarship that uses these three frameworks in combination, there is a precedent for weaving multiple frameworks together in studying USRCs, for using one or two of these frameworks in partnership, and for using elements of these frameworks in tandem with other theories. Cisneros et al. (2022) used intersecting frameworks (validation, as well as marginality and mattering) in their examination of "the ways in which USRCs institutionally support undocumented students in higher education" (p. 2). Castrellón (2021) combined four frameworks (diffusion of responsibility, Critical Race Theory, racist nativism, and Critical whiteness studies) in their research that was centered at an HEI with a USRC. In this work, Castrellón (2021) sought to understand how institutional agents understood higher education access and resources for undocumented students, and how those students, in turn, understood the work of the institutional agents. Separately, Castrellón (2022) employed a combination of Critical Race Theory (and its emerging branches- UndocuCrit, LatCrit, and Racist Nativism) and policy enactment to understand how institutional agents at the same institution enacted policies that affected undocumented students, and how those students interpreted that work. This precedent has also been embraced by burgeoning scholars in their doctoral dissertations (Pryor & Hoffman, 2021; Salcedo, 2020; Sanchez; 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2020). For example, Tapia-Fuselier (2020) used three theoretical frameworks in their doctoral dissertation "to examine how USRC professionals and affiliates understand the development, role, and function of a USRC on a California community college campus" (p. i). Elsewhere,

Salcedo (2020) used a multi-pronged framework in their doctoral dissertation wherein they conducted a multi-method program evaluation of an individual USRC over a three-year period that centered the experiences of undocumented students.

In the following sections, I will further elaborate upon Community Cultural Wealth, Tierney's Organizational Theory, and Critical Systems Thinking. I will describe the frameworks as they were used in this work, define the relevant terms, and discuss how each framework has been used in similar scholarship. After introducing the frameworks, I will address how I integrated these theories to frame my research questions, context, and population.

Community Cultural Wealth

The first of the three frameworks that I used in this dissertation is Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), developed by Tara Yosso in 2005. CCW uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens to center, celebrate and recognize "the array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts" that marginalized communities use to "survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). As I approached this dissertation, I decided to select an individual-level framework that centered the assets of the participants. At the time of the research design, I did not know the ethnoracial identities of the professional employees of USRCs. However, in selecting an individual-level, assets-centered framework, I intentionally selected an approach that "begins with the perspective that Communities of Color are places with multiple strengths" (p. 82). The CCW framework was an appropriate choice for this dissertation because it "involves a commitment to conduct research, teach and develop schools that serve a larger purpose of struggling toward social and racial justice" (p. 82), a commitment that aligns with one of the key functions of a USRC as defined by the literature—the fight against racist nativism (Freeman-Wong et al., 2022).

Yosso (2005) developed CCW as a response to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital in which Bourdieu asserted that capital (cultural, social, and economic) is acquired through one's family and/or one's education (Yosso, 2005). Bourdeiu's model does not allow for other types and sources of capital, which is limiting for folks who have been marginalized by the cultural, social, and economic systems in the United States. In Bourdieu's framing, the dominant groups in society are able to maintain power because their sociocultural experiences are upheld as the standard. As a result of this framing, dominant social groups (in this case, White folks who are upper and middle-class) have been perceived as having assets that other groups lack. In this model, there are limited opportunities for people outside of the dominant social group to gain capital and power without striving for and adopting the values of the dominant group.

From this context, Yosso (2005) constructed CCW with influence from CRT, which has roots in Critical Legal Studies (CLS). CRT and CLS acknowledge the racialized, classist nature of systems in the United States, and that institutions such as higher education institutions, were constructed to favor those in power. Yosso (2005) envisioned CCW as a mechanism to center Communities of Color in the concept of capital in research, allowing one to "'see' that Communities of Color nurture cultural wealth through at least six forms of capital such as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital" (p. 77). These six forms of capital are neither "mutually exclusive [nor] static" (p. 77)—instead, these forms of capital build upon one another to develop a more holistic understanding of the wealth of knowledges within an individual and their community.

The CCW model incorporates six forms of cultural capital: aspirational, social, navigational, linguistic, familial, and resistant. *Aspirational capital* refers to one's resiliency and ability to remain hopeful for the future in the face of barriers and challenges, both real and

perceived. In the context of a USRC, these barriers could be institutional bureaucracy, as well as policies and laws related to immigration, amongst others. *Linguistic capital* refers to the ways in which multilingual and/or multistylistic communication skills impart unique intellectual and social skills. Included among these styles are modes of storytelling, as well as artistic means of communication such as music, poetry, and visual art. This form of capital is an appropriate partner to hermeneutic phenomenology, which puts significant stock in language and styles of communication (van Manen, 1990; Zschomler, 2019). *Familial capital* refers to the lessons and skills one learns from their family, such as means "caring, coping and providing. . . which inform our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Yosso (2005) expanded her definition of family beyond the biological, nuclear, or legal definition of family to encompass the communities that nurture one's development within and across families. This expanded conceptualization of family is worthy of consideration in this dissertation that selected participants due to their role as educators, providers, and caretakers within a community-centered office.

Social capital refers to the "networks of relationships and community resources" (p. 79) that one can use to access and persist through otherwise exclusionary systems, such as higher education, healthcare, and the legal system. This form of capital could be conceptualized as a peer network of professionals who work at USRCs where members receive and provide education and socioemotional support, websites that are dedicated to collecting resources that are relevant to the work of USRCs, and relationships with local community resources that support the mission of the office. *Navigational capital* refers to one's ability to practice resilience and navigate through institutions and systems, particularly those that are hostile toward marginalized groups. This form of capital acknowledges one's individual agency and also the social

connections that help one "not only survive, [but also] recover, or even thrive" (p. 80) before, during, and after one attempts to navigate a situation and/or institution that might otherwise result in marginalization. Lastly, *resistant capital* refers to the historical knowledges and skills that individuals and communities develop, maintain, and pass down in response to inequality and systems of oppression. At a USRC, this form of capital could be seen in the history of student resistance that led to the development of USRCs, beliefs regarding advocacy that a professional learned from their community, or in the ways that a professional might fight to challenge the deficit perspectives of legally marginalized students in a hostile campus environment.

Figure A: Community Cultural Wealth Model

Source: https://slideplayer.com/slide/13633967/

Application of Community Cultural Wealth in this Dissertation. Although CCW was created with Communities of Color in mind, in this dissertation, I applied the framework to a group of individuals without having prior knowledge of their race and/or ethnicity. I used Community Cultural Wealth to establish an asset-based framework in this work and incorporate reflections regarding asset-centered languages and practices in my iterative reflective practices. I embraced Yosso's (2005) perspective regarding the malleable nature of CCW, and her

recognition that it is likely that additional forms of cultural wealth exist. Lastly, Yosso's (2005) framework informed my research protocol and questions.

CCW in Practice. Over the past two decades, CCW has become a widely used framework in higher education research (Bañuelos, 2021; Denton et al., 2020; see also Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Butler et al., 2020). Higher education scholars have used CCW in a number of ways in their research regarding individuals who hold marginalized legal identities and the resources that support them. Some scholars used CCW as their sole framework (Rascón-Canales et al., 2023; del Socorro Ceja Ceja, 2021), while others used CCW in combination with additional frameworks (Margheiro et al., 2020; Salcedo, 2020). A number of scholars focused on specific forms of capital from CCW (Deeb-Sossa & Boulware, 2022), while still, others used CCW's asset-based perspective to inform their work (Banh & Radovic-Fanta, 2021; Martinez-Benyarko et al., 2022; Rascón-Canales et al., 2023). Existing scholarship that blends CCW with other identity-centered frameworks serves as an example for this work, which integrates CCW with other frameworks to narrow and focus the work to most suit the problem at hand.

For example, Rascón-Canales et al. (2023) used CCW as the sole theoretical framework in their study regarding how DACAmented students used aspects of community cultural wealth in the wake of the rescission of DACA. In addition to using CCW as their theoretical framework, Rascón-Canales et al. (2023) chose to approach their research from an asset-based perspective, and they viewed CCW as their foundation. Salcedo (2020) used CCW in combination with subtractive schooling and transformative leadership in their program evaluation of the USRC where they worked. Margheiro et al. (2020) used the concept of counterspace in partnership with CCW in their research into the experiences of early-career academics in neurosciences from underrepresented groups. Deeb-Sossa and Boulware (2022) used CCW to frame their research

with Latinx and Chicanx undocumented students. Although Deeb-Sossa and Boulware (2022) used CCW as a comprehensive framework, they focused on navigational capital in relation to developing a counterspace and practicing critical resistance. Martinez-Benyarko et al. (2022) used CCW in a different form for their research into the mentorship experiences of midlevel Latinx/a/o student affairs administrators. Rather than using CCW as their theoretical framework, Martinez-Benyarko et al. (2022) incorporated CCW's asset-based perspective and its six forms of capital in their definition of effective mentorship, the concept at the heart of their study.

Elsewhere, Banh and Radovic-Fanta (2021) used aspects of CCW in their examination of the "barriers and bridges" that first-generation DACAmented and undocumented students faced in their undergraduate careers. Banh and Radovic-Fanta (2021) used the concepts of cultural wealth to describe their population and stated their intention to structure their study in opposition to deficit models. In an unfortunate example of how ingrained deficit perspectives are in academia, immediately after Banh and Radovic-Fanta (2021) made declared their intentions, they cited Bourdieu while describing the students as those "who, compared to classmates with more resources, are unfamiliar [with] how to navigate the paths of higher education" (p. 7). This disconnect is a reminder for me to continually reflect upon whether I am walking the walk in my work.

By using CCW as the foundational, individual-level framework for this dissertation, I began with the perspective that there is inherent value in people who hold identities that have been marginalized by their social systems. Yosso (2005) envisioned CCW as a "commitment to conduct research. . .that [serves] a larger purpose of struggling toward social and racial justice" (p. 82). I intend for the dissertation to align with this larger purpose in service of the professionals who support students who hold marginalized legal identities, an intention that I

elaborated upon in the following sections. In the following section, I will describe my second

framework, Tierney's framework of Organizational Culture, and how it will address

organization-level factors that influence the experiences of the professional employees of

USRCs.

Tierney

While Yosso's (2005) model of Community Cultural Wealth allowed me to consider

which aspects of a professional employee's identity help "hold together" one's personal identity,

Tierney's (1988) framework of organizational culture allowed me to zoom out from the

individual level and consider what holds a USRC together as an organization.

Tierney's (1988) framework of organizational culture is concerned with "what is done,

how it is done, and who is involved in doing it" as well as the "decisions, actions, and

communication" that occur "on both an instrumental and a symbolic level" (p. 24).

Organizational culture is informed by the "internal dynamics" of the organization as well as the

"values, processes, and goals" of the actors who are "most intimately involved" in the inner

workings of the organization (p. 24). Researchers and interested parties can identify the culture

of an organization "through stories, special language, norms, institutional ideology, and attitudes

that emerge from individual and organizational behavior" (p. 25). This aspect of the

organizational culture framework made it an appropriate partner to hermeneutic phenomenology,

which is concerned with the lived experiences of individuals as expressed through language (van

Manen, 1990). Both van Manen's version of hermeneutic phenomenology and Tierney's concept

of organizational culture respect the importance of linguistic clarity.

One imperfection of Tierney's framework is that it was developed via a case study that

focused on one institution. However, Tierney (1988) recognized the limitations inherent in this

approach and viewed this framework as a "specific understanding of organizational culture" that

would allow future researchers "to expand upon the framework" (p. 29). Tierney's (1988)

philosophy regarding his framework is similar to Yosso's (2005) acknowledgment that the CCW

model is incapable of encapsulating a number of forms of wealth that individuals and their

communities bring to college campuses. Yosso's (2005) and Tierney's (1988) perspectives

regarding their frameworks made them appropriate conceptual partners to a constructivist

methodology, such as hermeneutic phenomenology.

In the context of Tierney's (1988) framework, organizational culture is defined as "the

study of particular webs of significance within an organizational setting" (p. 25). There are six

concepts that Tierney considers essential to the study of organizational culture in higher

education, 1) Environment, 2) Mission, 3) Socialization, 4) Information, 5) Strategy, and 6)

Leadership. However, Tierney was not so positivist that he considered these concepts to be the

end-all-be-all of organizational culture in higher education. Tierney recognized that this theory is

a "provisional framework" and the concepts therein are neither "static [nor] mutually exclusive"

(p. 39). Instead, Tierney acknowledges that the components of institutional culture interact with

one another, overlapping and connecting in "an interconnected web of relationships" (p. 29).

Although he acknowledged the breathing room in his theory of organizational culture, Tierney

created a structure that researchers can use to incorporate this theory into their scholarship.

Tierney provided scholars with a series of questions that one can use to understand the culture of

an organization. Rather than provide a concrete definition of the six concepts in his framework,

Tierney used a case study to answer these reflective questions and expand upon the meaning of

the six concepts. Table 1 includes a breakdown of the six concepts in Tierney's theory along

with their respective reflective questions and examples of the concepts from Tierney's case

study.

Although Tierney's (1988) framework on organizational culture was created from a case

study of a university, rather than an office within an institution, in this dissertation I applied the

framework to a particular type of office within an institution, the USRC. Specifically, I used

Tierney's framework to guide the construction of my interview protocols and as an analytical

framework to assist my analysis and construction of participant narratives (see Table 1).

Tierney's Theory of Organizational Culture in Practice. Within the higher education

scholarship there is an established practice of combining all or some of Tierney's framework

with other frameworks to create a conceptual framework that is more nuanced to the specific

research at hand (see Davis, 2013; Hall, 2018; Savarese, 2019; Villarreal, 2022). The practice of

combining Tierney's framework with others to enhance their specificity has a precedent in

doctoral dissertations (see Davis, 2013; Hall, 2018; McNamee, 2022; Savarese, 2019) and

journal articles (see Villarreal, 2022). Separately, some higher education scholars have used

Tierney's theory as an analytical framework (Kezar et al., 2022). Scholars have used Tierney's

framework in different ways to suit their research. At times, scholars have incorporated aspects

of Tierney's framework into their work, rather than the whole (see McNamee, 2022; Savarese,

2019). For example, components of Tierney's framework have been applied by scholars who

sought to understand the socialization experiences of student affairs employees (Savarese, 2019),

and those who sought to understand the experiences of working-class, rural students in higher

education (McNamee, 2022).

Notably, McNamee's (2022) conceptual framework combined aspects of Tierney's

framework with Yosso's (2005) theory of Community Cultural Wealth, a practice I incorporated

and expanded upon in this dissertation. Other scholars employed the entirety of Tierney's

framework (all six elements of culture) in the higher education context (see Davis, 2013; Hall,

2018). Hall (2018) used Tierney's theory of organizational culture in combination with Astin's

theory of student involvement (1999) as they sought to understand the experience of student-

athletes at an HBCU. One similarity between Hall's (2018) work and this research is that Hall

combined Tierney's theory with an identity-centered theory, thus allowing Hall to connect the

participants' "lived experiences and place" (p. 41). However, Hall (2018) used IPA, a form of

phenomenology that asks the user to bracket their preconceived notions, a practice that runs

contrary to van Manen's (1990) approach to hermeneutic phenomenology. Villarreal (2022) used

a similar approach, combining Tierney's theory with Anzaldúa's (1987) Borderlands theory, a

practice that Villarreal described as a marriage of meso- (organizational culture) and micro-

(Borderlands) levels that accounted for individual and group identities. Akin to Hall (2018),

Villarreal (2022) used a proximal form of phenomenology (Heideggerian) in their work.

Elsewhere, Davis (2013) used Tierney's framework in their mixed-methods study regarding

hazing and organizational culture in historically White fraternities. Although Davis (2013) did

not incorporate a framework in a similar manner to Hall (2018) or Villarreal (2022), Davis did

Table 1

Tierney's Organizational Culture Framework and Examples of Application: Interview Protocol

Concept	Reflective Questions	Examples from Tierney's Case Study	Potential Interview Questions	Examples of Applied Interview Questions (see Appendix C)

Environment	• How does the organization define its environment?
	• What is the attitude toward the environment? (Hostility? Friendship?)
		Described through facets such as where students come from and where they reside after college; the socio-economic status of the neighboring communities; the impact of state policy.	• Please tell me about the physical space of your USRC.
			  ○ Where is it located? How accessible is it? What aspects of the space are important to how one experiences it?
			• How do you feel in your space?
			  ○ When you think about the space, what do you think are the most important elements for you and your job?
			• How do people tend to react to your office?
			  ○ Does there seem to be a difference based on someone's relationship to the office?
				1. What is your physical office environment like?
				  a. Where in this space do you do your work?
				    i. What is in your field of vision?
				  b. What is it like to be in that space, doing the work?
				  c. What aspects of this space are meaningful to your work?
				  d. Does this office have what you need to perform your job successfully?

Mission	• How is it defined?
	• How is it
		Discussed in reference to the published written mission of the	• If your office has a mission…
			  ○ What is it?
				2. Does your office have a mission?
				  a. If so, what is it?

	articulated? ● Is it used as a basis for decisions? ● How much agreement is there?	institution; how the mission interacts with the environment; the means through which the mission is communicated by the president of the institution.	○ How do you communicate it, and to whom? ○ How frequently do you edit your mission? ○ How is your mission used? ○ How does the mission relate to your role?	b. How do you communicate it, and to whom? c. How do you employ your mission?

Socialization	● How is it articulated?
	● What do we need to know to survive/excel in this organization?
		Described in the words of the participants and their perspective of the social environment at the institution, especially as it relates to social and professional norms and the power dynamics of the institutional leadership structure.	● If there are multiple employees in the office…
			  ○ How are your relationships with your coworkers?
			  ○ What do you think an employee needs to know to excel in this office?
			● Think about your colleagues outside of this office, across the university…
			  ○ How are your relationships with your colleagues?
			  ○ What do you think an employee needs to know to excel at this institution?
			● What roles do power and bureaucracy play in the social environment at this campus?
				1. What role does power play in your work?
				a. Think about a time when power intersected with your work, what was that experience like?
				b. Can you remember how you physically felt at that moment?
				c. How were your relationships impacted by that experience?
				d. Who should have power in this office?

Information	● What constitutes information?	Focused on how receptive the president was to receiving	● What information do you collect in your role?	1. What information do you collect in your role?

	• Who has it? • How is it disseminated?	communication from stakeholders, how the president communicated, and to whom. Also concerned with formal and informal networks of communication.	• What information would you collect if you had more resources? • What information do you distribute in your role? • What information would you distribute if you had more resources? • Is there any information that you choose not to collect and/or distribute? Would you be willing to share what types of information fall into these categories? • What information do you need to know to be successful in your role? ○ Do you have access to all of the information you need? What or who could help you get the information you need?	2. What information do you distribute in your role? 3. What does someone need to know to be successful in this role?

Strategy	• Which strategy is used?
	• Who makes decisions?
	• What is the penalty for bad decisions?
		Concerned how decisions were made. Was there a formal process? An informal process? Who was involved in the decision-making process? In this particular case, the concept of strategy	• When you think about your role, how are you involved in decision-making processes that relate to your responsibilities?
			• How are others involved in those decision making processes?
			• How would you describe the structure of these decision-
				1. What role do you play in decision-making processes that relate to your responsibilities?
				   a. How are others involved in those processes?
				   b. What is your relationship with these other people?

		focused on the individual in power and how they used communication, time, and space to influence stakeholders.	making processes? Are there formal or informal decision-making processes?	c. Who do you believe should be involved in the decision-making process that relates to your responsibilities?

Leadership	● What does the organization expect from its leaders?
	● Who are the leaders?
	● Are there formal and informal leaders?
		Discussed in relation to the university's president and how they practiced the five other concepts in the theory to influence the institutional culture.	● What is expected of the leadership of this office?
			● Who are the formal and informal leaders of this office?
			● What is expected from these leaders?
				1. Who are the formal leaders in your office?
				  a. What is expected of them?
				  b. How have those expectations changed over time?
				2. Who are the informal leaders in your office?
				  a. What is expected of these informal leaders?
				  b. What is your relationship with them?

acknowledge that Tierney's framework helps researchers account for myriad internal and external factors that influence the culture and subcultures of an organization.

Tierney (1988) acknowledged that organizational culture is influenced by entities "at many levels, within the department and the institution, as well as at the system and state level" (p. 26). Combining CCW and Tierney's framework for Organizational Culture allowed me to address the role of the individual identity and organizational culture on the experiences of the professional employees of USRCs. In the following section, I will describe my third framework, Critical Systems Thinking, and how it addresses systemic factors that influence the experience of the professional employees of USRCs.

Critical Systems Thinking

The third framework that informed this research is Critical Systems Thinking (CST), an advancement of systems thinking that was popularized by scholars such as Flood & Ulrich (1990), Jackson (1991), and Midgley (1991). In the 1970s, systems thinking was a positivist, functional theory that was ill-suited to address social systems (Jackson, 1982; Jackson, 2001). Critics of systems thinking argued that, to evolve into a practice that could address "issues related to people's differing world views, values, and interests," any developments to systems thinking would need to be grounded in the hermeneutic paradigm (Ulrich, 2012, p. 1233). In response to critics who found traditional systems thinking to be limiting, systems thinking developed into two approaches: hard systems (aligned with traditional systems thinking) and soft systems, the second of which led to CST. Soft systems approaches operate from the assumption that the social world is "the creative construction of human beings" (Jackson, 1982, p. 18). This evolution away from a paradigm that was rooted in "empirical observation of reality" toward a more interpretive paradigm made CST an appropriate partner for CCW, Tierney's theory of

organizational culture, and hermeneutic phenomenology (Jackson, 2001, p. 235; see also, Jackson, 1982). Additionally, this critical approach is well suited to this dissertation which is centered on a real-world social problem (Jackson, 2001).

CST allows one to critically assess the functions and impacts of a social system according to the perspective of a stakeholder, paying special attention to issues of power, marginalization, and emancipation (Bentley & Clarke, 2011; Cordoba & Midgley, 2008; Midgley 1997; Muñiz et al., 2023). Scholars of CST reject the notion of a single universal truth, arguing instead that systems are individually constructed and can be explored in many different ways, thus giving "rise to multiple understandings of the system in question" (p. 547, see also Ulrich, 1983, 1988; Flood & Ulrich, 1990). Given this constructivist bent, CST is an appropriate framework to use in partnership with hermeneutic phenomenology (Romm, 2002) because scholars of CST reject the notion of universal truth, arguing instead that systems are individually constructed (Ulrich, 1983, 1988; see also, Flood & Ulrich, 1990; Midgley, 1997). Further, just as hermeneutic phenomenology rejects the practice of bracketing oneself, CST tasks scholars to continually engage in critical reflection of their underlying assumptions, as well as those of others, "rather than concealing them behind a veil of objectivity" (Ulrich, 1983 as seen in Midgley, 1997, p. 41).

CST is an evolving framework that is informed by an ongoing conversation among scholars and practitioners from myriad fields including systems thinking, information sciences, and management (Cordoba and Midgley, 2008; Muñiz et al., 2023; see also Bentley & Clarke, 2011). Although CST has been embraced by scholars in somewhat disparate realms of academia, Cordoba and Midgley (2008) identified three core principles that were embraced by those participating in the dialogue regarding CST across disciplines: critical awareness, improvement,

and methodological pluralism. Critical awareness involves the process of iteratively examining

one's values and taken-for-granted assumptions, as well as the conditions and context that lead to

their existence (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008; Stephens et al., 2019). Improvement, or

emancipation, is concerned with the well-being and potential of individuals (Stephens et al.,

2019), as well as issues of power in the situation of interest (Bentley & Clarke, 2011; Muñiz et

al., 2023). This concept is "defined temporarily and locally, but in a widely informed manner"

(Cordoba & Midgley, 2008, p. 132). In practice, this means that different stakeholders could

define improvement in different ways, and there could be disagreement regarding whether an

intervention is actually an improvement (Midgley, 2003). Improvement is valuable to CST

because scholars recognize that there is a limitation to the number and quality of interventions

that one can attempt in any given situation (Midgley, 2003). The third core principle,

methodological pluralism is defined as "using a variety of intervention methods in a theoretically

coherent manner" (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008, p. 132). Embracing methodological pluralism

allows scholars to account for the strengths and weaknesses of various systems methodologies as

they evolve, and allows them to account for the complexity and nuances of particular contexts

and situations of interest (Kogetsidis, 2012).

As scholars continued debating the components and functions of CST, a delineation

occurred between scholarship that focused on methodological pluralism and critically informed

practice, and scholarship that focused on boundary critique (Torres-Cuello et al., 2018).

Scholarship that focused on methodological pluralism and critically informed practice was

centered on the appropriateness of choices that researchers make regarding theory and

methodology in relation to the context of their work (Jackson, 1991, 2002, & 2003; see also,

Cordoba & Midgley, 2008; Muñiz et al., 2023). Separately, scholars focused on *boundary*

critique, a means of reflecting upon the values and boundaries of a situation at hand (Midgley & Cordoba, 2008; Muñiz et al., 2023). The practice of *boundary critique* allows one to develop a nuanced understanding of a given system, situation, or problem (Midgley & Cordoba, 2008; Muñiz et al., 2023). I focused on the practice of *boundary critique* in this dissertation, which I will discuss in more detail in the next paragraph.

From Boundaries to Boundary Critique. Prior to the advent of "critical systems thinking", Churchman (1970), a systems thinking scholar, argued that system boundaries are social constructs that define "the knowledge and people to be considered relevant in a social design" and allow us to determine inclusion and exclusion criterion for analysis (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008, p. 132; Rajagopalan & Midgley, 2015). Ulrich (1983, 1988) extended the conversation regarding boundaries in systems thinking and connected it to critical theory (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008). Just as Churchman (1970) had a practical and conceptual perspective on boundaries, so too did Ulrich. Ulrich (1983, 1988) argued that there is a connection between values and boundaries and that taken-for-granted values impact the boundaries we create, whether or not we acknowledge these values. Ulrich (1983) also viewed boundaries as helpful during research design and analysis, as they are a means of "defin[ing] a stopping point in our work, identifying what is and is not relevant to our work" (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008, p. 133). Midgley advanced the discussion regarding boundaries in the 1990s and 2000s and tied it to "social processes of marginalization, whereby some stakeholders and/or issues may be devalued and even made invisible" (Rajagopalan & Midgley, 2015, p. 547). Marginalization occurs when stakeholders have different beliefs regarding the situation of interest and, thus, there is conflict or disagreement regarding where boundaries should be set (Rajagopalan & Midgley, 2015). Midgley advanced Churchman's definition of boundaries to

account for not only "*what issues* [sic] are to be included, excluded, or marginalized in

analyses," but also "*who* [sic] is to be consulted or involved" (Midgley, 2003; p. 89)—a

development that married issues of power and participation to the concept of boundaries.

CST accepts that there are two types of boundaries in a system: primary boundaries and

secondary boundaries. These boundaries are explicit or implicit expressions of value to those

who hold power in a system, value to the members of the wider system, as well as relegated to

the margins of those not valued (Midgley, 1992). The primary boundary within a system reflects

who/what is valued by those in power (Midgley et al., 1998). When elements are included in the

primary boundary, they are considered to be "centered". The process of including elements in the

primary boundary is called "centering". The secondary boundary within a system reflects the

values/ethics of those who do not hold power at a given time (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008;

Midgley, 1992). Elements that fall beyond the secondary boundary are seen as irrelevant to the

situation of interest by those who hold power (Midgley et al., 1998). The liminal space between

the primary and secondary boundaries is referred to as the margins. The margins contain

elements that are considered important to those who embrace the secondary boundary, yet less

valuable to those who embrace the primary boundary (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008). When one

views the elements in the margins as "profane" or devalued, one reinforces the legitimacy of the

primary boundary and engages in marginalization (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008). Marginalization,

be it intentional or unintentional, occurs when an element is impacted by a situation of interest,

but is not considered valuable by those in power. On the other hand, when one considers the

elements in the margins to be "sacred" or valuable, one reinforces the legitimacy of the

secondary boundary (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008). As societal norms and values change, elements

can migrate across boundaries, and boundaries can change as power shifts from one entity to

another (Midgley, 1992).

Boundary critique is the process of reflecting upon and discussing the values and

boundaries that influence a given system (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008). Scholars can use

boundary critique to investigate and attempt to explain issues of marginalization in social spheres

wherein there are "undesirable conditions from which people need emancipation" (Raza, 2021,

p. 2; Rajagopalan & Midgley, 2015). This process is intended to allow those affected by

marginalization to voice their concerns to involved parties (Raza, 2021). One important caveat

for boundary critique is that it is impossible for this process to be "*absolutely* [sic]

comprehensive" (Cordoba & Midgley, 2008, p. 132; see also, Midgley, 2003). Regardless,

Cordoba and Midgley (2008) believe that any potential negative consequences of an imperfect

critique would be offset by the associated benefits, allowing "for greater comprehensiveness than

taking a given (organisational) [sic] boundary for granted" (p. 132).

CST in the Literature. There is a limited pool of researchers who have applied CST in

an educational context, and fewer who have applied it to higher education (Muñiz et al., 2023).

One such example is Bentley and Clarke (2011), who applied the principles of CST to their

evaluation of information systems in higher education in the United Kingdom (Bentley & Clarke,

2011). Bentley and Clarke (2011) incorporated the principles of CST in their proposed

framework for information strategies evaluation at HEIs. Similar to this dissertation, Bentley and

Clarke (2011) incorporated organizational culture in their proposed framework. Unlike this

dissertation, which centers on Tierney's work regarding organizational culture, Bentley and

Clarke (2011) cited Schein (1995), as well as Wit and Meyer (2005) in their conceptualization of

organizational culture.

Scholars have used other frameworks that incorporate aspects of CST in their work. For

example, Castrellón (2022) wove four frameworks together in their research regarding both the

practices of institutional agents in the admissions office of a 4-year institution, and how

undocumented students understand these actions. Three of the frameworks that Castrellón (2022)

employed were identity-centered and focused on emancipation: CRT and two of its extensions—

LatCrit, and UndocuCrit. The fourth framework was policy enactment, which centers the

participants' "sociopolitical and sociohistorical context at macro and microlevels, as well as the

environment and institutional contexts" (Castrellón, 2022, p. 483). Castrellón's (2022) fourth

framework addresses the concept of nested systems and the potential influence these entities can

have on the experiences of individuals within an institutional context. Castrellón's (2022) work

is an example of how one can combine aspects of CST (accounting for the power and influence

of multiple contexts and systems) and asset-centered frameworks that are rooted in CRT, similar

to CCW.

In the preceding paragraphs, I describe how CST allowed me to engage in "a holistic

analysis of complex social problems and interventions," just as others have before me (Fixsen et

al., 2020, p. 2). Adding CST to CCW and Tierney's theory of Organizational Culture allowed me

to address not only the role of individual identity and organizational culture on the experiences

of the professional employees of USRCs, but also the influence of local, national, and

international systems that influence their daily lives. In the next section, I will discuss how I

integrated these three frameworks.

Integration of Frameworks & Conclusion

The three frameworks that I employed in this dissertation, CCW, Tierney's Model of

Organizational Change, and CST are connected to different aspects of the research questions at

the center of this dissertation. RQ1: "*What are the lived experiences of the professional*

employees who work at USRCs?" is primarily connected to Tierney's (1988) model of

organizational change. This question is focused on the lived experiences of respondents in

relation to their professional roles. RQ1a: "*What personal factors inform their experiences in*

their role?" is primarily connected to CCW. This question centers on the personal identities and

assets of the participants. RQ2: "*What are the experiences of USRC professionals when they*

encounter systemic factors, ranging from the centered to the marginalized?" is primarily

connected to CST. This question is intended to create space for reflection on the influence of

external systems on the lived experiences of the professionals who work at USRCs.

In this chapter, I discussed the state of the literature as it relates to this dissertation and

introduced the frameworks that I am using to inform my work. In the following chapter, I will

introduce the methodology that I employed in this dissertation, as well as my methods.

Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of professional employees who work at USRCs, with the intent of centering the voices of professionals who support students that are marginalized within higher education. In pursuing this purpose, this research engaged in a qualitative study with a hermeneutic phenomenological research design and a constructivist paradigm.

Hermeneutic phenomenology and constructivism pair well to pursue the functions of hermeneutic phenomenology, as both schools of thought embrace the idea of relativism (Guba & Lincoln, 2004; Lauterbach, 2018; Nigar, 2020; Urcia, 2021). Hermeneutic phenomenology is appropriate for this study because it allows the researcher and the participants to explore "the nature of the things, the essence and the veracity of the phenomena" (Fuster Guillen, 2019, p. 217), and share their experiences "in their own voices and on their own terms" (Woodley & Lockard, 2016, p. 324; see also, Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Scholars use hermeneutic phenomenology 'to touch the mystery of [a] place'" and look "for 'a glimpse of deeper meanings sequestered in time and cultural distance'" (Green et al., 2021, p. 2). Unlike scholars who embrace positivist and post-positivist paradigms, hermeneutic phenomenological scholars acknowledge that their role is not to discern the absolute truth, instead their responsibility is to point "to what is happening" (Crowther & Smythe, 2013, p. 10). A constructivist paradigm is an appropriate choice for this research because, similarly to hermeneutic phenomenology, the paradigm is rooted in relativism, where it is assumed that human intellects can produce "multiple, apprehendable, and sometimes conflicting social realities" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). I look forward to exploring the potentially variegated experiences of these professionals via a paradigm that makes space for the unique nature of human experience.

While there are a number of ways in which researchers can and have engaged hermeneutic phenomenology in their work, this study is informed by van Manen's (1990) recommendations regarding the ethical application of hermeneutic phenomenology in education research from *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. In the first section of this chapter, I will outline the five research activities that van Manen (1990) described as working together to inform the methodical process of hermeneutic phenomenological research.

In the second section of this chapter, I will discuss the methods that I undertook while pursuing this research. As is appropriate for hermeneutic phenomenological research that is rooted in a constructivist paradigm, the knowledge generated by the research was "constructed in interaction among investigator and respondents" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). The aim of this co-construction was to develop a dialogic relationship between me and the participants as we created a faithful reconstruction of their experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Urcias, 2021). In this section, I address the steps that I took to ensure ethical and humane practices throughout my research processes, including the steps I took to secure participant confidentiality and informed consent. At this point, I discuss the practices used to ensure rigour and robustness of the research. Rounding out this chapter is a third section wherein I discuss the limitations and delimitations of this study, and expound upon my positionality as a researcher.

Methodology: Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a German philosophical tradition that emerged in the early 1900s when Martin Heidegger broke from the established field of phenomenology that he learned from Edward Husserl, his one-time employer, mentor, and "fatherly friend" (Herskowitz, 2020, p. 402). Husserl saw phenomenology as a way to understand the essential aspects of lived

experience "as it appears to consciousness or to the *things themselves* [sic]" (Urias, 2021, p. 4).

Husserl embraced a post-positivist approach to phenomenology, believing that scholars should

strive to perform research that "is the rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear in

order to arrive at an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience" (Dowling,

2007, p. 132; Urias, 2021). A key concept in Husserl's approach is phenomenological reduction.

This is a practice intended to reduce researcher bias by first bracketing "our 'naïve' everyday

attitude toward objects," focusing our concentration on the object as it appears to us, then

"drawing from the object's particular manifestation the essential structures of 'pure'

consciousness that constitute it" (Herskowitz, 2020, p. 494). Heidegger disagreed with the

concept of bracketing, arguing that Husserl's belief in the possibility of a "context free and

disengaged perspective" was an "unrealizable aspiration" (Herskowitz, 2020, p. 494). Instead,

Heidegger encouraged the practice of reflection and knowledge co-creation with participants,

one of the distinctions between Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's hermeneutic

phenomenology (Urcia, 2021). This disagreement was the beginning of the end of Husserl and

Heidegger's relationship (Herskowitz, 2020). Their dynamic only worsened as Heidegger

aligned himself with the Nazi party, a group that classified Husserl as a Jew even though he

converted to Christianity during his life. Husserl died in 1938, before Germany invaded Poland,

and his letters and library were smuggled to Belgium (Herskowitz, 2020). I wrestled with

Heidegger's history in my decision to use hermeneutic phenomenology in this dissertation. I find

it important to acknowledge his involvement in a system that applied law and policy to commit

genocide. The United States has similarly applied laws and policies to commit genocide and

destroy lives. I hope that I was able to take what is useful from this field of scholarship and apply

it with a critical lens in an effort to create a more just society.

Heidegger's approach to phenomenology aligned with the interpretive paradigm. This ontological shift is reflected in his belief that consciousness cannot be separated from the world, instead, it is "with Dasein or situated human existence of being-in-the-world" (Urcia, 2021, p. 4; see also, Nigar, 2020). Dasein is a term that is related to one's connectedness to the immediate moment— "being that has the ability to question its Being" (Kakkori, 2009, p. 22). Meaning is then made by reflecting upon one's day-to-day experiences as they relate to "objects, space, time, embodiment, and interaction with other human beings" (Urcia, 2021, p. 4). In the Heideggerian school, hermeneutic phenomenology embraces the interpretive perspective that there is no single worldview, that instead we create a shared knowledge via a subjective process (Nigar, 2020; Urcia, 2021). Heidegger believed that linguistic descriptions are subject to interpretation. Language is a medium of translation, just like other art forms, such as sculpture and painting. Anytime we seek to interpret the meaning of someone's words, we are actually interpreting their interpretation of their lived experience (Nigar, 2020). Heidegger's approach birthed several methodologies, including the descriptive phenomenological psychological method, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, and van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology, the last of which I used in this dissertation (Dowling, 2007; Urcia, 2021).

van Manen's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

There is not a prescriptive methodology associated with van Manen's (1990) phenomenology, however, van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology incorporates conceptual guidance and a procedural process. In the following section, I will discuss this guidance and process and how I employed them. After that, I will describe the methods I used in this dissertation.

Conceptual Guidance: Lifeworld Existentials as Guides to Reflection. van Manen's approach to meaning-making in hermeneutic phenomenology echoes Heidegger's approach in its conceptualization of how one can understand the lifeworld and acknowledge the centrality of the lifeworld to the science of phenomenology. The Heideggerian approach centers the concepts of "objects, space, time, embodiment, and interaction with other human beings" (Urcia, 2021, p. 4). van Manen (1990) advanced that terminology in his frame, providing four "existentials" upon which a researcher can base aspects of their research design (p. 101). These existentials ground human experience and can serve as guides for researchers. Individually identifiable, yet intrinsically intertwined, the four elements that together form the lifeworld are: "*lived space* (spatiality), *lived body* (corporeality), *lived time* (temporality), and *lived human relation* (relationality or communality)" (p. 101; see also, Table 2). van Manen's engagement in the world of lived experience makes sense given my interest in professionals who work in Undocumented Student Resource Centers, which are physical locations that are dedicated to the support of these students. The literature argues that the physical nature and the students' experience of the space is vital to its potential effectiveness (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Rosas, 2020; Sanchez, 2020; Shelton, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2020).

Procedural. The specific aspects of research design that van Manen focuses on are phenomenological question posing, reflecting, and writing. There are five research activities that van Manen (1990) described as working together in "dynamic interplay" to form the "elemental methodical structure" of hermeneutic phenomenological research: 1) Investigating experience as we live it; 2) Reflecting on essential themes; 3) The art of writing and rewriting; 4) Maintaining a strong and oriented orientation; 5) Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (p. 31).

Investigating Experience As We Live It. van Manen's approach brings the German

philosophical tradition toward a practical bent—applying phenomenological concepts to a human

Table 2

The Lifeworld

Lived Experience	Concept	Meaning	Example	Examples of Applied Interview Questions (see Appendix C)
Lived Space	Spatiality	Felt Space "Both the way in which the space we find ourselves in can affect the way we feel and, conversely, how the way we feel can affect the way we experience a particular space" (Rich et al., 2013, p. 12)	Sense of being in a physical space Ex: a cozy chair for reading (van Manen, 1990, p. 102)	1. How do you physically feel when you are working in this space? 2. Does this experience change depending on who is in the space or how the space is being used?
Lived Body	Corporeality	What we reveal and conceal about our physical body (to ourselves and others, intentionally and unintentionally) "All that we feel, reveal, conceal, and share through our lived body" (Rich et al., 2013, p. 12)	Ex: How we may feel under a critical gaze Ex: How we may feel when our office has windows v. when our office doesn't have windows	1. Can you remember how you physically felt in that moment
Lived Time	Temporality	Subjective time as opposed to clock time or objective time (van Manen, 1990, p. 104)	Ex: The time passed during the last two minutes of a professional football game	1. How long have you worked in this role? 2. When you think about

				your experience, does it feel like that much time has passed?
Lived Human Relation	Relationality of Communality	A "lived relation we maintain with other in the interpersonal space that we share with them" (van Manen, 1990, p. 104) "Include[s] the communications and relationships we experience with others through the spaces and interactions we share and create with them" (Rich et al., 2013, p. 12)	Ex: How our relationships with our students motivate our work	1. Were there people in your life that influenced your journey to this role? 2. Have you been able to share this experience with them? How has that felt? 1b. How are you connected with them?

science-centered methodology (Urcia, 2021). This approach combines descriptive and

interpretive elements which is reflected in van Manen's embrace of concepts from Husserl and

Heidegger (Urcia, 2021). Husserl and Heidegger are both visible in van Manen's advancement of

hermeneutic phenomenology. Early phenomenological concepts from Husserl—lived

experience, consciousness, essences, and thoughtfulness—co-exist with Heideggerian concepts

regarding interpretation and meaning making. One important aspect of van Manen's approach is

"intersubjectivity. . . wherein researchers build a dialogic relationship with participants" (Urcia,

2021, p. 5; see also, Lauterbach, 2018). This relationship enriches and enhances the rigour of the

research process.

van Manen (1990) describes hermeneutic phenomenological research as a science that "is

interested in the human world *as we find it*," and the role of the researcher as one who must

"meet human beings. . . where they are naturally engaged in their worlds" (p. 18). Considering the importance of meeting human beings where they are, it makes sense that van Manen considered it imperative that hermeneutic phenomenological research account for the context in which the lived experience occurred (Dibley et al., 2020; Lauterbach, 2018; van Manen, 1990; Wertz et al., 2011). When one decides to undertake hermeneutic phenomenological research with van Manen's philosophy, one decides to work in close relationship with the participants to ask the question: "what is the nature of this phenomenon. . . as an essentially human experience" (p. 62). The human experience is oriented in the concept of the lifeworld, which is both "the source and the object of phenomenological research" (p. 53). Scholars who embark upon hermeneutic phenomenological research cannot take for granted what they think they know about the experience in question. To avoid being blinded by our presuppositions, scholars must "search everywhere in the lifeworld for lived-experience material that, upon reflective examination, might yield something of its fundamental nature" (p. 53; see also Nigar, 2020; Wertz et al., 2011). The researcher is encouraged to vigorously engage in their process with subtlety and sensitivity in order to develop a broad reflection of the notions which make these phenomena unique. Although van Manen has high expectations of researchers, he acknowledges that the *doing* of hermeneutic phenomenology is Sysiphean— "to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal" (p. 18). Nonetheless, I embraced this challenge enthusiastically.

   Reflecting on Essential Themes. van Manen (1990) shared several means of reflecting on essential themes, including collaborative analysis via group conversations and gaining understanding through artistic sources. In this research I focused on interpretation through

conversation and isolating thematic statements from written sources, such as written transcripts.

The following subsections introduces van Manen's philosophical and methodological approaches

to those means of collecting and analyzing data.

     Interpretation through Conversation. The *hermeneutic interview* is a means of opening

oneself up to the phenomenon in question by engaging in what Gadamer (1975) described as

"the dialogic structure of questioning answering" (p. 98). van Manen describes the interview's

conversational structure as a triad, wherein the participants are in a conversational relationship

with each other, and they are involved in a conversational relationship with the phenomenon that

unites them. The researcher is responsible for keeping the participants oriented to the

phenomenon in question, for keeping the question open, and for ensuring that the relationship

does not become exploitative. During this process, the participant becomes invested in the

researcher, to the point of becoming a co-investigator. The dialogic structure of hermeneutic

interviewing is bolstered by centering the spirit of friendship and collaboration in a series of

interviews wherein the participants can reflect on the developing themes or transcripts from

earlier conversations. During these follow-up conversations, the researcher and participant

consider the developing themes in relation to the original phenomenological question by asking:

"Is this what this experience is really like?" (p. 99). van Manen describes the goal of this process

to be a cyclical reconnecting with the original participants to discuss the emerging themes in

relation to their lived experience. van Manen does not provide concrete direction for this process,

rather he encourages the researcher to chase what Bollnow (1982) described as the "fulfilled

silence" that comes from "the truth of life, the state of being in truth that has been achieved in the

conversation" (p. 46). A fulfilled silence does not mean that all topics are exhausted. Rather the

conversation has slowed to a point of silence and the participants are left with a feeling of satisfaction and a call to further the work.

   Isolating Thematic Statements. Practically, van Manen identified three approaches to isolating thematic aspects from written forms, included transcriptions: a *wholistic* or *sententious* approach, a *selective* or *highlighting* approach, and a *detailed* or *line-by-line* approach. In this research, I used the *detailed* approach wherein I reviewed selected clusters of text and asked myself: "*What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?"* (p. 93). Throughout this process, I began to identify commonalities in the texts which I held "on to. . . by listing appropriate phrases or by capturing in singular statements the main thrust of the meaning of the themes." (p. 93). van Manen recommends that researchers practice active memoing as they gather and reflect upon more sources so they may "capture thematic statements in more phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs" (p. 95). Researchers can use these paragraphs to develop a narrative that reflects a function of phenomenology, which "attempts to systematically develop a certain narrative that explicates themes while remaining true to the universal quality or essence of a certain type of experience" (p. 97). As the researcher systematically teases out the phenomenological narratives, van Manen asks them to practice free imaginative variation to consider which themes are incidental to the phenomenon, and which are essential to its essence. van Manen encourages the researcher to consider: "*Is the phenomenon still the same if we imaginatively change or delete this theme from the phenomenon? Does the phenomenon without this theme lose its fundamental meaning?*" (p. 107). The researcher can reverse this process as a means of strengthening their analytical process.

   The Art of Writing and Rewriting. Hermeneutic phenomenology requires that the researcher practice a "minded act of writing," wherein they engage deeply in the process of

creating text and, by extension, understand more regarding the depth of a particular experience and themselves (van Manen, 1990, p. 124). Writing is at the heart of every hermeneutic phenomenological process, from memo writing in the data collection process to co-confirmation during data analysis, and the crafting of the anecdote. One aspect of hermeneutic phenomenology that van Manen espoused, and which I find beautiful, is the value of writing as a process, rather than simply a byproduct— "the essential moment was that of writing itself" (p. 126). Some critics of van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology, as well as many critics of much qualitative research, find issue with the approaches that are not "experimental or more positivistic" (p. 125). To them, van Manen replies— "Writing is the method" (p. 126).

Before a researcher can strive for authenticity in their writing, they must become "a true listener" in their research practice by practicing sensitivity toward "the subtle undertones of language, to the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak. . . to what things mean in this world" (p. 111-112). Actively listening with a breadth and depth that is not typically required in everyday conversation requires a researcher to recognize silence as a partner in their practice. Bollnow (1982) recognized that silence is not a negative space, rather "speech rises out of silences and returns to silence" (van Manen, 1990, p. 112). Bollnow's conceptualization of silence as "not just the absence of speech or language," resonated with me due to my lived experience. Before I began my studies as an academic researcher, I performed in classical music ensembles for the better part of seven years. During rehearsals, we regularly discussed the concept of silence and practiced deep listening to create a unified voice and shared experience for the musicians and, eventually, for the audience who joined us. However, I recognize that silence can be uncomfortable, depending on the strength of the conversational relationship and the lived experiences of all involved. A sensitive approach and a well-developed

interviewer-participant relationship can help the researcher use silence to the benefit of the

conversation and the participant.

Silence. van Manen (1990) identified three types of silence in hermeneutic

phenomenology: epistemological silence, literal silence, and ontological silence. Epistemological

silence occurs when an individual is "confronted with the unspeakable" (p. 113). For example,

you may know what a dog looks like, but you cannot describe them and you do not know the

name of their breed, yet you are able to help an artist draw the dog. When confronted with an

epistemological silence, one "may have knowledge on one level and yet this knowledge is not

available to our linguistic competency" (p. 113). This does not mean that the knowledge is

unspeakable to everyone—just that it is unspeakable to that person at that moment and they may

be able to speak it in some capacity at a later time. Literal silence is the "absence of speaking"

(p. 122). This form of silence can be used strategically in interviews when the conversation is

struggling to move forward. Sometimes literal silence can feel awkward, but if we allow

ourselves to sit in that silence together, "more reflective responses often may ensue" (p. 112).

van Manen recognized that literal silence can be valuable in the writing process, which is more

about quality than quantity. Literal silence and its partner, concision, have value in the

hermeneutic phenomenological practice where, sometimes, it is "important to leave things

unsaid. The text as a whole aims at a certain effect, and thus the silence of spaces is as important

(speaks as loudly) as the words that we use to speak" (p. 113). Lastly, van Manen described

ontological silence as the moment in which we return to silence—"the silence of Being or Life

itself" (p. 114). Ontological silence is accompanied by a feeling of peace or stillness which

Bollnow (1982) described "as the fulfilling silence of being in the presence of truth" (van

Manen, 1990, p. 114). I strove to reach ontological silence with participants. I embraced these

forms of silence as a research partner by being mindful to not overload interview sessions with

more questions than necessary, and by using semi-structured interviews.

      Anecdote. van Manen (1990) centers the anecdote as the methodological and narrative

tool of choice for hermeneutic phenomenologists. Methodologically, van Manen views anecdotes

as the means by which one can bring the intangible aspects of elusive notions into a

comprehensible format. As van Manen noted, anecdotes can concretize the abstract, thus helping

us remain tethered to reality where we can dig through "layers of meaning" to lay "bare the

covered-over meanings" of lived experience (p. 119). van Manen describes anecdotes as

pragmatic forces for communication, forcing "us to search out the relation between living and

thinking, between situation and reflection" (p. 119). Anecdotes can be especially powerful in an

elitist field such as academia because they can serve to democratize, level, and humanize our

work. Additionally, anecdotes can provide accounts where there is little recorded history of a

lived experience, such as at USRCs, which have informal beginnings and precarious existences

due to the country's uncertain legal climate. The anecdote has been used by figures across

generations to share their experiences of what could and could not be, and "*as concrete*

demonstrations of wisdom, sensitive insight, and proverbial truth" (p. 120). Historically, the

anecdote has represented what narrators deemed possible—a trait that complements hermeneutic

phenomenology's prioritization of plausibility rather than factuality. Lastly, and of particular

usefulness to the hermeneutic phenomenologist, an anecdote can address a phenomenon or

concern that is of general or universal interest, while it simultaneously focuses on the particular

aspects of the experience in question. Just as there are particular methodological functions of the

anecdote that serve hermeneutic phenomenology and vice versa, there are specific aspects of the

anecdotal narrative that complement hermeneutic phenomenology.

Anecdotal narratives invite the reader to engage with a concrete example of abstract theory while the reader is "simultaneously pull[ed] in but then prompt[ed] to reflect" (p. 121) on examples of an experience or phenomenon. van Manen (1990) identified several aspects of anecdotes which, when employed by phenomenologists, result in powerfully engaging narratives: when anecdotes are compelling enough to grab our attention; when anecdotes encourage reflection; when anecdotes are personally involving; when anecdotes are transformative, and when anecdotes allow one "to measure one's interpretive sense" (p. 121). Due to the personal nature of the lived experience, it makes sense that successful anecdotal narratives connect with readers on a personal level. van Manen further recommends that hermeneutical phenomenologists who employ the anecdote respect the methodology's reputation as "the science of examples" (van Manen, 1990, p. 121) by varying the examples they employ in their narrative. According to van Manen, the examples employed in anecdotal narratives are phenomenological descriptions, each of which "is in a sense only an example, an icon that points at the 'thing' which we attempt to describe" (p. 122). Another way to conceptualize this is to imagine that a "phenomenological description is an example composed of examples" (p. 122). Amidst this web of examples and experiences, it is valuable for the author to achieve transparency in their description and to aid the reader in visualizing the significance of the phenomenon. To do so, the author can employ several techniques. First, the authors must choose the appropriate themes, thoughtfully describe experiences, and make appropriate creative choices, e.g., use of tone, and silence. Second, the author must invoke the basic sensations and foundational grounds of engaging with the experience. Lastly, the author should address the phenomenological themes of a phenomenon by employing a variety of examples, which will

allow the "'invariant aspect(s) of the phenomenon itself" to come into view (p. 122). This last technique can also be used to show how phenomena differ, when relevant.

Once the hermeneutic phenomenological researcher has a solid understanding of the function of silence and anecdotal narrative in their process of writing and rewriting, they can turn to writing as a process of mediating reflection and action.

Writing Mediates Reflection and Action. Hermeneutic phenomenology requires that the researcher practice a "minded act of writing," wherein they engage deeply in the process of creating text and, by extension, understand more regarding the depth of a particular experience and themselves (p. 124). Writing is at the heart of every hermeneutic phenomenological process, from memo writing in the data collection process to co-construction during data analysis, and the crafting of the anecdote. One aspect of hermeneutic phenomenology that van Manen espoused, and which I find beautiful, is the value of writing as a process, rather than simply a byproduct— "the essential moment was that of writing itself" (p. 126). Some critics of van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology, as well as many critics of much qualitative research, find issue with the approaches that are not "experimental or more positivistic" (p. 125). To them, van Manen replies— "Writing is the method" (p. 126). van Manen believes that writing provides four key benefits hermeneutic phenomenology.

First, "To Write is to Measure our Thoughtfulness. *Writing separates us from what we know and yet it unites us more closely with what we know."* (van Manen, 1990, p. 127) Writing allows us to know ourselves more intimately. As we record our thoughts onto paper, we are confronted with what we know and how we know it. Through constant engagement in the writing process, the writer is able to create a body of knowledge (representing what they know) and connect with their "knowing body" (which represents what they are capable of saying) (p.

127). van Manen described this process as "the dialectic of inside and outside, of embodiment

and disembodiment, of separation and reconciliation," allowing us to make our internal

knowledge external and accessible to others (p. 127). *"Writing distances us from the lifeworld,*

yet it also draws us more closely to the lifeworld." (van Manen, 1990, p. X) Writing allows us to

create space from the experience that is necessary for us to "discover the existential structures of

experience" (p. 127). The process of writing about a phenomenon "'slackens the threads'

between [the author] and the world" (p. 127). "*Writing decontextualizes thought from practice*

and yet it returns thought to praxis" (van Manen, 1990, p. 128). Writing can allow researchers to

move away from the unique context and particularities in which a phenomenon is situated and

orient the writing "toward a more universal sphere" (p. 128). By disregarding the tangential

aspects of the phenomenon, we gain a deeper understanding of the "meaning isolated in some

isolated aspect of practice" (p. 128). This reflective practice allows the writer to engage "in a

more reflective praxis. By praxis we mean thoughtful action: action full of thought and thought

full of action." (p. 128). "*Writing abstracts our experience of the world, yet it also concretizes*

our understanding of the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 128). The language that we use as we

write is abstractive, thus "writing tends to abstract from the experience we may be trying to

describe" (p. 128). When we are able to craft a narrative that connects with the reader, we can

sometimes generate an experience that is "more compelling, more moving, more physically and

emotionally stirring than lived-life itself" (p. 129). By embracing the power of language to

convey emotion, "textual understanding can bring an otherwise sober-minded person (the reader

but also the author) to tears and to a more deeply understood worldly engagement" (p. 129).

"Writing objectifies thought into print and yet it subjectifies our understanding of something that

truly engages us" (van Manen, 1990, p. 129). When we commit to writing our stories and

experiences, we are making our internal notions, ideas, and questions publically and conversationally available. In this practice, we are "exercis[ing] self-consciousness"—allowing our consciousness to "[confront] itself, in a self-reflective action" (p. 129).

Second, "Writing Exercises the Ability to See" (van Manen, 1990, p. 130). In van Manen's (1990) approach, writing is a corporeal and intellectual process that is "the exercise of authority: the power that authors and gives shape to our personal being" (p. 130). As one engages in the physical practice of writing, one engages in a "textual reflection" that creates separation and distance from the lifeworld, allowing the author to "[abstract] and [objectify] our lived understandings from our concrete involvements" (van Manen, 1990, p. 129). This process allows the author to more concretely understand what they know and locate that knowledge in relation to the lifeworld. In the process, the author is more readily able to identify how their "existence is. . . mediated by [their] knowledge (p. 130). The practice and product of writing exhibits what the author is able and unable to see due to one's capabilities or boundaries. Seeing goes beyond the visual plane—seeing is also feeling, knowing, and understanding. van Manen (1990) places the author in the process of seeing, arguing that "*we* [sic] are what we can 'see' (know, feel, understand)," thus, "seeing the significance in a situation places us in the event, [making] us part of the event" (p. 130). For this reason, among others, it is not possible for the hermeneutic phenomenological researcher to bracket themselves from their research.

Third, "To Write is to Show Something" (van Manen, 1990, p. 130). Unlike other qualitative methods, phenomenological writing concerns not only the "literal content or lexical meaning" of a text, but also "the form of rhetorical structure" (p. 131). In this way, phenomenological writing is similar to poetry, wherein "the reader must be prepared to be attentive to what is said *in* [sic] and *through* [sic] the words (p. 130-131). This writing practice

aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology's embrace of silence, which allows the interviewer and eventually the reader, to let "us see that which shines through, that which tends to hide itself (p. 130).

Fourth, "To Write is to Rewrite" (van Manen, 1990, p. 131). The somewhat unstructured methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology is reflected in the time-consuming, cyclical process of writing, re-writing, revising, and editing, a process that creates depth as the writer uncovers truth "while retaining an essential sense of ambiguity" (p. 131). This patient back and forth process is resolved when "the parts and the whole. . . arrive at a finely crafted piece that often reflects the personal 'signature' of the author" (p. 132). An author's signature, or style, is reflective of their orientation to the world and language, as well as what the author is capable of seeing. Through this process, the author is able to create relationships and identify patterns which can result in theory.

Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Orientation

One of van Manen's (1990) concerns is the relationship between research and pedagogy. Scholarship that is not reflective of or responsive to pedagogy neglects what van Manen (1990) views to be the main function of theory and research, which is "meant to orient us to pedagogy in our relations with [our students]" (p. 135). There are four conditions that van Manen (1990) identified as being necessary for research and writing to be powerful and valid: "our texts need to be oriented, strong, rich, and deep" (p. 151). An oriented text is one that is crafted with "an awareness of the relation between content and form, speaking and acting, text and textuality" (p. 151). When an author writes an oriented text, they intentionally connect life and theory (p. 152). A strong text is one that is exclusive of other approaches or interests. The author must focus on their orientation in an effort to center their phenomenon of interest. A rich text reflects the

authors "fascination with real life" and their commitment to "exploring a phenomenon in all its

experiential ramifications" (p. 152). The anecdote that results from this fascination and

exploration should reflect what is "unique, particular, and irreplaceable" about a phenomenon (p.

152). Lastly, a deep text is written in a manner that allows the phenomenon of interest to retain

its meaning and resistance "to our fuller understanding" (p. 152). In writing with depth, the

author avoids oversimplification which can "[distort] and [shallow]-out life, failing to reveal its

depthful character and contours" (p. 152-153). A depthful text "[reaches] for something beyond,

restoring something lost, past, or eroded, and [reconciles] it in our own experiences of the

present with a vision of what should be" (p. 153). Given the complexity of a deep text, it is

unable to be summarized. Rather, one engages with a deep text by "meet[ing] with it, go[ing]

through it, encounter[ing] it, suffer[ing] it, consum[ing] it and, as well, be[ing] consumed by it"

(p. 153). By committing to these four conditions for research and writing, hermeneutic

phenomenological research can create work that is informed by and in service of the profession.

Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole

Lastly, van Manen (1990) returns to the assertion that hermeneutic phenomenological

research processes must be responsive to the nature of the phenomenon and avoid the trappings

of empirical research methodologies. Although it is important to have some concrete research

plans, it is less important to have a "detailed methodological excursus" until the actual research

is complete (van Manen, 1990, p. 162). Such patience allows the researcher to practice openness

in the face of perhaps unanticipated experiences during the research. While the researcher can be

somewhat flexible with their methodological plan, the researcher must consider the ethics of

their research at every turn. van Manen (1990) believes that the human science researcher must

be aware of the potential effects of the researcher on the people involved, the potential effects of

the research methods on the institutions where the research is conducted, the research could have

lingering effects for the participants, and, lastly, the researcher must consider how they might be

transformed by the process of conducting hermeneutic phenomenological research (p. 162-163).

In addition to considering the ethical ramifications of their research, the researcher needs to

consider the context of their research as they make methodological choices. van Manen (1990)

recommends a series of questions to help researchers in this process: 1) "*What is the object of*

human experience to be studied?", 2) *"What is the intelligibility of the experience to be*

studied?", and "*What is the experiential situation which the research enters?*" (p. 165-166). By

answering these questions, the researcher can help narrow their topic to be "well-defined and

well-focused," thus helping one avoid becoming "quickly lost in the sheer expanse and depth of

one's question" (p. 167). By engaging in these practices, which allow the researchers to remain

open to the phenomenon in question while simultaneously crafting enough structure to conduct a

feasible research project, van Manen (1990) argues that a researcher can find balance between

being in the moment with the phenomenon and participants and embracing the broad nature

required to understand the lifeworld.

Methods

Participants, Recruitment and Selection

Given that this research is centered on the experiences of the professional employees who

work at USRCs, the population consists of individuals who serve in that role. The population

under study consists of a relatively small group of professional employees who work at USRCs

at 2-and 4-year not-for-profit higher education institutions in the United States. Nationally, this is

a small population in a growing field, a reality that makes hermeneutic phenomenology an

appropriate methodological choice, given the methodologies commitment "to reveal an

understanding, given and created uniquely at that moment in time, between the players in the interaction." (van Manen, 1990, p. 146)

The inclusion criteria for this study required that participants actively worked as a full-time employee of a USRC. Participants could be enrolled as graduate students at their or a different institution, but their primary role needed to be as a professional employee at a USRC. For this study, I used a purposeful maximum variation sampling strategy to select participants who met the inclusion criteria (Emmel, 2013; Palinkas et al., 2015; Suri, 2011). I identified this sample by using previously published works that identify USRCs nationwide (see Cisneros & Valdivia, 2018; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021), and by consulting organizations that serve legally marginalized students in higher education, including Immigrants Rising, My Undocumented Life, DREAMers Roadmap, the Immigrant Legal Resource Center, the National Immigration Law Center, and United We Dream (Immigrants Rising, n.d.). After identifying the institutions with USRCs, I identified the sample utilizing a screening survey.

Sample Size

Concurrent with other hermeneutic phenomenological research, there was flexibility in the sample size for this research (Dibley et al., 2020). I strove to recruit no more than 10 individuals to participate in the study (Boyd, 2010; Moser & Korstjens, 2018), with the minimum number of participants set at six (Boyd, 2010). A sample size of 6-10 participants allowed me to engage deeply with the participants and the data, while the breadth of the range allowed me the flexibility to meet the needs of the study (Dibley et al., 2020; Gentles et al., 2015; see also, Harris, 2015; Kang & Kim, 2014). Ultimately, my sample included six participants. The participants in this study represent a small, but growing group of professionals in a new field that is under-researched.

Although some argue that sample size is undefinable prior to data collection, especially

for hermeneutic phenomenological research wherein "the scientifically important criterion for

determining sample size. . . is the intensity of the contact needed to gather sufficient data,"

Gentles et al. (2015) recognize the "pragmatic" function of sample size. van Manen (2014) finds

the concept of saturation irrelevant to phenomenology. Instead, I pursued ontological silence

with the participants. Ontological silence is a state of peace and completeness in which the

researcher and participant return to silence— "the silence of Being or Life itself" (van Manen,

1990, p. 114). I was not concerned about reaching an absolute agreement between participants,

or finding a truth that is universal to their experiences, because that is not the purpose of

hermeneutic phenomenological research (Crowther & Smythe, 2013).

Selection

I practiced maximum variation purposive sampling to recruit individuals for this study

(Harris, 2015; Kang & Kim, 2014; Moghaddam-Tabrizi & Sodeify, 2021; S. B. Owusu-Addo et

al., 2016; Woodgate et al., 2020; Woodgate et al., 2021). Maximum variation purposive

sampling allowed me to strive for "representativeness and diversity of organizations and

individual practitioners" (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 537) and include as many different experiences

as is feasible with the resources that are available. When selecting participants, I looked for

variation in their institution type (public v. private, 2- v. 4-year) and variation in their geographic

location. I specifically focused on those aspects because there are significant differences in

funding mechanisms and institutional autonomy depending upon institution type. Geographic

location is a similarly important factor because state sociopolitical contexts are hugely impactful

on the experiences on legally marginalized status. The inclusion criteria for participants was: an

individual who is currently employed full-time by a USRC at a 2- or 4-year higher education

institution in the United States. The individual must have been a professional employee, not a

graduate student level employee, such as a graduate student. The individual could be

concurrently enrolled in a graduate program, but their primary role must have been as an

employee, not as a graduate student.

Recruitment

I recruited participants by using publicly-available resources to identify the professional

contact information of USRC employees who I then individually emailed them from my Boston

College email address. I maintained a private spreadsheet with the contact information of these

individuals and a communication log. The spreadsheet included their first and last name,

institution name, professional email address, and a communication log wherein I indicated how

frequently I contacted them and whether or not they responded. In instances where there were

multiple individuals who could be professional employees at a particular USRC, I recorded all of

their contact information and emailed them individually. After obtaining IRB approval from

Boston College, I began recruiting potential participants. In total, I sent recruitment emails to

116 individuals.

Data Collection and Management

As I pursued my research, I used two means of data collection. First, I conducted a

screening survey via Qualtrics (see Appendix C) where I obtained preliminary data, including

demographic information (Anson, 2018; Upadhyay & Lipkovich, 2020). In this survey, I asked

participants to indicate their interest and willingness to be contacted for 3 semi-structured

conversational individual interviews (Flynn et al., 2019; Fylan, 2005; Lauterbach, 2018). van

Manen described hermeneutic phenomenological interviews as having two purposes "(1) as a

means to explore and develop a rich understanding of the phenomenon; (2) to develop a

conversation around the meaning of experience" (Lauterbach, 2018, p. 2884). I used the first

interview to develop an comfortable conversational connection with the participants, which

allowed me to dig more deeply into their lived experiences in the second and third interviews

(Dibley et al., 2020; Lauterbach, 2018; van Manen, 1990).

The second means of data collection consisted of three individual interviews with semi-

structured questions in a style that van Manen describes as conversational (Lauterbach, 2018;

van Manen, 2016). In a conversational interview, the researcher and participant spend time

developing a conversation around the meaning of and their understanding of an experience or

phenomenon (Dibley et al., 2020; Lauterbach, 2018). The majority of the interviews were

conducted via Zoom (Salmons, 2015). Due to previously scheduled personal travel that aligned

with the data collection period, I was able to conduct three second interviews in person (see

Appendix D). Before ending the first interview, I asked the participants to schedule the next

interview at a convenient time. The interviews ranged from 39 to 108 minutes and were audio

recorded, then transcribed by a professional service following the interview (Bartholomew et al.,

2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2020; Shelton, 2020).

Data Instruments

The instruments that used in this research were informed by the conceptual frameworks

central to this study. The first instrument served as a screening survey to collect preliminary

demographic information about the participants and screen for the inclusion and exclusion

criteria. Those participants who met the inclusion criteria and expressed interest in participating

in the research were invited to participate in three semi-structured interviews. Scholars have

previously used semi-structured interviews in phenomenological research to establish rapport

with the participants, gain a rich understanding of their lived experiences, and allow space for

expository questions (Lauterbach, 2018). The interview protocol was informed by the works of

scholars who have engaged in hermeneutic interviewing (see Vandermause & Fleming, 2011),

and scholars who used semi-structured interviews in phenomenological inquiries (see

Lauterbach, 2018). The interview questions asked how the participants came to do this work,

how they experience their work, and how they systemic barriers influence their experiences as

professionals. The interview protocol consists of 27 questions over the course of three interviews

(see Appendix D). The interview protocol was piloted with a student affairs professional who

works in an identity-centered student support office other than a USRC. While it would have

been preferable to pilot the survey with professional employees who work at USRCs, this

population is limited, and it was foolhardy to eliminate potential participants before data

collection begins. Due to the inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study, there was little risk

that those involved in the pilot study would be professional employees at USRCs during the data

collection period.

Data Analysis

As I collected data, I began analysis by employing the hermeneutic circle, an iterative

process of reflection, clarification, and "making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived

experience" that can help the researcher and participant work together to gain insight into the

phenomenon of interest (van Manen, 1990, p. 77; see also Dibley et al., 2020). Upon deciding to

conduct this study, I entered the circle wherein I began the process of going back and forth,

between and within the process until the end of the study (Dibley et al., 2020). This process is

intended to help the researcher gain a deeper and more meaningful grasp of the essence of the

phenomenon. I reviewed the written transcripts of the interviews with an intentional commitment

to the "free act of 'seeing' meaning" (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). While reviewing the transcripts, I

looked at the sentences and sentence clusters to consider what is revealed about the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). I was aided in my analytical endeavour by practicing consistent memoing so I could begin making connections and developing narratives regarding the phenomenon.

Throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data, I sought to identify themes which, in phenomenological analysis, could be understood as "the experiential structures that make up that experience" (p. 79). I used van Manen's (1990) conceptualizations of the lifeworld existentialism as a guide to my reflection (van Manen, 1990, p. 101). van Manen (1990) described the structural nature of phenomenological themes rather poetically, stating that "metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes" (p. 90). While dwelling with my data, I regularly stepped into and out of deep connections with the data so I could see the web forming in front of me (Dibley et al., 2020). Additionally, I returned to the original data at different stages so I could make space to meditate on the data and allow space for questions and ideas to "bubble up" (Dibley et al., 2020, p. 18). One of the ways that I did this was by going on walks and recording voice memos wherein I reflected upon the participants' experiences and began building their narratives. After stepping away from the voice memos for at least a day, I transcribed them and added them to the cache of data for analysis. As I began to identify themes, I considered whether or not the themes were incidental or essential by asking myself, "would the phenomenon be what it is without this theme?"

Limitations and Delimitations

There are quite a few aspects of myself and of my research design that served as limitations, delimitations, or both. While there is no perfect design or perfect researcher, I incorporated co-constitution throughout my data collection and analysis, and I integrated

additional measures to enhance trustworthiness and reliability, which I elaborate upon in the section related to ethics.

I was somewhat limited by my role as an outsider to the community of professionals who work in USRCs. While I did not have the benefit of membership in their immediate professional community, I hoped that my ten years of experience in student affairs served as a delimiting factor for this research. Additionally, I grew up in Texas and California, two states that, together, host the majority of USRCs nationwide. My personal, academic, and professional experience in these spheres helped me build rapport with the participants. Two other aspects of my identity that potentially served as limitations are my ethnoracial identity and my citizenship status. As a White woman who is a citizen of the United States, I have navigated my life without the constant threat of racism, nativism, and deportation—burdens that are almost constant pressures for the students served by USRCs, as well as a number of the professionals who serve these centers. One way in which my experience related to some of the students served by USRCs is my parentage— one of my parents is a non-citizen who lives abroad and must apply for a visa to enter the United States. These aspects of my identity fueled me to remain humble and self-aware as I sought entrance into this community. An additional factor that served as both a limitation and a delimitation is the COVID-19 context. Throughout COVID-19, higher education institutions embraced remote meeting options, and scholars have done the same. While these adaptations due to COVID-19 can make accessing peers across the world more feasible, the financial losses caused by COVID-19 could mean that USRCs across the country may have closed their doors or significantly impacted the ability of their professional employees to share their precious time with this research.

Positionality Statement

I approached this dissertation as a former student affairs practitioner who spent a decade working in residence halls at a large 4-year public university in Texas that prides itself on being affordable (University of North Texas, n.d.), and where almost half of its student body received a Pell Grant in 2022 (U.S. Department of Education College Scorecard, n.d.). One of my personal strengths that kept me in this notoriously-draining job for so long, and which helped me as a qualitative researcher, is my capacity to care for people openly and earnestly. My students taught me about aspects of our institution that I would not have otherwise encountered—barriers, challenges, and experiences of blatant prejudice that my students shared with me because they trusted me. My work allowed me to develop strong relationships with students who—just thinking about them makes me overwhelmed with gratitude, pride, hope, and concern for their well-being in the future—inspired me to pursue a degree that will hopefully allow me to improve our systems of higher education.

In the lead-up to this dissertation, I spent five years learning about the experiences of legally marginalized students in higher education. I conducted rigorous reviews of the existing literature and was able to learn from students who were DACA recipients and members of mixed-status families. In the course of this research, I came to believe that the staff who work at Undocumented Student Resource Centers could be meaningful support systems for legally marginalized students. As a former student affairs practitioner, I empathized with the staff and saw an opportunity to connect with the staff on a professional level. In approaching this research, I was conscious about not conflating my professional experience as universal in an attempt to develop a connection with potential participants. Additionally, I was careful to avoid assuming that I knew anything about anyone's experience before I talk to them, solely because I have read

literature or spoken with someone's colleague. In this process, it was more important for me to be humble and curious, rather than to be right. I held myself accountable to these values by practicing silence in my interviews and incorporating reflexive questions regarding assumptions in my post-interview practices.

Although I hoped to connect with participants based on our shared experiences as student affairs practitioners, I recognize that there are visible and invisible aspects of my identity that influenced my research at every stage. To those who know me by my email address and Google Scholar page, I am a white, blonde woman with a Nordic-sounding name that is enrolled at a PWI in the northeastern United States. Not visible are the scars of separation, and the sense of resignation that I will likely never live in the same country as my biological father and siblings, who need a visa to access the United States. The memory of being pulled over the night I graduated from high school, only to find out when we got home that one of my family members in the backseat did not have their papers, and was terrified that they were going to be deported. My fear that my cousins would not be able to get to the United States to say goodbye to our dying grandparents because the borders were severely restricted during COVID-19. Compared to millions of other people in this country and around the world, my life is comfortable, privileged, and safe, a reality of which I am completely aware.

My scholarly experiences have also influenced the perspective I bring to this work. There are two particular beliefs that substantially influence this dissertation. First, I believe that, whether or not something is true or believable to one person, it can still be known and experienced by another. As a qualitative researcher who has chosen to use a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, it is not for me to reason why when an individual is describing a lived experience. My job, and my privilege, is to respect and honor the lived experiences and

the truth as it exists according to each participant. I cherish this gift. Second, I believe that there

is no single absolute truth. Every individual has their own lived experiences, knowledges, and

values that inform their perspectives of the world. Additionally, these perspectives can shift over

time as individuals learn more about themselves and their world. My prescription to this

philosophy is informed by my academic background, my values, and my lived experiences.

Specifically, I am referring to my time spent studying Critical Systems Thinking, my years-long

commitment to talk therapy, and the influence of having lived in multiple states and countries.

I am sharing these stories to help you, the reader, and me, the researcher, identify why my

unconscious self was pulled to this work. Someone's legal status, and that of their support

network, is not inherent in the way they present themselves. However, one's legal status directly

affects their access to and experience in higher education in the United States. As a former

student affairs practitioner and as a scholar who has written about how systems of higher

education can and should support marginalized populations (see Borg, 2020a; Borg 2020b;

Muñiz & Borg, 2022), it makes sense that my personal, professional, and scholarly experiences

have come together to inform this dissertation.

Ethics

Ethical boundaries must be considered at every turn throughout the research process,

especially in qualitative research. While planning the study, I considered ethics regarding

recruitment, privacy, voice, and safety. The recruitment process was conducted with integrity,

thus ensuring that every participant was aware of their choice to opt in to the study and their right

to opt out at any point throughout the process. Additionally, I had a concrete plan regarding how

I intend to maintain participant privacy, and how I communicated that information to their

participants in a way that is easy to understand. One of the questions I was prepared to answer

was, "where will this information end up?" Participants were able to select their own

pseudonym, and the raw data was de-identified after transcription, before analysis. There was

one digital document that includes the participant's pseudonym and name, which was stored in a

password-protected file on a university-owned, password-protected server. I also worked with

participants to ensure that their narratives are sufficiently de-identified so that it does not risk

revealing aspects of their experience that they would otherwise feel uncomfortable, or unsafe,

sharing. Lastly, I practiced co-constitution during data collection and analysis. Co-constitution is

a reflexive process that enhances the rigour of hermeneutic phenomenological work that helps

researchers negate any potential negative bias, account for the literature, and ensure that the

voices of participants resonate strongly in the narrative (Dibley et al., 2020).

Chapter 4: Participant Narratives

Chapter Four presents participant narratives that center the purpose of this study, which is to develop a rich understanding of the lived experiences of professional employees who work at USRCs. Each of the narratives begins with a discussion of the physical space in which the participants work. This emphasis is due to both the literature regarding USRCs and the hermeneutic phenomenological approach used in this research. Across the literature, scholars and practitioners have discussed the crucial role that physical space plays in the existence of USRCs and the effectiveness of their work (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Rosas, 2020; Shelton, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2020). Appropriately, one of the main elements that form the lifeworld is spatiality, or the sense of being one experiences in their lived space (van Manen, 1990). Given that this research centers on the experiences of professional employees who work at USRCs, it is appropriate to center physical space in the participants' narratives.

After a discussion of the physical spaces in which the participants work, the narratives include aspects of their lived experiences that are connected to the three frameworks that inform this research: Community Cultural Wealth, Critical Systems Thinking, and Tierney's Model of Organizational Culture. Over the course of three interviews, I asked participants questions about their lived experiences as they relate to these frameworks (Appendix C). The narratives are strengthened by tangential information that I learned due to the space I held for participants to discuss what was important to them at that moment, as well as the personal connections that I made with participants. When I interviewed the participants, I was consistently moved by their generosity of spirit and their capacity for compassion. I hope that I do them justice in these introductions.

I present the narratives in chronological order according to the date and time of the

participants' first interview. Appendix D lists details regarding the format, date, and length of

participant interviews. Separately, Table 3 includes the participant profiles, which include their

pseudonyms, the pseudonym of their employing institution, and their region. The names of all

participants, as well as their employers, have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

However, I identified the region in which each institution is located to reflect the diversity of the

respondents' locations and the varying sociopolitical contexts in which they operate.

Table 3

Participant Profiles

Participant	Pronouns	Institution Type	Institution Pseudonym	Region	Length of Time in Role	Role
Karol	She/Ella	4-year public	Cherrywood A&M	West	Between 3 years and 5 years	Program Administrator
Alex	She/Her	4-year public	McElroy State	South	Between 1 year and 3 years	Associate Director
K	They/Them	4-year public	El Cerrito University	West	Between 6 months and 1 year	Counselor
Mayra	She/Ella	2-year public	Ceres College	West	More than 5 years	Program Coordinator
Evangelina	She/Ella/ Dra.	4-year public	Kealing University	Midwest	More than 5 years	Director
María Elena	She/Her	4-year public	Swallowtail Tech	South	Between 3 and 5 years	Coordinator
RiRi	She/Her	4-year public	Guadalupe College	West	Between 6 months and 1 year	Coordinator

This chapter concludes with a brief review of the narratives and an introduction to the following chapter.

Karol

Karol's office is a calm, discreet space at the edge of campus. Most days, Karol works on campus, allowing her to sense student energy and create professional and personal boundaries that serve her well-being. Light permeates Karol's office, as well as the adjoining communal spaces where students work, rest, and build community. If a student wants to have a private conversation, Karol can close her door, turn on her white noise machine, and be fully present with the student as they sit across from each other in the small seating area in her office.

> I feel like I bring that comfort, warmth or validity out of them and allow them to
>
> be themselves. I have students who are [eligible for disability services], and I've
>
> seen [expressions of their disabilities] come out in our meetings. I feel like it's a
>
> space for them to be themselves right. . .There's a level of comfort.

Although Karol is the only professional employee of her USRC, her office is just around the corner from professional employees who serve other marginalized populations. Like Karol, who identifies as a first-generation woman of color, Karol's colleagues hold marginalized identities that intersect with the communities they, or their office neighbors, serve. The walls of the communal spaces, offices, and hallways are filled with art that makes visible often marginalized aspects of student identities, including "art that represents the undocumented community." This art, Karol believes, has led to students "slowly finding comfort just coming in and feeling seen and feeling heard." Although the building has a discreet external presence, once you step inside it is vibrant and welcoming. Students do not have to fight for space and can feel

"visible and seen" and "more comfortable in terms of their statuses, their identities, their

program and just feel more community, which is important."

Karol's path to this work is similar to that of other higher education professionals. During

her undergraduate studies, Karol was a resident assistant, and was encouraged to pursue graduate

studies by a close friend. Karol decided that she wanted to improve the higher education system

so other students did not face hurdles similar to those she encountered as a student. One

distinguishing characteristic that underlines Karol's experience and her choices is her legal

identity. Karol is one of the many undocumented professionals who work in higher education.

Karol's tenure as a resident assistant during her undergraduate studies was only possible

because of her work authorization, which allowed her to live on campus and earn money.

Had I not had that exposure to being an RA, I think things would have come out a

little different. I felt like that support system was great and just, taking that risk to

be an RA. I never thought I would do that. I was hungry for funding and to

support myself, and so I did it for three years and then I went straight from

undergrad to grad school.

Karol's choices about graduate programs were shaped by the local and state sociopolitical

contexts in which the institutions were located, as well as their funding mechanisms for

undocumented students. The friend who encouraged Karol to apply to graduate school "was like,

'You should apply, you'll get in.' I was like, 'Well, I'm undocumented and I don't know if they're

gonna fund me like they're funding you.'" Although Karol found money to support her graduate

program, she found that "money didn't really support my mental health and my well-being," nor

did it make the institution a place where undocumented students were supported.

When Karol wanted to find a new job during the COVID-19 pandemic, she chose institutions where she wanted to work, "went to their HR office and I literally, I kid you not, I literally typed in the search box undocumented." Like other participants, Karol's job was "built from the advocacy efforts from students and so it's been a lot of pressure. . . I feel like I've been here longer than three years trying to build things and also create an infrastructure that was never there." Additionally, Karol belongs to the cadre of professional employees in higher education who wear multiple hats. "Having two roles, I feel like it hasn't been too sustainable, haha. Especially having an inaugural one. That itself also takes away from that time that I need to focus on building things. And so that's an additional layer. It's been difficult."

When she applied for her job, Karol was unaware that she would be the first person in her role, an aspect of her work that informs much of what she does each day. "In grad school, folks didn't fully go in depth about how time-consuming it is to create things, to look through emails. I like to be real about things of that nature with folks. It's not just butterflies." In this context, "time just goes by so fast," and Karol finds herself "not even meeting certain expectations because I don't have time. I don't have enough hours in the day. I try to protect my well-being and not overwork or overload myself." Karol practices a serious amount of labor as she creates and records new policies, systems, and processes.

> There's a lot of structure that we need to build. I'm grateful for my supervisor who
> has been able to provide more guidance in terms of 'Okay, I need you to
> document what you're doing. Create this guide so then if you were to leave or if
> you know, you go on vacation or you go on medical leave, whatever it may be.
> Like, if there's no Karol at least someone can look at these documents and

reference like okay, this is how, you know, an event is run, for example, or, you

know, this is how orientation is led.

The responsibilities that Karol bears as both the originator of her role and as the sole employee

of her USRC contribute to a bittersweet experience. Karol has a significant amount of autonomy

regarding the programming offered by her office, as well as how funds are distributed. At the

same time, Karol feels like her graduate program did not adequately prepare her to do the work it

takes to create and manage a program on one's own. However, Karol uses that experience to

make her a better advisor for her students. "Right now, I'm doing the best that I can and just

trying to create and build a foundation for campus and for others to work with me [to] support

our students." In this context, Karol prioritizes building relationships with campus partners that

can help her build a system that is supportive of undocumented students at her institution.

I can't do this work alone. I connect with other campus partners and other

stakeholders. Like, 'Hey, students are telling you this. Can we work something

out? Can we try to work with them or create a system that is going to be visible?'

A lot of times they feel invisible, or they feel unseen or unheard because they're

undocumented and they may not have the power to advocate for themselves for

those reasons. . . Just because I work with undocumented students doesn't mean

I'm the only one that needs to serve them. I also want to hold our colleagues

accountable like 'Hey, let's work together. You're connecting with them as well at

the same level that I am. They're coming to your office to ask for your services.'

So I think reminding them and holding them accountable that, you know, you are

serving all students, and they're all different. They all have different needs.

Karol's lived experiences as an undocumented student inform the choices she makes in her work. Although Karol's legal status allows her some protections as well as work authorization, she understands how fear can become an intimate presence in one's life.

> I guess there's still fear within you know, our lives and we're still in survival mode
> 24/7. Nothing is a guarantee, and you know, we have no lawful presence. And so,
> I think just working with students and reminding them, and that it's, it's okay, you
> know, to have all the emotions and still be able to be human at the end of the day.
> I wish I had, you know, folks that cared about me at that time or like really
> checked in with me, in terms of being human. So that's something that I tried to
> model with other folks as well, but students, yeah, particular.

Karol also struggled to navigate her feelings about serving students whose legal statuses meant they had access to fewer opportunities than she did. Similarly, she struggled to navigate her feelings when students had more opportunities than she did, or when students' legal statuses, and thus their opportunities, changed.

As a young person, Karol once faced the challenging decision of choosing between her inconsistently supportive family, or herself and her education. Karol made the courageous decision to invest in herself, even though at the time she didn't believe that she would be able to go to college. Fortunately, Karol had a teacher who believed in her. Her AVID teacher told her that she could go to college, and that she "was a rock star". He invested deeply in his students, which made his passing a few years after Karol's graduation a heartbreaking experience. Karol continues to bet on herself and put in the hard work it takes to heal from an existence that is continually under threat. As an undocumented professional, Karol's citizenship status and her work authorization exist at the pleasure of those in power. The "hopelessness" and

"powerlessness" that Karol faces do not keep her from fighting to become the person she wants

to be. Unless the system changes, Karol will remain undocumented. The only path to citizenship

that remains open to her is to get married, a choice that Karol has no interest in entertaining. "I

don't want someone to save me. . . I don't want to rely on someone else. . .I feel so grounded on

my own."

In some ways, Karol is trapped in a life where time moves at different speeds. Her

citizenship status is frozen in time, while her professional work whizzes by at a pace that she

struggles to maintain, and she fights to build an inner life rooted in a pace and peace that allows

her to heal and build the life she deserves.

K

K's office is located within the campus USRC, which hides in plain sight. Unless

students are explicitly looking for the USRC, they may overlook it due to its discreet signage and

subtle decorations. The space is illuminated by a wall of opaque windows that allows students

and staff to gather without feeling like they are on display. K shared how the physical space

informed their experience at work and their relationships with students and coworkers.

> Having even the opportunity or like the physical space to be able to [gather in
>
> community] with people, that means a lot to me, even if, you know, I'm like, not
>
> really one of the students. It just makes me really happy that like, that's possible.

The center's common area is ringed by a front desk, a stocked kitchenette, a meeting room, and

offices for K and their colleagues.

> It's really nice. It's furnished with cool stuff, like really good furniture, and for the
>
> most part, we have our own offices. . . This is like a big game changer. And
>
> there's also, a space for studying. Sometimes they host community-building

events. We also provide them with snacks and food. We try to keep it as homey as

possible and also this, like, a safe space. It's also kind of hidden. It's not even

hidden. It's like, hidden in plain sight.

If a student wants privacy for their meeting, K can close the door to their office and turn on the

white noise machine for an additional layer of discretion. K decorated their office with art and

mementos that display their personality and ambient elements intended to bring a sense of calm

to the space. Although K's office is small, there is a comfortable chair for visitors and a small

table that students can use when they visit. One of K's favorite elements in their office is their

collection of plushies, which they share with students when they need comfort.

I needed decoration. I was like, 'I need to make this comfortable.' I use it when

I'm in distress or when any of my students are in distress. I feel like it's a

grounding, or like, comfortable thing to hold. I get a lot of appointments where

some– at least one of us– is crying. And I don't know, it's like, comforting to have

that or kind of just like, you know, when you don't know what to do with your

hands when you're in distress. I kind of just handed them one of the plushies and

it helps a little bit.

Although K likes the "homey and cozy" environment they have created in their office, much of

K's work is done outside of this intimate space. When K is not in meetings, they relish the

opportunity to informally gather with students and colleagues in the USRC's common area. "But

sometimes I will also hang out in the study area because I don't like being in, like, an enclosed

space with no ventilation." Additionally, K enjoys opportunities to connect with colleagues

within the center and across campus.

Unfortunately, K has less time to nurture those informal connections, as their office has adopted a hybrid schedule. "I don't like the commute or having to get ready, but once I'm [in the office], I really like being in the space. And I don't really mind it as much, especially when the students are there. I feel like my mood just, like, automatically brightens when they're there." In this system, K and their colleagues have staggered schedules for on-campus and off-campus work days. K works on campus two days a week. The remaining days of the week, K works in their apartment, surrounded by art, books, and other personal items that bring them joy. For the most part, K can organize their schedule so their off-campus work days are mainly focused on administrative work. When K works on campus, their days are generally chock-a-block with student and staff meetings. K is essentially a case manager for 500 students, a heavy responsibility that allows for very little flexibility in their work and few opportunities to develop and host programs as they would like.

K works at the same institution where they got their undergraduate degree. K, who used to be an undocumented student, sought out the USRC for support while pursuing their degree. K's experience may be similar to other undocumented students who, for myriad reasons, have little to no familial support. When K was a young person, they traveled with their family to the United States and chose to stay in the country rather than return to an abusive home. Although K spent their entire college career as an undocumented student, they eventually adjusted their status via the Special Immigrant Juvenile classification.

K's work benefits from their experience as an undocumented student at the institution where they now work. There are numerous instances in which K's institutional knowledge allowed them to find and utilize loopholes to benefit their students. At times, K confronts the same bureaucratic roadblocks they encountered as a student. In these moments, K faces the

realization that they could have had much more support as a student if only the institutional

agents they encountered were adequately trained regarding the rights and protections allowed to

undocumented students. Regularly confronting how this system failed them as a student has left

a bittersweet taste in K's mouth. Although K wants to provide care and services for their

students, they are jaded by their experiences.

Amidst this emotionally taxing environment, K uses their employee benefits to care for

themselves in ways they weren't cared for as a young person. K is deeply committed to working

with a mental health professional to process past traumas and build a life centered on healing and

care for the community. K unabashedly uses these resources to improve their day-to-day life, but

they regularly struggle with their role in a bureaucratic, hierarchical system. Although that

tension has been difficult for K, they recently found strength while reconnecting with community

members who share their cultural background. In that environment, K was heartened by the

value that their community placed in the collective.

K acknowledges that the restrictive system in which undocumented students try to

succeed is unlikely to change. K doesn't know where their professional future lies, but they

know that they care about their students, and for now, that's enough.

Evangelina

The USRC at Kealing University is "small but mighty." When you walk into the center's

main office, you are immediately surrounded by art created by the students who use the center.

You might be greeted by the undergraduate or graduate student workers who work in the center

or the smell of someone heating their lunch in the kitchenette. Students can borrow any of the

books the center has available for loan or grab a snack from the office that Evangelina keeps on

hand "because we understand our students get hungry." Evangelina's office adjoins this common space, so she gets to walk through the activity as she comes and goes throughout the day.

Although the center's office is lively and has resources for students, Evangelina's favorite part of the center is a few doors down. "Even though this is a shared space, you'll see that the students have claimed it." In collaboration with Kealing's counseling center, Evangelina and her students converted her old office into an oasis. "Students love this area. I do too, actually, I'm not gonna lie. . .The students are like, 'It's a whole vibe back here.'" This beloved space is filled with tools for relaxation, such as a water feature, destress books and games, and art that expresses pride in being undocumented. Art and imagery that reflect students' pride in their legal identities permeate the common areas and Evangelina's office.

When you walk into Evangelina's office, your vision is filled with art expressing her commitment to her community, as well as art that features her family and outlines her professional history. Most of the art in Evangelina's office was gifted to her by former students, while other pieces echo her organizational and professional involvement. Close to Evangelina's workspace are pictures of her family and mementos that honor loved ones who passed away. Evangelina's office represents how completely she has intertwined her professional and personal identities.

> I'm really unapologetic about how much I care for and love these students. And
> sometimes they're like, 'Oh, you shouldn't really be like that. You shouldn't, you
> know, you need to be more professional.' I don't freaking care. I love these
> students, and so when I tell them, like, 'You put your part in, and I'm gonna put
> mine in,' I mean that.

There was an activating moment in Evangelina's youth that cemented her commitment to advocating for the rights of undocumented people and those who hold other marginalized legal identities. Like many children of immigrants, Evangelina was often asked to translate for them, especially in important meetings when understanding was crucial. Evangelina's activating moment happened in an immigration office when she accompanied her father, who was a legal permanent resident, to a meeting regarding his green card. Evangelina's father was critically ill and weak from receiving treatment, and he had a difficult time understanding the immigration officer who only spoke English. During the meeting, Evangelina began translating for her father, and the immigration officer "yelled at us. She was like, 'Why are you translating for him? Stop, stop translating. He's been in America long enough.' And I was like, 'Oh my God.' She treated us so, so inhumanely." Evangelina had to step out of the room to cry and calm herself down, reckoning with the realization that "this woman has all the power and I have none. And I hate feeling so powerless." Evangelina took a breath, went back to the room, and told her father, "swallow this shit sandwich you and I are about to eat, and then I'm going to take you out. We're going to wipe this taste out of our mouths." Reflecting on this experience, Evangelina is proud of herself and her father for being able to navigate this maltreatment.

> We play nice. 'Yes, ma'am,' 'Yes,' 'Okay,' 'Okay.' And then I saw her do that to
> every person who walked in. Just nasty. I felt like this woman needed a different
> job. She's miserable. And I remember sitting there and watching her treat him that
> way. And I thought, 'Never again. I will never sit back and watch someone treat
> people this way.' And after that, I started volunteering at citizenship workshops.

Evangelina worked in her community to support undocumented and legally marginalized people long before the USRC at Kealing existed. Before the center's creation, Evangelina worked at

Kealing in other capacities while maintaining a supportive presence on campus for students who

advocated for the rights of undocumented people. Evangelina's job and center exist because

students at Kealing advocated for their needs for years.

> First, [the students] started having ally trainings, they started going into classes.
> This is before my position exists. Then they started through their relationships
> with professors, and the Faculty Advocates for Undocumented Students was
> created. Then they're pushing back against the fact that their IDs didn't have their
> picture on them in the beginning. They push back against that, and they start
> asking, demanding change. And that sends a report of them being on the radar of
> people knowing that they're there. And then them reaching out saying, 'We need
> this, we need that.' Then they say like, 'We demand that the mental health
> counselors be trained, we demand that the police department be trained, we
> demand that the advancement team be trained, that academic advisors be trained,
> admissions be trained.' In those demands, we start going into those spaces and
> building relationships.

After a long period of student advocacy, the position that Evangelina now holds was created.

Interestingly, Evangelina helped create the job description by pulling together information from

existing USRCs.

> There wasn't a position like this one yet, so I pulled together everything. I added
> mixed-status students into the job description, and then I handed it to the then
> chief diversity officer, and I said, 'That's it. I don't want to hear anything else. I'm
> going to give you this information. I'm stepping away.' And I said, 'Please don't
> use *Dreamer*, please add mixed-status students, and I'm going to step back

because I want to apply for that job. And I don't want anyone to say that I did

something.

Evangelina's experience on campus and her connections to the community are vital to her

success in her role. She sees herself as being "the point of coordination"- connecting her students

to campus offices and vice versa. Evangelina and her colleague "have really good working

relationships. . . We've tapped into every college here at the university. . .We tried to have allies

in all those spaces that we can help work and shape policy that is a barrier to our students."

While these relationships are beneficial for her students, Evangelina is equally committed to her

relationships with colleagues who do similar work because "you can learn from one another. . .

We have to be lifelong learners in this process and in this role, but I think we need to always

remember we're not alone and tap into other networks, people for support, people who have

ideas, and you've got to find your people."

Although Evangelina has difficult days in this work, she loves her job. "The thing I think

we often miss is the self-care piece for people doing this work. That vicarious trauma is real. It's

heavy. . . It weighs on me a lot. And so having outlets to release that is super important." As she

moves forward, she is trying to learn new ways to care for herself so she can provide better care

for her students and her community.

Mayra

Large windows illuminate the much-loved USRC at Ceres College, the light from which

filters into Mayra's abutting office. The walls of Mayra's office are filled with art from local

artists and prominent undocumented queer artist Julio Salgado. Artistic renderings of monarch

butterflies share gallery space with posters from events Mayra has hosted and attended. The

remaining space of the office is decorated with plants and arranged specifically to account for

"what I want students to see and feel when they come into my space," which is "a welcoming

space for students to feel like, okay, I can hang out in here…and that [students] know without

even talking to me that they are supported…all of their identities and all of who they are."

> For them to know that this is a space where they are being seen and valued and
>
> welcomed is huge. That's really our purpose, right? If we can get that first level of
>
> trust, then we can really help students. And so the space is like the first
>
> impression that we can leave on them before even saying anything. We could be
>
> like, the best program ever, but if the space is all sterile and they feel like they
>
> can't sit because it's gonna get dirty. Or, you know, the whole thing with, like, in
>
> some places where there's like signs where it's like, 'No talking! No food! No cell
>
> phones!' Instead of that, can we say, you know, 'Keep your voice quiet, respect
>
> the space, there's people working,' or, you know, 'If you eat, clean up after
>
> yourself,' like, what a difference, right?

Mayra's office is located within another center, and the employees of the center and

Mayra's co-coordinator rotate their on-campus work days. While there is always a professional

staff member present, there isn't necessarily a staff member of the USRC present each day of the

week. When Mayra works on campus, she often eats her lunch and spends unscheduled time in

the common area of the USRC. Mayra is conscientious about how much time she spends in the

common area, trying to find a balance in which her presence allows students to see her "in a

more relaxed way" while limiting her presence so "they feel like they can be free and

comfortable." Comfort is a priority in the USRC at Ceres College, and Mayra is proud of the

"very homey and warm" environment that she and her students have curated. Mayra and her co-

coordinator surveyed students to see what they wanted from their USRC, and the feedback

informed how the "student-led" space was designed, furnished, and used. There is comfortably

worn-down furniture, small areas to work, and a resource corner that allows students to get

useful information easily and discreetly.

> We want students to be able to find all of their resources without having to talk to
>
> us. Of course, you know, we're there, and we can guide them even more. But [we
>
> want] for them to be able to find everything in one place. They know who we are
>
> through like, visuals and resources and [by] being accessible—my door's always
>
> open. We just got these little round thingies on our doors where it says like 'I'm in
>
> a meeting,' or 'Come in,' or, you know, 'I'll be back,' or 'I'm working remotely.'
>
> They don't have to ask someone else like, 'Oh, is Mayra in or not?' Of course, we
>
> want to be there for the students, but we also want it to be visually clear, all the
>
> time.

Mayra is among the multitude of higher education professionals who work at the

institution they attended. When Mayra had the opportunity to return to Ceres College to work at

the USRC, "it felt like a full-circle moment" because Mayra not only benefited from their

services during her time as a student, she was a member of the student group whose advocacy led

to the creation of the office. Mayra is a living repository for the history of the USRC at Ceres

College, from its early days as a lockable cupboard in a faculty breakroom to its present status as

a furnished and funded point of pride for the community.

Although the status of the USRC at Ceres College has become more secure over time,

Mayra's status as a DACAmented professional leaves her uneasy. Unless there are federal policy

changes, Mayra will need to renew her DACA status every other year, paying $495 for the

privilege to work and live in her community. If her renewal application is somehow delayed, or

if she can't make the payment, Mayra will be out of work until the issue is resolved, with no guarantee that her job will be there for her if and when her DACA status is renewed. When Mayra speaks to her community about the challenges of living and working as an undocumented person with DACA, she speaks with the authority that only personal experience can provide. Like other professionals whose identity aligns with the identity-centered student service that employs them, Mayra is not immune to the sociopolitical forces that impact her students. When there is difficult or painful news about the undocumented community, Mayra has to compartmentalize her experience in a way that allows her to serve her students without burdening them.

Regardless of the difficulties that Mayra experiences as a DACAmented professional, she gets joy and purpose from her work. After a settling-in period, during which Mayra learned the structure and culture of Ceres College as a professional employee, she now feels capable of making positive changes. All things being equal, Mayra hopes to remain at Ceres College so she can continue supporting her community and nourishing the program she helped advocate for as a young undocumented student who fought to improve her system for the better.

RiRi

RiRi works in the recently renovated USRC at Guadalupe College. The USRC has a bright, open common area with adjoining offices for RiRi and her boss and a small conference room for programming or student use. RiRi's office has furniture that includes an adjustable standing desk and a small seating area so that "if any student wants to come in and talk to me, then we can close the door to ensure privacy. That way, they're able to go ahead and talk to me, even our own students like that work here." RiRi divides her work hours between her office and the common area.

Whenever we are not as busy, or there's not as many students, I'm able to move

my laptop so I can work outside, as well. That way, I'm a little bit more engaged

with our student assistants that are here, to see what they're doing, what they're up

to. . . It's nice because it's not that big. We're all in one kind of common space

right here, so it's easier to keep that community building as well.

One of RiRi's favorite aspects of the common area is the wall of windows, which provides an

unobstructed view of the trees outside. When RiRi needs a moment to "step away every so often

[and] see the trees. It's nice."

Aside from the beautiful view outside the windows, RiRi loves working with students to

decorate the common area to celebrate different seasons and holidays. Students are welcome

regardless of their status, and RiRi is proud of the environment and community they are building

together. The common area has space where students can do homework, print for free, or watch

videos together, and a desk for the office's graduate student workers.

It's a nice environment. I know we also have students who are not undocumented,

but they love how they feel [here]. Very welcomed. They really enjoy being here.

We have a lot of students who just come in, and they're just literally sitting on

their laptops either working on homework or, who knows, sometimes I see them

watching shows, and they're all just hanging out. Them being here just adds a

little bit more because it's not as quiet. . . We're here for them.

RiRi has worked at the USRC since its inaugural year. Initially, RiRi worked full-time in a

different on-campus office and was asked to split her time to join the USRC as its first

administrative coordinator.

> It was like half and half because I was serving two departments at that time. . .I
>
> initially was working in a different office, and then this opportunity came about.
>
> They saw that I was fit for the role, and that's how they helped me get my foot in
>
> the door to being able to support both departments.

One of the reasons that RiRi became involved in this work is her experience as a first-generation

college student who is the eldest child of parents who were once undocumented. RiRi wears the

identities with a sense of duty to her family. "Trying to make sure that I'm always doing the best

for them, as well just to prove to them, you know, like they can [do it too]." As RiRi has gotten

older, and become a parent herself, she can listen to her parents' stories with a new perspective

and "definitely more understanding. I can see the struggle of what they went through." These

lessons inform RiRi's work, allowing her to relate the lessons she learned from her parents and

the stories they shared to the stories her students share with her at work. "I can see the struggle

and. . . where [the students] might need any assistance. I feel like [my experience with my

parents is] one of the reasons why I felt like being able to help this community is very important

to me."

Over a period of five and a half years, RiRi "experienced a lot of different transitions. . .

different directors, different coordinators that have also come and gone." The constantly

changing roster of staff resulted in "a little bit of everything, but I mean, it's not all bad. It's a

pretty good experience. And I've been fortunate to have been here from the beginning. So I've

been able to see how the department has grown." As colleagues filtered in and out, RiRi

transitioned from the administrative coordinator to the program coordinator and she was able to

become "solely focused on one department. So all my focus is just here. Whereas before it was

split, so it was a little more difficult to juggle the two departments." During these transitions,

RiRi's wealth of institutional knowledge provided crucial support to her students and colleagues. At the same time, her willingness to learn has been her steady companion during her learning process, allowing her to grow into "a bigger support for our students here on campus."

> Now that I'm just focusing here and working with our student population, it's nice. [Now I can] focus on just helping [the students] and then see different ways where we can [think about] the workshops that we want to offer and be intentional with goals as well as, you know, collaborating with different departments.

Although RiRi enjoys working in the newly renovated space, she has witnessed the difficulties that can come with change. To protect student privacy, USRCs rarely, if ever, have access to a list of students who might benefit from their services. As such, students oftentimes seek out their USRC because a trusted peer vouches for the office or because of an employee's visible and trustworthy presence on campus. The lack of continuity in RiRi's office has made it challenging to expand their student community. On top of an inconsistent staff roster, the USRC at Guadalupe College has changed physical locations twice during RiRi's tenure, and the COVID-19 crisis resulted in campus closures that limited student access to essential services such as those provided by the USRC. RiRi hopes that, with more consistency, they will be able to grow their community. Regardless of RiRi's desire to expand the center's reach, she is happy that her work has been meaningful to the students who have found their way to the USRC.

> It makes me happy when I see students here. It's because we have built that kind of community with students. When they come and say hi, they greet you individually, and you already know who they are. Them putting a smile on and when they come in with a good attitude as well. It's just, it's contagious. . . It definitely feels nice to be able to see students when they're coming in.

María Elena

María Elena's office is vibrantly decorated with art representing her values, culture, and history. Family photos, handmade art, and flags are just some of the pieces that María Elena curated to create "a space that is comforting to me. And you know, if the environment is welcoming, and I have a good thing going here, hopefully, the students can feel that as well." María Elena uses art to explicitly express her values as they relate to her work at the USRC.

> I've got posters in my hallway in different languages that are, you know, 'the right
>
> to live free,' 'live without fear of deportation,' things like that. . . I definitely have
>
> a lot of DACA and immigration support-related paraphernalia. It should be very
>
> apparent for students to know that they can say whatever they need to in this
>
> office.

Her office is located at the end of a hallway, upstairs, and tucked away from the general public. For the most part, people don't happen upon María Elena's office unintentionally. Because of this relative privacy, María Elena is able to express her values more freely without fear of retaliation, "when you come to my office, there's a bulletin board, and it's just covered. You know, like, 'A trans person has been here,' and all sorts of ally-related things. And so, it's nice, I'm able to do what I want, basically with my space as the building allows." When students enter María Elena's office, they can sit on the couch and enjoy light filtering in from either of the windows while they look to see if a bird has found safe haven in the tree outside. María Elena's office is in a different building from the USRC at Swallowtail Tech, and the majority of her time is spent in her office rather than in the USRC. The location of María Elena's office reflects her employment status. María Elena splits her time between two responsibilities, one of which is

serving as the Coordinator of the USRC at Swallowtail Tech. Although she serves in two roles,

María Elena spends the majority of her on-campus work hours in her office:

> Some students just drop by, or if they schedule an appointment or want to meet in
>
> person, then this is where I tell them [to meet me] because it's secure. I'm at the
>
> end of a hallway that, unless you're paying attention, you could very easily just
>
> walk by and not notice. I have a door that locks. So that's all very useful to have
>
> when having these kinds of conversations or attending webinars or other meetings
>
> where this information is being discussed.

Like the majority of the USRCs represented in this dissertation, which are the direct or indirect

byproduct of student advocacy, the USRC at Swallowtail Tech is the indirect result of student

advocates who demanded enhanced support for undocumented students. In response to this

student advocacy, Swallowtail Tech's leaders formed a task force to proactively assess DACA's

impact on the institution, and the task force recommended the creation of a USRC. María Elena's

reputation on campus was a decisive factor:

> The Provost of the University approached me to set up a meeting with me and my
>
> boss to discuss the possibility of having some kind of DACA resource network or
>
> center on campus. When that was being discussed among the higher-ups and
>
> people asked for names of people who could serve in that role, my name kept
>
> coming up.

María Elena worked in higher education for a number of years before Swallowtail Tech created a

USRC. Although her role didn't officially center on undocumented student support, María Elena

did similar work for about ten years.

I had already been doing workshops and trainings on campus at the faculty and

staff level, [and] at other universities, regionally. I'm also a member of a national

organization. And so, I've done a lot of work with the national organization as far

as presenting at national conferences. And I serve as one of the co-chairs for one

of their social justice advising communities.

Concerns about immigrant rights and undocumented people have always been part of

María Elena's life. "I'm an immigrant. I came here at the age of three, and I have the privilege of

being a citizen, but only because my father is a white Cuban. When we came from Mexico, we

came on an airplane." María Elena recognizes how she benefited from her father's nationality,

skin color, and their means of travel. "Any slight variation to that, and I could be in that same

position that these kids are in." While María Elena and her parents experienced privileges in their

journey, other members of her family have struggled for decades. "I have family who has been

undocumented for a long time, like literally just recently, one of my cousins who came, he

originally was petitioned by his older sister in like '92, '93. And he just now got his residency."

The parallel lines that run through María Elena's family, separated by legal status, abruptly

intersected her work after she began working in higher education full time.

I got a phone call from my cousin's wife because their son was interested in

applying to Swallowtail Tech. He was filling out paperwork, and they had hired

some kind of professional, college prep type of person, but that person would only

meet with the students, and they would only talk in English. My cousin's wife

didn't speak English, so she's like, 'I don't know what they talk about, and he

doesn't really know how to explain to me really well, and I don't know how to

help him,' and all this stuff. And she started telling me all these different things

and reading off papers or applications, and when she said Selective Service, I was

like, 'Okay, just stop. Let's figure it out. Let me get back to you.' That's when I

started doing a little bit of Googling and kind of looking because now, you know,

that I had another privilege of working at the universities like oh, there could be

[useful] things here. That's when I noticed there was a decent amount of

information out there, but it was just everywhere.

This experience with her cousin's family changed the trajectory of María Elena's career.

As a graduate and professional employee of Swallowtail Tech, María Elena knew the

institution and was able to navigate through the system to find the relevant information

and then translate it into Spanish to make it accessible. María Elena's supervisor took

notice of the work that María Elena was doing and encouraged her to build it out.

I just kind of snowballed from there, from me trying to help my cousin. I was

promoted a year after that [and] my supervisor saw me doing these things. I was

like, 'Okay, well, I'm gonna just start a little, just a little slideshow, a PowerPoint

presentation. I'm just gonna start kind of gathering these sources and seeing what's

out there.' And just on my own started compiling information. When I was

promoted, she said, 'Nobody's talking about this in this space, you need to [talk

about it]'. . . At my first presentation, people were like, 'Aren't you scared?

You're gonna get in trouble,' and, 'What if you get fired?' and you know, 'This

topic is, like, so controversial, blah, blah, blah.' And my supervisor was in the

audience, and I just said, 'Well, she put me up to it, so I think I'm okay.' And then

it just kind of went from there.

María Elena feels a deeply personal connection to her work, acknowledging that "it's difficult work, but it's definitely very rewarding. And it's not something I feel like I can just drop either." Unfortunately, María Elena's sociopolitical context has become increasingly unfriendly, with the office becoming more discreet and going "underground again" to avoid being targeted. Regardless of the state of her sociopolitical context, María Elena remains committed to her work and her community. "We did it before DACA existed. You're here during [DACA], and if, and when it goes away, we're still going to be doing the same things. Just supporting the students."

Alex

When Alex goes to work each day, she enters the larger student services center that holds her office. The USRC at McElroy State shares "one hallway with other centers within the division. . . So there's just a bunch of offices, and then we have a front desk. And then we have a lobby, like a study area" and conference rooms that support all of the centers in the office, where the centers host workshops and events. There are "tables for students to come and study. . . desktop stations where the students can work on a computer if they don't have a laptop. We offer free printing. . . There's usually free food and snacks. . . It's usually a pretty busy space, but it's usually students studying." The communal nature of the office suits Alex's desire to connect with students "that I'm pretty close with, and they'll sit with me and we'll have lunch. The front desk is like an area where I hang out and have, like, pretty long conversations with students just about life." Additionally, this shared space allows Alex and her coworkers to have "random conversations or like checking in on each other. . . sometimes [we] will eat lunch together."

That dynamic follows Alex to her office, where students will often linger in her open doorway "and ask how I'm doing, and I notice they're like, lingering longer, you know? And I'm

like, 'Okay, you need something.'" When students visit her office, Alex is able to invite them to

sit in the chairs directly across from her desk. Although Alex's office space is relatively small,

she filled the space with practical pieces like a whiteboard and "filing cabinets with like a bunch

of like event supplies," as well as plants and decor that reflect her passion for her work, and

pieces from her family that bring a smile to her face. "I just am able to really focus in my space,

and I like all my artwork and my plants. So, it's cozy."

Alex did not expect to work in higher education. As a first-generation college student

from a low-income background, "it's like a feat just to get your undergrad and I knew some grad

students. I didn't know what that meant or what they were doing." Although Alex does not share

a legal identity with the students she serves, she sees echoes of her experiences as a first-

generation student from a low-income background.

> Knowing the majority of our undocumented students are first-gen and the
>
> additional barriers that are there. I think I related in that way of also being first-
>
> gen and low-income, and seeing these additional barriers and the treatment they
>
> were receiving and the lack of attention they were receiving. I think all of that just
>
> kind of led me to grow interest in working with this community.

During Alex's undergraduate career, she realized that her path was veering from her original

plans. Fortunately, Alex had a mentor whose work interested her.

> I was talking to one of my advisors, and I was like, 'Hey, I like your job. I like
>
> that you help us and you mentor us, and like, you know, you're a role model for
>
> us.' I was like, 'How do I do what you do?' And they were like, 'Oh, this is
>
> higher education.' And I was like, 'Okay,' so on a whim, I applied [to a master's
>
> program in higher education].

During Alex's graduate program, she became involved in bridge programs for high school students who were interested in enrolling in higher education. While doing this work, Alex realized that "nobody's being intentional about our undocumented population." Additionally, Alex found it frustrating to be associated with a federal program that wasn't allowed to serve undocumented students because they "weren't allowed under that federal grant to work with students who are not documented or rightful citizens. . . I encountered more mixed-status students as they were eligible as US citizens." Alex was frustrated that she saw "this amazing program that I've benefited from as a student that these students don't have access to." The gap that Alex saw in this work resonated with her.

> I'm fifth-gen, immigration-wise. I'm not mixed status. I don't have any direct
>
> family members that are undocumented. I think through all the work I do with
>
> students and just constantly seeing, you know, that gap, and seeing just the lack of
>
> empathy and understanding from high school staff was very frustrating.

Alex encountered those frustrations at around the same time that students at McElroy State began seriously advocating for the creation of the campus's first USRC. The student leading the charge asked Alex "to participate in the program and, like, help build it out, but I was new to grad school. Everything was new. I was trying to get my bearings, and I was like, 'Not right now.'" Only a few years later, Alex was in the midst of her doctoral program, and a full-time position was created to run the USRC. Initially, Alex was hesitant about adding to her plate "because I was still a full-time student in the middle of my doctoral program, but it's always felt like a need that I wanted to get into and that I'm constantly seeing gaps about." However, Alex felt comfortable on campus and had developed relationships with students and stakeholders, "so it just seemed like a good fit."

After joining the USRC, Alex completed her doctorate and enjoyed a few months with one full-time job before she was asked to add another professional role to her docket.

I feel like I replaced all the dissertation/doctoral stress with a new job. I have free time, but I'm exhausted. I think it's just me learning to give myself grace and like, slow down. But it's difficult, especially with my undocumented students. [Their] needs are urgent and serious. And the [other] program is massive and has a lot of deadlines and logistics happening. I think it's just a lot to adjust to.

While this additional role was stressful, the financial benefits that came with the job were meaningful in her life. Unbeknownst to Alex, that additional job would be crucial to her livelihood when McElroy State unceremoniously closed its USRC over the winter break.

It obviously blindsided me, you know, [it was] very abrupt, very surprising. Because we were told for months that our program was fine. . . And then out of nowhere, you know, they decided to discontinue the program with no warning and without any discussion about the program so that was very frustrating and confusing and upsetting. . .For the students to come back and be blindsided, no clear explanation, everything was confusing and frustrating. It's like managing, operating through my grief, handling their grief, you know, lots of emotions with the students that are all valid. It's just a lot of grief, I guess. And also at the same time trying to make sure we're still meeting students' needs through other avenues outside of the program.

The lack of direction from institutional leadership, and the dearth of explanation as to why their program was canceled, left Alex and her students reeling. Irrespective of whether McElroy formalized their support for legally marginalized students, the students continued their residence

on campus, only to have their support system abruptly withdrawn. In this environment, Alex is doing her best to move forward.

> The only thing I'm able to continue to do is just advise students as they come. There's nothing saying that I'm not legally allowed to advise students. My supervisor said, you know, I'm an employee and advisor or staff member like anyone else and legal isn't asking me to not talk to students. They're just saying we can't have an official Undocu-program hosted by the University.

Day by day, Alex is leaning on her family, community, and friends to build a new routine. "I think over break was probably the hardest, but I think now that I'm back and meeting with students and you know, getting back to my routine, I think that's all fine. Weekly therapy is very helpful." Alex's sociopolitical context makes it difficult to hold out hope for the immediate future of the USRC at McElroy State. Regardless, Alex remains committed to her students.

This chapter served to introduce the participants and the environments in which they work. The following chapter includes the findings from the series of interviews with each participant.

Chapter 5: Findings

This chapter presents findings regarding the lived experiences of the professional employees of USRCS. The research questions that guided this study were: 1) What are the lived experiences of the professional employees who work at USRCs?; 1a) What personal factors inform their experiences in their role?, and 2) What are the experiences of USRC professionals when they encounter systemic factors, ranging from the centered to the marginalized?

Two broad themes emerged regarding the first research question: 1) What are the lived experiences of the professional employees who work at USRCs?; 1a) What personal factors inform their experiences in their role? The themes are, 1) the fortuitous and personal journeys that led the participants to their roles; 2) creating emotionally and physically secure spaces that are student-centered and student-led. The first theme, the fortuitous and personal journeys that led the participants to their roles, presents findings related to the personal connections that the participants have to the identities served by USRCs and the varying professional and academic experiences that are represented amongst the participants. The second theme, creating emotionally and physically secure spaces that are student-centered and student-led, presents the ways that the participants employed emotional intelligence to create USRCs that are student-centered and student-led.

Three broad themes emerged regarding the second research question: What are the experiences of USRC professionals when they encounter systemic factors, ranging from the local to the international? The themes are, 1) navigating challenges in a new field and a tumultuous landscape, 2) prioritizing mental health and protecting joy, and 3) navigating an uncertain future. The first theme, navigating challenges in a new field and a tumultuous landscape, presents findings related to how the participants navigated systemic challenges that are related to the newness of their field and their changing landscape, as well as the ways in which the participants used their experiences, strengths, and relationships to navigate these systems. The second theme, prioritizing mental health and protecting joy, presents how the participants' mental health intersected with systemic factors related to their work experiences, as well as the ways they incorporated joy in their work to serve themselves and their students. It is worth noting that the participants' mental health is also related to their lived experiences and the personal factors that

inform their work. However, this finding is rooted in the systemic factors that impact their experiences, so it is best incorporated into this section. The third theme, navigating an uncertain future, presents findings regarding funding mechanisms and their sociopolitical contexts, systemic factors that concern the participants when they consider the future of their field.

Together, these themes highlight the ways in which the lived experiences of the professional employees of USRCs are shaped by their individual values and personal histories, as well as the ways in which they experience, perceive, and navigate systemic factors.

The first two themes shared herein relate to research questions 1 and 1a. These research questions focus on the lived experiences and the personal factors of the participants which inform their work. The following sections discuss the personal histories, values and motivations of the participants, as well as their personal philosophies and experiences as professionals. After this, there will be a transition to the themes that relate to the second research question.

A Personal and Fortuitous Journey to the Role

The participants shared two consistent aspects of their journeys to their roles as professional employees of USRCs. First, the participants have personal connections to legally marginalized identities. Some of the participants are or were undocumented, while others have family members who are or were undocumented. The only outlier is Alex, who does not have an immediate personal connection to a legally marginalized identity. Second, the participants all found their way to this work in a fortuitous manner. The participants have a variety of academic interests and professional histories, although most have a direct connection to education or community advocacy. Some of the participants studied higher education at the graduate level before they began this work. Others worked in higher education before USRCs existed and found their way to it once opportunities became available. Common across the group is what

Evangelina calls a "spark moment"—an experience where they were activated to pursue work in support of legally marginalized individuals, especially in the college environment. The following section will explore how the professionals in this study found themselves in this relatively new field of work in ways that feel fortuitous and personal.

Personal Connections

All of the participants in this dissertation have a personal connection to marginalized legal identities, a factor that informs their lived experiences in their role. Three of the seven participants currently are or previously were undocumented. Among the three who belong to that small group (K, Mayra, and Karol), two of them connected with a USRC during their undergraduate careers. The remaining participants had spark moments where they were deeply affected by witnessing and supporting family members and students who were marginalized due to their legal statuses.

The three professionals who are or were undocumented see their experiences as assets to their work. Although Mayra initially felt insecure in her power because of her identity as an undocumented professional, she realized that her legal status and experiences made her "the ideal person to be in this position." Mayra felt empowered by the realization that "when [she's] advocating for undocumented students and their families, [she knows] what [she's] talking about." When Mayra was able to "switch that mindset," from feeling undercut by her legal identity to feeling empowered by it, she felt grateful that she was able to "think about [her identity and power] and feel comfortable and confident. And it was helpful to have a base because [she] was like, 'Okay, it's not just me,' or 'It's not just all of the undocumented people. We have allies too.'" Mayra's professional experience improved when she was able to sit more comfortably in her identity and, thus, have more confidence at work. At the same time, Mayra's

increased self-confidence helped her expand her support network at work, which increased her comfort at work. This personal growth takes time and a sense of safety, which Mayra recognizes is not available to every undocumented person on a college campus.

K was undocumented during their undergraduate career. For the duration of their college experience, K attended an institution where they were able to seek community and support from a USRC. K's experiences as an undocumented person were hugely impactful to their experiences as a student, and to their experience as a professional.

> I didn't really understand what being undocumented in college would look like until I got here. . . My freshman year, almost every day, I would be [on the main steps] crying because the financial aid office would be like, 'No, fuck you. Good luck figuring it out yourself.' I feel like that sums up my experience. . . I hated feeling like no one could help me, and so I don't do that [with my students]. And I know, even in my experience now, there's a lot of offices that say no to helping our students. I've had people say no to me when I ask, like, 'Hey, can you help my student experiencing this?' So yeah, that sucks."

Initially, K wanted to work at a nonprofit in the community. "I really like doing program work instead of doing direct services. . . Ideally, [I want to work at] like a nonprofit that supports like, low-income folks, and kind of just like, similar to what undocumented students face, but I think like just to a wider population." Although K knew that they wanted to work in a related field, they did not expect to work at the USRC with which they were so familiar. However, that familiarity gave K a leg up during the application process. "I did so great in my interviews that I ended up back here. . . Obviously, I'm very familiar with that identity. And throughout college, a lot of my work has been around like supporting undocumented students and stuff." K was

grateful to have a full-time job that allowed them to survive, as well as a job that related to their interests. However, K felt trapped, stating- "it's hard to try to get out of the Immigrant Movement." K's personal experiences as an undocumented student influenced their journey to their role and influenced the work they do each day. Although K has ambitions outside of this line of work, K's personal connections to their students are hugely important to K's experiences at work. K and Mayra both expressed the importance of the campus community to their experiences as undocumented people on college campuses, which unfortunately had dissimilar results.

As discussed in Chapter 4, RiRi, Evangelina, and María Elena are three of the professionals whose personal connections to marginalized legal identities informs the work they do. All of these professionals, when asked why they came to this work, discussed their connections to loved ones with marginalized legal identities. Additionally, these are also the only three participants who had experience working full time in higher education before the opportunity arose to work at a USRC. When the opportunity came to support legally marginalized students at their institutions, each of the professionals took on inaugural roles to serve the community.

The personal connections that the participants have with legally marginalized identities are deeply informative to their experiences in this work. In addition, the professionals' daily work is informed by the experiences they had as undocumented students, and/or the experiences they shared with their loved ones who are or were undocumented. These personal connections to the identities served by USRCs are valuable to advancing the work and supporting students.

Professional and Academic Paths

Another factor that informs the lived experiences of the professionals is their academic and professional paths. None of the participants in this dissertation ended their undergraduate career with the plan to work at a USRC. Some of the professionals became involved in a USRC during or after their graduate education, while others were already employed by their institution in other capacities when the USRCs opened, and they shifted roles to join the USRC staff. Although two participants are graduates of their current institutions, and they participated in the USRCs where they now work, neither set out with the goal of working in this USRC. Among the participants, multiple fields of study and areas of professional experience are represented. There are sociologists, artists, activists, educators, and linguists. The varying professional and academic experiences across the participants reflect a diverse group of professionals who contribute to a dynamic cohort of USRC professionals. As a group, they have a broad swath of skills, knowledges, and experiences that they can use to advocate for their students.

Alex became involved in a USRC when she was pursuing a graduate degree in higher education. Alex learned about the field of higher education through her involvement in a student development program while pursuing an unrelated undergraduate degree. After graduating, Alex worked for a similar student development program in the high school context. While working for the program, Alex saw that the program's resources and benefits were restricted to students who were U.S. citizens, which sparked her desire to change the system. "My boss was like, 'You should go for your master's and get your degree in higher ed,' and I was like, 'I don't know what graduate school is. I don't know what a master's is. I don't know what higher ed is.'" During Alex's graduate career, she had the opportunity to work with the students who advocated for her current USRC during its formative period. Once the USRC was institutionally recognized and

had the funds to pay for Alex's work, she was able to officially join the USRC and commit to its

growth. Alex's experience echoes the professional journey of others who found their way into

higher education through leadership programs that they were involved in as students.

Additionally, Alex's experience includes a spark moment wherein she identified the avenue

through which she wanted to pursue a more just system of higher education for marginalized

individuals.

      Unlike Alex, Mayra was involved in the undocumented student movement during her

undergraduate career. During that experience, Mayra realized that she wanted to work with the

community in the public, nonprofit sector, "and so throughout the rest of [her] undergrad, [she]

was like, 'Okay, I wanted to go into nonprofit.'" After graduating, Mayra began working at adult

schools, "primarily with English learners, immigrants," which still "felt like the work that [she]

wanted to do and the community that [she] wanted to work with." Mayra did not have an

immediate plan to return to higher education or work at a USRC until her alma mater contacted

her. The institution was opening a USRC, and they needed an employee to operate the space.

Due to Mayra's experience as a student leader, they wanted her to return to the campus to lead

this formalized initiative. Fortunately, Mayra was able to apply for the job and she became the

inaugural employee of the center. Unlike Alex, Mayra found a calling in the undocumented

student movement during her undergraduate career. However, that experience did not

immediately direct Mayra to work at a USRC, which may reflect the relative newness of the

USRC phenomenon. Mayra's experience as a community organizer and educator serves her in

her current role at the USRC, which reflects the value that can be found in volunteers, partners,

and employees who transition into higher education after working in a different sector.

The participants in this study came to the work in a variety of ways, but they were often fueled by similar motivators. Ultimately, the field is strengthened by having professionals with varying academic and professional backgrounds who are personally connected to the identities of the students they serve. In these circumstances, the professionals feel deeply invested in their work and have myriad strengths to serve their students and strengthen their community.

The proceeding section includes themes that continue expanding upon research questions 1 and 1a. Unlike the preceding section, which focuses on the participants' personal histories and journeys which inform their work experiences, the following theme discusses the lived experiences of the participants' in their professional lives, which are informed by their values and philosophies.

Creating Emotionally and Physically Secure Spaces that are Student-Centered and Student-Led

As indicated in the first section, the participants have personal connections to this work and bring a variety of professional and academic experiences to their work. This section discussed how the professionals employ those aspects of their lived experiences to create student-centered and student-led spaces that are emotionally and physically secure for students and community members. The participants were consistent in their commitment to centering students in all aspects of their work. There were three overarching ways in which the participants centered their students in their work. First, the participants centered students by employing emotional intelligence in their philosophical and practical approach to the work. Second, the participants discussed and exhibited how they centered students in the ways that they curated their physical environments, including the provision of tailored resources to support their students. Third, the participants reflected a commitment to empowering a student-led space. This

commitment is reflected in their support for a student-led community and for their

encouragement of student advocacy. The participants were adamant that their students were the

true leaders and change agents of their space.

Employing Emotional Intelligence

The participants discussed the importance of emotional intelligence in developing a

student-centered approach to their work. The participants were generous with their stories and

emotions, willing to reflect deeply on their experiences and name a broad array of the complex

emotions associated with their work. In particular, there were three emotions that the participants

brought up repeatedly as they reflected upon their approach to centering their students in their

work. First, the professionals discussed the role that passion plays in their professional

relationships and their motivations to do the work. Second, the professionals exhibited and

shared the role of vulnerability, especially in relation to their connections with their students.

Third, the professionals acknowledged the importance of humility in their work experiences.

Passion

Many of the participants discussed the role that passion plays in their work experiences.

The participants discussed the role of passion in two ways. First, the role of passion in their

public-facing persona and relationships—for example, how their passion is perceived by others

and how they use their passion as a relationship-building tool. Second, the role of passion in their

internal motivations and experiences—for example, how they use their passion to persist through

challenges and how it can impact their mental health.

The participants were aware of how integrating passion into their public perception and

relationships could be leveraged in support of their work and community. For example, when

María Elena talks about her USRC to campus and community partners, "people can genuinely

see my passion for it. I am trying to help people remember that [our students] are people. These are their lives." Mayra shared that her ability to express her passion for the work externally allows her to recruit allies and partners across campus and the community successfully. "That's really like the core thing that I bring, being able to be passionate about this work. I think people definitely see that and are willing, or wanting, to work with me." Alex saw how her external expressions of passion helped her build relationships with her students. Passion "helps me approach [the work] in a unique way that's more interpersonal with the students, and I'm able to build that rapport." Alex believes that "the students, especially this particular population, can see how hard I'm working and how passionate I am. And I think that lends them to want to help me and help the program and help others." When the professional employees of USRCs are able to convey their passion for their work in an engaging manner, they can build relationships with stakeholders and foster positive relationships with their students.

The participants also described the experience of using passion as an internal motivating tool, and as a factor that impacts their mental health. Connecting with their passion for the work can help professionals maintain a sense of enthusiasm and provide an emotional cushion when the work gets difficult. For example, Alex is "very committed and passionate and driven," factors that "help [her] show up to work and not feel like it's work." Additionally, this internal force can help buoy the mental health of the professionals. Mayra shared that her passion for the work helped her persist through difficult circumstances. "I am very passionate about helping students and passionate about this community. I'm passionate about advocating [and being] willing to put myself out there." Alternately, Alex acknowledged how feeling so much passion for one's work can be difficult to manage— "I, I care a lot. So I think that's a detriment, but it's also…a good thing?. . .Yeah, it's a double-edged sword." Alex and Mayra's experiences reflect

how professionals can leverage their passion to serve the work, while also serving as a reminder

of how passion can be a double-edged sword in regards to their mental health. The passion that

the professionals feel for their work can help them explore and embrace other emotions that

might otherwise be difficult to tap into in a professional environment. For example, Mayra's

passion for the work helps her practice vulnerability, another emotion that can be a useful

professional tool.

Vulnerability

The participants discussed how they embraced vulnerability as a tool to help them be

effective leaders and to build relationships with students. Mayra identified three skills that she

thought were important to be a good leader—vulnerability, patience, and empathy. Professionals

who are able to practice these three skills can create environments where people feel

comfortable. Mayra viewed vulnerability as a practice. For example, rather than hoping that

students feel comfortable enough to ask embarrassing questions, Mayra makes herself vulnerable

and puts herself forward to "make other people feel comfortable asking [her questions]. Even if

they're like, 'I don't know, I'm embarrassed to ask,' it's like, 'We'll figure it out together.'" Karol

uses vulnerability as a tool to shape her relationships and the environment at her USRC. "I bring

that comfort and vulnerability out of [the students]. . . It's a space for them to be themselves."

Alex also uses vulnerability as a tool to help build relationships with her students, which allows

her students to "understand and get to know me as a person and not just some staff member." In

Alex's experience, "that vulnerability piece, I think it lends the students to be more open and

come to me and disclose, and I think that helps." As previously discussed, the professionals who

operate USRCs do not have access to a list of all the students who may benefit from their

services. Instead, the students have to self-disclose, a reality that puts them in a vulnerable

position. The participants understood and respected the seriousness of disclosure, and they used

their own vulnerability as a tool to make students feel comfortable and safe at the USRC. Given

the courage and trust it takes for a student to make themselves vulnerable and self-disclose, the

participants were humbled by the gift they felt they received when they were entrusted to care for

their students.

Humility

The participants frequently acknowledged the importance of humility if one hopes to be

successful in this work. Regardless of whether or not the participants were undocumented or a

citizen, if they were new to their roles or more experienced, they centered humility as a necessity

for the role of a professional employee in a USRC. Specifically, they discussed humility in

relation to their learning processes and roles as experts on their campuses, and in relation to their

relationships with their students.

Although the participants are looked to as the experts on their campuses, they are aware

that they are constantly threading the needle. The participants recognized that, yes, they are often

the most informed people on their campus regarding the students served by USRCs. However,

they are aware that they work in a rapidly changing field and that it would be impossible for one

person to know everything that relates to the experiences of the students served by USRCs. The

professionals who work at USRCs have different personal experiences and connections to

marginalized legal identities, none of which are applicable as a universal truth to the experiences

of their students. Consider the perspective of Karol, an undocumented professional— "just

because we have lived experiences that are very similar doesn't mean we have to be an expert."

In this role where the context is constantly shifting, tenure does not mean that a professional is

all-knowing. When asked to reflect upon what would make someone successful in her work,

Mayra reflected on how the willingness to practice humility was necessary, regardless of her tenure in her role. She shared,

> I've been doing this work for over 10 years, and there's still things I don't know. . . The humility of being like, 'I don't know what that is,' and the will to research and talk about it. . . There's a lot of work. . . The willingness to learn and willingness to work with others and [practice] a lot of patience [are necessary to succeed in this work]. I know this isn't easy. It's not intuitive. People don't just know laws and how to support undocumented students.

The participants discussed how important it was for professional employees of USRCs to accept that it is impossible for them to know everything as it relates to their students. Once a professional can recognize that they are not the absolute authority on the field, they are able to embrace a professional journey centered on asking questions and learning, which is ultimately of great service to their students. Humility also plays a role in Evangelina's perspective regarding who holds knowledge in the USRC environment and how to respond in moments where she causes harm.

> I can learn from students as much as they can learn from me. I've learned so much from them, and I've been called in a few times. There's always the ability to be humbled, and to learn, and to be grateful to be in the space and to be invited in as someone who is not holding this identity and [who is not] directly affected, right? It's not about being the savior. It's about uplifting and amplifying their issues. We are not here to save people. These students are so badass. They have done it by themselves. They come armed with so much cultural wealth when they get here, and ways of knowing, and funds of knowledge that have been passed down. We

need to stop thinking of them as 'Oh, these little poor kids are, you know, they're

so broken, they need to be fixed.' That's not the case.

The participants' embrace of humility in their practices allowed them to be grateful for

the opportunity to learn. Karol acknowledged the role that this process played in her professional

development: "Mistakes got me here. I did cause harm at one point. . . I've been called out on

that too, and I'm like, 'Thank you for letting me know.' . . Being okay with [being called out] as

you're processing [is important]. . . Because [otherwise] it just haunts you everywhere."

Evangelina had a similar experience when she caused harm, "Like crud, I did this and I didn't

mean to." Given the inevitability of human error, Evangelina encouraged professionals at USRCs

to "just own it." While Evangelina wants for students to "call [her] in and give [her] an

opportunity to do better," she respects that when she asks for forgiveness from her students, "it's

up to them, [whether or not] they choose to forgive [me]." The participants' embrace of humility

reflects their commitment to centering their students in their work and in their spaces.

The participants' emotional intelligence, specifically the ways they center passion,

vulnerability, and humility in their work, are a consistent throughline in their lived experiences

as professionals. When the participants encountered systemic barriers, they were able to employ

these skills to navigate challenges while also supporting their students and themselves. The next

section describes how the participants channeled their experiences, values, and skills into

building and supporting physical spaces that centered their students.

Curating a Student-Centered Space

The participants are proud of the spaces they have curated during their tenure. These

spaces are the base in which their lived experiences unfold, and the participants have taken

ownership for the way the space conveys their values, priorities, and the tone they want for their

work experience. One of the means by which the participants curated a student-centered space

was via the assembly and distribution of tailored resources. Although every USRC did their best

to maximize the tailored resources they provided, they were all bound by physical and financial

resources at their disposal. Regardless of the physical and financial resources that a USRC has,

one of the ways that the professionals shaped their space was by setting the emotional tone of the

space and creating protective mechanisms that encouraged students to practice vulnerability.

Alex recognized that when a student comes to the USRC, it might be "their first time

kind of confronting their identity and putting themselves out there and in their eyes like exposing

themselves to support." Out of respect for the courage it takes to make oneself vulnerable, the

professionals took measures to protect student privacy. Some of the offices were located in

discrete locations, and/or they had discreet signage so the center was not easily identifiable if you

were not explicitly looking for it. Additionally, some of the professionals had white noise

machines in their offices so they could help students feel a greater sense of privacy during

closed-door conversations. Another way that the professionals fostered an environment where

the students could feel safe being vulnerable was through the way they carried themselves at

work. Karol saw the value in having less formal relationships with students who might otherwise

only have formal relationships with faculty. Karol recognized that it was important for the

students to have a more comfortable relationship with a university employee, and that it was

valuable for the students to have a connection with a professional employee whose marginalized

identities may intersect with theirs. K reflected upon their time as an undergraduate student who

was involved with a USRC and used that experience to inform how they interact with students.

> I reflect[ed] on what worked and what didn't work when I was a student and
>
> [thought] about like, what would I have needed? . . I guess [for] college in

general, but also, like interacting with staff. . . I'm not a fan at all of like

professionalism, or just trying to keep things formal, especially if you're in a

student space. I feel like the more corporate [you are], the less open students will

be to you. And the point of my role, or at least how I see it, is like, first was to be

the safe space for students. I want to try to give that energy.

While the energy and intention that K and Karol describe is important to creating a sustainable

USRC, the environment the professionals curate can only go so far without the buy-in and

support of students.

Among the participants, Mayra, Evangelina, and K are privileged to have the longest-

standing relationships with the institutions where they work. As such, they have seen their spaces

grow and they understand how students have influenced the formation of the centers. Mayra can

look around her USRC and see physical reflections of the students' connection to the space. The

students decorated the walls with art they made and posters from social movements and took the

time to hang up string lights to celebrate the holidays.

It's become such a beautiful space. . . Everyone who walks in there, they're

like, 'Wow, this feels so nice.' . . It just feels homey. . . It's a very fun [space]. You

can tell it's loved by students, and it's curated by students, and they just love that

space. There's students all the time, there's music. . . we actually recently did a

survey [of the] students and some of the main highlights were that they felt like the

space was welcoming and fun. [This] was beautiful because we're like, if anything,

we feel like that's the success. If you feel welcomed and you want to be here and

you feel like it's fun, like we did one of our main jobs.

Mayra's professional experience is improved by the relationship that the students have with the space. As Mayra sees the space change according to the students who travel through and make it their own, she can see physical manifestations of her investment in her work. Evangelina has experienced similarly positive outcomes because of the relationship that her students have with their USRC. Although Evangelina refrains from calling the USRC a safe space, "because I can't guarantee safety," the students "use those words," calling the USRC their safe space. Instead, Evangelina calls the USRC a "supportive" space, while at the same time she is "not going to take [the students'] words and say no [it's not a safe space]. I love that they feel that when they come here, that it's theirs." The level of comfort and ownership that students have in their USRCs can make a marked difference in their experiences. K recognized the powerful impact that such a space can provide on the emotional wellbeing of their students. "Students come here and hav[e] space where they don't have to fight, and just feel more visible and seen. I felt like more students are feeling more comfortable in terms of, you know, their statuses, their identities, their program and just feeling more community, which is important." This experience that K described, knowing that there is a space on campus where the students do not have to explain themselves, do not have to fight for space, and where they can feel seen for who they are, is an invaluable aspect of identity-centered student services that can relieve invisible burdens from students.

Providing Tailored Resources

The participants described a litany of resources they provide through their centers, resources which they cultivated to help students navigate systemic barriers. Some of the centers provided access to computers and free printing, the latter of which was a big draw for the students. Although these campuses had other spaces with printing (at a cost), the students gravitated toward their USRC to use this resource. The centers provided varying access to food,

depending upon their resources. Students were fed via a variety of mechanisms, ranging from food and snacks at programming, to grab-and-go light snacks available in the center's common areas, to an institutionally-funded food pantry that provided regular access to staples like cereal and sandwich supplies, as well as weekly access to hot meals. Mayra acknowledged that food is an especially important resource for these students and to the function of USRCs— "Food is so important. It's so important, so important to build community. The idea of breaking bread together." The participants acknowledged that access to free food is especially important for the students they serve because they often have limited access to legal work opportunities and money is tight, so their students can be priced out of on-campus dining options.

A few of the centers that had access to more financial resources were able to provide funds for DACA renewals, scholarships for books, low-cost transit passes, emergency grants, meal passes for on-campus dining options, and paid fellowships or internships for students who would not otherwise be able to work on campus, due to their legal status. The participants had to find creative ways to match their students with available funds. One example of creative problem solving is Evangelina's means of collecting donations for student scholarships. Evangelina is at a point in her career where she is paid to share her experiences with outside organizations. Rather than keeping her speaker fee to use for herself or her family, Evangelina repurposes those funds into a student scholarship fund that is available specifically for students who cannot access other funds due to their legal status.

The participants centered the students in their programmatic work—hosting Know Your Rights workshops and UndocuAlly workshops, in addition to social programming tailored to their students. Additionally, the participants centered future students and students' family members by hosting informational workshops in the greater community, including at local high

schools. While these resources are important and beneficial to the students, there are other ways that the professionals center their students at their USRCs, including through the curation of a student-led community that is rooted in vulnerability, privacy, and the centrality of the students.

Committing to a Student-Led Community

The professionals felt most successful when they felt like students were leading the community, decisions that were often informed by the professionals' perspective regarding power and collective action. K, Alex, and Mayra are among the professionals who actively fought against creating hierarchical structures in their offices. Alex saw her USRC community "as a collective. . . we're collectively collaborating and building together and it's not like top down." This collectivist mindset reflects one of the most encouraging trends among the participants, which was their commitment to empowering their students and creating environments where the professionals could use their power as needed, then get out of the way and let the students determine the purpose and functions of their USRCs. At Ceres College, Mayra turns to her students for guidance regarding the purpose of their USRC, and commits to communal decision making, whenever possible.

> I don't always have this whole vision of what we're gonna do . . . the students give me that vision, right? . . . Let's make sure that everyone feels included, and they feel valued, and they feel heard. . . There's a lot of spaces on campus where we have governance committees. People are on those committees, but this is just a formality and so they feel that if they're not actually being heard, or like what they're thinking is being taken into account. But in our spaces, they are. Like, there's no decision that we've made [without our students]. Sometimes it takes a little bit longer to figure it out, but you know, people feel very much included.

Alex and Mayra's intentional choices regarding the structures of their centers and the systems

they employ reflect their commitment to constructing a student-led community. As Evangelina

said, "[The] students are our priority. They're essentially our bosses, so we. . . let them know that

they have the power to make changes." In that dynamic, Evangelina tries "to lead by example,"

showing students how she "steps into [her] power and how [she] uses [her] power. . .[her] voice.

. .and other forms [of power] like [her] position. . .to make sure that we make changes and

advocate for our students and their families, and that things are [aligned] with the goals that we

have in our office." Evangelina had the professional experience and navigational capital to

confidently empower her students to advocate for themselves and their communities.

Sometimes the participants facilitated student-led initiatives in their roles as supervisors

of student employees, volunteers, and interns. For example, K encouraged their students to

"make [programming] decisions," and to "meet with each other and talk to each other when you

make those decisions." Alex had a similar approach with the student volunteers and interns she

supervised. The students Alex supported are involved "in everything we do, all the way down to

the macro level of strategic planning, like 'Where are we going? What are we doing? What's our

mission? What's our purpose?' They're involved in that entire process." Alex saw her role as

important to facilitating the collective nature of the organization's structure—"If we get requests

from reporters, I bring them in. I never make a decision on my own and then tell them what we're

doing. I don't run it like that." Alex's respect for her students, their needs, and their autonomy

strengthens the relationships she has with her students and the community.

Other times, the participants facilitated this in their roles as advisors to student

organizations. At times, these student-led efforts allowed the students to "get the needle moved"

(Alex) for changes that the professionals supported but felt unable to advocate for due to their

status as employees of the institution. Alex's students collectively organized outside of the

formal structures of the USRC, which allowed Alex to "help them in the background behind the

scenes on how to build these things out, how to write a proposal, how to negotiate, and how to

get connected with local state representatives." This allowed Alex to "step aside and let [the

students] do it. It's from the students, not me, so I'm not risking my job." One aspect of this

dynamic that Alex is proud of is the ways in which her students are then able to advocate for

themselves within the community and educate stakeholders about their needs. "I think it's really

cool to watch that development. That despite you know, all the clouds and the shittiness, if you

will, right? We're still able to keep working together and moving forward and they're able to

grow and develop as young professionals." Alex's willingness to invest in students outside of

formal institutional structures reflects the humility that the professionals who work at USRCs

embody in their work. The development and needs of their students are the priority.

> It comes back to, and this is something you know, like the students even told me
>
> early on. Like, 'We don't need you to talk for us. When we do, we'll let you
>
> know.' So there's times when it's like that line where you step up and step back.
>
> And then sometimes you step way back and let 'em go. And so knowing like, I
>
> need to pass the mic, right? It's okay. It comes back to [the idea of] make space,
>
> take space, right? Like you need to give space when it's time, and I think some
>
> people are still hellbent on saving people. Stop. We're not here to save people.
>
> (Evangelina)

While the participants do much to center students as the leaders of their USRCs, they

recognized that their students ultimately hold greater power than the professionals, whether or

not the students are able to recognize this. Karol took this a step further, acknowledging that as

much as a professional employee would like to align themselves with their students in

advocating for change, the students "have their own power," a reality that is reflected in the rich

history of student advocacy in the development of USRCs nationwide.

Encouraging Student Advocacy

All but two of the USRCs in this study were created as a direct result of continued

student advocacy over a period of years. The professionals whose jobs were created as a direct

result of student advocacy expressed a deep level of respect, care, and commitment for their

students and responsibilities. This experience was certainly intensified because almost all of the

participants in this dissertation whose work was created by student advocacy also hold inaugural

roles.

In Alex's situation, "the students got the program created, they advocated, they got the

position created. . .and that's a big deal to have a dedicated staff member for this community for

the first time." During Alex's time in her graduate program, she saw the students at her

institution fighting for support and representation for several years before she was able to join

the center as its first employee. Evangelina also witnessed the students at her institution fighting

"for years" for the funding to support a center and employ a professional employee. The student

advocacy movement at [Evangelina's institution] had a powerful snowball effect. "Over the

years [the students] asked for scholarship money, they asked, no, they made demands of the

institution. . . They also had these demands that they would do and they would have a call to

action. Our calls to action were on our campus to make it more undocumented friendly." In the

days of this student movement, Evangelina supported the students as an advisor while she

worked in a different role at the institution. Having witnessed the historic effort and change over

time, Evangelina is deeply moved by what the students built by working together to harness their

power for change. "It's beautiful, what they created, and that I've been like, invited to be a part of it." Karol had a similarly strong emotional reaction to the advocacy efforts of her students, but the emotions she felt were different from the pride that Evangelina experienced. Rather, Karol feels "a lot of pressure from like, myself and from the institution, from the students" due to the responsibility she has been entrusted with.

Mayra's experience is unique because she was one of the students who helped advocate for the creation of her role, and she is the only participant who worked at a community college. In that context, Mayra and the students she worked with recognized that this support is especially important at community colleges where "students of course transfer. For them, it's sometimes hard to like, transfer what they've already worked on," to advocate for change at Ceres College "versus restarting, right? Because the students left Ceres College and then they have to restart [their advocacy efforts]. So they wanted [a professional employee] to be there and be like the constant to like pass on the information, or train students and do more of the like, institutional work." [Mayra's institution] is incredibly fortunate that they were able to recruit and hire Mayra as the inaugural employee of their USRC because she is the cornerstone of its foundation and development. As a result of her experience, Mayra is an enthusiastic supporter of student advocacy. Mayra recognizes that "most of everything that we have at [institution] has been pretty much started by students. . .because obviously students are very interested and very active." One remarkable example of student advocacy, of which Mayra is incredibly proud, is the story of a student who came to the leadership team and suggested that the USRC apply for a grant. The student then worked with the leadership team to build a submission that resulted in the USRC securing important funding. The student in question was an active ally in the center, and they

remain an ally of the center after they completed their time at Ceres College and transferred to a

4-year institution.

> That's probably one of my most favorite moments. So a student, they were one of
>
> our interns. And I just love it because, you know, they identified as an ally. So
>
> they're a student who's an ally. And before working with us, they had, you know,
>
> they had friends that they knew who were potentially undocumented or part of
>
> mixed status families. But they didn't have any, like, direct immediate, like within
>
> their family or anything like that, or immediate family at least, that were
>
> undocumented. But they just like, they really loved the mission of [the USRC]
>
> and they really loved the community. They wanted to do more and learn more.

Working with this student to advocate for the community and enhance support for the USRC was

a pivotal moment in Mayra's professional career.

> That's exactly what we hope for our students, that they feel so empowered that
>
> they are going to create something new that doesn't even exist. That is like, the
>
> ultimate success. To say our programs are working, our programs are helpful and
>
> our programs really do impact student lives, you know. It just demonstrates the
>
> power that our students have, and that we have.

> Evangelina has a similar perspective on the importance and power of student advocacy.

"I have conversations with students, and I tell them you can ask for what you want. Your

university will tell you what's what. There's times, they're like, 'Can we do this?' And like, you

can do what you want. I don't put any limits on them." In this context, Evangelina provides

similar support that Mayra does. Rather than deciding the direction in which the students move,

Evangelina teaches them advocacy techniques and equips them with skills to strategically

navigate the path toward their goals.

> They need to know this is what freedom of speech looks like. This is what
>
> protecting yourself looks like. So it's not me telling them 'Oh, we got to be careful
>
> because this could happen.' It's more like, 'These are the facts. This is what you
>
> need to know. Can you go in and advocate in the state capital? Sure you can.
>
> Here's what you need to know how to do it right. Because you can't go in there
>
> like, you know, just screaming, yelling at people. You have to learn how to do
>
> that. Can you do things? Yes.'

Students are at the heart of the work that the participants do each day. Their commitment

is evident in the ways they practice emotional intelligence by embracing passion,

humility, and vulnerability in their internal and external practices. Additionally, the

extent to which the participants invested in student-center spaces is evident in the

physical spaces they curated in their USRCs. Lastly, the professionals exhibit their

commitment to their students via the ways they empower and advocate for student

leadership in their office and beyond.

The previous sections discussed the findings as they relate to the first two

research questions that framed this dissertation. Two themes were presented, the first of

which focused on the participants' paths to their roles and the second of which focused

on their priorities as professionals. The following sections include three themes that relate

to the second research question, "What are the experiences of USRC professionals when

they encounter systemic factors, ranging from the centered to the marginalized?" This

research question accounts for external systemic factors that influenced the participants'

experiences. Three themes are presented, the first of which focuses on how the participants' navigated their work experiences, the second of which focuses on the professionals mental health and external influencing factors, and the third of which addresses the uncertain future that lays ahead of the participants.

Navigating Challenges in a New Field and a Tumultuous Landscape

The first two sections discussed how the participants' lived experiences shaped their professional journeys, values, and their commitment to build emotionally and physically secure student-centered and student-led spaces. However, a number of systemic factors created challenges for the lived experiences of the professionals, including a lack of financial and human resources and outsized work responsibilities. This section describes how these challenges impacted the lived experiences of the participants and how they employed their institutional knowledge, navigational capital, and relationships to navigate these challenges. The following findings reflect how the participants experienced and conceptualized time, how they managed unsustainable expectations, how they employed institutional knowledge and navigational capital, and the importance of building and nourishing developmental relationships with colleagues.

Experiencing and Conceptualizing Time

Time stretched and collapsed for the professionals, depending upon the lens through which they viewed their experiences. When focusing on the shorter-term, day-to-day experiences in their role, the professionals often experienced their work as "a blur" (Alex). In the longer-term, the professionals felt the impact of COVID-19 on their lived experiences and perspective of time. For example, Mayra's sense of time was warped by the COVID-19 pandemic— "time flies so fast, right? I mean, three years, and we're still in the pandemic." In this context, the

participants found it difficult to plan and execute their work in a strategic manner, which would ultimately advance their work.

One challenge for the professionals was the amount of time dedicated to navigating institutional bureaucracy. For instance, RiRi works in a system that has numerous bureaucratic processes, a structure that allows for transparency, but which can be incredibly limiting.

> Basically, everything we do has to be approved. . . any little thing, flyers, everything has to be pre-approved. We might have an idea of wanting to do something, but it just doesn't work. . . Even to just purchase the snacks, they have to go through at least, I want to say, once we've processed it here like internally, it still has to go through at least four other people before it technically gets fully approved. And that's how it goes. . . it's just the process, but it's very tedious. Right now, with a lot of different transitions on campus, it would take at least two weeks [to get approved], which is still not too bad. But sometimes we want to rush things, and that's when we get a little bit of a delay. So for that it's just like okay, we have to kind of move it along. . . It's a little frustrating to be honest.

In this context, RiRi has to plan all of her programming before she meets her students. As a result, RiRi runs into problems aligning the programming schedule with her students' availability and tailoring the programs to the students as she gets to know them. Oftentimes, the only way for RiRi to adapt her plans to accommodate her students is by circumventing the system, a process that puts her at risk for professional repercussions.

Mayra also has difficulty navigating the bureaucratic hurdles at her institution: "I would say probably a third of my work is just trying to figure out how to do things within the system that exists." Other participants shared similarly time-consuming navigational challenges,

especially those who originated their roles, like Mayra, Alex, and Karol. That burden was

heightened for the individuals who held these inaugural roles in their first professional jobs. Alex

began her role while she was still in graduate school, and she reflected upon her growth.

> I didn't have a lot of confidence, I think, in that first year. It was my first year
>
> running the program, in charge of like, mission, vision, budget, strategic plan, all
>
> of that. It's my first full time job, so there's just a lot of firsts. And it was a big
>
> undertaking. I think that's been an interesting transition, to see just the growth the
>
> [USRC] has had and how comfortable I feel now and how confident I am in a
>
> position.

Karol began her job after graduate school, and the "job description didn't say that it was an

inaugural role at all." When Karol accepted the role, she found that there were no historical

documents to lean upon, no pre-existing relationships that she could nurture, "I was like, I don't

know what to do. It was such a new role, and there was nothing left for me. I was literally

creating everything." Regardless, the challenge of unexpectedly adopting an inaugural role did

not leave a bitter taste in Karol's mouth. That sentiment is influenced by a supportive supervisor

"who has been able to provide more guidance in terms of okay I need you to like document like

what you're doing, create this, you know, guide for example, or like step by step." Karol has

been tasked with building a program from the ground up. "I feel like we're missing that structure

piece, but we're getting there."

Among the professionals who had more experience with their institution, either as alums

or as long-term employees, there was a sense of frustration and disappointment that progress

moved so slowly. Consider Evangelina, who has worked at her institution for over five years:

It doesn't feel like it's been that long, but because there's still so much work to do.

I mean, we've gone through it. We started when there was nothing for

undocumented students. And then DACA came, right? And DACA was good—

not great—because it didn't help everyone. But it helped some. And then it felt

like okay, this is something, some momentum, right? And then we started getting

laws to help students, but we still had those who didn't have DACA. And now we

have so many more students without DACA. I feel like we haven't stopped

fighting, we're not done. It doesn't feel like a lot of time has passed because we're

still in it.

Mayra, an alum of her institution, who has worked there for over five years, shared a similar

reflection on her experience of the passage of time:

When I think about other programs, we are definitely like a really big program, a

really established program. But it also surprises me that it took us this long, you

know? There was a huge need, you know, and there has been support and there

has been movement and mobilizing and organizing. And we're still not where we

want to be. So sometimes it does feel that way, like, 'Oh my gosh, it's already

been so long and we're not where we want to be.'

Like Mayra, María Elena is an alum of the institution where she works. Also like Mayra, María

Elena has two official roles on campus, a responsibility that can feel burdensome in the limited

time available each day.

It seems like a lot of time has already passed and yet, it's [passed] so quickly. So

in that role, of kind of managing two brains at once, I kind of feel like I almost

have two separate jobs. . . And I've been lucky to have a graduate assistant for

most of that time, except for like, this past fall semester, it just didn't happen and I

wasn't able to hire anybody. Mostly it's me kind of navigating those two areas,

and there is another [person who does my other job]. So at least there is that

additional support and when I became the coordinator for the USRC, we were

allowed to hire a 50% person to kind of backfill that position to take over some of

the stuff that I was going to allegedly drop. She's helped incredibly. It's been

great. Definitely taken a lot of stuff off my plate, but then it's still like, not

enough. You know, that 50% is still not enough. So it's been interesting. Like so

just kind of navigating those two spaces and trying to meet the needs of both and

surviving.

María Elena's conceptualization of time was informed by the work she was expected to perform.

Although María Elena was the only professional employee of her USRC and had access to

support from a graduate student, she was doing that work as an addition to the original role for

which she was hired. María Elena is one of the participants whose work responsibilities were

outsized compared to the personnel that were available to her and the USRC.

Managing Unsustainable Expectations

As the participants in this dissertation wrestled with their experiences of the passage of

time in relation to their work, their experiences were shaped by unsustainable expectations at

work. There were several factors that informed these experiences, including a lack of adequate

support work and lack of support from colleagues at their institutions. Some of the participants

had additional challenges because they held two official roles in their institution, which limited

the amount of time they could focus on the USRC and increased the scope of their

responsibilities.

Feeling Understaffed and Overburdened

The participants in this study shared experiences when they felt that their workload would be easier to manage with more support. Participants wished that their schedules could allow for more time with their students, they wished for more support staff, and they wished that other employees across their institutions would take up this work as part of their established practices.

The amount of time it takes to create trusting, meaningful relationships with students was an important investment for the professionals. When the participants had more external demands on their time, their relationships with students were impacted. For example, Evangelina discussed the amount of time and care that goes into building a trusting relationship with a student, then the time it takes to understand their needs and work with the student to build a customized plan to address their unique situation.

> There's a whole piece of like, relationship building that we have to do before we
> have to earn their trust, right? We have to earn their trust. We have to make sure
> that we know all these variables so that we can say, 'This is what we're gonna do
> in this situation.'

Evangelina had to understand what legal status the student held, and the legal status of relevant family members. Once Evangelina was entrusted with that information, she could then move forward with a specialized care plan.

> I don't think I've ever had a student where I'm like, 'Oh, we're gonna do this for
> you'. This is like, there's no template that I'm like, 'Here's the magic template.
> This is how we're gonna do it'. Every little piece. There's like, something's going
> to be different. Everything has to be customized, right? Like are there [consistent]

things? Yes. We're going to talk about funding. We're going to talk about

engagement. We're going to talk about housing about payments about

scholarships, like those things are all going to come right. But how you do it is

going to be different depending on the situation.

K shared a similar experience in their job, where they are a case manager for approximately 500

students. When students come to K, they are often in crisis, and need attentive, thoughtful care

that requires creative solutions and which would be impossible to deliver in a rote method during

a prescribed time period. "Sometimes we get the higher ups saying like 'You need to be meeting

with more students'. . . I'm like, if I have to meet with even just like, one or two more students

per week like I will not get anything done. I don't know how."

The participants also wished for additional staff to help them with administrative tasks

that took time away from their larger goals and purposes. Karol wished for "an assistant Karol or

executive Karol" to help her talk through decisions and take over some of the administrative

tasks associated with her role. Evangelina also wished for administrative staff, "because all the

other centers have administrative assistants, but we really don't have anywhere to put someone.

You're like, where are we going to put the person?" Space is a consideration for the employees

who work at USRCs, because their resources are limited and oftentimes their access to space is

dependent upon the generosity of others. Alex, a professional who operated a one-person center,

wished for at least one additional employee to support her work.

That's what's missing for me is having additional staff, because I'm one person for

a [large] campus. I'm one person helping the undergrads, the graduate students,

training the staff and faculty. I'm doing events, I'm helping the larger community,

with prospective students and high schools are reaching out and they want

support. It's a lot and then starting this fall I'm directing another program now.

Experiences like these left the participants feeling guilty that they were not doing more or enough to help their students and center be successful. Although Alex was a "full time doctoral student, full time staff member," when she began her job, she "felt guilty because I was like, oh, I should be writing grants. I shouldn't be doing this, when in actuality like, I felt like the institution just needed to step up." María Elena struggled with similar feelings, "I will, very often, think like I'm not, you know, doing enough with the USRC or I've dropped the ball on some things." When faced with those feelings, María Elena turns to her community and tries "not be too hard on myself to do what you can and to work with that community. Because they might also not have the answers, but at least there's other people that you can talk to that understand. You don't have to explain the whole thing."

Other participants expressed their frustration that colleagues across campus would take the initiative to become active allies for their USRC and their students. Mayra shared that desire, acknowledging: "I have a capacity limit, right? And I can't do anything and everything that's undocumented. Just because we are that center doesn't mean that we are the only ones that should be doing anything to do with undocumented folks." Karol recognized that the students she serves in her work are involved in more aspects of the institution than her USRC.

Just because I've worked with undocumented students doesn't mean I have I'm the

only one that needs to serve them. I also want to hold our colleagues accountable.

'Let's work together. You're connecting with [the students] as well at the same

level that I am, they're coming to you to ask for your services.' I think, just you

know, reminding them and holding them accountable that you know, you are

serving all students, and they're all different. They all have different needs.

The lack of support from colleagues is especially concerning when it becomes apparent to the

students. K had an experience with a student who was crying and asked "would your boss even

care about what I'm telling you right now?. . .I knew that my boss wouldn't care, she probably

would have told me to stop talking about it. . . I'm kind of struggling. How do I make this a safer

space when it also just can't be me?"

The participants described work experiences where their professional expectations were

outsized compared to the time, resources, and support that the employees currently received.

These experiences are barriers to advancing the work and providing additional support to

students, while also serving as a threat to the wellbeing of the professionals.

"I just want to have one job"- Karol

One of the most impactful systemic barriers that the professionals encountered was the

experience of managing two professional roles. Over half of the participants held two official

roles at their institutions. Alex noted that this distribution made it difficult to give the USRC the

care and attention it needed: "you can't really build a program out, you know, to the capacity it's

needed if it's not your primary role, or if you have too much on your plate." In all, Mayra, Alex,

Karol, and María Elena had to juggle their responsibilities to their USRCs with other interests on

campus. Among that group, Mayra is the only person who has another professional staff member

that works in their USRC. Karol acknowledged that her role as the inaugural employee of their

USRC "also adds more, takes away from that time that I need to focus on like building things.

And so that's another, like, additional layer. It's been difficult." Karol acknowledged that this

experience is not unique, and that "other folks within campus do have multiple roles, and they're only getting paid for one for example, I feel like that's just the trend in higher ed, unfortunately."

Elsewhere, Alex described the physical and emotional toll of beginning her job while being a full time graduate student, then after only a few short months, being asked to take on an additional full time role on campus. When Alex was balancing her role as a full time graduate student, and her role as the inaugural employee of her USRC, she hit a wall.

> I was having daily panic attacks. And it was bad. That's brutal, bad, bad. Like the worst mental health I've ever had. And I never really thought about mental health up until that point. . . I had been in the full time position for a few months. That was really overwhelming, and then qualifying exams were happening so that looming you know, you pass or you fail or you're out of the program. Like that's a lot of stress. So yeah, there's a lot of doubt. You know, am I going to finish this program, blah, blah, blah. Yeah, it happened because every time I would open up the qualifying exam document, my heart would just "POW."

At that point, Alex sought the help of a therapist to help manage an experience that was more taxing than she could have prepared for. "I was empty. I couldn't receive affirmations. I wasn't present. Here, but not here. Yeah, it really impacted my like, work. And I couldn't write. I couldn't do anything. So it was bad. I think it was beyond survival mode. In the trenches." Although Alex had a brief reprieve after she finished her degree, she only had a few months before she had "two programs on my plate. And I'm still one person.. . . Think this past month and a half has been very hard. . . I think my exhaustion is kind of tainting the how do you feel in the space I'm like, 'Oh, work'." Alex's experience is a cautionary tale of what can happen to an individual when they are asked to perform two full time roles with minimal institutional support.

Alex is fortunate that she has supportive familial and social support networks, and a good relationship with a therapist that was able to help her persist through an otherwise unreasonable situation. Alex, Karol, and the other participants who hold multiple jobs at their institution exhibit how such an expectation can cause the professionals to unduly suffer on both a personal and a professional level and can create situations where the needs of their students fall through the cracks.

The participants shared how their professional expectations often felt unmanageable. Two specific aspects of their work that informed these experiences are their difficulties working in USRCs that are understaffed, and how they experience work environments in which they are expected to perform two professional roles. Although the professionals struggle to navigate these challenges that are rooted in their institutional context, they have found ways to leverage their personal experiences and strengths to persist in their work experiences.

Employing Institutional Knowledge and Navigational Capital

One of the ways in which the participants leverage their personal experiences and strengths is by employing their institutional knowledge and navigational capital. All of the institutions in this dissertation featured USRCs that were created decades after the institutions, and the systems in which they operate, were founded. As a result, rarely a day went by in the lives of these professionals wherein they did not encounter a way to navigate through and around these institutions that were not built to serve students who hold legally marginalized identities. The professionals leaned on their personal experiences with the institution, either as former students or as comparatively longer termed employees. For the few participants who did not benefit from that time at the institution, they had other forms of capital and knowledge that supported their work.

K is one example of a professional who used their institutional knowledge and navigational capital to circumvent restrictive systems. During the time when K was an undocumented student at the institution where they now work, they sought assistance from the USRC and had to advocate for themselves in unsupportive university contexts. Now that K is responsible for helping students navigate the same institution, they have learned that some of the barriers they encountered during their undergraduate career were due to misinformation from university professionals. Additionally, some of the policies have changed since the time that K was a student, and it can be bittersweet to help students access benefits that K was denied. One of the most impactful things that K does in their work is helping students navigate institutional bureaucracy to access as much financial aid as they can. For example, K helps students fill out their paperwork in ways that maximize their cost of attendance, all without violating university policy. Additionally, K helps students access emergency funds through procedures that are not accessible to folks without intimate knowledge of the system.

> It gets really frustrating just like, you know, trying to navigate bureaucracy. And trying to figure out these loopholes for our students. Sometimes it's frustrating, and then sometimes it also feels weird, because obviously I can't write any of these [instructions in] emails. But I have to like meet with them and be like, 'Listen, I'm not telling you to lie.'. . .But it's like, it was one of those things where it's like, am I being slimy? I think they appreciate it. Because especially once they understand why I do that, I think they're like, oh, okay, like you're looking out for me. But also I think we both kind of have that understanding like me and this student. I think they appreciate it though.

Evangelina also used her institutional knowledge to provide better financial support to her students. Over her time at her institution, Evangelina learned that her students could ask the financial aid office to grant her access to student financial aid records so Evangelina could help provide more tailored supports.

> We do FAFSA, for the mixed status students and alternative FAFSA for the non-mixed, you know, for the undocumented students, and then we do we do this thing with, it's an email that our students send out to financial aid that allows us to get around FERPA because we can't really work with them and know their business right. But this says, 'I give Evangelina from the undocumented student resource center, permission to advocate on my behalf with financial aid and blah blah blah' and anything else. And then that puts us in the back of like, 'Hey, can you tell me about this student? What did they miss? Oh, they didn't do this form.' I'm like, 'Hey, why didn't you talk?' 'I got scared. I didn't know how to do it'. 'Come on, we're gonna help you finish it.' Those roadblocks are bottlenecks that they were getting to, we now get to push that out. And I think that's where we excel. There's so many pieces. But that to me has been the game changer for funding for so many students.

These examples represent the ways that the institutional knowledge and navigational capital of the professionals have direct impact on the foundations of the student experience. A professional with a substantial amount of institutional knowledge and navigational capital at their institution can make the difference between a student being able to access and persist through the institution, and the student falling through the cracks.

Importance of Developmental Relationships with Colleagues

Another means by which the participants practiced persistence was by building and maintaining developmental relationships with colleagues. Across the board, the participants talked about the importance of relationships with their colleagues. Whether these were social relationships that improved the workday, strategic relationships that helped students access other resources, or collegial relationships centered on knowledge development and support, all of the participants shared experiences that were meaningful to their work.

The participants shared ways that their colleagues on campus benefited their work experiences. For example, K found community with coworkers over informal lunches. These relationships are sources of joy, and also useful to help process frustrations in a setting that is away from the students they serve: "It's hard to meet with students and obviously, like, I'm making this for them. Like, I'm not here to vent about how terrible this is. Being able to kind of like hold that in and release it elsewhere. Like sometimes, lunchtimes become like complaining times." Mayra expressed her emotional connections to her coworkers.

> I love everyone in our program. . . Everyone is very much like equity minded and very, like, you know, student centered. I mean that we can't assume that for everyone right. . . But at least in our small building, like I love working with everyone. . . We're a very strong team. I like that we overlap you know, I overlapped with at least one other person on the days that I'm there. I think it's pretty consistent, our team and our space. It is really genuinely like a little family.

The social relationships that the professionals have with their colleagues directly affect their experiences at work, both allowing the professionals to persist through frustrations and challenges, and to pursue joy in their work experiences. In addition to social

relationships, the participants also shared how they strategically formed and nourished relationships in service of their work.

There are several ways that participants approached strategic relationships. Some, like Alex, focused on building "a reputation on campus. And rapport with the students, like current juniors are mentioning me and the program to incoming freshmen, like, 'hey, go talk to Alex', or like, 'oh, [the USRC] is chill like, go talk to them', blah blah, blah. I think that's something I'm noticing." RiRi shared that her experience suffered from a dearth of such strategic relationships. During RiRi's time at the center, there have been multiple directors and the center changed location after the campus was closed for COVID-19. In this evolving context, RiRi and her colleagues have not been able to build a similarly beneficial reputation. At the opposite end of the spectrum is Evangelina, who has had more than five years to build relationships with campus partners.

> We have relationships with career services with mental health counselors, with a
> financial wellness team with our scholarship director with our financial aid office.
> We have the Academic Advising Center, we're actually located in a building that I
> have academic advisors, I have mental health counselors. I have the honors office,
> the Center for Student Assistance. We have a ton of like resources in this building
> alone, career services if I didn't say it already. We're all in this building. The
> students were very intentional when they asked for this position that I not be
> placed in a Latino Center. Because they're like, 'She's not just helping Latino
> students', and we had to push back against that narrative quite a bit. And man,
> when I came here, all the students started coming. And it's beautiful. Like I have
> so many different countries, Palestinians, I have Lithuanians, Polish students,

Nigerian students, Cameroon, Uganda, Philippines, Korean students. You know, I

have Latino students, Central American, Mexican, South American, and so it's

like this huge range of students that I help. And so it's nice because it's all of these

students in this building.

The strategic relationships that professionals build and employ on behalf of their students

are critical to growing the USRC and enhancing its effectiveness. Privacy laws and data tracking

limitations prevent professional employees from accessing a list of all of the students who could

be well served by USRCs. As a result, the professionals who operate USRCs have to develop a

positive reputation and engender trust among the community they hope to serve. This reputation

and trust will make their USRC a space where students might feel courageous enough to make

themselves vulnerable, in order to seek support that could be beneficial. At the same time, the

professionals have to build relationships with colleagues across their campus who could help

remove roadblocks across a student's time at the institution. Once a professional has developed

both of those types of relationships, they have a powerful base from which they can operate and

make change. In addition to the strategic benefits of relationships, the participants described how

they used collegial relationships to advance their capacity as professionals.

The participants valued learning and turning to their colleagues for help. At RiRi's

institution, she found that one of the good things about having colleagues is that "you've got that

little kind of community within the system where it's like, in case maybe you're not able to

answer like, they might be able to help you. And just being able to ask questions." RiRi saw the

value of being vulnerable. "Not knowing something doesn't mean it's a bad thing. It's just, you

know, obviously knowing who to go to, or them helping point you in the right direction of where

you can connect so that way you can get the right answers." Evangelina emphasized the

importance of tapping "into a network of other people doing this work so that you can learn from one another. So yeah, those are things that you really need to, to have and, and always to learn". RiRi expressed gratitude that she has access to a network of scholars who do similar work. This network meets virtually on a monthly basis and has "a listserv where. . . maybe has something that they need additional information about, or if this campus is already doing [something]. Why redo, restart something. . . that's already been done. That's one thing that we're very fortunate where it's just like, if we wanted to reach out to somebody we can." María Elena has a similar connection with scholars and practitioners who do this work. María Elena is involved in an organization that facilitates "very informal conversations with other university practitioners, whether they're novices or highly seasoned on the topic and just try to answer questions, share resources and information. Things like that. And so being involved has helped tremendously." These important relationships help the professionals maintain their health and wellbeing, as noted by María Elena: "You're not alone. Because sometimes it can be very difficult. You know, your hands are tied in various ways. But knowing that at least there are other people also out there kind of doing the work is really helpful to know."

These collegial relationships are crucial to the development and persistence of the professional employees, regardless of their tenure in the field. When professional employees are able to invest in these relationships, they see payoff in their work. These relationships both support the development of the field, and allow professionals to ask questions and access resources from knowledgeable peers, thus allowing them to advance and hone practices at the institutional level. Additionally, a strong professional support network can help combat some of the isolation and loneliness that can arise due to the small number of professionals who work in their offices.

Being connected is important. Whether it's on your campus or somewhere else, and then being willing to ask questions about it because all of this changes so much and we don't always have the answers. . . Acknowledging that we may not have the answers. . . to be persistent, as well. Things don't necessarily change overnight. And sometimes when they do change overnight, it's usually not for the better, is what I'm noticing when things suddenly change. It's like well, that wasn't the right decision. Like, this was not thought through at all. So that patience, perseverance, the willingness to reach out to others. Because I'm always like, 'Hey, I don't know about this, but I'm gonna try to find out,' or 'Let me point you in the direction of who might be able to help you.' Accepting that unknown, as well. Everything operates under that feeling of not knowing, of uncertainty with the laws or with what happens on the campus. Then trying to not overthink that because you also have to be a little protective of your sanity. (María Elena)

This section revealed that the professional employees of USRCs are central to the success of their centers. Regardless of the challenges and systemic factors that the professionals encountered, they found ways to use their personal experiences and strengths to navigate and persist. The knowledges and skills that the professionals use in the face of systemic barriers are unique to the professionals, which thus informs the ways in which the centers persist when faced with systemic barriers. As such, the experiences and wellbeing of the professionals can directly inform the experiences and wellbeing of the USRC and their students.

Prioritizing Mental Health and Protecting Joy

The previous sections discussed how the participants found their way into their roles, how they centered and empowered students in their physical spaces, as well as the challenges the participants encountered and the tools they used to navigate through these systemic factors. While there are some aspects of the participants' interior worlds represented in those experiences, the participants viewed their mental health as a key aspect of their work when they encountered systemic factors, which often created challenges. The participants discussed how their mental health impacted their lived experiences, and how they prioritized their mental health and protected joy for themselves and their students. The professional employees discussed how emotionally taxing this work is and how they attended to their mental health in response to their lived experiences both at work and outside of work. In general, the participants described the work as being very difficult and emotionally demanding. Some of the participants discussed how their existing relationship to their mental health impacted their wellbeing. The participants who held marginalized legal identities discussed how their legal identities impacted their work experiences and mental health. Other topics related to mental health that were reflected in their experiences include their relationship with boundaries, and their commitment to joy.

Difficulty of the Work

I think you just go go go. I think that's a trauma response, for me, to go go go, then I don't slow down. And so I'm fearful sometimes. Who's doing this work? And are we doing this work and carrying so much with us that we don't slow down and take care of ourselves?

- Evangelina

Across the board, the participants talked about how wide-ranging their responsibilities were, and how the ever-changing nature of the sociopolitical context meant their work was

constantly shifting. Alex put it simply, "I think this work is really hard." Karol agreed— "The

work can feel heavy sometimes." Mayra voiced a similar perspective, detailing some of the

specific aspects of the work that contribute to the experience.

> This work is really hard. It's really hard on a lot of fronts. It's hard because there's
>
> a lot of people that don't know it, don't understand this work or the community.
>
> It's really hard because it's hard emotionally. I do a lot of emotional labor. It's
>
> hard because I don't get compensated for my work the way I think I should be.
>
> It's, it's hard because I can't just turn it off. You know, at the end of the day, I'm
>
> still thinking sometimes, I'm thinking about students and some about myself.
>
> Sometimes I'm thinking about, you know, how these things are impacting you
>
> know, folks and communities. It's just, it's very hard work and then also, it's just
>
> such demanding work. The students, you know, [are] always freaking out about
>
> weird messages from admissions or like, freaking out about this or that. Then
>
> there's a lot of things I need to know keeping up to date with everything like
>
> policies and both federally, state, local, at Ceres College. There's a lot of things
>
> that I need to keep in mind. . .one is obviously prioritizing my health and my
>
> mental health.

The participants had different personal histories with awareness of and attention to their

mental health. Some, like K, had committed themselves to therapy before starting this work, a

practice that helps them cope when work is difficult: "I'm in my healing era. Like, I'm focusing

on myself, type thing. Because I think if I had come into this job with that mindset [that I'm not

making change fast enough], I would hate this job more than I do already." Karol had a similar

experience, where her personal history with therapy and her established relationship with a

therapist helped her address aspects of her work that were daunting.

> I have a lot of anxiety, like, presenting [to groups]. And I sometimes feel like,
>
> maybe I should try something else. Where I won't suffer that aspect. But then my
>
> therapist was telling me she was like, 'You don't have to like everything about
>
> your job.' Like you're right. Sure, I hate doing presentations. You know, I hate
>
> presenting in front of groups. I have so much anxiety, that is a lot for me. Like
>
> everything else, like individual conversations [are fine]. I'll do like administrative
>
> things. You know, a big part of it. Like, I just have to do them.

Alex, who had previously worked with different student populations, spoke to the specific

emotional commitment required to work in a USRC.

> When I was just supporting like, US citizens, first-gen, low-income students, you
>
> know, like, I don't know, I just feel like with this particular population, it's just
>
> harder and there's more barriers. I think it can be draining. I think in this line of
>
> work, what's necessary is self-care. And like, I know, that's like being monetized
>
> and whatever. But the general idea of making sure you're taking care of yourself,
>
> like putting your oxygen mask on first, I think that's been the biggest learning
>
> curve for me over the past three years. How can I be sustainable in this work and
>
> still be effective, and not burnout again?" (Alex)

> The capacity to persist through difficult situations is a necessary skill for this work.

Evangelina described one of the moments where she reached her capacity. Unfortunately, at this

point, Evangelina had not had the opportunity to invest in her mental wellbeing, a gap that was

evident when her work environment was unsupportive.

> I almost left. There were two times when I almost left the institution because it
>
> was so bad for me. And I was so miserable. Like, I remember sitting at the edge
>
> of my bed and being like, 'I don't want to go in.' And my husband was like, 'Then
>
> get another job.' And I remember praying about it and thinking about it. And
>
> saying like, 'I think there's a reason why I'm here and I'm not going to let this
>
> person push me out, not for all the good I'm doing.'

Evangelina was not the only professional who shared how their mental health intersects with their ability to persist in this work. Karol described the Sisyphean experience of fighting to improve a system that was not built to serve undocumented individuals like her and the students she cares for.

> So just going in academia, like it's hard. It's hard, like it's really, really hard. You
>
> know, when it wasn't meant for folks like me or you know, students. So I think
>
> just yeah, there's a lot and so that's why I think about leaving sometimes. Like I'm
>
> so vulnerable. And so it's, it's a constant battle. Yeah. I don't know if I'll ever like,
>
> be hella good.

The participants shared experiences in their work that were deeply connected to their mental health. For multiple reasons, participants had different personal histories of engaging with mental health professionals and investing in their mental and emotional wellbeing. Among the participants, it appeared that those who had invested in their mental health were more confident in their ability to persist during times of difficulty in their professional lives.

Intersection of Legal Status and Mental Health

Amongst all other personal factors that informed the experiences of the professionals, the most meaningful was the intersection of legal status and mental health. Two of the participants,

Mayra and Karol, are undocumented individuals with DACA status, a legal identity that touches every aspect of their lived experiences. This work is particularly challenging for undocumented professionals with work authorization, such as those with DACA, because their status is tenuous, and they serve students who have legal statuses that may have more or fewer associated benefits. Nonetheless, each day Mayra and Karol actively decide to fight for their communities and care for the others, even when a sense of uncertainty can sometimes feel suffocating.

Karol describes her experience as feeling like she's "always in survival mode." This feeling is unlikely to change, unless the government policy changes, granting Karol citizenship and its associated sense of permanence. Although Karol feels vulnerable, she recognizes the benefits and privileges that she has in comparison to some of her students, and it weighs on her. "I feel very powerless and I also get mad and frustrated. Like, I feel like I, I'm not a US citizen, but it almost feels like I am, you know, in that undocumented hierarchy level, you know. . .I very much feel powerless. And very guilty. Very guilty." One of the ways that Karol helps manage anxiety related to her status in the work environment is to take control of her narrative.

> One thing that helps with my anxiety is to, when I introduce myself, like I talk a
> little bit about like, 'Oh, yeah, you know, like, I'm a DACA recipient.' And I felt
> like that brings me confidence when I do that first and when I don't do it. . . I start
> like, feeling those insecurities. It literally happened yesterday and today. . . I have
> to continue to do that in order to like, overcome or like heal.

Karol shared her experiences as an individual on a healing journey. One of the most important relationships in Karol's life is her relationship with her therapist. Through this relationship, Karol can process traumatic experiences from her past that impact her present. "A lot of its rooted in my childhood. I'm getting emotional, cause that's where it

literally stems from, that's something that I talk about with my therapist, too. She's been really helpful in terms of like, processing through those emotions." It is not lost on Karol that she is able to regularly see a therapist to work through these traumas because of the benefits associated with her job, and she is worried for her students who may be carrying similar burdens with fewer supportive resources. "I think about like, the students here because they're so driven and motivated. I feel like 'Oh, my God, like, did they suffer, like, do they have like, traumas like I do?' . . . So, I'm just grateful for my mental health provider."

Mayra's experience is similar to Karol's due to its tumultuous nature. She described the guilt she felt because she had DACA status, and the majority of her students could not even apply for the status.

DACA is definitely just like ancient at this point. And a lot of our students, we just pretty much like assume that they don't have that DACA—unless they're older students who are returning, or just older students in general. So, I do understand that, and sometimes there's that guilt, right? Because they feel like they can relate to me, you know because I am undocumented. And I understand that, but at the same time, I also have this huge privilege, which allows me to be in that role and have an income and like all of this. So, there's also that guilt, as I try not to like, talk about it like, you know, so it's just like, interesting, like being in that space. . . So, it's really stressful.

Mayra feels like she is being pulled in different directions due to the similarities and differences between her legal status and that of her students— "one of the biggest challenges of this work is because I am part of the community." She is in solidarity with those without DACA

"because that's a different experience," while at the same time, she is being buffeted about by the same unstable sociopolitical context as her students. When sociopolitical situations at her institution negatively impact the students, or "when there's like an anti-immigration policy, and our students are feeling, like, attacked or, you know, just like hurt by whatever is happening. . . I'm having to create a space for them and be there emotionally." In those moments, Mayra recognizes that she has a responsibility as an educator and as a leader of the USRC to "do my emotional labor. . . but then I'm having to deal with my own stuff. How does it affect me?. . And that affects how I show up. Because sometimes I just don't have the energy. I want to be there for the students, but I'm like, 'Who's there for me?'" That selfless emotional labor is a difficult and sometimes lonely aspect of Mayra's work.

In this context, Mayra was confronted with the need to take care of herself, not just her students, because the work "is very emotional, even for those who maybe aren't undocumented. It's very emotional. When you hear from students about what's going on with them, or someone got deported or something like that, it's very emotional. So, taking care of ourselves is huge." Mayra found that working in her office on campus, creating a boundary between her home and her work, is helpful to both her work and her wellbeing. "That's why I think, you know, when I go into the USRC, I'm like, 'Okay, this is a space where I can actually do my own stuff like I can show up and match the students and like, be there for the students and stuff.'" Although that boundary is helpful to Mayra, her office is currently structured as a hybrid work environment, so she only works in her office a few days each week.

Mayra acknowledges that she "wouldn't be here if it wasn't for DACA." The emotional impact of the unstable, seemingly random nature of the DACA policy is a familiar companion to Mayra. "To think that an executive order is what my career depends on is very interesting.

Currently, you know, I'm able to renew as long as the program is still open to renewals."

Although Mayra is grateful for her status, she cannot think about her privileges and benefits

without considering those who are excluded or what the future holds. "I just think about, you

know, other folks who would want to do this work and who are not able to at the moment

because they don't have DACA. Or even if DACA is no longer open for renewals or around.

How that would affect my particular situation?" Mayra is always aware of her status, and her

work is influenced by the conflicting emotions that come with DACA.

Mayra shared the story of a colleague whose DACA renewal form was hung up in

bureaucratic bottlenecks and who, as a result, lost their work authorization until the government

processed their paperwork. During that time period, Mayra's colleague could not work, and the

colleague's future was dependent upon the university holding their position for them, in the

meantime. Mayra shared how this experience led her to doubt her security in her role, and

preemptively worry about how the institution might react if the same thing were to happen to

her.

> Even though it's like, the security of like, you know, our campus says, they
>
> support undocumented folks and like all of this, but they're also like, the work
>
> needs to get done, and they're also thinking like, you know, they are an institution
>
> and things like that. So, it's like, how long if that happens to me? How long are
>
> they willing to wait? Are they gonna replace me? Like, you know, just all of those
>
> things every two years, I'm like, thinking about that. And I'm like, okay, I need to
>
> renew it. I need to like, you know, really get on it because I don't want to have to
>
> go through that.

Both Mayra and Karol shared how their legal status regularly impacts their mental health and their work experiences. As undocumented individuals who hold work authorization, they feel grateful for the benefits associated with their status, and how this status allows them to serve their communities. However, the impermanent nature of their status is a cause of perennial anxiety. It is difficult to be fully present in one's body, work, and moment in time when the threat of DACA's recission remains overhead, and the clock is always ticking—focused on the next renewal deadline. In the midst of this, Mayra and Karol described experiencing roiling guilt as they do their best to serve students who cannot access such benefits, and whose opportunities after college were limited due to their lack of work authorization.

Boundaries and Mental Health

The participants discussed how personal and professional boundaries played a role in their mental health and informed their professional experiences. Although all of the participants acknowledged the role that these boundaries play, they, understandably, had unique thresholds and expectations that suited their wellbeing. However, there was a marked difference between how some of the newer professionals conceptualized their boundaries and how the more experienced professionals conceptualized their boundaries. This could be attributed to the drastic change in work culture and the higher education experience as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data for this dissertation was collected in 2023 and 2024, after the COVID-19 pandemic caused most higher education institutions in the United States to transition some or all of their operations to allow employees and students to work from home. Most of the participants began working in their role during or after the COVID-19 pandemic emergency period, so they did not have much experience working at their USRC or institution before the world turned

upside down as a result of COVID-19. During the data collection period, most of the professionals worked in hybrid roles where they split their work between on-campus and off-campus workdays. While there are benefits to working from home, the integration of work into one's home life creates a new test for boundary creation and maintenance.

Some of the participants valued strict boundaries between their personal and professional lives. For example, Karol explained that working on campus "helps to separate things. I don't take my work home unless it's really needed. . . It's my home. It's sacred to me." Professionals working in USRCs were unlikely to be paid salaries large enough to afford a housing environment that allowed for an office or designated workspace that was separate from their living areas. This meant that they had to set up their workspace in their bedroom or a common area of their living space. Karol shared that when she is home, "it's just Karol time." While there are some days when Karol works from home, she tries to limit those to a "case by case basis." Karol is among the group of new professionals who prefer to establish clear boundaries between their personal and professional lives which also serves to protect their mental health.

Alternatively, K did not mind working from home multiple times a week, acknowledging that it can be lonely, but they "prefer to be at home." K divides their work schedule, so their work-from-home days are more focused on administrative tasks, which supports their wellbeing. "I try to not take meetings when I'm home. So that helps a lot. I don't need to be annoyed at anyone today." Unlike Karol, K found that working at home allowed them to "separate and not think too much about work. Because if I'm here every day, I think I will go crazy." For the days that K works on campus, they found that traveling via public transit allowed them to "start transitioning out like, 'Okay, we're not thinking about work anymore. Let's start thinking about what food we're eating for dinner.' So, that helps a lot." In K's situation, working from home

allowed them to separate themselves from aspects of their work environment that caused them

stress and frustration. Although Karol and K have different perspectives on the boundaries, they

are comfortable with, both of these new professionals described experiences in which they

regularly considered how boundaries can serve them.

María Elena and Evangelina are the two most tenured employees that participated in this

dissertation. As such, both María Elena and Evangelina had several years of experience as

working professionals prior to the changes that occurred as a result of COVID-19. The

experiences that María Elena and Evangelina had in the workforce prior to COVID-19 surely

impacted their conceptualization of boundaries as it relates to their work experiences. Unlike K

and Karol, María Elena did not define her personal and professional boundaries according to

where she worked. María Elena did not have a distinct preference regarding whether or not she

worked at home or at the office, only that sometimes it can be "nice [that there are] fewer

interruptions at work, sometimes, than at home." Importantly, María Elena felt supported by her

boss when she allowed María Elena to adapt and work from home when needed. "I'm very lucky

that I can do a lot of my stuff remotely too if I really want to, as long as I get my work done,

which is fantastic to have that kind of a supportive supervisor who trusts [me and] gives me

autonomy."

Like María Elena, Evangelina's conceptualization of boundaries was not intrinsically tied

to where she worked. Rather, Evangelina's conceptualization of boundaries was related to recent

revelations regarding her relationship with her family and her relationship with her mental

health. When Evangelina reflected on her earlier experiences as a professional employee of a

USRC, she recognized that "100% I feel like the boundary piece wasn't there." Evangelina "was

gone a lot at night" as she pushed herself to work harder and harder, chasing a goal line that was

always moving farther away. As Evangelina's kids got older, they were able to advocate for

themselves in the moments where Evangelina was unable to recognize how hard she was

working and was unable to commit to change.

> One of the things I say is, 'Oh, it's gonna get better.' I always say, 'It's going to
>
> slow down, it's going to slow down' and [my daughter's] like, 'Mom, you're
>
> always saying it's going to slow down, and it hasn't slowed down'. . . The one
>
> thing like I can say is like, maybe I'm not the greatest at setting boundaries, but
>
> damn my kids are.

Evangelina's kids and her students helped her realize that boundaries are important for self-care,

and they are important to the people we love. In her reflections, Evangelina recognized that the

experiences she had caring for her students could help her learn how to care for herself. "We

have to find our ways to self-care. Tap out for a bit like the students, right? Yeah, like I tell them

'Tap out, tap back in.' We have to tap out too and forgive ourselves."

The professionals in this study used boundaries in different ways to suit their needs, as

well as the needs of their students and loved ones. The fact that the professionals are exploring

how boundaries can suit them, at times with the support of their supervisors, is indicative of a

field that recognizes the importance of wellbeing to persistence. This work is not a track meet,

it's a marathon, and the professionals at the heart of this work stand the best chance of enduring

through challenges if they are comfortable with the boundaries, they operationalize in relation to

their work experiences.

Joy

Amidst this context, the participants actively turned to joy as a means of attending to their mental health and wellbeing, as well as that of their students. Joy was framed in two ways— the concept of UndocuJoy, and joy as a means of resistance and persistence.

UndocuJoy

Mayra and Evangelina incorporated UndocuJoy into their work practices as a means of recognizing and celebrating wins in their students' lives, and a way of combating the tendency to "sometimes only look at the bad or the stress" (Mayra). Oftentimes the experiences of legally marginalized individuals are framed through deficit perspectives—constantly focusing on the difficulties in their lives and the ways they are perceived to be lacking in comparison to more privileged and centered groups. Alternatively, UndocuJoy makes space to celebrate life, and all its components, with the community. Mayra recognized that this recentering is especially valuable in the current sociopolitical context, where USRC's operate in the "midst of anti-immigration [sentiment and policies] at the federal level," and the students may be navigating through "their family suffering from deportation and things like that." UndocuJoy is an act of individual and community resistance that serves as a ray of light and hope amidst a context that would otherwise ignore or dismiss the positive aspects of one's life.

Evangelina's USRC formalized UndocuJoy into a series of events facilitated by the USRC where students shared moments of joy, while Mayra's USRC tries to center "the UndocuJoy of everything." This joy can come from "celebrating when we have wins like a student transferring or a student getting an A. . . Celebrating the joys and making those connections and building community." Mayra felt so strongly about UndocuJoy, that she described it as being "at the heart of the work." Choosing to center UndocuJoy gives Mayra a

way to persevere "in spite of all of these challenges," and "makes it hard to leave" when the work might otherwise be too difficult. For Mayra, UndocuJoy "is why I wake up every morning and show up to work." The work is "hard but also very much, you know, enjoyable and worth it and meaningful. . . there's a lot of meaning in this work." Mayra and Evangelina's choice to center joy in their work with their students is shared by the other participants, who embraced joy as a means of practicing resistance and persistence throughout the highs and lows of working at a USRC.

Joy as Resistance and Persistence

The participants viewed joy as a crucial tool for both them and their students as they attempt to persist through challenges while navigating swirling, and often unsupportive, sociopolitical contexts. From the outside, it can seem like the students get little reprieve from the pressures associated with their legal identities, and that their legal identity is their primary identity. However, Alex argues, that is not the case.

> People in this role need to understand that yes, this is a highly political [and] contentious, like, topic and community that we're talking about. But at the same time, these are young adults that want to have fun and be themselves and not be this label of 'Undocumented,' right? They're the same as any other students just that nine-digit difference.

The 'nine-digit difference' that Alex is referring to is a Social Security Number, an invisible boundary between undocumented individuals and others, including DACA recipients. Rather than getting caught up on the difficulties, Alex considered what she could do to help her students feel comfortable chasing joy and self-discovery.

So, I think for me in my role, putting all that bureaucracy and power stuff aside

and like, 'How can I bring these students community and joy? And how can they

put aside all those fears and anxieties and unknowns and be present, and make

friendships and make good memories?'

The professional employees of USRCs need to be aware of the sociopolitical context in

which they operate and remain sensitive to the challenges their students encounter, while also

protecting and creating space for the students to just be themselves. This is no easy feat. The

professional employees decided to carry some burdens on their backs so their students can walk

lighter, even if it's just while they are ensconced in the sense of the peace and community at the

USRC.

In this context, it is important that the employees recognize how they can find joy in their

experiences, as well. If the participants did not make and hold space for joy in their work, there

was no way for them to serve their students well, or for long. Amidst the stressful experience of

being an inaugural employee of a USRC while managing the stress of being undocumented,

Karol emphasized that "finding joy in the work that we do is really important." Just as the

professionals hold space for their students to experience joy, sometimes the professionals need

their support networks to help them lighten their load. In Evangelina's case, her friends were

instrumental in helping her acknowledge that she could feel joy even if she did not feel like the

work was done. "My friends told me 'You deserve to have fun, too. You deserve to have joy

too.'. . .We have to have joy."

Working as a professional employee at a USRC is difficult. The participants described

the intense emotional investments they made in their work and their students. Considering how

personal one's mental health journey is, it makes sense that the participants had varying

conceptualizations of what it meant to care for themselves and their communities. It is important

to listen to the experiences of undocumented professionals and learn how we can help adapt our

systems to be supportive of their experiences and needs. While we may not have the power to

change immigration policy at the federal level, we all have some power to make decisions that

make their work experiences better, or at least less harmful. Additionally, it will be interesting to

see how new professionals' perceptions of mental health care and boundaries influence their

relationships with their students. For more experienced professionals, it is important to

understand how young professionals conceptualize boundaries and mental health care. There

appear to be two distinct understandings of what it means to care for oneself and one's students,

and if the two camps do not communicate, there could be conflict and gaps in care. Lastly, we

must center and make space for UndocuJoy and other forms of joy as acts of resistance and

persistence. While it is important to be knowledgeable of the sociopolitical context that affects

USRCs and their students, this work will be for naught if it does not fuel joy with and among the

community.

Navigating An Uncertain Future

The previous sections address the routes by which the participants arrived in the

profession and the ways the participants center and empower students in their work.

Additionally, they discuss how the participants navigate systemic factors that create challenges

in their work and how the professionals use their personal strengths to navigate and persist.

Lastly, the preceding section discusses the ways in which the participants prioritize their mental

health and protect joy in a context that can be difficult to manage. The last section of this chapter

presents findings regarding how the participants' experiences were informed by the uncertain

future ahead of them. The professional employees in this sample all spoke about feelings of

uncertainty that wax and wane depending upon their sociopolitical context; experiences that seep into their lived experiences in different ways. There are many ways in which university systems and the greater sociopolitical context fuel the simmering tension underlying their daily lives. Participants discussed the funding mechanisms for their USRCs, the sociopolitical contexts in which they operate, and the role of their citizenship statuses, which will be elaborated upon in this section.

Funding Mechanisms

Although all of the participants were full-time employees, the funding mechanisms for their jobs and their centers varied. Some of the centers were funded primarily through donations. For example, K observed that, at their center, approximately "70% of our funds is from donors." The center had an employee who was dedicated to fundraising the resources necessary to maintain operation from year-to-year. K's experience as an employee of the center was soured due to the lack of institutional support and the tenuous nature of their employment.

> El Cerrito University does not care about like these populations. . . I mean, right
> now there's like, just a lot of like, uncertainty. So, a lot of our staff are on
> contracts, because that's how much our donors kind of gave. Like, I'm on a
> contract and I'm not sure like after my contract expires, like do I still have a job?
> Yeah, so it's rough and every year we don't know if we'll have funding for our
> program. It's very weird.

K found it difficult to be fully present in their work while their employment was dependent upon a year-to-year contract. "There's a sense of powerlessness, because all of this could change and can disappear. If someone above us just says like, 'No, we're not having that anymore.' And it sucks. So, I feel like that's more present for me than feeling like, 'Oh, yeah, like I can do this'."

K's anxiety about funding and stability took a further hit recently when their programming budget was suddenly slashed in half, without explanation.

> Sometimes I get into this mood of like, I don't even care anymore. I'm just gonna be here to clock in my hours and I'm not gonna care but like, I don't think I have the heart in me to especially if it directly affects someone. My consciousness [sic] could never. But it definitely sucks. And I think that that might also be why I'm kind of like one foot in one foot out.

Alternatively, Karol had a different experience when she applied for her job, observing the ways in which her institution valued her role, even though Karol applied during a period of budget cuts:

> When I interviewed for this role, they were like, 'We think this role is vital for our students.' So they elevated support for our students. And so, they ensure that this role was still continuing, or still like, available for folks to apply. And so that made me feel good. So that was helpful, you know, that they cared and that they didn't see this as a, they didn't want students to be more in harm or, you know, not have the support system that they needed at that time as well.

For USRC's that received institutional funding, this financial support often came after several years of operation. Even then, the financial support was limited. Consider Alex's experience at McElroy State: "when the position got started. . . [it] was the first time that like, [our USRC] was getting institutional dollars," but that funding was only enough for Alex's salary, "so that's what I was dealing with the first two years was running a program where it was considered, you know, that my position was program funding, which is crazy." During that two-year period, the funding was a "not renewable" purse of "donation based" funds that were

garnered through "utilizing institutional programs like fundraising programs to try to help get the

word out and get eyes on us to rack in some revenue there." Simultaneously, Alex was bearing

the weight of being the first person in her role while she "was a full-time doctoral student full

time staff member. I felt guilty because I was like, oh, I should be writing grants. I shouldn't be

doing this, you know, when actuality like, I felt like the institution just needed to step up, right."

Mayra had a similar experience at her institution. The USRC at Ceres College existed for

over a decade without receiving "ongoing funding from the college. . . Just two years ago, they

agreed to fund my position. After you know, it being around for forever and it being

continuously grant funded." Although Mayra's position is funded by the institution, the other

employee in Mayra's office is funded by grants, rather than the institution. The lack of

institutional investment in the center weighs on Mayra, and takes time away from other

important tasks:

> Our program and everything that goes into a program, there's no funding, it's all
>
> grant funded. It's all donations. It's all of us fundraising. We do flea markets, we
>
> do like, random things to fundraise. So that has a huge impact on what we're able
>
> to do because every year we're always worried about money, you know, and, and
>
> we have to take the time that we could be doing on our programming or in other
>
> things to like, do grant writing and do we're doing the reports and things like that.
>
> So, it does make our life, you know, harder and stuff. So, it would be awesome if
>
> we just had like a stable funding.

The lack of financial stability and adequate (if any) institutional investment in

USRCs was represented in almost every experience. The only anomalous experience was

that of RiRi, whose center benefitted from a sizable donation, which was turned into an

endowment for the center. However, employee salaries do not come from the

endowment, and are instead supported by state funds.

Sociopolitical Context

Shifting local, state, and national contexts caused all of the participants varying measures

of uncertainty. Mayra and Evangelina both expressed how local politics and policies influenced

their experiences. In Mayra's case, she was learning how to become involved with and influence

the local city council and district.

> I've learned pretty recently about the importance of attending, like, board
>
> meetings. . . district wide. . . just to see what is being said, but also what is being
>
> proposed. Because sometimes we don't hear about it until after. So other times,
>
> it's, it is very much reactionary, and because sometimes we don't even know
>
> certain things that are happening, like for example. . . we had a particular policy,
>
> that was a really good policy. . . In the summer when everybody is gone, I mean,
>
> not everyone, but most people are, kind of, it slows down. No one wants to attend
>
> meetings and like, I mean, faculty and students are mostly gone. So [the board]
>
> removed the policy, and we come back in the fall and then it's like, 'oh, it's no
>
> longer there.' And so sometimes, I don't, we don't even know about these things.
>
> Because again, the conversations are only happening at the top. Unless someone
>
> tells us about it, then we can advocate for it. . . But if we didn't have allies in those
>
> spaces, like we probably wouldn't even know. . . if they're having conversations
>
> about that. . . Sometimes, you know, people I think, assume that we know and
>
> we're like 'no, we don't know.'

In an effort to avoid further experiences where she and her students are caught unawares by an impactful policy, Mayra has begun empowering students to attend local meetings.

> We have students who we'll send to different meetings, and they'll like report back and, you know, and it's definitely a collaborative effort on our part to, to be in the know of things. And sometimes it's not even related to undocumented students. Like they might pass a policy that's like [related to IDs] . . . And so, we're like, well, if a student [doesn't have a form of state or US ID], that might deter them from applying because they might not know, like, 'Will this be okay?'. . . It's not really related to undocumented students. . . It's like things like that where we have to be like, even like, oh, yeah, that sounds like okay, like it doesn't affect our students. But then it's like, oh, no, it does. Yeah. It's really challenging. So, most policies are like that, where they're not specific to undocumented students, but they definitely affect our students.

Evangelina also expressed concern over the potential impact of local politics and policies, and she encouraged her students to attend local meetings to advocate for themselves. At the same time, Evangelina is hyper aware of her various personal and professional roles. Before entering situations where her identities may be conflated, Evangelina carefully considers which "hat" she will don for the occasion. For example, Evangelina shared a story of a current issue, wherein the city council of the town in which Kealing University is located was considering an organization that would have secondary repercussions for the students she served.

> I'm going to be there and I'm going to try to bring people with me who can say something, and I will be there in support, but I can't speak at that meeting, in my opinion, because they're gonna be like, where do you live? And I'm like, ooh, not

here. . . And then the other part is I also work at the university that happens to be

in this town. So, I can't go in with my university hat. And so I am, I do organize in

this town, so I can go with my organizing hat, but again, I don't live in this town.

Evangelina's sensitivity to her role and power within different contexts helps protect her from

potential professional repercussions. As a long time employee of her institution (in her words "a

lifer"), Evangelina has seen how support for her works changes depending upon who is in power.

"If you don't have a friendly administration, if you don't have people who are on the same side as

you it's going to it's going to, like, hold you down. You can still battle, but it's gonna be a much

harder fight."

At the institutional level, María Elena's office was supported and funded by institutional

leaders who were no longer employed at Swallowtail Tech. During our conversations, María

Elena expressed uncertainty about how the new leadership would respond to her presence.

I've had that kind of conversation with my supervisors just to say like, I don't

know what the plans are. They think like yeah, we're still continuing, but you

know, it could just be up to him that if he doesn't think it's worthy. So, to just to

let him know or kind of bring it up with him or how or when we can discuss like,

are you keeping it, keep funding it you know, keep as is or put more into it or

whatnot.

Simultaneously, María Elena was navigating the aftermath of a state policy that shuttered

similar programs at other state institutions. Unlike similar offices, the USRC at Swallowtail Tech

was an add-on service to a pre-existing service, thus housing it under an arm of the institution

that was free from political attack. Although this organizational structure may have been a

detriment in a different context, the nontraditional organizational structure protected the USRC during this crisis.

> The other big challenge that affects everything else right now is the [state] legislation. . . Working under that new parameter. So, we're gonna continue to do the same thing that we've been doing because it's essentially providing research based evidence based resources and services. If we do still provide a workshop and we're going to like retool it just to make sure that we're in compliance and everything. . . Being very careful about it. So, we kind of laid low in the fall. . . We had to dismantle so many things on the campus, if the [USRC]were [in a different office], we immediately would have been cut. So, I also have that really like unique situation of being housed. . . where I'm protected because we also try to focus on research as well. . . it also elevates that like scholarly aspect for an extra level of protection.

María Elena felt uncertain about her protection at the institutional level and was concerned about the state policy context and its potential repercussions on her work. In another circumstance, Alex's institutional context and state policy context resulted in the abrupt dissolution of the USRC at McElroy State. In the aftermath, Alex was left to care for students without support from the institution: "It's just a lot of unknowns right now. Nobody knows the answer. You know, it's not about getting to the right person. We're in new territory. So, no one knows anything." Alex felt deeply for her students at this moment, "they're pissed. Yeah. Super frustrated, hurt, annoyed. I think they're most frustrated by the fact that they don't know why. They don't have a solid logical reason as to why their program was terminated." Amidst this

tumult, people asked Alex if she would leave the state or McElroy State, but Alex sees a need

that remains.

> I don't see myself leaving anytime soon. And I think at the end of the day, despite
> the legislation like the students are still here, yeah, like they still need support,
> you know, even if it's not a formal program like I can still be here to support the
> students myself. Along with you know, my GA but yeah, the work still needs to
> be done. I don't see myself fleeing because of a bill. You know, as mad as I am at
> the institution and the state, it's still my home state and my family is still here. I'm
> just gonna stick around to see what I can do. I think this idea of like, building trust
> with students and community is like, more important than ever, and it's always
> been at the forefront of my mind and when I'm thinking about my priorities for
> work, students are always number one. They always come first. And I think since
> this happening and like seeing what they're going through, and you know, all their
> emotions and their need is at an all time high right now. I think it's important than
> ever right for me to prioritize and center them in my work. And everything else
> can come second, right. You know, even though the university doesn't want to
> recognize them and support them, I'm gonna do that.

This chapter presented findings related to the three research questions that guided
this research. There were five broad themes that emerged from the data and a number of
subthemes which are encapsulated therein. The next chapter includes a summary of the
findings and a discussion of their relationships to the literature, ending with a discussion
of the implications of these findings and recommendations for the future.

Chapter 6: Discussion, Analysis, Recommendations

Chapters four and five present findings related to the lived experiences of the professional employees who work at Undocumented Student Resource Centers. Specifically, the findings respond to three research questions: 1) What are the lived experiences of the professional employees who work at USRCs? 1a) What personal factors inform their experiences in their role? and 2) What are the experiences of USRC professionals when they encounter systemic factors, ranging from the centered to the marginalized? This chapter includes a discussion and analysis of the findings which were interpreted within the context of the literature and the three conceptual frameworks that informed this research: Community Cultural Wealth, Tierney's Theory of Organizational Change, and Critical Systems Thinking. This chapter includes an analysis of the findings, as broken down into five overarching themes: 1) creating emotionally and physically secure spaces that are student-centered and student-led, 2) trauma amid the work, 3) managing unsustainable expectations, 4) motivation and mental health, and 5) adapting to uncertain contexts. These first three themes address the first research question regarding the lived experiences of the professional employees of USRCs. The third theme addresses research question 1a, which focuses on the personal factors that impact their role. The last theme addresses the second research question regarding the experiences of the participants when they encounter systemic factors. After presenting the analysis of these findings in relation to the extant literature, the chapter ends with implications for the frameworks used in this work and recommendations for practice.

Creating Emotionally and Physically Secure Spaces That Are Student-Centered And Student-Led

The findings from this study affirm the literature that recognizes the vital nature of USRCs to the socioemotional well-being of students with marginalized legal identities Haudley, 2021; Hypolite, 2020; Jones & Williams, 2006; Means & Pyne, 2017; Tachine et al., 2017; Sanchez, 2020). Additionally, the findings from this study reinforce the value of fostering environments that center vulnerability and, as a result, help attend to their students' sense of belonging, mental health, and persistence (Brown, 2021; Sanchez, 2020). Much of the existing scholarship about USRCs describes the ways in which these centers support their students with a range of tailored supports including food pantries, mental health counseling, direct financial support and the promotion of advocacy and a sense of belonging (Cisneros & Rivarola, 2020; Nienhusser et al., 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2020, Rosas, 2020). The findings from this study underscore the continued importance of these resources to the professional employees of USRCs, who demonstrate remarkable resilience in their efforts to support their students. Additionally, the findings from this research support existing literature that acknowledges the creative ways in which these professionals solve problems that impact their students (Salcedo, 2020). For example, participants shared how they specifically phrased the language on a grant application to request funds that are accessible to students who hold marginalized legal identities. Another example is from one of the participants who, when a student needed a background check to complete a course requirement in a healthcare setting, knew that the student could request a different type of background check that did not include citizenship status while simultaneously meeting the requirements for the healthcare setting.

Existing scholarship regarding USRCs indicates that their existence is generally due to student advocacy, and the findings from this study affirm this belief. However, as seen in Chapter 4, the institutional leaders at Swallowtail Tech's USRC had a more proactive response to student advocacy, institutionalizing supports that eventually became the USRC. This finding can provide hope and guidance for others in the field who want to create a USRC through official institutional channels, and for those who want to advocate for enhanced institutional support of USRCs created via student advocacy. As seen in Chapters 4 and 5, the participants in this study performed all of the job functions described in existing literature about the professional employees of USRCs. For example, the participants in the study served as advisors, counselors, and mentors, while also prioritizing the empowerment of students and catering to their holistic needs (Brown, 2021; Martinez Belmontes, 2020; Nienhusser et al., 2020; Salcedo, 2020; Shelton, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2021).

As seen in Chapters 4 and 5, two of the participants disclosed that they were presently undocumented individuals with DACA status, and an additional participant shared that they were undocumented during college. Their relationship with their legal status and their experiences as undocumented college students greatly informed their work. Karol and Mayra, both undocumented professionals with DACA status, shared how their legal status was a blessing and a curse. While they were able to earn a living and do work, they found meaningful, they had to navigate emotional minefields related to their statuses and those of their students. For instance, as DACA recipients with work authorization, they sometimes felt guilty trying to support their undocumented students who did not qualify for DACA. Alternately, there were times when their undocumented students transitioned to having a legal status with more security and benefits than that enjoyed by Karol and Mayra. Amidst these challenges, Mayra found confidence in her belief

that her legal status meant that she was among the best suited to serve students with marginalized legal identities. Additionally, the participants shared how they used their legal statuses to build relationships with students and colleagues. Existing literature about professional employees who serve students with marginalized identities affirms the value of that vulnerability because these students are more likely to reach out to professionals who share aspects of their identities, such as legal status (Jackson Preston et al., 2021). However, this responsibility can be an undue burden for professional employees who share marginalized identities with their students.

Trauma Amid the Work

These professionals bear outsized emotional burdens due to their sense of duty to care for these students, while they also experience secondary trauma when caring for students who are navigating the same barriers and traumas (Anderson, 2021; Jackson Preston et al., 2021; Lynch & Glass, 2018).

The findings from this study extend Lynch and Glass' (2019) study regarding secondary trauma among professional employees and graduate assistants who work in student affairs. As noted in Chapter 2, Lynch and Glass' (2019) study was limited because the instrument it employed to collect data did not consider the unique forms of trauma that are associated with students who hold marginalized legal identities. According to the literature, these forms of trauma include familial separation, deportation of self-and/or a loved one, or the revocation of DACA (Bazo Vienrich, 2021; Benuto et al., 2018; Daftary, 2020; Flores Morales & Garcia, 2021; Kwon et al., 2020; Lopez, 2005; Marroquin, 2014; Montiel, 2016; Nguyen & Martinez, 2015; Schmalzbauer & Andrés, 2019; Shelton, 2020; Price & Mowry-Mora, 2020; Rosas, 2020). The findings from this study affirm how undocumented individuals experience the trauma associated with the instability of DACA.

Future research regarding the experiences of the professional employees of USRCs can extend Lynch and Glass' (2019) study in two ways. First, Lynch and Glass' (2019) instrument could be expanded to include the unique forms of trauma that the literature has identified as impactful to the experiences of students who hold marginalized legal identities. By incorporating these forms of trauma, the tool could be reevaluated to see if it respectfully includes the unique experiences of professional employees who hold marginalized legal identities. Second, future scholarship can recognize the additional forms of student trauma that were identified in this study, which may not be considered traumatic for students who do not hold marginalized legal identities. As seen in Chapters 4 and 5, these sources of trauma include lack of medical insurance and/or inability to pay for healthcare, lack of access to work opportunities during school, which can lead to being unable to afford housing and food, and a sense of hopelessness about being able to legally work after graduation. Although there are students across the spectrum of identities and backgrounds who have limited or no access to these resources, students with marginalized legal identities are, more often than not, systematically barred from legally accessing these necessary resources, while others (such as DACA recipients with work authorization) have severe restrictions on their access to said resources. By expanding Lynch and Glass' (2019) tool to account for these forms of trauma that are unique to students who hold marginalized legal identities, future research could gain a more accurate representation of the trauma that professional employees in higher education manage in their work.

The findings from this study also affirm the findings from Jackson Preston et al.'s (2021) health assessment of professional employees in higher education. Specifically, Jackson Preston et al.'s (2021) focused on "professional quality of life and self-care" (p. 166) by assessing factors such as burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, mindful self-care practices,

support systems, and health-related quality of life (as defined by the HRQOL-14 from the

Centers for Disease Control). The findings from this study affirm the inclusion of these factors in

Jackson Preston et al.'s (2019) assessment, as the participants shared their experiences caring for

their students and themselves amidst tumultuous and often traumatic environments. These

findings suggest that the field would benefit from applying this tool to the professional

employees of USRCs to assess their wellbeing in the workplace.

Managing Unsustainable Expectations

The findings from this study affirm existing scholarship, which found that professional

employees in higher education were undersupported, overworked, and underpaid (Kodama et al.,

2021). Participants shared the difficulties that they faced when they felt undersupported by their

supervisors. As seen in Chapter 5, the experiences that professional employees have with their

supervisors and other institutional leaders are critical to their persistence in this emotionally

taxing role. This finding aligns with existing literature that establishes the importance of

supervision experiences to professional employees in higher education (Lamb et al., 2018;

Marshall et al., 2016; Shupp & Arminio, 2012). When the participants discussed moments in

their professional history where they considered leaving their roles at USRCs, they were pushed

to that point due to unsupportive supervisors and institutional leaders, not because the job was no

longer important to them. Although the majority of the participants had at least some experience

with a supportive supervisor in their current roles, there is only so far that support can go when

the workload becomes unmanageable.

Contributing to the unsustainable expectations the participants described this is due to the

fact that these offices are chronically understaffed, most having only one or two employees, thus

affirming Tapia-Fuselier's (2021) findings regarding the staffing of USRCs. The participants

shared how these staffing challenges limited their ability to meet the needs of their students while managing the operations and administrative elements of their work. There is preexisting literature that identifies how these challenges impact the professional employees of LGBTQIA+ centers in similar ways, and this study extends those findings to the population of professional employees of USRCs (Anderson, 2021). However, there are specific aspects of the participants' experiences that contributed to this feeling, and which were not addressed in the literature. First, the participants in this study often held inaugural roles. The specific administrative and sociopolitical burdens associated with creating an office were extremely burdensome to the participants. For example, there are no historical documents that these employees can use to ease their administrative and decision-making processes. Second, these professionals had to build a network for their office in an organizational context that was unfamiliar with their work. Third, several of the participants in this study held multiple professional roles on campus, so their already limited time was divided between different commitments. Future research regarding professional employees in higher education should explore the experiences of those who hold inaugural roles, as well as those who have multiple professional roles on campus. These findings affirm the literature that places the burden on institutions for "burning through" their employees (Anderson, 2021). There is a growing concern in higher education regarding the emotional wellbeing of professional employees, and these are specific areas of focus that can provide meaningful contributions to professional employees of whom much has been asked.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

The findings from this study affirm existing literature regarding the sacrifices that professional employees in higher education make, which affect their mental health and wellbeing. These sacrifices include delaying personal goals, such as marriage or homeownership,

and sacrificing time with their families (Kodama et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2016). Another

finding regarding the participants' mental health that aligns with the literature is the difficulties

that professional employees have regarding imposter syndrome, confidence, and feelings of

incompetence in their work (Renn & Hodges, 2007, p. 367; see also Chance, 2021). Whereas the

existing literature states that these difficulties can lead to unhealthy coping strategies, including

neglect and substance abuse, the participants in this study described a deep level of commitment

to their mental health and wellbeing. This commitment was evident in their relationships with

their mental health providers and in their willingness to respond to feedback from their loved

ones. Additionally, the majority of the participants explicitly discussed the importance of

boundaries in caring for their mental health and wellbeing. Considering that the wellbeing of

these professionals is critical to their ability to serve their students (Harrison, 2010; Chessman,

2021), these findings can inform how supervisors and institutional leaders support the

professional employees of USRCs. Additionally, these findings can help the professional

employees of USRCs argue for boundaries and resources that protect their mental health and

wellbeing. Aspirational capital, which also plays a role in the mental health and wellbeing of the

professional employees, will be discussed later in this chapter.

Adapting To Uncertain Contexts

Unfortunately, the professional employees of USRCs can rely on few constants except

the reality that their work is always changing due to unsteady external sociopolitical contexts

(Cisneros & Rivarola, 2020). The participants in this study shared their approach to this

experience, which involved a commitment to learning and a wholehearted embrace of the

humility needed to acknowledge that it is impossible to know everything about this work.

However, there is only so much that the professional employees of USRCs can do when their

policy environment transitions from uncertain to unfriendly or explicitly hostile. In these moments, the professional employees of USRCs are of vital importance. As Alex shared when her USRC was abruptly dismantled due to a change in her policy context, her students are still there, in need of support, even though there are no longer formalized institutional supports in the form of a USRC. In the midst of a sociopolitical context that includes increasingly targeted attacks on DEI initiatives (Watson, 2024), scholars should quickly invest their resources in understanding this phenomenon as it impacts the professional employees of USRCs and the students they serve.

The findings from this study extend work from other scholars who have focused on the impact of systemic factors on the experiences of professional employees of identity-centered student services. For example, Harris & Patton (2017) focused their research on the experiences of directors of Black culture centers, ultimately identifying micro and macro level systemic challenges. Harris & Patton's (2017) findings align with those from this study—both of which included issues related to inadequate funding and ignorance from their colleagues across campus. The recommendations that Harris and Patton (2017) made to address these challenges were seen at several of the USRCs in this study. For example, one of the recommendations was to develop and nurture cross-campus collaborations, a practice that is commonplace among the professional employees of USRCs, as seen in Chapters 4 and 5. Harris and Patton (2017) also recommended that professional employees tap into their center's alumni networks. Although USRCs are a relatively new phenomenon in the world of identity-centered student services, the majority of the centers benefit from the history of student advocates who fought for their creation. As seen in the findings, the professional employees of USRCs have relationships with the students who

advocated for their centers' creation, and they are committed to maintaining those relationships after the student graduates or transitions out of the institution.

Implications for Theory and Practice: Community Cultural Wealth

As discussed in the literature review, scholars have found that the professional employees at USRCs, like their colleagues at other identity-centered student services, employ and are strengthened by incorporating their cultural wealth in their work. The participants in this study discussed how navigational, resistant, and social capital informed their experiences as professional employees of USRCs.

Resistant Capital.

One of the most unexpected yet salient themes across the participants was their employment of joy and UndocuJoy as resistant capital in their experiences as professional employees of USRCs. As seen in Chapter 5, the participants specifically discussed joy as a means of resistance in the face of mentally exhausting work and uncertain contexts. Existing literature that discusses the mental health of professionals does not discuss the role of joy in protecting their mental health (see Tapia-Fuselier, 2020). For example, Evangelina shared how her friends encouraged her to pursue and protect joy in her personal life, thus improving her wellbeing as a professional. Alex discussed how she conceptualized joy as a means of resisting the limiting the negative effects of bureaucracy and power on her students. Additionally, Mayra and Evangelina discussed the concept of UndocuJoy, and how they employed it in their work to support their students. Santa-Ramirez and Hall (2023) introduced the concept of Undocujoy into the academic sphere with their piece *UndocuJoy as Resistance: Beyond Gloom and Doom Narratives of Undocumented Collegians.* In this piece, Santa-Ramirez and Hall refrain from prescribing "one definition of conceptualization of joy because every individual experiences that

emotion and what it means to them differently" (p. 583). Instead, the authors referred to, among other relevant materials, a poem from Yosimar Reyes (Define American, 2017) titled *#UndocuJoy*, and a blog post from Elena Calderon, a doctoral student and higher educational professional at the University of Arizona (Arizona, 2022), wherein she defines UndocuJoy as a way "that undocumented individuals can incorporate 'Joy' into their immigrant narrative" (Calderon, n.d.) Reflecting upon her experiences, Calderon shared, "I used to be undocumented and I struggled with the idea that I could add humor or joy into my story. I always felt that I had to emphasize the struggles I faced to assure that people understood where I was coming from." At the time of publication, the concept of UndocuJoy is more common amongst practitioners (see East Carolina University, 2019; Modesto Junior College, 2019; Plascencia-Rodriguez, 2019; San Diego Mesa College, 2023; Western Washington, n.d.) than in the literature (see Santa Ramirez & Hall, 2023). This finding contributes to the small body of literature regarding the concept of UndocuJoy.

Familial Capital.

The participants in the study described how the knowledge they learned from their *familia* or kinfolk was instrumental to their experiences. These findings affirm the work of Tapia-Fuselier (2020), whose study of the employees of USRCs found that "every participant in this study identified as undocumented, in a mixed-status family, or had a personal connection to immigration. This personal connection to the work was a clear factor in keeping the USRC professionals motivated, even while having an enormous load of responsibilities compounded by our current political context" (p. 469). The narratives presented in Chapter 4 and the findings presented in Chapter 5 reflect the ways in which the participants' experiences were informed by their legal status, the legal status of their loved ones, or a personal experience caring for students

who hold marginalized legal identities. This finding contributes to the body of literature

regarding the importance of familial capital to higher education professionals, especially those

who hold marginalized identities (see Wallace & Ford, 2023).

Navigational Capital.

The findings from this study indicate that all of the professionals in this study were rich

in navigational capital. All of the USRCs featured in this research were created decades after the

schools and the systems from which they operate were founded. The participants encountered

systemic barriers on a regular basis, and they had to find a way to navigate through and around

these institutions that were not built to serve students who hold legally marginalized identities.

Participants stressed the importance of their institutional knowledge in their efforts to navigate

their campuses. This finding aligns with existing literature regarding the ways in which the

professional employees of USRCs have to navigate barriers to support their students (see De

Leon, 2023; Tapia-Fuselier, 2022), as well as the broader pool of literature that addresses how

other university employees support students who hold marginalized legal identities (Castrellón,

2022; Freeman-Wong et al., 2022). One of the most important strategies that the participants

employed as a means of tapping into their navigational capital was the network of colleagues that

they relied upon to help them find new and better ways to persist in institutional contexts that

were not built for them or their students. This finding affirms Tapia-Fuselier's (2021) finding

that "relationships on campus are critical to [the employees of USRCs] being able to support

[their] students. . . and the support that comes as a result of these relationships are critical" (p.

140).

Although Tapia-Fuselier (2021) acknowledged the importance of these relationships, he

challenged the long-term benefit of this system that is so heavily dependent on professionals to

create and nurture these necessary connections. In 2022, Tapia-Fuselier encouraged institutions to present "a demonstrable commitment to enhancing undocu-competence across an institution's campus rather than simply relying on USRC professionals" (p. 472). This charge supports the findings which shared the participants' calls for additional support from institutional leaders and their colleagues across campus. While the professional employees of USRCs have effectively employed their navigational capital to build critical relationships and practice creative problem solving, skills that should be appropriately recognized and compensated by their employers, they should not have to jump through hoops to provide adequate support for their students. Future scholars can work with these practitioners to identify the areas of their work that benefit most from their navigational capital, then work together to dream of and provide recommendations for a system that is built to serve students with marginalized legal identities.

Future Applications of Community Cultural Wealth

The findings from this research contribute to the body of literature that uses CCW (or one of its offshoots, such as UndocuCrit) in their research about legally marginalized students in higher education (see Shelton & Hughart-Thomas, 2023). This work also contributes to the small but growing body of literature that employs CCW (or one of its offshoots, such as UndocuCrit) in their research about USRCs (see De Leon, 2023 [LatCrit]; Rosas, 2020 [UndocuCrit]; Salcedo, 2020 [CCW]). One aspect of this research that could inform the use of CCW moving forward is the intentional choice to avoid centering a particular race, ethnicity, or legal identity when recruiting the participants. This decision was made with respect to the movement to acknowledge and incorporate a broader, more representative reflection of races and ethnicities in scholarship regarding students with marginalized legal identities (see Chan, 2010; Russell & Cisneros, 2023; Russell & Reyna Rivarola, 2023; Russell, 2024; Salinas Velazco et al., 2015;

Santa-Ramirez & Hall, 2023). Although this research was about professional employees, not students, the study was designed to account for all forms of wealth that the participants may carry and to account for whichever marginalized identities they bring with them to their work.

Implications for Theory and Practice: Tierney's Theory of Organizational Culture

As discussed in Chapter 3, one aspect of USRCs that empowers them to be most effective is the fact that they are institutionally supported offices that are incorporated into their institutional organizational structure. Given this positioning with the institution, it is valuable to understand how the professional employees of the USRC experience the greater organizational culture, as well as the more localized organizational culture of the USRC. Tierney considered six elements as essential to understanding organizational culture in higher education: 1) Environment, 2) Mission, 3) Socialization, 4) Information, 5) Strategy, and 6) Leadership. The participants in this study discussed three elements of organizational culture as being of particular importance to their experiences: Environment, Socialization, and Leadership. The following section features a brief discussion of these three themes in relation to the findings and the literature.

Environment

In accordance with the literature, the physical existence of the USRCs and the environment curated within are crucial to the success of both students and employees (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Rosas, 2020; Sanchez, 2020; Shelton, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2020). This affirms the work of Cisneros & Valdivia (2020), who argued that "USRCs are critical physical and symbolic spaces that help undocumented students and students of mixed-status families build community, improve their educational conditions, and increase their opportunities for academic success" (p. 54). As seen in Chapters 4 and 5, the participants used their offices to

create physical and symbolic reflections of their values. The participants were equally concerned about the ways their students felt in the USRC as they were concerned about the actual resources within, a finding that affirms Cisneros & Valdivia's (2020) research, stating the importance of USRCs as physical spaces "where students could go for support, where students could feel safe, and where they could obtain resources and information relevant to their immigration status" (p. 57). Similarly, this finding affirms Tapia-Fuselier's work with the USRC professionals, which found that these employees "work hard to foster a space where undocumented students can begin to process and heal from trauma and make peace with their identities, including their undocumented status" (p. 470). This finding reinforces the importance of investing in and maintaining USRCs and all physical spaces that are curated to support students who hold marginalized identities (Hypolite, 2020; Miller, 2019; Rosas, 2020; Shelton, 2020; Tapia-Fuselier, 2020). In 2023 and 2024, there has been a growing trend wherein states have taken measures to eliminate spaces and structures that provide institutional support for marginalized students (Lange & Lee, 2024). The findings from this study can be used to strengthen arguments against these restrictive, discriminatory policies and fight for institutional investment in physical spaces for identity-centered student services.

Socialization

The findings from this study reflect the high value that the participants placed on relationship-building in their work, as well as their nuanced understanding of power dynamics within these relationships. As seen in Chapter 3, these findings support Tierney's conceptualization of Socialization, which aligns relationships and power dynamics in higher education organizational culture. For example, as described in Chapter 5, the participants' relationships with their students were strengthened when the participants empowered the

students in their environment. Additionally, the participants shared that their professional

relationships were supported by embracing humility and supporting a collective community,

rather than an authoritarian or hierarchical structure. Lastly, the findings reflect the importance

that the participants placed in learning from and supporting their peers. These findings reinforce

Tapia-Fuselier's (2020) and Cisneros and Valdivia's (2020) findings regarding the importance of

collegial relationships to the success and wellbeing of the professional employees of USRCs.

The findings from this study reinforce the importance of socialization to the organizational

culture of USRCs, as well as the wellbeing of their professional employees.

Leadership

The findings from this study extend Tierney's conceptualization of leadership to consider

organizational cultures wherein students embrace and are empowered to explore leadership roles

within their USRC and beyond. As stated in Chapter 5, most of the USRCs in this study exist as

a direct result of student advocacy. This finding affirms the work of Cisneros & Valdivia, who

found that "the development of USRCs was often attributed to mobilizations by and on behalf of

undocumented students" (p. 56). As stated in Chapter 5, the participants in the study expressed

their respect for the students' advocacy efforts and consistently stated their commitment to center

and empower students in their space. Future scholars who choose to incorporate Tierney's

framework in their research should intentionally avoid stereotyping/preemptively assuming that

leadership and its associated power follow a traditional hierarchical structure. Several of the

participants in this study also expressed their commitment to building communities that were

centered on collective power rather than hierarchical power. The assumption that organizations

have leaders is a limitation of this framework.

Future Applications of Tierney's Theory of Organizational Culture

The findings from this research contribute to the literature that employs Tierney's framework in the study of organizations within higher education (see Davis, 2013; Hall, 2018; Savarese, 2019; Villarreal, 2022). Specifically, this dissertation extends the established practice of combining Tierney's theory with other frameworks in doctoral dissertations (see Davis, 2013; Hall, 2018; McNamee, 2022; Savarese, 2019). As seen in Table 1, all six elements of Tierney's theory were incorporated into the research design, a practice that echoes similar scholarship that used Tierney's sextuple in their work (see Davis, 2013; Hall, 2018). One way that this study advances the field is in its use of Tierney's theory with van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology. When used together as complementary conceptual framework, the six elements of Tierney's framework (environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership) align well with the four elements of the lifeworld (lived space, lived body, lived time, lived human relation) as identified by van Manen (1990). Consider, for example, the alignment between Tierney's conceptualization of environment as it relates to organizational culture and van Manen's conceptualization of lived space as it relates to the lifeworld. The reflective questions that Tierney provides as guidance for understanding environment can be used to explore one's experience in their lived space. There is further alignment between the concepts of lived human relation and socialization, as well as leadership, and Tierney's related questions can help scholars explore their affiliated concepts in van Manen's conceptualization of the lifeworld. Although other scholars have used other forms of phenomenology in conjunction with Tierney's theory (see Hall, 2018; Villarreal, 2022), this study is among the first in higher education to use Tierney's theory with van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach.

Implications for Theory and Practice: Critical Systems Thinking

This research presents an example of how CST can be used in higher education scholarship to incorporate critical reflection of systems as constructed by the participants. The participants experienced systemic factors in different ways depending on their personal identities, experiences, and contexts.

Boundary Critique: Centering and Marginalization

The findings from this study present two themes regarding centering and marginalization as seen in the experiences of the professional employees who work at USRCs, two of which I will explore in this section. First, the process of centering and marginalization was reflected in the experiences of the participants who are undocumented professionals with work authorization. The following section describes the process of centering and marginalization that the participants experienced in their work, as well as an analysis of the implications of this process, and recommendations. Second, the process of centering and marginalization was reflected in the experiences of the participants whose work is situated in sociopolitical climates that transitioned from being supportive to unsupportive during the course of the research. After briefly discussing the specific circumstances for each of the participants, an analysis of their experiences in relation to the literature is presented, then a series of recommendations.

Undocumented Professionals with Work Authorization.

The findings reflect how higher education institutions overlook the unique needs and challenges of undocumented professional employees. In doing so, higher education institutions marginalize these professionals and make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to feel secure in their professional roles, a reality that affects the quality of their work and their mental health. As Mayra and Karol discussed in Chapter 5, their legal status influenced every aspect of their

experience. Simultaneously, their legal status as employees was not explicitly addressed by their institution. As DACA recipients, both Mayra and Karol have to reapply for work authorization every two years—a process that is expensive, time consuming, and emotionally exhausting. Although DACA status lasts for two years, the National Immigration Law Center recommends submitting one's DACA renewal application 150 days before its expiration date to avoid a lapse in work authorization (NILC, 2022; USCIS, n.d.). Undocumented professionals at higher education institutions carry a persistent sense of fear and anxiety about what might happen to them if they lose their work authorization, even for a short period of time if their application is delayed. Although an employer may express verbal or written support for undocumented individuals, a lack of institutional policies regarding employment protections in the case of delayed work authorization leaves undocumented professionals vulnerable. For example, if Mayra's work authorization expires in August because her application is delayed, how long will Ceres College hold her job before they decide to hire someone else? How long can Mayra survive without her income? These are just two of the questions that undocumented professionals with work authorization may reflect upon in their unstable work environments.

Although higher education institutions cannot directly expedite or influence their employee's DACA renewal applications, they can codify protections for undocumented professionals in the case that their DACA renewal applications are delayed. The human resources departments at higher education institutions need to learn about the unique needs and challenges of undocumented professionals. There is a small but growing body of literature about the experiences of higher education professionals that are undocumented (see Reyna Rivarola, 2022; Reyna Rivarola et al., 2023), in addition to literature and initiatives that address the needs of undocumented professionals, generally (see Treviño et al., 2017; UndocuProfessionals, n.d.;

Ambrosio et al., 2021). Human resources professionals should also make themselves available to the undocumented professionals on their campus, and explicitly share their desire to learn from this population to improve their professional experiences. Institutional leaders and hiring managers also need to regularly educate themselves on the experiences of undocumented professionals, so they can foster professional environments that are sensitive to and respectful of their unique challenges and needs.

In both Karol and Mayra's institutional systems, undocumented professionals were marginalized. Those who held power to address the needs of professional employees did not center the needs of undocumented professionals in their institutional systems. In their current roles, Karol and Mayra did not hold enough institutional power to center the needs of undocumented professionals within their institutional systems. The needs of undocumented professional employees could be centered in two ways. First, if those with power adjusted their values to include undocumented professionals. Second, if power shifted hands to someone who values undocumented professionals. Unless higher education systems change, undocumented professionals with work authorization will not be able to exist comfortably within their workspaces, leaving them vulnerable to burnout and limiting their professional potential.

Future scholars that wish to center undocumented professionals in higher education can incorporate UndocuCrit (Aguilar, 2018) into their research design. This study was not designed to address a specific aspect of the participants identities, but future work that focuses on these individuals would benefit from incorporating UndocuCrit, thus allowing the research to develop a more nuanced understanding of how their identities as undocumented individuals intersects with their experiences as professional employees. For those wishing to incorporate identity-centered frameworks in their research design, Castrellón (2022) can serve as a useful point of

reference, although, Castrellón's piece did not include CST in its approach to systems-thinking.

Future research regarding undocumented professionals can incorporate CST and an identity-

centered framework to continue centering the unique needs and experiences of these individuals

with a respect for their sociopolitical contexts.

Sociopolitical Contexts in Transition.

The findings also reflected how the participants were centered and/or marginalized within

their institutional and sociopolitical contexts. During the data collection period, two of the

participants' contexts shifted. However, these changes impacted the participants' work in

different ways, depending upon how their USRCs were, or were not, centered by organizational

leaders.

As seen in Chapter 5, Alex's institutional and sociopolitical contexts transitioned from

explicitly supporting McElroy State's USRC and its students to removing all support for the

USRC and its students. Through this process, Alex's USRC moved from being centered within

the primary boundary of its system to being marginalized between the primary and secondary

boundaries. This action reflects how the organizational leaders with power, who previously

centered Alex's work, were influenced by their external sociopolitical context to push the USRC

into the margins. USRCs nationwide are at risk as attacks on DEI initiatives at public institutions

increase across the United States (Watson, 2024). Alex's situation reflects how USRCs can

become secondhand casualties of their sociopolitical contexts if institutional leaders do not

center USRCs when other identity-centered student services are targeted. In anticipation of

increased attacks on DEI initiatives at public institutions nationwide, the professional employees

of USRCs and their allies should take preventative measures to protect the existence of their

USRC in case similar legislation is enacted in their sociopolitical context. The case of María

Elena's USRC provides an example of how professional employees at other USRCs can adapt

their practices to enhance their protection.

Elsewhere, María Elena managed a similar change. As described in Chapter 5, during the

data collection period, María Elena's sociopolitical context shifted to become less friendly

toward individuals with marginalized legal identities. As identified in the findings, the USRC at

Swallowtail Tech had two distinctive elements when compared to the USRC at McElroy State,

elements that served as protective factors when the sociopolitical context became less friendly.

First, the USRC at Swallowtail Teach received more support from institutional leaders

after students advocated to enhance supports for undocumented students, an origin that reflects

the values of those in power and their explicit centering of María Elena's work. When the

external sociopolitical context became less friendly, the USRC at Swallowtail Tech, and the

students it served, had an additional layer of protection when compared to students at other

institutions that did not benefit from similar centering. Organizational leadership at Swallowtail

Tech used their power to center their USRC when external systemic factors could have otherwise

forced Swallowtail Tech's USRCs to the margins. María Elena's experience shows how

Tierney's theory of Organizational Culture, and its emphasis on the role of leadership in shaping

culture, interacts with Critical Systems Thinking in this research.

Second, as described in Chapter 5, the USRC at Swallowtail Tech was intentionally

structured to serve another purpose on campus. In the case of Swallowtail Tech, this additional

purpose was to support evidence-based research conducted in collaboration with other

professionals and offices on campus. As a result, the USRC at Swallowtail Tech had

organizational purposes and relationships that went beyond the scope of solely providing support

as an identity-centered student service. When external forces targeted DEI initiatives and, as a

result, identity-centered student services like USRCs, Swallowtail Tech's USRC leaned into their other purposes and avoided erasure. As described in Chapter 5, María Elena responded to these external attacked by adapting aspects of her work, such as the language used on their website and the language used in advertisements, and the content of their programming. In making these adjustments, Maria Elena hoped to avoid opening herself and her students up to attacks, losing institutional support for the USRC, or losing her job. Additionally, these changes made it easier for the organizational leadership of Swallowtail Tech to center the USRC within its primary boundary, maintaining its funding, its website (with adaptations), and the physical space of the USRC.

These findings can be useful to three different groups. First, they can be instructive to students and professionals who are advocating for the creation of USRCs and developing operational strategies for their potential offices. Based on the findings from this research, advocates for developing USRCs should consider how they can expand their purposes to include work that is beyond the scope of traditional DEI work, thus creating a potential layer of protection. Second, they can be helpful for the professionals who currently work at USRCs. These professionals can use their social, strategic and collegial relationships, as well as their institutional knowledge and navigational capital, to devise a protective strategy for their USRC. Lastly, these findings can be useful to institutional leaders who are interested in how they can improve support for their USRCs and how they might be able to support similar identity-centered student services that are threatened by their sociopolitical contexts.

Future Applications of Critical Systems Thinking

This research provides an example of how Critical Systems Thinking can be further incorporated into the field of higher education. Critical Systems Thinking allows higher

education scholars to practice critical awareness of their approach, while also serving as critical friends to the field with a justice-oriented lens that both accounts for sociopolitical contexts while recognizing the constructivist nature of truth and experience, while embracing a commitment toward improvement of the field. The findings from this research provides two examples of how CST can be used when considering the experiences of individuals, as well as how organizations operate, when encountering systemic factors that result in centering and/or marginalization. One of the limitations of the application of CST in this study is the lack of specificity regarding the participants' exact sociopolitical contexts. Due to the small population of USRCs nationwide, the state and local sociopolitical contexts in which the participants operate had to be protected to ensure participant anonymity.

Implications for Practice

Although there are implications for practice sprinkled throughout Chapter Six, two of the participants from this dissertation made specific recommendations for practice that need to be acknowledged. First, Evangelina discussed how helpful she would find it if there was a compendium of resources regarding self-care that was tailored to those who work at USRCs and with others in the immigrant community. Second, Mayra expressed an interest in learning how higher education institutions do, and do not, offer support for their undocumented employees through initiatives such as the provision of the $495 DACA renewal fee. Mayra hopes to work in community with other undocumented colleagues and build a list of best practices for higher education institutions to support their undocumented employees, including those with and without DACA.

Future Areas of Study

The study contributes to the body of literature regarding professional employees in higher education that used hermeneutic phenomenological methods (Coates, 2017; Kodama et al., 2021; Marine, 2011). One of the limitations of this study is that six of the seven participants used she/her pronouns, a homogeneity that mirrors the majority of existing scholarship regarding professional employees in higher education (see Jackson Preston et al., 2021; Lynch & Glass, 2019; Marshall et al., 2016; Martinez Hoy & Nguyen, 2020; Martinez Hoy & Nguyen, 2021; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Shupp & Arminio, 2012; Wilson, 2000; Wilson et al., 2016). Additionally, the race, ethnicity, and sexuality of the participants were not collected for this study, which limits its applicability to scholarship that centers those aspects of a professional employee's identity (see Jackson Preston et al., 2021; Lynch & Glass, 2019; Marshall et al., 2016; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Shupp & Arminio, 2012; Wilson et al., 2016). The preceding sections include some recommendations for future areas of study, including the pressing need to address ongoing threats to DEI initiatives, and how scholars can use their skills and resources to understand and support professional employees in higher education that hold inaugural roles. `

Conclusion

As of 2024, Undocumented Students Resource Centers are considered the gold standard for supporting students in higher education who hold marginalized legal identities. Although there is a growing body of literature that centers the experiences of students in relation to USRCs, less literature exists regarding the experiences of the professional employees who operate these critical services. This study served to address that gap in the literature by exploring how these professionals not only experienced their work but how those experiences were informed by their unique identities, values, and history, as well as varying external systemic

factors. The guiding principles of this study were informed by three frameworks that centered the

cultural wealth and assets of the participants, considered the organizational culture of the centers,

and made space for the participants to identify and elaborate upon systemic factors they

considered relevant to their experiences. As a result of this structure, the participants were able to

reflect upon their personal and professional experiences and values that relate to their work.

The findings from this study reinforce the importance of these professional employees to

the wellbeing of their students. Although the participants operated within unstable contexts and

were generally underresourced, they expressed their commitment to giving everything they could

to their students while also attempting to care for their wellbeing and maintain sustainable

professional and personal boundaries. The participants in this study strongly believed that their

USRC was at its best when it was student-centered and student-led, an act of humility and love

that reflects how important these professional employees are to their communities. When faced

with as the number and severity of the systemic barriers as those faced by the professional

employees of USRCs and the students they serve, it is understandable that any professional

might feel hopeless or burnt out. Fortunately, the participants in this study displayed an immense

capacity for hope and selflessness, which is seen in this reflection from Karol:

"Maybe one day there won't be a need for a role like mine. The universities are going to know

what to do. They're gonna have everything in place. Everyone's gonna know how to support

everybody. That's the dream."

The participants in this study exhibit the power of what can be accomplished through

love and respect for oneself and one's community, a commitment to the process of learning, and

capitalizing on one's strengths. Mayra put it wonderfully, "This is work of the heart." Students,

advocates, professionals, and scholars have much to learn from these participants whose work

provides vital services to students who hold marginalized legal identities.

References

Acevedo, N., & Solorzano, D. G. (2023). An overview of community cultural wealth: Toward a

protective factor Against racism. *Urban Education*, *58*(7), 1470-1488.

https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859211016531

Aguilar, C. (2018). Undocumented critical theory. Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies. 1-9,

https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708618817911

Ambrosio, G., Pérez Valle, C., Jiménez-Vázquez, I., Said, F., & Pamplona, L. (2021). *The state

of undocumented educators in New York*. UndocuEdu.

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d9b610753ba512b1fb88e9e/t/636e8669e3c47d332

4b42404/1668187802775/UndocuEdu_Report_Final.pdf

American Bar Association. (n.d.). Family separation and detention.

https://www.americanbar.org/advocacy/governmental_legislative_work/priorities_policy/

immigration/familyseparation/

Anderson, R. K. (2021). Burned Out or Burned Through? The Costs of Student Affairs Diversity

Work. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *58*(4), 359–371.

https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2020.1822853

Anson, I. G. (2018). Taking the time? Explaining effortful participation among low-cost online

survey participants. Research & Politics, 5(3), 205316801878548.

https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018785483

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands = la frontera : the new mestiza*. Spinsters/Aunt Lute.

Astin, A. W. (1999). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. Journal

of College Student Development, 40(5), 518.

Baaz Medina, M. D. C. (2020). Si se puede: Undocumented Latinx students navigating

    community college. [Master's Thesis, California State University, Long Beach].

    ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2469850848?pq-

    origsite=primo

Ball, L., Leigh, D. & Mishra, P. (2022, September 7). Understanding US inflation during the

    COVID era. Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/bpea-articles/understanding-u-s-

    inflation-during-the-covid-era/

Ballerini, V. & Feldblum, M. (2021). Immigration status and postsecondary opportunity: Barriers

    to affordability, access, and success for undocumented students, and policy solutions. *The*

    American Journal of Economics and Sociology, *80*(1), 161–186.

    https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12380

Banh, & Radovic-Fanta, J. (2021). University and professor practices to support DACA and

    undocumented students: DACA student experiences, teacher knowledge, and university

    actions. *Social Sciences(Basel)*, *10*(9), 346. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10090346

Bañuelos, N. (2021). *Community cultural wealth goes to college: A review of the literature for*

    *career services professionals and researcher*s (WCER Working Paper 2021-6).

    University of Wisconsin– Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Bartholomew, T. T., Gundel, B. E., Kang, E., Joy, E. E., Maldonado-Aguiñiga, S., Robbins, K.

    A., & Li, H. (2021). Integrating cultural beliefs about illness in counseling with refugees:

    A phenomenological study. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *52*(8-9), 705–725.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/00220221211038374

Bazo Vienrich, A. (2021). "I used to be one of them": Reflections on researching DACA

students as a DACA beneficiary. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in*

Education, *34*(8), 700-714, https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2021.1956623

Bea, M. D., & Taylor Poppe, E. S. (2021). Marginalized legal categories: Social inequality,

family structure, and the laws of intestacy. *Law & Society Review*, *55*(2), 252–272.

https://doi.org/10.1111/lasr.12553

Bentley Y., & Clarke S. (2011). Evaluation of information strategy implementation: A critical

approach. *Journal of Organizational and End User Computing*, *23*(1), 1–17.

https://doi.org/10.4018/joeuc.2011010101

Benuto, L. T., Casas, J. B., Cummings, C., & Newlands, R. (2018). Undocumented, to

DACAmented, to DACAlimited: Narratives of Latino students with DACA status.

Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 40(3), 259-278.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986318776941

Bernanke, B. & Blanchard, O. (2023). What caused the U.S. pandemic-era inflation? Hutchins

Center on Fiscal & Monetary Policy at the Brookings Institution.

https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Bernanke-Blanchard-

conference-draft_5.23.23.pdf

Bjorklund, Peter. (2018). Undocumented students in higher education: A review of the literature,

2001 to 2016. Review of Educational Research, 88(5), 631–670.

https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318783018

Borg, N. (2020a). Higher education innovations in response to the needs of Syrian refugees and

asylum seekers in Germany and elsewhere. In de Wit, H., Ergin, H., Khajarian, A.,

Unangst, L., and DeLaquil T. (Eds.). *Refugees and higher education: Trans-national perspectives on access, equity, and internationalization*. Brill Sense Publishers.

Borg, N. (2020b). Higher education's response to refugee crises: Applying lessons from the Syrian conflict to the Venezuelan context. In de Wit, H., Ergin, H., Khajarian, A., Unangst, L., and DeLaquil T. (Eds.). *Refugees and higher education: Trans-national perspectives on access, equity, and internationalization*. Brill Sense Publishers.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In (Ed.) Richardson, J., Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education (1986), pp. 241–58

Boyd, C. O. (2010). Philosophical foundations in qualitative research. In Patricia L. Munhall (Ed.), *Nursing research: a qualitative perspective.* (pp. 65-89). Jones and Bartlett Publishers.

Briscoe, K. L. (2022). Student affairs professionals experiences with campus racial climate at predominantly white institutions. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 15*(5), 560-571. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000311

Brown, A. L. (2021). Dwell in possibility: A narrative study on the lived experiences of undocumented students' sense of belonging in the United States. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www-proquest-com.proxy.bc.edu/docview/2553565277?pq-origsite=primo.

Bureau, D. A. (2018). Grounded in their work: Interpreting perceptions of professional values by participants in student affairs preparation programs, *Journal of College and Character*, *19*:3, 215-228. https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2018.1481098

Butler, A., Engstrom, E., Lusk, G., & Rogers-Thibou, S. (2020). *Community cultural wealth in the community college: A systematic review of latinx student engagement* (Order No.

28002959). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2425885995).

https://go.openathens.net/redirector/bc.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/community-cultural-wealth-college-systematic/docview/2425885995/se-2

Calderon, E. (n.d.). Undocujoy: A former undocumented girl experiencing joy.

https://undocujoy.home.blog/contact/

Calle, C. Z. (2021). Ni de aquí, ni de allá: Sense of belonging among Latinx DACA recipient university students. [Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www-proquest-com.proxy.bc.edu/docview/2572593732?pq-origsite=primo

Carlos Gomez, J., & Meraz, V. (2021, February). Immigrant families during the pandemic on the frontlines but left behind. CLASP: The Center for Law and Social Policy. https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2021/02/immigrantfamiliesduringpandemic_02122021_final.pdf

Castrellón, L. E. (2021a). "As soon as they hear 'undocumented,' they stop advising": Theorizing a (sub)conscious evasion of responsibility from institutional agents to undocumented students. Educational Studies (Ames), 57(3), 269–286. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2021.1892680

Castrellón, L. E. (2021b). "Just being undocumented you gotta find loopholes": Policy enactment of an in-state resident tuition policy. Journal of Diversity in Higher Education. 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000314

Chan, B. (2010). Not just a latino issue: Undocumented students in higher education. *The Journal of College Admissions*, *206*, 29.

Chance, N. L. (2021). A phenomenological inquiry into the influence of crucible experiences on

    the leadership development of Black women in higher education senior leadership.

    Educational Management Administration & Leadership, *49*(4), 601-623.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211019417

Chessman, H. M. (2021). Student affairs professionals, well-being, and work quality. *Journal of*

    Student Affairs Research & Practice, *58*(2), 148-162.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2020.1853556

Chishti, M. & Bush-Josephe, K. (2023, January 26). Biden at the Two-Year Mark: Significant

    Immigration Actions Eclipsed by Record Border Numbers

Churchman, C. W. (1970). Operations research as a profession: 1. Introduction. *Management*

    Science, *17*(2), B37.

Cisneros, J., & Rivarola, A. R. R. (2020). Undocumented student resource centers. Journal of

    College Student Development, 61(5), 658–662. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0064

Cisneros, J., & Valdivia, D. (2020). "We are legit now": Establishing Undocumented Student

    Resource Centers on campus. Journal of College Student Development, 61(1), 51–66.

    https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0003

Cisneros, J., Valdivia, D., Reyna Rivarola, A. R., & Russell, F. (2021). "I'm here to fight along

    with you": Undocumented student resource centers creating possibilities. Journal of

    Diversity in Higher Education, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000355

Coates, T. K. L. (2017). Hearing the voices of Generation Y employees: a hermeneutic

    phenomenological study. *Human Resource Development International*, *20*(1), 37–67.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2016.1222486

Converse, M. (2012). Philosophy of phenomenology: how understanding aids research. Nurse

    Researcher, 20(1), 28–32. https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2012.09.20.1.28.c9305

Córdoba, J.-R. & Midgley, G. (2008). Beyond organisational agendas: using boundary critique to

    facilitate the inclusion of societal concerns in information systems planning. *European

    Journal of Information Systems*, *17*(2), 125–142. https://doi.org/10.1057/ejis.2008.4

Crowther, S. & Smythe, E. (2016). Open, trusting relationships underpin safety in rural maternity

    a hermeneutic phenomenology study. BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth, 16(1), 370–370.

    https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-016-1164-9

Daftary, A. -M. H. (2020). Living with uncertainty: Perceptions of well-being among Latinx

    young adults in immigrant family systems. *Family Relations*, *69*: 51-62.

    https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12407

Davis, K. R, (2022). "Not nearly what it used to be": A mixed methods study on hazing and

organizational culture in historically white fraternities. [Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State

    University. LSU Scholarly Repository.

    https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/5933

De Leon, B. (2023). Developing an undocumented resource center: the case of mountain west

    university. [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas at San Antonio]. ProQuest

    Dissertations.

    https://go.openathens.net/redirector/bc.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-

    theses/developing-undocumented-resource-center-case/docview/2819236817/se-2

Deeb-Sossa, N., & Boulware, J. (2022). "We are not a token!": Cultural citizenship and

    transformational resistance in higher education. *Urban Education*, *57*(7), 1145-1176.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085918802629

Define American. (2017, August 22). *Share the UndocuJoy!* [Video]. YouTube.

> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1kkdBjASfc&t=12s

del Socorro Ceja Ceja. (2021). An examination of the factors that contribute to undocumented

> student success in higher education. [Doctoral dissertation, California State University,

> Sacramento]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Denton, M., Borrego, M., & Boklage A. (2020). Community cultural wealth in science,

> technology, engineering, and mathematics education: A systematic review. *Journal of*

> *Engineering Education, 109*(3): 556–580. https://doi.org/10.1002/jee.20322

Dibley, L., Dickerson, S., Duffy, M., & Vandermause, R. (2020). Data analysis and

> interpretation. SAGE Publications Ltd, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529799583

Dibley, L., Dickerson, S., Duffy, M., & Vandermause, R. (2020). Reflexivity and rigour. SAGE

> Publications Ltd, https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781529799583

Dowling, M. (2004). Hermeneutics: an exploration. *Nurse Researcher*, *11*(4), 30–39.

> https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2004.07.11.4.30.c6213

Dowling, M. (2007). From Husserl to van Manen. A review of different phenomenological

> approaches. *International journal of nursing studies*, *44*(1), 131–142.

> https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2005.11.026

East Carolina University. (2019). *Latinx Heritage Month speaker, Yosimar Reyes: UndocuJoy:*

> *Shifting the Perspective in Undocumented Representation*.

> https://calendar.ecu.edu/event/latinx_heritage_month_speaker_yosimar_reyes_undocujoy

> _shifting_the_perspective_in_undocumented_representation

Eddles-Hirsch, K. (2015). Phenomenology and educational research. *International Journal of*

> *Advanced Research, 3* (8), 251-260.

Emmel, N. (2013). Purposeful sampling. SAGE Publications Ltd,

    https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473913882

Fixsen, A., Seers, H., Polley, M., & Robins, J. (2020). Applying critical systems thinking to

    social prescribing: a relational model of stakeholder "buy-in". BMC Health Services

    Research, 20(1), 580–580. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-020-05443-8

Flint, M. A., Kilgo, C. A., & Bennett, L. A. (2019). The right to space in higher education:

    Nonbinary and agender students' navigation of campus. Journal of College Student

    Development, 60(4), 437–454. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2019.0039

Flood, R. L., and Ulrich, W. (1990). Testament to conversations on critical systems thinking

    between two systems practitioners. Systems Practice, 3(6), 7–29.

Flores Morales, & Garcia, Y. (2021). Beyond undocumented: Differences in the mental health of

    Latinx undocumented college students. Latino Studies, 19(3), 374–399.

    https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-021-00325-4

Flynn, S. V., Korcuska, J. S., Brady, N. V., & Hays, D. G. (2019). A 15 year content analysis of

    three qualitative research traditions. Counselor Education and Supervision, 58(1), 49–63.

    https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12123

Folgueiras-Bertomeu, P., & Sandín-Esteban, M. (2023). The research question in hermeneutic

    phenomenology and grounded theory research. The Qualitative Report, 28(5), 1452-

    1472. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5715

Francis, P. C., & Horn, A. S. (2017). Mental health issues and counseling services in us higher

    education: An overview of recent research and recommended practices. *Higher*

    Education Policy, 30, 263-277.

Freeman-Wong, R. E., Mazumder, T., & Cisneros, J. (2022). Keep Fighting for Existence:

Undocumented Student Resource Centers as Counter-Spaces Within Community

Colleges. Community College Review, 50(4), 436–455.

https://doi.org/10.1177/00915521221111461

Friga, P. N. (February 5, 2021). How much has Covid cost colleges? $183 billion. The Chronicle

of Higher Education. https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-fight-covids-financial-

crush

Fuster Guillen, D. E. (2019). Qualitative research: Hermeneutical phenomenological method.

Propósitos y Representaciones, 7(1), 201–229.

https://doi.org/10.20511/pyr2019.v7n1.267

Fylan, F. (2005). Chapter 6: Semi-structured interviewing. In J. Miles & P. Gilbert (Eds.), A

Handbook of Research Methods for Clinical and Health Psychology. (pp. 65-77). Oxford

University Press.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. *Handbook of

qualitative research*, *2*(163-194), 105.

Gadamer, H. G. (1975). *Truth and method*. Continuum.

Garcia, G. A. (2016). Exploring student affairs professionals' experiences with the campus racial

climate at a Hispanic serving institution (HSI). *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*,

9(1), 20–33. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039199

Gentles, S. J., Charles, C., Ploeg, J., & McKibbon, K. (2015). Sampling in Qualitative Research:

Insights from an Overview of the Methods Literature. The Qualitative Report, 20(11),

1772-1789. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2373

Gill, P. W. & Harrison, L. M. (2018). The completion agenda impact on student affairs practice in community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *42*(11), 797–811. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2018.1448728

Gomez, V., & Pérez Huber, L. (2019). Examining racist nativist microaggressions on DACAmented college students in the Trump era. California Journal of Politics and Policy, 11(2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.5070/P2CJPP11243089

Gonzales, R. G., Camacho, S., Brant, K., & Aguilar, C. (2019). *The long-term impact of DACA: Forging futures despite DACA's uncertainty.* Immigration initiative at Harvard & National UnDACAmented Research Project.

https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Gonzales-et-al._final_daca_report.pdf

Green, E., Solomon, M., & Spence, D. (2021). Poem as/and palimpsest: Hermeneutic phenomenology and/as poetic inquiry. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 20, 160940692110530. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211053094

Griffin, K.A., Hart, J.L., Worthington, R.L., Belay, K., & Yeung, J.G. (2019). Race-related activism: How do higher education diversity professionals respond? *The Review of Higher Education 43*(2), 667-696. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2019.0114.

Hall, A. L. (2018). HBCUs Matter: The Lived Experiences of Involved Student-Athletes Changing the Game [Doctoral dissertation, Clemson University]. ProQuest Dissertaations.

https://www.proquest.com/docview/2103964245?sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses

Harris, J. C., & Patton, L. D. (2017). The challenges and triumphs in addressing students'

    intersectional identities for Black culture centers. *Journal of Diversity in Higher*

    Education, 10(4), 334–349. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000047

Harrison, L. M. (2010). Consequences and strategies student affairs professionals engage in their

    advocacy roles. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *47*(2), 197–214.

Haudley, C. (2021). Native American college student dynamics at a university native American

    student center. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona]. ProQuest Dissertations &

    Theses Global. https://www-proquest-com.proxy.bc.edu/docview/2572593732?pq-

    origsite=primo

Herskowitz, D. (2020). The Husserl-Heidegger relationship in the Jewish imagination. *Jewish*

    Quarterly Review, *110*(3), 491–522.

Hilhorst, D. (2018). Classical humanitarianism and resilience humanitarianism: making sense of

    two brands of humanitarian action. International Journal of Humanitarian Action, 3(15),

    1-12. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-018-0043-6

Hypolite, L. I.. (2020). People, place, and connections: Black cultural center staff as facilitators

    of social capital. Journal of Black Studies, 51(1), 37–59.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934719892238

Immigrants Rising, n.d. A guide to building on-campus undocumented student programs. 1-27.

    https://immigrantsrising.org/wp-content/uploads/Immigrants-Rising_A-Guide-to-

    Building-On-Campus-Undocumented-Student-Programs.pdf

Jackson Preston, P., Peterson, H., Sanchez, D., Corral Carlos, A., & Reed, A. (2021). Serving

    Students Takes a Toll: Self-Care, Health, and Professional Quality of Life. Journal of

Student Affairs Research and Practice, 58(2), 163–178.

https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2020.1853558

Jackson, M. C. (1982). The nature of soft systems thinking: The work of Churchman, Ackoff and

Checkland. *Journal of Applied Systems Analysis*, *9*(1), 17–29.

Jackson, M.C. (2001). Systems thinking and the social sciences. In: Ragsdell, G., Wilby, J. (eds)

Understanding Complexity. Springer, Boston, MA. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-

1313-1_26

Jackson, M.C. (1991). The origins and nature of critical systems thinking. *Systems Practice*, *4*,

131–149. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01068246

Jackson, M. C. (2002). *Creative systems thinking: a complete approach for successful*

management. Wiley.

Jackson, M. C. (2003). Deeper complementarism: a brief response to Ulrich. *Journal of the*

Operational Research Society, 54, 1225–1226.

https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jors.2601630

Jacobs, E. (2023). *Two years of Biden's immigration policies: 10 actions and their impact*.

Center for Immigration Studies. https://cis.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/jacobs-two-

years-of-biden-1-23.pdf

Jaschik, S. (2022, March 6). Anti-trans speaker blocked at U of North Texas.

https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2022/03/07/anti-trans-speaker-blocked-u-

north-texas

Jones, J. D. & Williams, M. (2006). The African American student center and Black student

retention at a pacific northwest PWI. The Western Journal of Black Studies, 30(4), 24–

34.

Jordan, M. (2021, October 28). Family members separated at border may each get up to

$450,000. The New York Times.

https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/28/us/politics/trump-family-separation-border.html

Kakkori, L. (2009). Hermeneutics and phenomenology problems when applying hermeneutic

phenomenological method in educational qualitative research. *Paideusis: Journal of the

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society*, *18*(2):19-27.

Kang, S. K. & Kim, E. H. (2014). A phenomenological study of the lived experiences of Koreans

with mental illness. *Journal of Social Service Research*, *40*(4), 468-480,

https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2014.905164

Kantamneni, N. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marginalized populations in

the United States: A research agenda. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 119, 103439–

103439. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103439

Kezar, A., Hallett, R. E., Perez, R. J., & Kitchen, J. A. (2024). Scaling success for low-income,

first-generation in college, and/or racially minoritized students through a culture of

ecological validation. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 17*(2), 229-242.

https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000401

Kim, J. (September 28, 2020). COVID-19 and the future of higher ed staff. Inside Higher Ed.

https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/covid-19-and-future-higher-

ed-staff

Kodama, C. M., Narui, M., & Walterbusch, T. (2021) "Just over here floating around":

Geographically bound professionals in student affairs. *Journal of Student Affairs

Research and Practice*, *58*(5), 532-545, https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2021.1908314

Kogetsidis, H. (2021). Systems methodologies for handling problem complexity. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-08-2021-2931

Krauze, L. (2020, April 13). Opinion: Undocumented immigrants, essential to the U.S. economy, deserve federal help too. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/13/undocumented-immigrants-essential-us-economy-deserve-federal-help-too/

Kwon, P., Pattinson, M. C., Faust, E., Hobaica, S., Tse, J., Sainz, R., Castañeda, C., Graham, B. S., & Keiser, G. H. (2020). A resilience intervention to increase academic persistence among undocumented students in higher education. Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 19(4), 452–471. https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192718823185

Lai, B. (2020, November 13). More school counselors needed to boost students' future. Boston Herald. https://www.bostonherald.com/2020/11/13/more-school-counselors-needed-to-boost-students-future/

Lange, A.C., & Lee, J.A. (2024). Centering our humanity: Responding to anti-DEI efforts across higher education. *Journal of College Student Development 65*(1), 113-116. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2024.a919356.

Lamb, C. & Uong, J.& Haynes, C., Coley, E., Valdes, L., & Wendel, D. (2017). Trial and error: How student affairs staff in community colleges learn to supervise. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice. 42*. 1-4. 10.1080/10668926.2017.1343690.

Lauterbach, A. A. (2018). Hermeneutic Phenomenological Interviewing: Going Beyond Semi-Structured Formats to Help Participants Revisit Experience. The Qualitative Report, 23(11), 2883-2898.

https://go.openathens.net/redirector/bc.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-

journals/hermeneutic-phenomenological-interviewing-going/docview/2155621343/se-2

Legal Information Institute [LII]. (n.d.). Undocumented immigrant. Cornell Law School.

https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/undocumented_immigrant

LePeau, L. A. (2018). Examining the experiences and characteristics of academic affairs and

student affairs leaders identifying as social gadflies. *Journal of Diversity in Higher

Education*, *11*(4), 402.

Lopez, M. (2005). Reflections on educating Latino and Latina undocumented children: Beyond

Plyler v. Doe. Seton Hall Law Review, 35(4), 1373-1406.

Lynch, R. J. & Glass, C. R. (2019). The Development of the Secondary Trauma in Student

Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP). Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice,

56(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2018.1474757

Mahler-Rogers, Dionicia (2017) "Higher education administrators' response to student activism

and protests," *Higher Education Politics & Economics*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

Marine, S. B. (2011). "Our college is changing": Women's college student affairs administrators

and transgender students. *Journal of homosexuality*, *58*(9), 1165-1186.

Margherio, C., Horner-Devine, M. C., Mizumori, S. J., & Yen, J. W. (2023). Connecting

counterspaces and community cultural wealth in a professional development program.

Race Ethnicity and Education, *26*(6), 772-792.

Marroquin, V. (2014). Latino mixed citizenship status families and access to higher education.

[Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Long Beach]. ProQuest Dissertations

Publishing. https://www-proquest-com.proxy.bc.edu/docview/2407993271?pq-

origsite=primo

Marshall, S. M., Gardner, M. M., Hughes, C., & Lowery, U. (2016). Attrition from student

    affairs: Perspectives from those who exited the profession. *Journal of Student Affairs*

    Research and Practice, *53*(2), 146-159.

Martinez Belmontes, A. (2020). Graduate student reflections on their undocumented experience:

    A qualitative study of the hardships experienced in higher education. [Master's thesis,

    California State University, Fresno]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www-

    proquest-com.proxy.bc.edu/docview/2532500187?pq-origsite=primo

Martinez-Benyarko, M., Espino, M. M., & Camarillo, N. (2022). They're my life advisory board:

    Latinx/a/o mid-level student affairs administrators' mentoring experiences. *Journal of*

    Student Affairs Research and Practice, *59*(4), 419-434.

Martinez Hoy, Z. R., & Nguyen, D. H. K. (2020). Compassion fatigue in student affairs

    practitioners working with undocumented college students. *College Student Affairs*

    Journal, *38*(2), 126-142.

Martinez Hoy, Z. R., & Nguyen, D. H. (2021). Higher education professionals navigating anti-

    immigration policy for undocumented students. *Educational Policy*, *35*(7), 1163-1190.

McEvoy, J. (2021, June 18). All the times Trump promised to repeal DACA.

    https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemimamcevoy/2020/06/18/all-the-times-trump-promised-

    to-repeal-daca/?sh=345cb199679a

McNamee, T. C. (2022). The cultural transition into and navigation of higher education for rural

    students from poor and working-class backgrounds. [Doctoral dissertation, Columbia

    University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

    https://www.proquest.com/docview/2741016401?_oafollow=false&accountid=9673&sou

    rcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses

Means, & Pyne, K. B. (2017). Finding my way: Perceptions of institutional support and

    belonging in low-income, first-generation, first-year college students. Journal of College

    Student Development, 58(6), 907–924. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0071

Midgley, G. (1991). The sacred and profane in critical systems thinking. In M.C. Jackson, G.J.,

    Mansell, R.L Flood., R.B. Blackham, & S.V.E. Probert (Eds.) Systems Thinking in

    Europe (pp. 397-398). Springer.

Midgley, G., Munlo, I., & Brown, M. (1998). The theory and practice of boundary critique:

    developing housing services for older people. *Journal of the Operational Research

    Society*, *49*(5), 467-478.

Midgley, G. (Ed.). (2003). *Systems thinking*. London: Sage.

Midgley, G. (1992). The sacred and profane in critical systems thinking. *Systems practice*, *5*, 5-

    16.

Migration Policy Institute. (2019a). Educational attainment among U.S.-born adults and all

    immigrant adults by country of birth in 2019.

    https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-

    immigration-united-states-2020#demographic-educational-linguistic

Migration Policy Institute. (2019b). Unauthorized immigrant populations by country and region,

    top states and counties of residence, 2019.

    https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/unauthorized-immigrant-

    populations-country-and-region-top-state-and-county

Miller, R. A., Wynn, R. D., Webb, K. W. (2019). "This really interesting juggling act": How

    university students manage disability/queer identity disclosure and visibility. Journal of

    Diversity in Higher Education, 12(4), 307–318. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000083

Modesto Junior College. (2019). *UndocuJoy: Shifting the perspective of undocumented*

    representation.

    https://www.mjc.edu/studentservices/undocumented/documents/undocujoy_yosimar_reye

    s_pfd.pdf

Moghaddam-Tabrizi, F., & Sodeify, R. (2021). Lived Experiences of Nurses in the Care of

    Patients with COVID-19: A Study of Hermeneutic Phenomenology. *Iranian journal of*

    nursing and midwifery research, *26*(6), 537–543.

    https://doi.org/10.4103/ijnmr.IJNMR_319_20

Montiel, G. I. (2016). Navigating the Ivy League: Funds of knowledge and social capital of

    undocumented Ivy League students. *Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy*, *28*, 64-79.

Moser, A., & Korstjens, I. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 3:

    Sampling, data collection and analysis. *European journal of general practice*, *24*(1), 9-

    18.

Moustakas, C. (1994). Phenomenological research methods. In Phenomenological research

    methods. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658

Montelongo Hernandez, Cesar. (2023). Dreams deferred: United States policies that shape

    undocumented immigrant youth. J*ournal of the National Hispanic Medical Association.*

    1, 51-57. 10.59867/NHMA0107.

Muñiz, R., & Borg, N. (2022). "Internationalization at home" in the United States: Enhancing

    admissions and enrollment practices for marginalized students during and after the

    COVID-19 pandemic. *STAR Scholar Books*, 39-50.

Muñiz, R., Woolsey, M., Keffer, S., & Barragán, S. (2023). A systematic review of critical

    systems thinking (cst) in the education field: Gaps and opportunities for systemic change

toward racial equity. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, *32*(3), 251-268.

> https://doi.org/10.1177/10567879231157372

Muñoz, S. M., & Vigil, D. (2018). Interrogating racist nativist microaggressions and campus

> climate: How undocumented and DACA college students experience institutional legal

> violence in Colorado. Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 11(4), 451-466.

> http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000078

National Immigration Law Center [NILC]. (2014, December). Frequently asked questions: The

> Affordable Care Act & mixed-status families. https://www.nilc.org/issues/health-

> care/aca_mixedstatusfams/

National Immigration Law Center [NILC]. (2022, January). Toolkit: Access to postsecondary

> education. https://www.nilc.org/issues/education/eduaccesstoolkit2a/#tables

National Student Clearing House (2023). Current term enrollment estimates.

> https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/

Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn

> from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, *8*, 90-97.

Nguyễn, D. H. K., & Martinez Hoy, Z. (2015). 'Jim Crowing'Plyler v. Doe: The Resegregation of

> Undocumented Students in American Higher Education Through Discriminatory State

> Tuition and Fee Legislation. *Cleveland State Law Review*, *63*(2).

Nienhusser, H. K., Reyna Rivarola, A. R., & Salazar, C. (2020). Association for the Study of

> Higher Education (ASHE) & ACPA: College student educators international joint

> response to the supreme court of the United States decision on the deferred action for

> childhood arrivals (DACA) program and position statement on undocumented college

> students.

https://www.ashe.ws/Files/Position%20Taking/ASHE%20&%20ACPA%20Response%2
0to%20SCOTUS%20DACA%20Decision%20and%20Position%20Statement%20on%20
Undocumented%20College%20Students.pdf

Nienhusser, H.K. (2018). Higher education institutional agents as policy implementers: The case
of policies that affect undocumented and DACAmented students. The Review of Higher
Education 41(3), 423-453. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2018.0014

Nigar, N. (2020). Hermeneutic phenomenological narrative enquiry: A qualitative study design.
Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 10(1), 10–18.
https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1001.02

Njoku, A., & Evans, M. (2022). Black women faculty and administrators navigating COVID-19,
social unrest, and academia: Challenges and strategies. *International Journal of
Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(4), 2220.

O'Sullivan, K., McGrane, A., Clark, S., & Marshall, K. (2020). Exploring the impact of home-
schooling on the psychological wellbeing of Irish families during the novel coronavirus
(COVID-19) pandemic: A qualitative study protocol. International Journal of Qualitative
Methods, 19, 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920980954

Olivares, V. (2022, March 3). UNT students protest Jeff Younger, conservative speech on
'transgender child abuse.' *The Dallas Morning News.*
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2022/03/03/unt-students-protest-
conservative-speech-on-transgender-child-abuse/

Owusu-Addo, S. B., Owusu-Addo, E., & Morhe, E. S. (2016). Health information-seeking
behaviours among pregnant teenagers in Ejisu-Juaben Municipality, Ghana. *Midwifery*,
41, 110-117.

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, *42*, 533-544.

Pham, H., & Van, P. H. (2019). Subfederal immigration regulation and the Trump effect. New York University Law Review, 94(1), 125-170.

Plascencia-Rodriguez, S. (2019, October 18). *Undocu-joy: Flipping the narrative on what it means to be undocumented*. Cal State University Signal. https://www.csusignal.com/la_letra_n/article_76db35d0-f1ca-11e9-aed6-b781de76c582.html

Price, M., & Mowry-Mora, I. (2020) DACA and the differentiated landscape for college access: Experiences from a new destination state. Geographical Review, 110(4), 437-456, https://doi.org/10.1080/00167428.2020.1773267

Pryor, J. T., & Hoffman, G. D. (2021). "It feels like diversity as usual": Navigating institutional politics as LGBTQ+ professionals. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *58*(1), 94-109.

Rajagopalan, R., & Midgley, G. (2015). Knowing differently in systemic intervention. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, *32*(5), 546-561.

Rascón-Canales, M., Navarro Benavides, V., Marquez, A., & Romero, A. (2023). "Trump can take away your status but he can't take away your education": a qualitative study of students in higher education following the DACA rescission announcement. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 1-13.

Raza, S. A. (2021). Managing ethical requirements elicitation of complex socio-technical systems with critical systems thinking: A case of course-timetabling project. *Technology in Society*, *66*, 101626.

Renn, K. A., & Hodges, J. (2007). The first year on the job: Experiences of new professionals in student affairs. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *44*(2), 604-628.

Rivarola, A. R. R. (2022). So, how exactly do I "bring my full self" to the profession?: Queer, Latino, and undocumented in student affairs. In *Queerness as Being in Higher Education* (pp. 71-79). Routledge.

Reyna Rivarola, A.R., Valdivia Ordorica, D., Bohórquez García, L., & Cisneros, J. (2022). Undocument immigrants and allies knowledge community: UndocuSAPro reflections on the DREAM Act. In NASPA Knowledge Community Publication Committee (Eds.), *2022 NASPA annual conference, March 19–23, 2022, Baltimore, MD, the annual knowledge community conference publication* (pp. 77-79). NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. https://www.naspa.org/files/dmfile/2022-NASPAKC-Final-Rev.pdf

Rich, S., Graham, M., Taket, A., & Shelley, J. (2013). Navigating the terrain of lived experience: The value of lifeworld existentials for reflective analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *12*(1), 498-510. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691301200125

Romero Morales, & Consoli, A. J. (2020). Mexican/Mexican-American siblings: The impact of undocumented status on the family, the sibling relationship, and the self. Journal of Latinx Psychology, 8(2), 112–126. https://doi.org/10.1037/lat0000133

Romm, N. (2002). A trusting constructivist view of systems thinking in the knowledge age. Systems Research and Behavior Science, 19, 455-467. https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.501

Rosas, R. O. (2020). "'Paradise...they make you feel at home': A case study on understanding the role of an Undocumented Student Resource Center and its influence on the college journey of undocumented students. [Doctoral dissertation, California State University - San Bernardino]. ScholarWorks. https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/966

Russell, F.S. (2024). Amplifying Black undocumented student voices in higher education (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003442998

Russell, F., & Cisneros, J. (2023). The (un)embraced: The experiences of Black undocumented students on college campuses. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000523

Russell, F. S., & Rivarola, A. R. R. (2023). What does it mean to be UndocuBlack? Exploring the double invisibility of Black undocumented immigrant students in US colleges and universities. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *2023*(203), 61-76.

Salcedo, N. R. (2020). "I know I can count on them": A program evaluation of an Undocumented Student Resource Center. [Doctoral dissertation, San Francisco State University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2448900508?pq-origsite=primo

Salmons, J. (2011). Designing and conducting research with online interviews. In *Cases in online interview research* (pp. 1–30). SAGE Publications, Incorporated. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506335155.n1

Sampaio, A., Fernández, J.S. (2023). Interrogating Vulnerability Within the University: A Case Study of Undocumented/DACAmented Students at a Jesuit Institution. In: Rivers, I., Lovin, C.L. (eds) Young People Shaping Democratic Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-29378-8_8

San Diego Mesa College. (2023). *Undocu joy celebration*.

    https://www.sdmesa.edu/calendar/index.php?eID=7152

Sanchez, R. S. (2020). Cultural wealth and the racialized experiences of persisting Latinx

    business students in a predominantly White institution: A study on sense of belonging.

    [Doctoral dissertation, Portland State University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

    https://www-proquest-com.proxy.bc.edu/docview/2424510034?pq-origsite=primo

Santa-Ramirez, S., & Hall, K. A. (2023). UndocuJoy as resistance: Beyond gloom and doom

    narratives of undocumented collegians. *Journal of College Student Development*, *64*(5),

    572-588.

Savarese, K. A. (2019). *Living in the liminal: A phenomenological study of the socialization*

    experience of midlevel managers in student affairs. [Doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State

    University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

    https://go.openathens.net/redirector/bc.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-

    theses/living-liminal-phenomenological-study/docview/2274520281/se-2

Schmalzbauer, L., & Andrés, A. (2019). Stratified lives: Family, illegality, and the rise of a new

    educational elite. Harvard Educational Review, 89(4), 635-660,700,702.

    https://go.openathens.net/redirector/bc.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-

    journals/stratified-lives-family-illegality-rise-new/docview/2331212668/se-

    2?accountid=9673

Schein, E. H. (1995). The role of the founder in creating organizational culture. *Family Business*

    Review, *8*(3), 221-238.

Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attacks on the United States Capitol. (n.d.).

    About. https://january6th.house.gov/about

Shelton, J. L. (2020). The role of institutional agents in supporting undocumented Latinx college

    students. Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 1–14.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2020.1825460

Shelton, L., & Hughart-Thomas, A. (2023). Undocumented college students: Sense of belonging

    from orientation, transition, and retention experiences. *Journal of College Orientation,*

    Transition, and Retention, *30*(2). Retrieved from

    https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/jcotr/article/view/4884

Shupp, M. R., & Arminio, J. L. (2012). Synergistic supervision: A confirmed key to retaining

    entry-level student affairs professionals. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and*

    Practice, *49*(2), 157-174.

Spencer, H. & Gay Stolberg, S. (2017, August 11). White nationalists march on University of

    Virginia. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/11/us/white-

    nationalists-rally-charlottesville-virginia.html

Stephens, A., Taket, A., & Gagliano, M. (2019). Ecological justice for nature in critical systems

    thinking. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, *36*(1), 3-19.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). Fostering effective connections between academic and student affairs at

    Historically Black Colleges and Universities: From "career pathways" to collaborative

    partnerships. *New Directions for Student Services*, *2019*(167), 37-47.

Streitwieser, B., Duffy-Jaeger, K., & Roche, J. (2020). Comparing the responses of US higher

    education institutions to international and undocumented students in the Trump era.

    Comparative Education Review, 64(3), 404–427. https://doi.org/10.1086/709427

Suri, H. (2011). Purposeful Sampling in Qualitative Research Synthesis. Qualitative Research

    Journal., 11(2), 63–75. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ1102063

Tachine, A. R., Cabrera, N. L., & Yellow Bird, E. (2017). Home away from home: Native

    American students' sense of belonging during their first year in college. The Journal of

    Higher Education (Columbus), 88(5), 785–807.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.1257322

Tapia-Fuselier, N. (2020). Benefits, obstacles, and limitations to the institutionalization of an

    Undocumented Student Resource Center: A call for inside/outside strategies of support

    [Doctoral dissertation, University of North Texas].

    https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1707246/m1/107/

Tapia-Fuselier, N. (2021). Enhancing institutional undocu-competence through establishing

    undocumented student resource centers: A student-encompassed approach. Journal of

    College Access 6(2), 132-145. https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol6/iss2/10/

Tapia-Fuselier, N. (2023). "We do it all": Understanding the experiences of undocumented

    student resource center professionals. *Innovative Higher Education*, *48*(3), 457-475.

Teranishi, R. T., Suárez-Orozco, C., & Suárez-Orozco. M. (2015). *In the shadows of the Ivory*

    Tower: Undocumented undergraduates in the uncertain era of immigration reform.

    Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education, UCLA.

The White House. (2021, July 17). Statement by President Joe Biden on DACA and Legislation

    for Dreamers. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-

    releases/2021/07/17/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-daca-and-legislation-for-

    dreamers/

The White House. (2023, April 13). FACT SHEET: Fact Sheet: President Biden Announces Plan

    to Expand Health Coverage to DACA Recipients. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-

room/statements-releases/2023/04/13/fact-sheet-fact-sheet-president-biden-announces-plan-to-expand-health-coverage-to-daca-recipients/

Tierney, W. G. (1998). *The responsive university: Restructuring for high performance*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2715 North Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21218-4319.

Tierney, W. G. (2008). Trust and organizational culture in higher education. In *Cultural Perspectives on Higher Education* (pp. 27-41). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Todoran, C., & Peterson, C. (2020). Should they stay or should they go? How the 2017 U.S. travel ban affects international doctoral students. Journal of Studies in International Education, 24(4), 440–455. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319861344

Torres-Cuello, M. A., Pinzón-Salcedo, L., & Midgley, G. (2018). Developing a Systemic Program Evaluation Methodology: A Critical Systems Perspective. Systems Research and Behavioral Science, 35(5), 538–547. https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.2561

Treviño, L. E. J., García, J., & Bybee, E. R. (2017). "The day that changed my life, again": The testimonio of a Latino DACAmented teacher. *The Urban Review*, *49*, 627-647.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS]. (n.d.). Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). https://www.uscis.gov/DACA

U.S. Department of Education College Scorecard (n.d.). University of North Texas. https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/school/?227216-University-of-North-Texas

Ulrich, W. (1984) Critical heuristics of social planning: A new approach to practical philosophy. Wiley.

Ulrich, W. (1988). Churchman's "process of unfolding" and its significance for policy analysis and evaluation. Systemic Practice and Action Research, 1(4), 415-428. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01066583

Ulrich, W. (2012) Operational research and critical systems thinking—an integrated perspective,

    Journal of the Operational Research Society, 63:9, 1228-1247, DOI:

    10.1057/jors.2011.141

UndocuProfessionals. (n.d.). *Undocumented professionals*. https://www.undocuprofessionals.net/

University of Arizona, (2022, March 16). *Elena Calderón was featured as a keynote speaker.*

    College of Education. https://coe.arizona.edu/news/2022/03/elena-calder%C3%B3n-was-

    featured-keynote-speaker

University of North Texas (n.d.). Tuition, costs and aid. https://www.unt.edu/admissions/tuition-

    costs-aid

Upadhyay, U. D., & Lipkovich, H. (2020). Using online technologies to improve diversity and

    inclusion in cognitive interviews with young people. BMC Medical Research

    Methodology, 20(1), 159–159. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-020-01024-9

Urcia, I. A. (2021). Comparisons of adaptations in grounded theory and phenomenology:

    Selecting the specific qualitative research methodology. *International Journal of*

    Qualitative Methods, *20*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211045474

van Manen, M. (1990). Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive

    pedagogy. State University of New York Press.

Vandermause, R. K. and Fleming, S. E. (2011) 'Philosophical hermeneutic interviewing',

    International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 10(4), 367–377. doi:

    10.1177/160940691101000405.

Vigil, D.; Muñoz, S.M. (2023). The influence of the Trump era on sustaining whiteness through

    imperialist reclamation on college campuses: How undocumented students experience the

normalization of racist nativism. Education Sciences, 13, 171-187.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13020171

Villarreal, C. D. (2022). Servingness in the Borderlands: A study of faculty hiring at a Hispanic-

serving institution on the border. *AERA Open*, *8*, 23328584221099597.

Wallace, J. K., & Ford, J. R. (2023). Returning home: Reflections on cultural capital cultivated

for Black men faculty through multicultural affairs work. *Journal of Diversity in Higher

Education*.

Watson, L. (2024, February 14). Anti-DEI efforts are the latest attack on racial equity and free

speech. *ACLU*. https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/anti-dei-efforts-are-the-latest-

attack-on-racial-equity-and-free-speech#:~:text=LGBTQ%20Rights-

,Anti%2DDEI%20Efforts%20Are%20the%20Latest%20Attack%20on%20Racial%20Eq

uity,foster%20racial%20equity%20and%20progress.

Weiser, S. G., Wagner, T. L. & Lawter, M. (2019). Double jeopardy: (Trans)versing higher ed as

queer trans advocates. Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy. 15(3). 323-339.

https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2018.1542359

Wertz, F. J. (2011). *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis: Phenomenological psychology,

grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research, and intuitive inquiry*. Guilford

Press.

Western Washington University (n.d.). *Undocu-Joy celebration*. Multicultural Student Services.

https://mss.wwu.edu/undocu-joy-celebration

Wilson, M. E., Liddell, D. L., Hirschy, A. S., & Pasquesi, K. (2016). Professional identity, career

commitment, and career entrenchment of midlevel student affairs professionals. *Journal

of College Student Development*, *57*(5), 557-572.

Wilson, M. E. (2000). Connection and transition: Influences of career mobility on the close friendships of women student affairs professionals. *Journal of College Student Development*, *41*(5), 529.

Wit, B. D., Meyer, R. (2005). *Strategy synthesis: Resolving strategy paradoxes to create competitive advantage text and readings* (2nd ed.). Thomson Learning

Woodgate R. L., Comaskey B., Tennent P., Wener P., Altman G. (2020). The wicked problem of stigma for youth living with anxiety. *Qualitative Health Research*. *30*(10):1491-1502. doi:10.1177/1049732320916460

Woodgate, R. L., Comaskey, B. & Tennent, P. (2021). Muddy waters: Parents' perspectives on the bullying experiences of youth living with anxiety. *Child Youth Care Forum, 50*, 527–545. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-020-09588-9

Woodley, X. & Lockard, M. (2016). Womanism and snowball sampling: Engaging marginalized populations in holistic research. Qualitative Report, 21(2), 321. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2198

Yosso, T. J. (2005) Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. Race Ethnicity and Education, 8(1), 69-91. https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006

Zschomler, S. (2019). 'Language Is Your Dignity': Migration, Linguistic Capital, and the Experience of Re/De-Valuation. Languages, 4(3), 64. MDPI AG. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/languages4030064

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear [Insert Name],

My name is Natalie Borg, and I am currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Boston College Lynch School for Education and Human Development. **For my dissertation, I am conducting a research study regarding how the professional staff of Undocumented Student Resource Centers experience their work.** I intend to conduct three rounds of individual interviews with participants so that I can develop an in-depth understanding of their experience in their work, what strengths they bring to their work, and how they encounter systemic factors. Each interview will be conducted remotely. Interviewees will receive a gift card worth $50 as compensation for their participation.

Participation is strictly voluntary and participants may withdraw from the project at any time for any reason. The identity of all participants will remain anonymous and confidentiality will be strictly enforced at all times. **Attached** you will find the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) letter, approving the study. **If you wish to participate in this study, please complete <u>this survey</u>.**

I would like to thank you in advance for your time and attention. I look forward to your response. You can also reach my chair, Dr. Heather Rowan-Kenyon, Ph.D. at heather.rowan-kenyon@bc.edu with any questions, comments, or concerns you may have.

V/r

Natalie Borg, M.Ed.
Ph.D. Candidate | Higher Education
Lynch School of Education
Boston College

Appendix B: Preliminary Screening Survey

1. What is your last name? *
2. What is your first name? *
3. What is your professional title?
4. How long have you worked in your current role?
5. How would you describe your current role? *
    a. Graduate Assistantship
    b. Professional Employee
    c. Part-Time Employee
6. Are you currently enrolled in one or more academic programs?
    a. If yes, what is/are the type of program/s you are currently enrolled in?
        i. Master's Degree
            1. Type: M.A., M.S.W., M.Ed., M.B.A.
            2. Focus: _____
        ii. Doctoral Degree
            1. Ph.D. with a focus in _____
            2. Ed. D. with a focus in _____
        iii. J.D.
            1. With a focus in _____
        iv. Other: Please describe
7. What is the name of your office?
8. What type of institution do you work for? *
    a. 2-year public
    b. 2 year private not-for-profit
    c. 4-year public
    d. 4 year private not-for-profit
9. What institution do you work for?
10. In what state or territory is your institution located? *
    a. [Drop down of the states and territories]
11. Would you be willing to be contacted to participate in three remote interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes? *
    a. Yes
    b. No
12. What is the email address where you would like to receive information about this research? *

    *Required to answer

Appendix C: Interview Protocols

Protocol, First Interview:

Introduction

Hi, thanks for sharing your time with me today. My name is Natalie Borg, and I am doctoral candidate at Boston College. I'm currently pursuing my Ph.D. in higher education, and I am working on my dissertation titled "Serving Legally Marginalized Students via Identity-Centered Student Services: Undocumented Student Resource Centers and Their Professional Employees." The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of the professional employees at USRCs. I invited you to participate in this study because of your role at a USRC.

Did you get a copy of the IRB after you completed the screening survey?

[If no, provide them with another copy before moving forward]

Your participation in this research is 100% voluntary and you can withdraw consent at any point in this process. You could do this before, during, or after the data collection process. If you decide to withdraw your consent, you will not face any penalties or negative repercussions from me or Boston College. You are also welcome to pause our interview at any point, or skip any questions at any point, no explanations needed.

Protecting your privacy is incredibly important to me. Are you okay if I take an audio-recording of our conversation? I will use this recording to create an accurate transcription of our conversation, which will help me with data analysis. The IRB form details the specific steps I will take to secure the recording and your privacy.

Please let me know if you have an alias or pseudonym that you would like me to use over the course of this project. You are welcome to change this alias at any point during the process. Do you have any questions or concerns that I can address at this point?

As we move forward, please feel free to stop me at any point if you have any questions or Concerns.

The plan today is to spend about 45 minutes together in conversation about your lived experiences as a professional employee at a USRC. Please ask questions at any point during our conversation and reach out afterwards if you have any questions or thoughts.

Once we finish today, I will send you a digital VISA gift card for $20. You will receive this gift card even if you decide to withdraw consent.

The last thing we will do is schedule your second interview.

What questions do you have before we begin?

Thank you!

Are you okay if I begin the audio recording? [ONLY if they consent to be audio recorded]

Interview Questions
1. How are you?
2. I have some information from your survey, could you let me know if I understood you correctly?
   a. Based on your survey, I see that your job title is _____ and that you work in an office called _____. Is that correct?
   b. It looks like you have worked there for _____ months/years. Is this correct?
3. When you think about your experience, does it feel like that much time has passed?
4. Can you tell me about your decision to apply for this job?
   a. Did you have any connections to this office or institution beforehand?
5. What was the application process like?
6. Were there people in your life that influenced your journey to this role?
   a. Have you been able to share this experience with them? How has that felt?
   b. How are you connected with them?
7. Does your office have a mission?
   a. If so, what is it?
   b. How do you communicate it, and to whom?
   c. How do you employ your mission?
8. What is your physical office environment like?
   a. Where in this space do you do your work?
      i. What is in your field of vision?
   b. What is it like to be in that space, doing the work?
   c. What aspects of this space are meaningful to your work?
   d. Does this office have what you need to perform your job successfully?
9. How do you physically feel when you are working in this space?
   a. Does this experience change depending on who is in the space or how the space is being used?
10. How do other people seem to react to this space?
    a. How do you feel about their response?
11. What else do you think I should know about your journey to this role and your experience in this space?

Closing Remarks
That's all that I have for now. Thank you for sharing with me today!

Before we leave, could we schedule our next conversation?

If you think of anything that might be relevant between now and our next conversation, please feel free to email me. I'm happy to find another time for us to chat, or to receive your thoughts in written form, audio message, or whatever is comfortable for you.

I am sending you your digital VISA gift card as soon as we hop off this call. Please email me if it doesn't come through within half an hour.

Protocol, Second Interview:

Introduction

Hi, it's nice to see you again!

> [If they consented to being audio recorded]
>
> Do you have any questions or topics you would like to talk about before I begin the audio recording?
>
> [If they did not consent to being audio recorded]
>
> Do you have any questions or topics you would like to talk about before we begin?

As a reminder, your participation in this research is 100% voluntary and you can withdraw consent at any point in this process. You could do this before, during, or after the data collection process. If you decide to withdraw your consent, you will not face any penalties or negative repercussions from me or Boston College. You are also welcome to pause our interview at any point, or skip any questions at any point, no explanations needed.

As we move forward, please feel free to stop me at any point if you have any questions or concerns.

The plan today is to spend about 45 minutes together in conversation about your lived experiences as a professional employee at a USRC. Please ask questions at any point during our conversation and reach out afterwards if you have any questions or thoughts.

Once we finish today, I will send you a digital VISA gift card for $20. You will receive this gift card even if you decide to withdraw consent.

The last thing we will do is schedule your third interview.

What questions do you have before we begin?

Thank you!

Are you okay if I begin the audio recording? [ONLY if they consent to be audio recorded]

Interview Questions

1. Here are some reflections I have from our first conversation, could we talk about them to see if I am understanding your experience as you described?
    a. [Space and time for co-constitution]

2. Thinking about the experiences in your life that make you who you are (professional, academic, personal, or otherwise) what strengths do you bring with you into this work?
   a. How do you feel when you use these strengths in your work?
   b. How do you feel like the people you work with respond to these strengths?
3. Thinking about your experience in this job, are there any strengths that you have that you want to employ?
   a. If there are, why have you been unable to employ these strengths so far?
   b. How does that feel?
4. What role do you play in decision-making processes that relate to your responsibilities?
   a. How are others involved in those processes?
   b. What is your relationship with these other people?
   c. Who do you believe should be involved in the decision-making process that relates to your responsibilities?
5. What role does power play in your work?
   a. Think about a time when power intersected with your work, what was that experience like?
   b. Can you remember how you physically felt at that moment?
   c. How were your relationships impacted by that experience?
   d. Who should have power in this office?
6. What roles does bureaucracy play in your work?
   a. Think about a time when bureaucracy intersected with your work, what was that experience like?
   b. Can you remember how you physically felt at that moment?
   c. How were your relationships impacted by that experience?
   d. What role should bureaucracy play in this office?
7. What does someone in your role need to know about power and bureaucracy to excel in this work?
8. What else do you think I should know about what you bring to your work and how external influences impact your experience?

Closing Remarks
That's all that I have for now. Thank you for sharing with me today!

Before we leave, could we schedule our next conversation?

If you think of anything that might be relevant between now and our third and final conversation, please feel free to email me. I'm happy to find another time for us to chat, or to receive your thoughts in written form, audio message, or whatever is comfortable for you.

I am sending you your digital VISA gift card as soon as we hop off this call. Please email me if it doesn't come through within half an hour.

Protocol: Third Interview

Introduction

Hi, it's nice to see you again!

[If they consented to being audio recorded]

Do you have any questions or topics you would like to talk about before I begin the audio recording?

[If they did not consent to being audio recorded]

Do you have any questions or topics you would like to talk about before we begin?

As a reminder, your participation in this research is 100% voluntary and you can withdraw consent at any point in this process. You could do this before, during, or after the data collection process. If you decide to withdraw your consent, you will not face any penalties or negative repercussions from me or Boston College. You are also welcome to pause our interview at any point, or skip any questions at any point, no explanations needed.

As we move forward, please feel free to stop me at any point if you have any questions or concerns.

The plan today is to spend about 45 minutes together in conversation about your lived experiences as a professional employee at a USRC. Please ask questions at any point during our conversation and reach out afterwards if you have any questions or thoughts.

Once we finish today, I will send you a digital VISA gift card for $20. You will receive this gift card even if you decide to withdraw consent.

The last thing we will do is talk about the next steps.

What questions do you have before we begin?

Thank you!

Are you okay if I begin the audio recording? [ONLY if they consent to be audio recorded]

Interview Questions

1. Here are some reflections I have from our first and second conversations, could we talk about them to see if I am understanding your experience as you described?
   a. [Space and time for co-constitution]
2. Who are the stakeholders related to your work?
   a. How do you communicate with them?
      i.   Is there variance in how you communicate, depending on your audience?
   b. How did you establish relationships with your stakeholders?
3. Who are the formal leaders in your office?
   a. What is expected of them?
   b. How have those expectations changed over time?

4. Who are the informal leaders in your office?
    a. What is expected of these informal leaders?
    b. What is your relationship with them?
5. What information do you collect in your role?
6. What information do you distribute in your role?
7. What does someone need to know to be successful in this role?
8. What else do you think I should know about how you experience your work?

Closing Remarks

That's all that I have for now. Thank you for sharing with me today!

Before we leave, what questions or concerns do you have at this point?

If you think of anything that might be relevant after we disconnect, please feel free to email me. I'm happy to find another time for us to chat, or to receive your thoughts in written form, audio message, or whatever is comfortable for you.

Once we end our call today, I will dig into my data analysis process and begin writing up my findings. My plan is to complete this research over the next few months so I can defend my dissertation in March of 2024. My door is open to you at any point between now and then if you have questions or concerns about my process and the final product. My door remains open to you after I defend, and I will update you if my contact information changes after I defend my Dissertation.

I'm sending you your digital VISA gift card as soon as we hop off this call. Please email me if it doesn't come through within half an hour.

Appendix D: Details of Participant Interviews

Participant	Interview Format	Date	Length (min)
Karol	Zoom	October 20th, 2023	64

	In-Person	October 27th, 2023	108
	Zoom	November 9th, 2023	58
Alex	Zoom	October 19th, 2023	57
	In-Person	October 23rd, 2023	74
	Zoom	January 22nd, 2024	37
K	Zoom	October 24h, 2023	47
	In-Person	October 30th, 2023	70
	Zoom	December 14th, 2023	66
Mayra	Zoom	December 19th, 2023	61
	Zoom	January 3rd, 2024	55
	Zoom	January 8th, 2024	75
Evangelina	Zoom	December 20th, 2023	79
	Zoom	January 4th, 2024	64
	Zoom	January 5th, 2024	55
María Elena	Zoom	January 8th, 2024	76
	Zoom	January 11th, 2024	60
	Zoom	January 16th, 2024	91
RiRi	Zoom	January 11th, 2024	40
	Zoom	January 18th, 2024	53
	Zoom	January 19th, 2024	46