

# *“Because We Feel the Pressure and We Also Feel the Support”: Examining the Educational Success of Undocumented Immigrant Latina/o Students*

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*Drawing from the educational experiences of fifty-four undocumented immigrant college students, Laura E. Enriquez seeks to uncover the concrete ways in which social capital is used to successfully navigate K–12 educational institutions and pursue a higher education. Enriquez argues that there is a need for a more grounded understanding of how marginalized individuals develop and use social capital. She finds that undocumented immigrant students receive emotional and financial support from multiple actors, including family members, peers, and teachers. Yet undocumented students require informational resources specific to their legal status, which tend to be provided by other undocumented students rather than by traditional institutional agents. Looking specifically at how these students utilize their social capital, Enriquez shows that undocumented immigrant students participate in patchworking, the haphazard piecing together of various resources, in order to achieve their educational goals. Additionally, their use of social capital is not dictated by expectations of direct reciprocity but, rather, by a more collectivist framework of empowerment. Ultimately, the findings from this study suggest that reconceptualizing one’s social network as a “family” more aptly captures the nature of undocumented immigrant students’ social capital while also providing an opportunity to empower marginalized communities.*

I enrolled myself [in Community College].  
I learned how to do it and without the help of anybody . . .  
I have to take care of my own things and not let  
somebody else do the work that I have to do.

—Miguel Romero, *California State University senior*

*Harvard Educational Review* Vol. 81 No. 3 Fall 2011  
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Because at some point you can't really say,  
"Oh I did this by myself." There's always somebody  
who you ask for help, at least one person in your life.

—*Alberto Romero, California State University senior*

Immigrant success stories are often framed in individualistic terms because popular myths, like the American Dream, promote ideals of meritocracy and self-reliance (McNamee & Miller, 2009). As a result, mainstream society tends to value discourses of individual achievement, in which a person is assumed to have been independently successful. Like Miguel, the undocumented immigrant students I interviewed sometimes incorporated these individualistic discourses into the recounting of their educational journeys. However, as Miguel's older brother Alberto aptly explains, success is never a wholly independent endeavor. In fact, I found that while some of the students in my study felt that they tread their educational paths alone, they were all helped by others at some point in their journey. It was partly through forms of social capital like this that each was able to successfully complete high school and attend college.

While only a small percentage of undocumented immigrant youth graduate from high school and even fewer go on to pursue a higher education, I examine the educational paths of undocumented Latina/o college students who were among this group in order to assess how their successful K–12 educational experiences can be reproduced for other undocumented immigrant students. I find that their educational successes are related to their ability to develop and utilize social capital in order to secure the resources needed to navigate the educational pipeline.

To begin, I review the literature on social capital and undocumented immigrant students and suggest that work on social capital in education needs to include a more grounded approach to examining how it is created, used, and strengthened by marginalized youth. Next, I explore the resources provided by undocumented immigrant students' support networks and investigate the ways in which undocumented immigrant students utilize these networks as social capital. Through this analysis, I demonstrate that these underresourced individuals patch together the resources provided by their social networks in order to meet their objectives of college attendance. Building on the social capital literature, I find that their use of social capital is not governed by rules of direct reciprocity but by a collectivist understanding of indirect reciprocity, where resources and support are expected to be paid forward out of solidarity and commitment to community empowerment and social justice. Finally, I discuss how some undocumented immigrant students are framing their social networks as families in order to capture the true impact that others have had on their lives. I argue that this envisioning of social networks as "families" generates an opportunity to empower marginalized youth and communities to defy cultural deficiency models that blame families, rather than institutions of social inequality, for the underachievement of marginalized youth.

## Exploring Social Capital Theory in Education

A growing body of literature utilizes a social capital framework to assess educational experiences and success (Dika & Singh, 2002). Bourdieu (1986) theorized that all forms of capital are related. Social capital (e.g., relationships with teachers, peers, or family members), therefore, can be used to access economic or cultural capital (e.g., resources like advice, institutional knowledge, or academic skills), which can then be harnessed to generate human capital (e.g., educational success and credentials). Coleman (1988) claims that developing social capital requires high-density networks, a level of trust, expectations of reciprocity, and norms and sanctions that promote the common good over the individual good. Furthermore, without these structural characteristics, networks cannot function effectively. In sum, social capital theory suggests that most social associations can be turned into sources of social capital when both individuals expect to benefit from the sharing of resources and believe they can trust the individual to reciprocate directly. Alternatively, reciprocity has also been conceptualized as indirect or generalized, where one individual provides a resource to another with the expectation that the favor will be passed on and eventually returned to them by a third party (Levi-Strauss, 1969). Glanville and Bienenstock (2009) argue that this type of reciprocity leads to a higher prevalence of group solidarity and is enforced through the fairly closed nature of social networks. However, the empirical literature regarding the use of social capital in educational contexts does not explicitly establish how (or if) reciprocity is established in hierarchical institutional relationships like those between students and teachers or school officials.

Exploring the drawbacks of social capital, Stanton-Salazar (1997) and Conchas (2006) demonstrate that structural systems of inequality limit an individual's ability to develop social networks outside of the family and find sources of institutional support and knowledge. Resource-poor networks are said to be restricted in access, influence, and resource variety when compared to resource-rich networks, which are characterized by a large quantity of heterogeneous resources that have influence in multiple social institutions (Lareau, 2003; Lin, 2001). In addition, social networks are exclusive, demand conformity, and exert downward-leveling pressures, which often preclude the participation of marginalized individuals (Portes & Landolt, 1996). Although marginal groups, like immigrant youth, who have less access to social capital actually reap greater rewards from what little social capital they have (Kao & Rutherford, 2007), social capital cannot be a panacea for inequality because access to it is controlled by the same forces that promote social inequality in the first place.

Because educational institutions value forms of social and cultural capital that reflect hegemonic power hierarchies, they privilege those who conform to White, upper-class, male cultural norms. As a result, educational encouragement, resources, and high expectations are doled out to those who can appeal to dominant discourses of educational success and have been placed in

more advanced educational tracks or programs (Conchas, 2006; Oakes, 2005). More often than not, this marginalizes women, low-income individuals, and people of color because of their limited access to traditional forms of cultural and social capital. Examining the perceived "lack" of capital in immigrant and second-generation students, Valenzuela (1999) finds that "subtractive schooling" policies devalue alternative forms of capital (e.g., bilingualism, cultural identities), which leads to students being punished for not having school-sanctioned forms of economic, social, and cultural capital. Similar subtractive policies also devalue the social and cultural capital of low-income and working-class White and Black students (Lareau, 2003). Attempting to counter this deficit perspective, Yosso (2006) redefines social capital as "community cultural wealth" or culturally based strengths that have typically been devalued by assimilationist education policies. These alternative forms of capital turn past inequalities into strengths that can be used by minority individuals to persist and succeed within hegemonic social institutions.

For the most part, studies on the role of social capital in promoting educational success have emphasized that the family is a student's primary source of social capital. Studies have consistently found that educational attainment is positively associated with family structure, family discussions, parental influence and expectations, parental cultural capital, parent-school involvement, and parental monitoring of youth (de Graaf, de Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000; Dyk & Wilson, 1999; Lareau, 2003). While cultural deficiency theories have been used to blame Latina/o immigrant families for the educational underachievement of their youth, immigrant parents and communities have been found to transmit stronger educational values through familialism and the collective social capital of the ethnic community (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). In addition, Suárez-Orozco (1989) argues that immigrant parents also relay a "dual frame of reference" where they draw comparisons between life in the country of origin and life in the United States in order to encourage their children to value and take advantage of educational opportunities.

While the family is a key institution for socialization and resource gathering, youth, especially high school-aged adolescents, participate in multiple institutions, forging social ties with teachers, school officials, peers, community members, employers, coworkers, and individuals from religious, social service, and government agencies (Ianni, 1989). Specifically, teachers and school officials can provide access to institutional resources and academic opportunities, and encourage educational persistence (Cronigner & Lee, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). However, working-class, Latina/o, male, and immigrant students often face negative educational stereotypes that limit opportunities for positive relationships with teachers and prevent them from seeking support or advice (Kao & Rutherford, 2007; Lopez, 2003). Similarly, positive peer relationships have been found to provide institutional knowledge, build support networks, and increase educational performance (Conchas,

2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). While homogeneous peer networks may function well for capital-rich groups like upper-middle-class individuals, Whites, and East Asian immigrants, they are less helpful for underresourced groups like working-class individuals, Blacks, and Latinas/os (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Additionally, social networks with caring and supportive teachers, peers, and school officials can be institutionally produced through academic programs that serve to integrate students, build community, provide access to educational opportunities and institutional knowledge, and foster positive student identities and peer groups (Conchas, 2006; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996). While marginalized students may be able to find and access these supportive educational environments, institutionally structured social networks are rare, affect only small groups of students, and can have limited effects. Most marginalized students are thus left to forge their own social ties and networks.

Although there has been a significant amount of empirical work examining the roles various social actors play in the social networks and educational achievements of adolescents, most study these sets of actors in isolation. While some, like Stanton-Salazar (2010) and Croninger and Lee (2001), acknowledge that there are multiple social actors at work in these networks, they do not examine the ways in which social ties from various types of actors (e.g., peers, parents, extended family, teachers, school officials) are pulled together and mobilized to achieve educational success.

Although there has been some discussion in the literature regarding the structure of social networks, it has focused mainly on resource-rich networks. The term *cosmopolitan networks* has been developed to describe the social capital of upper-middle-class individuals who are able to construct diverse relationships with a variety of high-status institutional agents who also have their own rich, dense networks (Kanter, 1995). In addition, Lin (2001) describes network brokers, or "bridges," who are members of multiple networks and therefore are able to access multiple resources and construct dense social capital. While these terms seem to capture the structure of social capital, they inherently assume that the individual is resource-rich and is in the presence of or can be incorporated into multiple networks. Attempting to understand how underresourced individuals and communities structure and mobilize their social capital, I turn to the literature on adult immigrant incorporation. Specifically, Menjívar (2000) demonstrates that underresourced adults have a hard time accessing and utilizing social capital because there are few to no resources with which to build up social ties and participate in expectations of direct reciprocity. As a result, these underresourced adults practice *patchworking*, where they piece together their widespread yet uneven and unpredictable social ties in order to build up the resources they need to achieve their objectives (Kibria, 1993; Menjívar, 2000). Building on this idea, I argue that underresourced, undocumented Latina/o immigrant youth also practice patchworking, where they piece together limited resources from various sources in order

to generate the networks and social capital that they require to facilitate their educational persistence and success and to meet all of their various financial, emotional, educational, and informational needs.

### The Case of Undocumented Youth

There are an estimated 12 million undocumented individuals in the United States, 81 percent of whom are from Mexico and Central and South America (Passel & Cohn, 2009). One and a half million of these individuals are undocumented children under the age of eighteen who have been guaranteed access to a K-12 education through the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982). As a result, an estimated 65,000 undocumented youth across the nation graduate from high school each year, and a little over 700,000 undocumented young adults aged eighteen to thirty-four have at least a high school diploma or equivalent (Batalova & McHugh, 2010; Gonzales, 2007). However, only an estimated 5-10 percent pursue a higher education; the vast majority of others are prevented from doing so due to institutional, legal, and financial barriers (Gonzales, 2007). As a growing and increasingly marginalized population, it is critical that we study the educational experiences of these undocumented immigrant youth so as to increase their educational success and social incorporation and to set them on a path to legalization.<sup>1</sup> Facilitating educational success is a means of empowering individuals, families, and communities so that they can challenge and disrupt the social forces that marginalize them. If large numbers of undocumented youth continue to find it impossible to finish high school or pursue a higher education, society will be confronted with a growing number of youth who are unable to pursue their dreams, support their families, and give back to their communities and country. Ignoring undocumented immigrant youth will only contribute to their further social and economic marginalization and the continued reproduction of a second-class citizenry.

In California, Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540), enacted in 2002, granted these undocumented youth access to in-state tuition rates for public institutions of higher education. This benefit was afforded to all students who had attended a California high school for at least three years, received a high school diploma or equivalent, enrolled at a state institution of higher education, and signed an affidavit stating that the individual will apply for legal residency if given the opportunity.<sup>2</sup> In 2006, there were an estimated 1,630 undocumented AB 540 students enrolled in California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) institutions and approximately 5,000 attending California Community Colleges (California Senate Appropriations Committee, 2006; Gonzales, 2007). However, even if these academically talented students are able to persist long enough to obtain a college education, they do not have a way to utilize their college degrees within U.S. borders because they cannot legally work (Perez, 2009).

Having grown up in the United States and completed a significant amount of their education in U.S. institutions, undocumented immigrant youth are practically indistinguishable from their documented and citizen peers (Abrego, 2006; Perez, 2009). They perform as substantive members of American society by participating in educational institutions, getting good grades, and being civically engaged (Perry, 2006). However, a closer look at the high school experiences of undocumented immigrant youth reveals that legal status creates an undocumented student experience defined by unequal access to higher education, limited educational resources and opportunities, and uncertain futures (Huber & Malagon, 2007). While both undocumented students and their parents value education, financial barriers and legal contradictions often lead to lower educational aspirations and attainment (Abrego, 2006; Flores, 2010). In fact, many undocumented high school students lose hope and give up on their education during their junior and senior years when they realize the institutional and financial barriers that will prevent them from pursuing college (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Gonzales (2010) finds that K–12 educational institutions structure academic opportunities and access to institutional and social support so that only a small number of undocumented students are able to access the institutional knowledge, financial resources, and social support that they need to graduate and pursue higher education. The select few who matriculate into college continue to fight for access to the academic, financial, and emotional resources and support they need to persist, and they often suffer from depression, loneliness, and a lack of financial support (Huber & Malagon, 2007).

### Data and Methods

This article draws from three rounds of interviews conducted between 2007 and 2010 for separate projects; the first focused on the educational experiences of undocumented Latina/o students, the second on their political participation and activism, and the third on the intersection of racialization and legal status in the experiences of Latina/o and Asian Pacific Islander undocumented students. Despite these different objectives, each round of data collection consistently collected data on K–12 educational experiences and pathways to college by asking the same set of educational history questions. During these one- to three-hour, semistructured interviews, I collected detailed information about students' relationships with teachers, school officials, and peers; the educational messages they received; the types of classes and activities they participated in; their decision to go to college; the college application process; and the various ways in which their undocumented immigrant status affected these experiences. It is from the shared portion of all these interviews that I drew my analysis. I audio recorded and transcribed all the interviews. The transcripts were fully coded to locate themes that emerged from the data. Main emerging themes, which contributed to this article, included institutional knowledge,

cultural capital, social capital, support (subcoded as school officials, teachers, peers, parents, siblings, friends), curriculum, resources, programs (subcoded as academic, extracurricular, and community), and effect of legal status.

In total I interviewed fifty-four undocumented Latina/o college students living in the greater Los Angeles area. Using my prior contacts, I recruited respondents from nine college campuses across Southern California by making presentations to undocumented student organizations and e-mailing through their listservs. I make no claims of representative sampling, considering that I drew most of my respondents from undocumented student organizations; however, I did conduct snowball sampling in attempts to reach those who had discontinued their involvement or were taking time off from school. In total, I interviewed six community college students, twenty-four UC students, and twenty-four CSU students. A little more than half of the UC and CSU students had attended a community college before transferring. With the exception of some siblings, none of the participants had attended the same high school. While a majority of my undocumented participants were of Mexican origin, four were from Peru and one each from Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. The gender breakdown was fairly equitable, with a total of thirty-one women and twenty-three men. Their ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-nine, with a majority of participants being in their early twenties. Most importantly, there were a variety of educational paths represented, as their K-12 educational experiences varied in amount of U.S. schooling, type and composition of high school attended, enrollment in college access programs, and access to institutional resources. Most had access to at least one AP or honors class, which structurally positioned them to be able to build positive social capital (Gonzales, 2010).

Having worked with undocumented students as a mentor, teacher, and activist for the past five years, I have been able to build strong ties within the undocumented student community and develop a nuanced understanding of their experiences. As a citizen, I was and am aware of my privileged positionality in conducting and writing this research, as well as of my insider status as a Latina and ally within the DREAM Act and immigrant rights movements. Occupying this insider-outsider status, I actively worked to recognize its effects on my observations, the ways the individuals may have responded to me, and the manner in which I analyzed and wrote up my research. I did this by privileging the experiences of undocumented students, giving them the power to define their own experiences through semistructured interviews, and using open coding analysis.

### Components of Undocumented Latina/o Youths' Support Networks

In contrast to what the literature predicts, undocumented Latina/o students in this study form supportive social networks that resemble those of their documented and citizen peers. According to the literature, these students' marginal



social status as Latina/o, undocumented, and low-income individuals predicts that institutional structures will limit their access to institutional actors; however, I find that they are able to obtain emotional, financial, and informational resources from various social actors, primarily their family members, teachers, and peers. While the literature on social capital and networks generally focuses on the roles of social actors, I organize my analysis by resource type in order to highlight the fact that these resources come from various social actors and not necessarily from where they are traditionally expected. Although I discuss the three types of resources separately, it is important to remember that these are complex and dynamic categories that can interact with one another to produce each individual's support network.

### *Emotional Resources*

Educational success is often attributed to parental expectations of academic achievement and their participation in educational activities (Lareau, 2003). For Latina/o families, cultural deficiency models are often used to blame families for the low achievement levels of Latina/o youth (Gonzalez, 1990; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Most of my respondents, however, cited family as their primary form of emotional support, as they provided sympathy, encouragement, and motivation.

The majority of my respondents attributed their educational persistence to their families' educational expectations and messages. While the literature generally suggests educated family members are better providers of emotional and informational support, I find that the majority of family members had minimal educational experience yet still passed on encouraging educational messages despite, or rather because of, their own limited educational opportunities. Edith, a twenty-four-year-old CSU senior, explained her parents' rationale for their positive messages: "I guess they realized that they did miss out on something. And it's not really because they wanted to quit school, it's because the situations that they were living [in] didn't really give them the opportunity." Similarly, some interviewees noted that older siblings sent encouraging messages. Sofia, a twenty-year-old CSU junior, explained that her brothers, who did not attend college, often speak of her and her college attendance with pride, and that is what keeps her motivated. Throughout most of the interviews, individuals noted that parents and older siblings frequently provided positive educational messages regardless of their own education levels.

While the family was often the focal point credited with providing emotional support, my respondents drew a distinct line between support at home and support at school. In general, this seemed to result from the highly negative institutional barriers and experiences that they faced at school on a daily basis. For example, Sofia drew a distinction, arguing that while family support was important, they are "not here [school]. So then the people who are here, my friends, keep me going." All together, it appeared as if friends were able to provide social capital both in the classroom and while future educational

plans were being made. Most often they offered a direct source of social capital that sustained individuals during marginalizing institutional experiences and helped them successfully navigate their K–12 education and find a path to college. Despite the critical support provided by peers, these ties could break easily as students were faced with institutional barriers, like changing schools, being tracked into different programs, or encountering negative messages from parents, teachers, or other peers.

Negative interactions at school, however, are fueled by teachers' raced, classed, and gendered perceptions of students' ability and willingness to succeed; this makes it harder for undocumented, Latina/o, low-income, and male students to secure the emotional support and encouragement of teachers (Lopez, 2003; Lareau, 2003). However, most of my respondents noted the critical role of supportive teachers who encouraged them to take more challenging classes, talked to them about their lives outside of school, and promoted a college-going atmosphere. Yet, they also recognized that they were among the select few within the broader marginalized student population who had positive relationships with teachers. For example, Sofia drew a connection between teacher support and dropout behavior:

A lot of the people who do drop out . . . who are undocumented and are the [racial] minorities, they do it because they face teachers who . . . don't believe in them. So when you find those [encouraging teachers], like I have, they're a big part of keeping you in school.

Clearly, teacher support can have a definitive effect on the educational success of students, especially undocumented students who are more prone to dropping out because of increased institutional barriers to higher education (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2010).

### *Financial Resources*

Similar to emotional support, financial support is provided to undocumented Latina/o students by multiple sources. While emotionally supportive networks were able to sustain my respondents throughout their educational careers and encouraged them to subscribe to a college-going agenda, their dreams of attending college were often challenged during their junior and senior years as they began to apply for college. During these years, financial support networks were critical to students as they filled out applications, paid fees, and weighed tuition costs.

Family income is one of the main sources of financial support for middle-class students; meanwhile, low-income citizen students are able to supplement family resources with fee waivers and financial aid. Undocumented high school students in this study, however, seldom received financial resources from their family. A few had parents or extended family members who were more financially stable and could afford to help them. In these cases, family members tended to be permanent residents who had access to higher-paying or more

stable jobs. But most study participants responded as Samantha, a twenty-five-year-old UC senior, did when I asked if she ever received financial help from her family: "Rarely . . . I stopped thinking they could help a long time ago . . . I never even thought of asking them." Citing their families' lack of financial resources, most of my respondents knew that there were no resources to pay for application fees, let alone tuition once they got accepted.

Due to limited financial resources among family members, most of my respondents turned to others who had been emotionally supportive of them and their education in the past in order to secure financial resources. Yazmine, a nineteen-year-old CSU first-year student, vividly explained how her teachers actively supported her during the college application process, not only by encouraging her to apply but also by providing economic support when she could not afford the application fees: "My other teachers paid for my CSUs applications . . . Behind my back, they [wrote] a letter . . . [to] the other teachers . . . So, the teachers were pulling out money, just to give me. So I was like, 'Wow. This school really wants me to go somewhere.'" By providing economic help, the teachers were able to send Yazmine a clear and supportive message that encouraged and enabled her to apply to college. In addition to providing her with financial support, this sent Yazmine an emotionally supportive message that her teachers were invested in her future success. Others reacted similarly to finding out that they had been selected to receive scholarships. Mauricio, a twenty-six-year-old UC graduate, explained that getting a scholarship was the "biggest encouragement you could get. Someone outside your family, your circle of friends, affirms your hard work. They're saying, 'You've done outstanding work and we want to reward that work by giving you the financial means to continue.'" Despite not even knowing the individuals who chose him to receive a scholarship, Mauricio managed to draw emotional encouragement out of the financial support he was provided. Given that all these financial resources produced the same supportive and encouraging effects, it seems that it is irrelevant where the resources emerge from as long as they emerge from somewhere.

### *Informational Resources*

Because most of my respondents were in honors or AP classes, they all had access to teachers or counselors who provided them with information and advice for applying to college and filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and scholarship applications to access financial aid. While this information was likely helpful for low-income, immigrant, and/or racial minority *citizen* students, undocumented immigrant students in my study found that these college information discussions rarely included information about overcoming the particular institutional barriers presented by undocumented legal status, specifically the means of applying to college without a Social Security number and ineligibility for financial aid and most private scholarships. One of the most critical resources for undocumented high

school students in California is information about AB 540, which not only increases the affordability of higher education for undocumented students but also gives them a reason to finish high school, hope that they will be able to attend college, and a means to assert their belonging in American society (Abrego, 2008; Flores, 2010). While teachers and school officials are generally considered to be the main source of informational resources for marginalized students (Stanton-Salazar, 2001), I found that most of the undocumented students I talked to were not provided *useful* informational resources by these traditional sources.

Recalling interactions with teachers and counselors during the college application process, most of my respondents explained that these institutional actors were not able to provide information specific to undocumented immigrant students. Some, like Leslie, a twenty-one-year-old UC senior who recently legalized her status, explained that she simply did not tell her counselors or teachers about her legal status because her mom had instructed her to never tell anyone. Yet, others, like Stephanie, a twenty-two-year-old recent UC graduate, recalled "coming out" as undocumented to her counselor: "I went to my high school counselor and I told him about my situation and he said that unfortunately I would have to pay out-of-state tuition." Although Stephanie was graduating three years after AB 540 had been implemented, her counselor was not able to inform her of this key informational resource. Perhaps this was because she was not attending a school with a large immigrant population. However, students who were attending high schools with large undocumented populations and had access to individuals who knew about AB 540 also had a difficult time receiving information. For example, Antonia, a twenty-one-year-old UC senior, explained that her counselor knew about AB 540 but "just told me to go fill out this one form that proved residency, so I just filled it out and didn't ask any questions. I thought that everyone was gonna get financial aid." In this case, we see that some institutional agents knew about AB 540 and its ability to provide in-state tuition, but they were not able to explain the specifics of the bill or how being undocumented would affect the student's education. As a result, students like Antonia knew they were able to attend college but did not receive the information they needed to navigate the transition to college and to understand the opportunities to which they would and would not have access.

Despite the limited information provided by teachers and school officials, my respondents found themselves weakly tied to social networks that included other undocumented students. While Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) find that non-Latina/o (i.e., more advantaged) peers provided institutional knowledge to Mexican-origin (i.e., less advantaged) students, I found that undocumented peers were key providers of informational resources. For example, Carlos, a twenty-three-year-old CSU senior, explained that he learned about AB 540 from one of his undocumented high school friends who had heard about it from a community college coach who was trying to

recruit him as a runner. While undocumented high school peers could provide crucial information, others found out about AB 540 and other undocumented student resources from undocumented students they had never met before. Specifically, Martín, a twenty-year-old UC junior, recalled attending a visit day at a university he had been admitted to and meeting an undocumented student who told him about AB 540, scholarships he was eligible for, and the people to whom he could reveal his status on campus. Jose, a twenty-three-year-old recent UC graduate, said that he had a neighbor whose friend was undocumented and attending college. This weak tie to another undocumented student allowed him to learn about AB 540 and meet a counselor at a local community college whom he knew to be AB 540-friendly. Armed with knowledge about AB 540, many returned to tell their counselors that they were wrong and proceeded to reeducate them. While the number of informed teachers and school officials is growing, many of the students in my sample learned about AB 540 and other undocumented student resources through scattered weak ties to other undocumented individuals who understood how to navigate the system as an undocumented student. In line with Portes and MacLeod's (1996) assertion that attending an inner-city, majority-minority school reduces ethnic disadvantage, I find that interviewees who lived in neighborhoods or went to high schools that did not have large undocumented populations often stated that they felt they had a harder time accessing information. According to these students, their counselors did not need to know about AB 540 in order to serve the majority of the school's population, and they lacked opportunities to find and form ties with other undocumented individuals.

Exploring the sources of these three critical resource types, I find that undocumented immigrant students receive emotional and financial support from multiple actors, including family members, peers, and teachers. However, contrary to the literature, which suggests that informational resources come from key institutional actors like teachers, counselors, and school officials (Cronigner & Lee, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999), in this study I find that undocumented-specific institutional knowledge is often obtained through weak ties with fellow undocumented students. I suggest, then, that the social networks of undocumented immigrant Latina/o students are composed of many of the same actors and similar types of resources highlighted by the social capital literature; however, the experiences of these fifty-four students also demonstrate that some groups require specialized institutional knowledge that is not consistently possessed by the institutional agents traditionally thought of as resource-rich actors.

### Using Social Capital: Patchworking and Paying It Forward

Having established the main actors and resources present in the social networks of undocumented immigrant Latina/o high school students in my study,

ten and powerful. But there was no advice about how she could help or steer me in the right direction.

This lack of awareness and inability to help began to drive a wedge between Mauricio and his school-based support network. The positive emotional support networks from his friends and teachers dwindled as graduation approached; he hid from others the fact that he would not be attending one of the many universities he had been accepted to because he could not afford it. Instead, the day after graduation, he went with his mom to work in a factory.

While working in 120-degree heat and dreaming about college, Mauricio searched for people to ask about his college options but found no one. His networks proved insufficient until he read a Spanish-language newspaper article about undocumented students attending UCLA and in-state tuition rates provided by AB 540. "I showed my older sister, who's also undocumented, and the next day we went to [local community college] to apply and talk to a counselor about our options." Despite securing the necessary informational resources, Mauricio still lacked the financial means to cover tuition. Scraping together earnings from ironing at the factory, working at a discount store, and cutting meat in a butcher shop, he was able to come up with the tuition a few months later. Finally having and piecing together the institutional knowledge about AB 540, the emotional support of his older sister, and the financial resources generated by three jobs, Mauricio was able to realize his dreams of attending college, and after five years he graduated with a bachelor's degree in English and Chicano studies.

This long process of searching and relationship building demonstrates that patchworking is a tenuous process in which an individual's social capital formation and resource gathering are often uneven, haphazard, and constantly shifting. There is no telling when students will meet the right person or find the right piece of information, and when they do, they might find themselves having lost one of the other pieces. In Mauricio's case, he had plenty of emotional support in high school, but this resource had shrunk by the time he actually enrolled in college.

Mauricio's story demonstrates that the personal resources of undocumented immigrant youth are too limited to produce K-12 educational success and college attendance without the help of others. As a result, all of my respondents built up their social capital during their high school careers and found themselves practicing patchworking as they attempted to draw resources out of their social capital. However, the haphazard and unpredictable nature of this process sometimes meant that not all the necessary emotional, financial, or information resources were available at the same time. In Mauricio's case, he took a year off between high school and college in order to build a wider network so that he could practice patchworking. Others found themselves able to patchwork successfully while in high school so that they matriculated directly into a four-year university. Yet others took time off while in college or waited

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to transfer from a community college until they had enough resources and support. While their specific experiences varied, their methods were the same. As a result, we see that patchworking not only requires a fair amount of luck and searching, but is constantly shifting. Thus, there is the tenuous possibility of successfully gathering all the types and amount of resources necessary for enrolling and persisting in institutions of higher education. This helps explain how only a select group of undocumented high school students manages to persist in K-12 education and find a path to college.

### *Paying It Forward: The Rules of Social Capital Use*

Most of social capital theory argues that social capital is developed as individuals share resources and develop a reciprocal relationship that can be used to secure access to each others' resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). I find that direct reciprocity does not govern the social capital developed by the undocumented immigrant students I interviewed. Additionally, it does not appear as if indirect or generalized reciprocity necessarily governed their social capital use because there was not necessarily an expectation that a favor would be returned to them in the future by a third party. Instead, I suggest that a more communal conceptualization of social capital operates, wherein social capital is passed on indefinitely without the expectation of ever receiving something back in the future. This process is governed by the rule that once received, resources and support will be paid forward and used for the advancement of the undocumented immigrant population as a whole. This suggests that the building of social capital within the undocumented immigrant student population may not be dictated by individualistic, rational choice negotiations of reciprocity but, rather, by ideas of social justice and community solidarity. Not expecting anything in exchange, either directly or indirectly, these resource exchanges are made with the intent of disrupting social structures that reproduce inequality and advancing undocumented and marginalized communities as a whole.

Discussing her own and her fellow undocumented college students' educational success, Edith explained that "one of the reasons why I feel that we are all doing well is because we feel the pressure and we also feel the support. And the support is what's keeping us pushing forward." Edith attributes the educational successes of undocumented students to the various forms of emotional, financial, and informational support they received; but the price of this support, or the rule dictating its use, is the positive "pressure" to put the resources to good use by persisting in educational endeavors and passing the support on to others.

The pressure provided by familial social capital often comes in the form of "dual frames of reference" (Suárez-Orozco, 1989). Traditionally, a dual frame of reference refers to a comparison drawn between opportunities available in the host country as opposed to the home country. Essentially, stories an-

dual frames of reference become sources of cultural capital that can facilitate the educational success of minorities and encourage their resistance of institutional inequalities that would otherwise perpetuate their educational and economic underachievement (Gándara, 1995). For immigrant children and children of immigrants, dual frames of reference are created and passed on by parents when they speculate as to how immigration has altered the opportunity structure. This type of country-based comparative was often quoted by students as among the supportive educational messages that their parents gave them. Generally, parents compared their own educational opportunities with those available in the United States so that their children would be inspired to focus on educational success. At times, parents even credited their moving to the United States as attempts to provide their children with better opportunities. Yazmine shared that “my mom would tell me, ‘I didn’t cross the border for you just to come in the house and just get pregnant or get married . . . I brought you here to become someone. To go to high school, to graduate and things like that.’” Since their supportive educational messages have been wrapped up with stories about their parents’ sacrifices and dreams for their children, my respondents clearly understood that they were supposed to “repay” their parents by making their sacrifices worthwhile and striving to achieve the lives that their parents had in mind for them when they migrated. While this phenomenon is prevalent in documented and citizen 1.5- and second-generation youth, my respondents suggested that its influence was stronger for undocumented immigrant youth because of the specific sacrifices incurred by their parents’ undocumented migration.

Similarly, my respondents did not seek to reciprocate directly the emotional support and institutional resources provided by their teachers and other school officials but repaid them by pushing forward with their education. Edith said, “I’m actually more motivated. Whenever I feel like this is too much . . . I think about [my teachers and mentors] who have showed support. And I’m thinking there’s no reason to let them down.” Like Edith, most of my respondents asserted that their motivation came from not wanting to let down those teachers and mentors who supported them emotionally or used their institutional power to secure them access to critical resources. In most cases, these teachers and institutional agents were not interested in direct reciprocity when they provided these students with resources. Yazmine explained,

My college counselor gave me her credit card and she paid for [my college application] . . . And I was like, “I’m going to pay you every single cent.” She’s like, “Yes you are. But not with money. You’re going to pay me [by] giving back to the community.”

In this case, the rules are clear: reciprocity is defined as the continued commitment to give back to the community and create social change. It appears that some institutional actors, like Yazmine’s counselor, were acting as what Stanton-Salazar (2010) calls “empowerment agents,” individuals who invested



their resources in these students in order to empower them and push forward a larger social justice agenda. In addition, many of my interviewees sought to reproduce the support of their influential teachers and mentors by pursuing the same careers as teachers, counselors, professors, or nonprofit organizers. For example, Edith explained that she wanted to become a nonprofit organizer because she received most of her college information and support from her participation in a nonprofit youth program when she was a high school student. In this way, they would be able to carry on the work of their empowerment agents so that future students like themselves would be able to access the social support and capital from which they had benefited.

While traditional expectations of reciprocity may have been lowered due to the strong ties to their families, teachers, and other institutional agents, I find that there were still no expectations of direct reciprocity from the weak ties that undocumented immigrant students created with their undocumented peers. Although Menjivar (2000) establishes that there are limited expectations of reciprocity when sharing informational resources because of their low-cost nature, I find that undocumented peers not only provided information but often engaged in extensive resource sharing. It was common for students to follow up with peers by taking them to a college campus or introducing them to other undocumented students or knowledgeable and trustworthy institutional agents. For example, Samantha recalled how when she was a senior in high school she had been given the phone number of Edna, an undocumented college student who had previously attended her high school. In addition to telling Samantha about AB 540 and other undocumented student resources, Edna took her to meet with institutional actors at the university she was attending. The only expectation was that Samantha pass on this help by talking and meeting with other undocumented students once she had developed her own undocumented cultural capital and institutional contacts. Similarly, during a workshop, Dolores, a UC senior and undocumented student organizer, recalled how her mother's friends would give her number out to undocumented high school students who would then call her. "It gets annoying, but you know you did it too. Called up a random person. All awkward. Now they're calling you. So, do your part and share the wealth." While information and support specific to undocumented students' institutional navigation was clearly much harder to come by, this did not create a rule of reciprocity or secrecy but rather an expectation that the information and support must be shared. These undocumented student networks essentially created a critical mass of students who were attempting to resist institutional inequalities by spreading information freely. At the same time, older students who did not have access to undocumented-specific information and support often focused on the importance of giving workshops to facilitate the spread of information. While they were not necessarily participating in a form of reciprocity, they did subscribe to a sense of communal social justice where they used their privileged status as an undocumented college student to help younger undoc-

umented youth. Their indirect reciprocity not only produced an increased sense of group solidarity, as Levi-Strauss (1969) suggested, but simultaneously increased the possibility of uplifting the community from within. Doing so, and developing rules that demanded this community-centered framework, increased the number of individuals who were dedicated to combating structural marginalization and producing a more socially just education system.

As the recipients of various forms of social capital and resources, undocumented immigrant students in my study sought to pass on the support that they received and advance the undocumented immigrant community as a whole. Departing from the individualistic scope of direct reciprocity, they engaged in an alternative form of indirect reciprocity where they shared resources not with the expectation of receiving support from a third party but, rather, out of a sense of community solidarity and social justice. In essence, all the support they received throughout their lives created a pressure to put the shared resources to good use by tirelessly pursuing their own and others' education. In this way, they would be able to empower the community and build up its internal social capital. As a result, I suggest, the rules that govern the social networks of undocumented immigrant students are ones of communal resources and empowerment.

### Building a "Family"

In light of the community-centered rules that govern the social capital of undocumented immigrant students, I found that some of my respondents made sense of these competing individualistic and collectivist ideas by framing their social networks as "families." Often this started in high school when teachers and mentors expressed their commitment to students by using familial terms. For example, Yazmine paraphrased one of her closest teachers, who told her, "You will see me as a teacher during class, but after class, if you want to have more personalized time with me, we can talk too. If you don't have a mom, I could be your mom." While the teacher took this first step in framing herself and the support she could provide in familial terms, Yazmine suggested that this was the point when their relationship deepened and she trusted her more. Similarly, Sylvia explained her connection to the undocumented student organization at her college and how she saw it "as another family. Because I spend time here and it's becoming my other house, where I can rely on people. I know a lot of people who are there and support [you] and let you know that you can count on them." In both these cases, seeing supportive nonfamilial individuals as family allowed them to contextualize and embrace the unconditional support provided by these individuals. In addition, (re)envisioning teachers, counselors, peers, and other forms of social capital as extensions of family networks unburdens immediate family members from having to provide all resources. By reframing capital as a collective enterprise,

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By expanding the definition of family or reframing the origins of support  
networks, we can validate all forms of supportive social capital and the various  
resources they can provide. While some respondents were still searching for  
a way to understand and name the important resources that they have devel-  
oped and pieced together, others were already harnessing the power of this  
familial conceptualization. For example, an undocumented student organiza-  
tion had institutionalized the idea of "family" by assigning each new member  
to a smaller group of undocumented students. Each group was headed by a  
"mother" and "father" who were more seasoned members and had built up  
an institutional knowledge of the campus. Group members were then each  
other's "brothers" and "sisters." These small families were then responsible  
for looking out for one another and could be turned to for support, informa-  
tion, and resources. Institutionalizing the idea of family seemed to help these  
undocumented students create social capital that no longer required reciproc-  
ity. Instead, they worked together to facilitate each other's success and build  
up their shared undocumented cultural wealth.

I argue that increasing the use of these family and communal conceptual-  
izations of social capital can promote more widespread use of rules of collec-  
tive empowerment, thus increasing marginalized students' access to resources.  
In this way, the undocumented community may be able to empower itself from  
within by reframing themselves as not only recipients of social and cultural  
capital but also providers and creators of it.

## Conclusions

Social capital theory suggests that most social associations can be turned into  
sources of social capital when both individuals expect to benefit from the shar-  
ing of resources and believe they can trust the individual to reciprocate (Bour-  
dieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). While the education literature on social capital  
explores the various resources provided by families, teachers, school offi-  
cials, and peers (Conchas, 2006; Dika & Singh, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2001),  
I find that there is still a need to examine how marginalized students, like  
undocumented immigrants, develop and utilize these social ties in order to  
access much-needed resources. This article addresses this gap by developing a  
grounded approach to understanding the structure and use of undocumented  
immigrant student social capital.

In exploring the social capital of undocumented immigrant students, I first  
establish that their emotional, financial, and informational resources came  
from a variety of social actors. In line with the literature, I find that emotional  
and financial resources are provided by family members, friends, and teach-  
ers. Additionally, I find that undocumented immigrant students require highly

specialized informational resources as a result of the institutional barriers created by their legal status. These resources were sometimes obtained through weak ties to undocumented peers and not from institutional agents, as the literature suggests.

Second, the growing theoretical literature on the structure of social networks assumes that participants are all well-resourced individuals (Kanter, 1995; Lin, 2001). Drawing from Menjívar (2000) and Kibria (1993), I suggest that undocumented immigrant students participate in patchworking by piecing together their various resources in order to meet a specific objective. The haphazard and uneven nature of this process allows me to highlight the tenuous possibility of successfully patching together the necessary emotional, financial, and informational resources. This framework then helps us explain how only a select group of undocumented high school students manage to persist in their K–12 education and find a path to college.

Third, I argue that the social capital networks of undocumented immigrant students are not governed by individualistic rules of reciprocity but by a collectivist understanding of indirect reciprocity where they share resources and support one another out of solidarity and commitment to empowerment and social justice. These community-centered expectations ask not for direct reciprocity, but that students put resources afforded to them to good use by persisting in their educational endeavors and empowering others along the way. These new rules challenge and problematize conventional notions of direct reciprocity in social capital theory and demonstrate that social capital building and resource sharing can happen in ways that challenge social inequality and promote the empowerment of marginalized individuals.

To promote a more widespread use of these new rules, I suggest that we find ways to increase the use of familial and communal conceptualizations of social capital. My respondents have embraced the concept of “family” to account for and validate the critical roles played by individuals within their social networks. In addition, it allows for the revaluing of groups of people who have traditionally been portrayed as lacking in resources and demonstrates how marginalized individuals are not only recipients of social and cultural capital but also providers and creators of it.

## Notes

1. The DREAM Act bill proposes to provide a select segment of undocumented youth with a path to legalization if they enter at a young age, complete high school, and spend at least two years at an institution of higher education or in the military. The federal DREAM Act has been introduced into each Congress for the past ten years. It was most recently voted on in December 2010, when it successfully passed through the House of Representatives. It gained a majority of votes in the Senate (fifty-five) but failed to reach the sixty needed to prevent a filibuster and advance (Library of Congress, 2010). It was reintroduced again on May 11, 2011, to the Senate (Demirjian, 2011).

2. Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin also provide in-state tuition to undocumented students. Texas, New Mexico, and Illinois also provide some access to financial aid. Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, and South Carolina have laws that prohibit in-state tuition rates for undocumented students (Flores, 2010; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011).

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