



In-Service Teachers' Knowledge of Common Features *Associated With Disorders and Developmental Disabilities*

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ABSTRACT. The problematic term “citizen science” continues to circulate in scholarly circles and points to challenges with how researchers may conceptualize who takes part in community-engaged inquiry. Emerging from experiences with a research team intentionally comprised of students who are undocumented, political asylees, and those belonging to mixed status families, we seek to center how immigration status can inform justice-oriented research processes. By focusing on students experiencing liminal status, we note both the structural barriers they face as well as their agency. Through a critical reflexive process, we outline four key tensions that address skills, authenticity, inclusivity, and possibilities relevant to mixed status teams conducting community-engaged research. By exploring how citizenship status impacts research at epistemological and applied levels, we arrive at more inclusive and just possibilities for community-engaged research.

INTRODUCTION

Even as scholars push for more critically and community-based alternatives to traditional research approaches, persistent assumptions can still limit what we conceive of as possible. Community-engaged scholarship and teaching have long been aligned with promoting effective citizenship and civic engagement to support the so-called public good (Bringle and Wall 2020). Moreover, the problematic term “citizen science”, defined in part as public participation in research, continues to circulate in scholarly circles (Thigpen and Funk 2020). For example, we recently reviewed a call for papers from an academic organization inclined to support social justice causes that included several mentions of “citizen-scholars” who aimed to align their research with public issues. Such terminology and frameworks reflect a bias in how researchers and their institutions may conceptualize who takes part in community-engaged inquiry. In effect, “citizen science” can bring about the erasure of non-citizens engaged in such efforts, thereby relegating them to living “in the shadows” despite concerted efforts to center their voices (Enriquez and Saguy 2016). Further it implies a narrower conceptualization of citizenship and democratic participation that cannot account for more creative, transgressive, and flexible forms of engagement (Kim 2018). To truly make research public, democratic, and justice-oriented, we seek to directly address questions of citizenship status and how we can reconceptualize community-engaged scholarship.

Our larger research project focuses on uncovering the potential barriers and challenges undocumented immigrants navigate to become public school teachers in California, and in turn, how these lived experiences shape their pedagogical practices. The research study is guided by the following research questions: What are the pathways into teaching for undocumented immigrants? In what ways does their identity as undocumented immigrants influence their approach to teaching and learning? Through interviews and focus groups with “UndocuTeachers”, we hope to bring light to their experiences and drive change at the intersection of immigration and education reform. Here, we build on discussions arising from our research that focus on immigration status as an important, but often overlooked, aspect of researcher reflexivity.

Emerging from experiences with a research team intentionally comprised of students who are undocumented, political asylees, and those belonging to mixed status families, we seek to center how immigration status can inform justice-oriented research processes. For the purposes of this paper, we define our mixed-status team as one whose members experience liminal status. Liminal citizenship denotes an ambivalent legal position characterized at once by uncertainty and marginalization, but also the possibility for agency (Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014). Drawn from our current project focused on the experiences of undocumented teachers, we note four tensions that community-engaged research teams may work through in their pursuit of justice. As our research is still

ongoing, the tensions we present are those we ourselves continue to work through. The article presents a critical and inclusive vision of community-engaged research that centers students with liminal status.

BACKGROUND

When it comes to community engaged research and scholarship, opportunities for participation have historically been reserved for the most privileged and located within predominantly White institutions (Sydnor et al. 2010; Stanton 2014; Harden et al. 2017). Literature has begun to explore how post-traditional, first-generation, and working-class students participate in community-engaged scholarship in ways that critique prevailing Whiteness of the field (Syeed et al. 2020; Bocci 2015), but much work remains to represent the experiences of liminal status students. Looking to the experiences of undergraduate students with liminal status, we come to understand the layered complexities involved in traversing higher education, immigration policy, and community-engaged scholarship.

The opportunities available to liminal status students within higher education are often framed within a legal context. In 2012, when the decade-long political struggle by immigration advocates, legislators, and youth to pass the DREAM Act stalled, then President Barack Obama signed and passed the executive order instituting the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) (Pallares 2014). Those eligible for DACA are undocumented immigrant youth who arrived in the United States as minors, have proof of enrollment or graduated from American schools, have been continuously present since their arrival in the US, and have not been convicted of a crime. Eligible applicants are expected to renew their DACA status every two years; becoming DACAmented shelters undocumented youth from deportation and provides work authorization. As an executive order, DACA is a temporary administrative program, and makes it vulnerable to the political agenda of the administration within the Oval Office. While DACA has loomed large in national conversations on immigration reform, on a state level our team has specifically benefited from California Assembly Bill (AB) 540. First passed into law in 2001, it allows certain students to pay in-state tuition fees within California's public universities and colleges. Qualifications for AB 540 require that students prove full-time attendance for three or more years within California educational system, thus, those eligible for in-state tuition fees extends beyond just undocumented students to those of other liminal statuses as well (California Student Aid Commission 2018). AB 540 is an important economic lifeline for students of various immigration statuses because they can also apply and receive financial aid. While these two policies factor significantly into providing access to higher education, we will explore the very divergent lived

experiences of liminal status students and the precarity characterizing their undergraduate careers.

Undocumented students, and DACA recipients in particular, are often celebrated for their resilience in pursuing their college degrees (Williams 2016). However, Gonzalez (2014), notes that despite the encouragement and support these students may receive while applying, upon enrolling and starting their college careers, “their financial challenges and precarious legal status thus engender circumstances that put them into more frequent and fraught interactions with campus bureaucrats than are typical of other students” (Gonzalez 2014, p. 161). Students engaged in this research project shared similar experiences while in high school and in some cases faced similar bureaucratic hurdles in their adjustment, management, and advocacy of their education within the university. The sense of isolation and exclusion that liminal status students may feel can ripple across their college experiences (Williams 2016). Undocumented students are often excluded from high impact educational practices and learning opportunities, including study abroad and faculty-directed research (Stebbleton and Aleixo 2015). This point resonates deeply with our student-researchers who have attempted to take advantage of every opportunity available to them, while also acknowledging those that remain off limits. As we reflect on these points, we are reminded that access itself is not enough.

Before continuing on, we wanted to briefly introduce ourselves in order to position our identities and help the reader understand how our voices show up in this work. Our research team came together to work on a study aimed at understanding the pathways and practices of undocumented teachers in California public schools. We began our first team meeting by discussing how our lives have been shaped by migration and education. The brief self-identifications below are expanded upon further in later sections:

- Abigail (research mentor), Latinx, second generation of Mexican immigrant background;
- Esa (research mentor), Muslim, second generation of Kashmiri immigrant background;
- Farah (student researcher), Muslim, Middle-Eastern, Egyptian, Pending Asylee, first generation immigrant;
- Fatima (student researcher), Mexican-American immigrant, first generation college student;
- Sherry (student researcher), Chinese-American immigrant, first generation college student.

Each member of our team comes from an immigrant background, but we experience unique forms of liminality due to the racialization and marginalization associated with our intersectional identities. That being said, there are still other liminal status groups, such as those living with Temporary Protected Status, that are not represented on our team. Nonetheless, forces like crimmigration and state surveillance have impacted our respective communities in indelible ways (Ali

2017; Menjívar et al. 2018). As we discuss below, our lived experiences as well as our commitments to justice shape our approach to research and scholarship.

Perspectives

In order to arrive at a more critical and justice-oriented approach to community- engaged scholarship, we draw on Gordon da Cruz's (2017) work to address three essential questions posed in her framework: (a) Are we collaboratively developing critically conscious knowledge? (b) Are we authentically locating expertise? and (c) Is our work grounded in asset-based understandings of community? By centering citizenship status, we believe our work can shift the ways that we think about community-engaged scholarship in ways that reconceptualize forms of knowledge and the role of the university. Research on, by, and for undocumented people complicates the avowed democratic aims of community-engaged research (Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020). Indeed, the experiences of undocumented and liminal status communities continues to complicate notions of who belongs within the bounds of American democracy and who does not. The paper reflects an intervention into the "apartheid of knowledge" that can suppress non-dominant viewpoints, and specifically those of undocumented people (Pérez Huber 2009). Rooted in their own lived experience, Brewster (2019) elaborates on "undocumented intelligence" as neglected and subversive forms of knowledge gained while navigating oppressive institutions. Critical race scholars have long examined questions of how citizenship is racialized, but have not always directly linked it to positionalities aligned with actual legal status (Ladson-Billings 1998). Building on these various bodies of work, we elaborate an intersectional epistemological framework that is oriented towards justice and also rooted in liminal status students' forms of knowledge.

Another intervention we make here is to challenge the supposed divide between campus and community. Historically, the related fields of service learning and community- based research have adopted language and practices that reflect an almost charitable orientation to potential community partners (Gordon da Cruz 2017; Mtawa and Wilson-Strydom 2018). Furthermore, practitioners have emphasized partnership building off campus, the need for cultural competence, and making connections with typically privileged students (Briscoe et al. 2009; Adelabu 2014). In the context of university-community collaborations, there is a sense that the community is "out there" and not represented on campus. However, in our case we recognize the importance of starting on campus, especially for an institution like our own that disproportionately serves students of color from working class and immigrant backgrounds. Further, as we build relationships with programs and centers on campus, we recognize their strong networks and funds of knowledge that are also community-focused.

The blurring of lines between campus and community is also evident when examining interlocking systems of injustice. This connection has become particularly fraught on our campus as the university's commitment to offering sanctuary remains tainted by recent events. In 2016, university police pulled over a vehicle with a broken headlight near campus. After the driver's name showed up in the ICE database, he was held at the University Police Station before being handed over to immigration authorities who deported him later that same day. After students and faculty mobilized, the university president issued an executive order mandating that campus police not arrest or detain people on the basis of their status (Rivera 2016). Even as our university attempts to correct its policies, we know firsthand that there are still ways the institution and its implication in other systems may continue to impact liminal status students.

Reflecting on Our Work

In the context of community engaged-research, discussion of researcher positionality remains a promising yet neglected area of study (Muhammad et al. 2015). Rather than relying on approaches to positionality that focus on the social distance between students and research participants, we instead have paid close attention to the shared spaces between them (Brewster 2019). In the place of reflexivity that deals with discomfort associated with privilege and power, we emphasize the challenges that arise when liminal status students are "too close to the research" (Diaz-Strong et al. 2014). Further, our approach to reflexivity is not only in service of validating findings, but rather allows us to acknowledge the messiness of our work, including missteps and misunderstandings within our team (Pillow 2003). The paper thus is built on our team members' reflexive accounts of our larger research study focused on the experiences of undocumented teachers.

To piece together our reflexive account, we utilized various data sources. Student research assistants have maintained reflexive journals throughout the project and participated in reciprocal interviews at specific stages of the process (Malacrida 2007). We maintained shared process notes that also highlighted points of convergence and divergence. Research mentors/professors also maintained their own reflexive memos to supplement student accounts. Additionally, campus-based partners, including the undocumented student center, acted as a sounding board and offered analytical insights. These various points of contact reflected the wide-ranging personal, political, and professional elements of our research study. Engaging the emotional dimensions of research, particularly "bad feelings" of fear or helplessness, proved vital to authentically reflecting the liminal status experience (Diaz-Strong et al. 2014). Collective debriefing and analysis were an ongoing part of our research process, allowing for iterative observations and malleable conclusions.

Tensions Facing Mixed Status Research Teams

Based on our reflexive accounts, we highlight four tensions that community-engaged research teams should consider especially when working with liminal status students and communities. We argue that our recommendations are not only relevant to research focused on liminal status groups, but can actually create a more inclusive approach to community-engaged research that explicitly addresses citizenship status. First, we discuss the importance of lived experience in shaping research outlooks and skills. Second, we discuss the difference in how undocumented experiences are authentically represented in our team as opposed to the tokenism they typically face. Third, we look at how un- documented status is often constructed and racialized, emphasizing the need for more intentionality in building solidarity across the broader population of those experiencing liminal status. Fourth, we discuss how liminal status students are confronted with moments of impossibility, as well as activism and support, when navigating institutions. Table 1 below summarizes some of the key tensions we continue to work through in our research.

Table 1. Tensions for Mixed Status Research Teams.

Tensions	Considerations
Skills vs. Struggles	Diversify criteria for student-researchers to center lived Experience and recognize that their assets are the result of struggle
Inauthentic vs. Authentic	Moving beyond alienating interactions and opening up space to share/discuss lived experiences
Solidarity vs. Inclusivity	deepening solidarity work by centering diverse liminal status identities
Impossibility vs. Possibility	Recognizing the supports on campus as well as the persistent obstacles while navigating institutions

Struggles vs. Skills: The Weight of Student Assets

Working toward inclusivity requires a re-conceptualization of valuable skills or assets that students bring to community-engaged research. When recruiting student research assistants, teams may consider the value of firsthand experience with liminal status in relationship to other traditional research skills. Aside from being able to utilize such lived experience as a form of knowledge, liminal status students often develop tools for advocacy that they can apply to research processes (Chang 2016). Unless explicitly referenced in calls for student research assistants, those with liminal status may not even apply.

Even as we emphasize an asset-based understanding of liminal status students, we must also be mindful that this is perhaps one of the rare instances where students are encouraged to see themselves and their lived experience as valuable knowledge. Also for many students, they have been told to not share, give details, or testify on the particulars of their experience—as sharing or drawing attention

to their immigration status can make them and their loved ones vulnerable if shared in the wrong context. As a team we spent a considerable amount of time building trust amongst ourselves, by modeling and encouraging our students to feel comfortable.

The skills our students possess are often understood as assets developed in the form of social, familial, and educational survival and achievement. Sherry's work ethic is tied to wanting to prove to her mother that they have a viable future in the US and would be successful. Fatima, upon finding out that she was undocumented, realized that she would experience limitations in terms of work, scholarship, financial aid and thus, needed to work twice as hard to remain competitive in school. She stated, "I began to work hard in school to become an 'ideal' candidate for colleges . . . I became a tri-athlete and an honors/AP student in three different clubs throughout high school. I felt like my success as a student reflected my community in many different ways. Everything I did was to prove how worthy I was to receive the same education and opportunities as my peers". Students involved in the project share similar sentiments as other undocumented peers who may feel pressure to always remain a step ahead and that school is their "number one job" (Vakil 2019). The work ethic, determination, strong grades, and desire to "become a 'perfect' candidate for colleges", would reap rewards for Fatima in the form of scholarships to pay for college expenses. As Fatima disclosed, "There was this constant pressure to prove to others how worthy my family and I were to receive the same opportunities". In our team meetings and through the student journal entries, what became apparent is how a politics of worthiness is articulated and critiqued, in large part because the immigrant rights movement often uses at its disposal and mobilizes around a discourse shaped by a politics of inclusion (Pallares 2014; Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020).

However, to package these difficult experiences simply as a toolkit or skills to be utilized did not always sit well with our team. As Farah explained, "we call them skills or knowledge but in reality, they are struggles, not really skills". In many ways, Farah reflected that these skills "are skills that no one else needs to have but us. Because no one else needs to learn the laws about work permits, the laws of immigration, what to tell officers when we get stopped, whether we can open the door to ICE or not and how to reply to them". Similarly, Sherry shared that her mom instructed her to avoid conflict at all costs given her legal status: "I studiously avoid any conversation or situation that might cause conflict, like political views . . . I consistently need to express the idea that I am harmless". To call them skills does not adequately acknowledge the emotional, social, and psychological toll that come with these lived experiences. These skills are not necessarily to be sought out or listed on a resume, but rather the result of necessity and survival. Thus, as research teams adopt an asset-based approach that values the participation of liminal status students, they should also be prepared to recognize the tremendous weight of their lived experiences.

Inauthentic vs. Authentic: Creating a Safe Space

As liminal status students pursue their education, they report challenges in finding spaces to be their authentic selves. Too often, they are regarded either as tokens to be celebrated or they are forced to uncomfortably compartmentalize their identities. As our team worked towards building a space where we could freely discuss and express our thoughts, opinions, and critiques of the ways immigration policy has failed to respond adequately and humanely to real needs, this was antithetical to the messaging more commonly bestowed on undocumented and liminal status people: stay quiet. Creating safe spaces within higher education has been a key element of undocumented student organizing, especially in the context of widespread criminalization and surveillance of these communities (Soltis 2015).

Even supporters of liminal status students can still foster spaces that may be alienating. Recalling her efforts to get her education funded, Farah observed that, “We use our struggles to get scholarships from people who never struggled like us”. When attending scholarship awards ceremonies, both Fatima and Farah noticed they were the only non-White people in the room. Both did not want to seem ungrateful for the scholarship, but also felt uneasy as their presence felt tokenized. “My story, which is basically my life”, Farah recalled, “seemed to be really fascinating for them to make me the only brown person there receiving a scholarship . . . As soon as I realized that I was the only brown person there, I felt really out of place and I just wanted to take my money and go. I felt really ungrateful saying that but I also realized that I was the category they needed to fill: ‘the struggling person of color.’” Such tokenism is often gendered and racialized, serving to marginalize even individuals like high achieving students who are perceived to have “made it” (Flores 2011). Thus, even as these students and their stories are celebrated in such spaces, they do not experience a sense of community or an ability to be authentically themselves.

When not tokenized, liminal status students often feel like they cannot be their whole selves. As is reflective of the wider liminal status population, some of our team members have not always felt comfortable engaging publicly around their status. Student researchers include outspoken campus leaders as well as those who have not disclosed their status to even some of their closest friends. They describe instances of having to hide aspects of their identities, whether it’s giving excuses for not being able to participate in school trips, withdrawing applications for paid internships, or even speaking up to defend immigrant groups. Fatima referred to this as a dual identity that liminal status students experience. Reflecting on her own experiences, she wrote that “Although one is a student like their peers, receiving the same education, and getting involved with sports and clubs in high school, one begins to recognize the hardships they endure throughout their educational journey”. In reading about this dual identity, a phrase that resonated with us came from the story of another undocumented

young person: “This contradiction-of feeling very different from your peers, but also, in some ways, just like any other teenager is a part of the Dreamer experience” (Vakil 2019).

To cultivate a safe space for students, we sought to make our research team one that was defined by their authentic experiences. Research mentors continually reminded student-researchers of their role as partners who are responsible for helping to shape the project, not just as assistants to carry out a predetermined plan or purely logistical tasks. Drawing on their lived experiences, students had a major role in shaping all research activities, from developing confidentiality protocols to building rapport with study participants. Our meetings are also defined by a more laid-back, conversational manner that allows us to also check in on a host of mundane, personal, emotional, and political matters. Sherry noted, “I always feel lonely since I cannot talk about my status and my difficulty to anyone except my mom. I want to help others who have a similar situation as mine, but I don’t know how to help them”. She sees her involvement in our project as an “opportunity to gain more knowledge about the undocumented community and create awareness to others who have prejudice to the undocumented community”. Similarly, Farah shared that “The knowledge and skills I learned made me want to be a part of this research because I feel that I belong here. I can be all my identities without judgement or fear”.

Inauthentic vs. Authentic: Creating a Safe Space

Ensuring that we were developing critically conscious knowledge required us to re-think who we wanted represented in our research team. Because of the politics and racialization of immigration, we wanted to be intentional about which student experiences would inform our work. Thus, we have sought to de-center DACA and Latinx experiences in favor of a focus on liminal status that encompasses other less represented identities. These realizations came about largely from the student-researchers themselves who helped shift the focus of our recruitment.

Dreamers, and more specifically DACA recipients, have occupied a central place in the nation’s imagination on immigration. Whether it’s due to the stories told by grass-roots activists or other media biases, Dreamers have almost become synonymous with undocumented students. However, DACA recipients represent only one strand in the broader population of liminal status students (Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020). The researcher-mentors on our team were similarly not immune to DACA-centric narratives. When writing our initial job announcement for the position, we wrote that “DACA students are encouraged to apply!” Committed to compensating our undocumented research assistants, we assumed that DACA students would have work authorization. However, in utilizing that language we learned that we also alienated some potential student applicants. Farah, a pending asylee, initially had reservations about applying to the position, in part because of our DACA-signaling, a status that she does not hold and thus

felt her application would not be considered. Farah continued to explain that she joined the research team because “I deeply believe that in order for one group to gain their freedom or justice, solidarity is necessary” and she asserted that we needed to push against our normative ideas of who is considered undocumented, and the fact that there are “different types of liminal status immigrants in this country” that are “not usually discussed when we talk about immigration”. For her, as with everyone on the team, the fact that our research team honors the realities and experiences of liminal status students is important. Through our conversations, she has reminded us of the many faces of the “undocumented” or “temporary” community who all similarly live with the real “fear of deportation as well as having liminal opportunities in everything”. In fact, due to eligibility criteria as well as tumultuous political timelines, none of our student researchers are DACA recipients. Within an already marginalized group, our students represent a particularly vulnerable subgroup.

Depending on the project, it may also be important to address the fact that liminal status is often racialized and essentialized in exclusionary ways (Buenavista 2018; Kim and Horse 2018; Palmer 2018). While we recognize that those of Latinx background represent the largest demographic of liminal status people in California (Hayes and Hill 2017), our research partners encouraged us to expand our focus. In our experience, it was important for students and our research partners to be able to represent their broader social and cultural milieu, especially as it also reflected the broader participant population we have attempted to reach through our research project. Thus, we were careful to avoid normative language in our research recruitment and translated recruitment materials into languages that reflected and celebrated our diverse, liminal status team including Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Spanish. Another instructive anecdote comes from Farah who was hesitant to apply to work on the project. She ultimately applied for the position when she saw one of the research-mentors had a Muslim/Arabic name. For her, that simple fact signified that this was not a strictly or normatively Latinx space. Fatima, who serves as the AB 540 and Undocumented Students Commissioner on campus, also shared her reservations regarding an invitation she received to speak at a Hispanic Heritage Month event. Although her initial inclination was to skip the event in order not to perpetuate the notion that immigration is only a Latinx issue, the group discussed the possibility of her attending a variety of cultural celebrations to encourage more groups to seek resources and support. Our group meetings have been generative spaces to work through ways to craft action-based research that not only can prove impactful for marginalized communities, but also meaningful ways of building, creating, and sustaining solidarity across racial and immigration status differences. Research teams need to consider that solidarity does not mean erasure of what makes communities distinct, but rather how do we build from those differences to craft a sense of inclusion that does not flatten the differences but rather sees them as an asset (Rosas 2019).

Impossible vs. Possible: Navigating Institutions

When navigating institutions, students often encounter severe limitations that may render some opportunities impossible. Sherry wrote in an entry that “I can do less given my status, and therefore I had to endure a lot of pain”. Moreover, Farah expressed that she always had to be a step ahead and remain informed of her rights on the federal and state level because she realized that even lawyers, financial aid counselors, or other campus resources, even if well intentioned to assist undocumented students, were not knowledgeable in her rights as a pending asylee. She writes, “I learned to accept new changes and adjust to new laws that are affecting me without letting it interfere with my daily life” and was forced to “learn to be able to hide my identity when it comes to the wrong people. I learned to know who could be a potential threat to my status or to me as a person”. Farah explained the ways he identity, as someone who is “not American, I am pending without a status, I am brown, I am Middle Eastern, I am Muslim, I am from a low SES and I am a female”, has meant she has “lost many battles”. Instead of seeing them only as disempowering losses, she has managed to see them as what fuels her sense of purpose to raise awareness and speak up, where ever she feels safe to do so, on behalf of liminal and undocumented communities as well as other marginalized communities.

Seeing undocumented people as “impossible” outsiders or subjects restricts the possibility to even conceive of their having a place in American society that entails rights or other opportunities (Nicholls 2013; Ngai 2004). Further, these notions do not reflect actual lived experiences of liminal status people. Student-researchers have shared that even their close friends could not conceive of the possibility that undocumented people could work, pay taxes, or obtain a driver’s license. Moreover, when discussing our study population with administrators on campus, they were surprised that undocumented teachers were in fact legally authorized to work and obtain professional credentials in California. This sense of impossibility is one that students must contend with all the time. Even as Fatima acknowledged the anxiety and fear she lives with, she also noted that “My experience as an undocu-student made me realize that nothing was really ‘impossible.’ There is always an alternative and one has to know where to look to access resources made for us. As a researcher in this project, I believe I have an essential background that allows me to truly understand the journey of an undocu-person”. What our project represents, then, is seeking out the possible as we face the impossible. On one level, we bring to light the challenging pathways of undocumented teachers who seek to work in public schools. On another, our liminal status student-researchers exercise agency, political consciousness, resourcefulness, and solidarity in their work despite the limitations imposed on them.

One area in which we faced difficulty in navigating limitations and possibilities was compensating liminal status student researchers. The issues of

equity and labor, common to the broader undocumented population, must be addressed critically in the context of community-engaged research as well. Undocumented student activists, credited with having great resilience, are also at times made out to be ‘superhuman’ in their accomplishments and report feeling that their labor is exploited by campus leadership (Muñoz et al. 2018). Even on our “sanctuary” campus, we know that many liminal status students face misinformation in navigating everyday administrative processes. Finding workarounds requires not only political commitment on the part of faculty advisors who may wield more power, but also creativity and openness to shifting research timelines and expectations.

Even as we lay out the challenges, we also want to ensure that we emphasize the kind of support we have received as well. Within our team, students offered invaluable support to one another and conducted impromptu “know your rights” legal clinics. For example, student researchers helped each other navigate institutional processes to ensure they were able to take advantage of in-state tuition through AB 540. Research teams can enlist the help of campus support groups, especially those serving undocumented students, that can play important ally roles. In our experience, the undocumented student center acted as more of a research partner, helping shape our project from its inception. Further, these campus-entities can help foster trust, support recruitment efforts, and offer institutional insights on complex policies. Research teams can consider the reciprocal nature of such partnerships. In our case, the relationship proved mutually beneficial, as leaders of the undocumented student center sought to develop stronger research ties with faculty. Our connections to campus partners are rooted in a longer history of involvement in work supporting undocumented students.

Conclusions

Our work on liminal status builds on Gordon da Cruz’s (2017) framework by recognizing that community assets are often the result of struggle, creating authentic spaces is an intensive relationship-building process, marginality is layered and complex, and that university research collaborations must increasingly look critically within at their own campus communities. It is also important to note here that the lessons shared in this article are very much a work in progress and also situated in our unique context. As such, they represent our current thinking in the midst of an ongoing research project. We plan to revisit these themes and explore how they have evolved at the conclusion of our study. Given local social and political ecologies, mixed-status research teams on other campuses may find additional or divergent tensions that they face. Moreover, because of the precarity of our group, we have chosen to withhold some details of our work. Sharing best or promising research practices regarding liminal status groups may at times need to be more covert and conducted within safe spaces.

Given the importance of trainings and information sharing to support undocumented students (Banh and Radovic-Fanta 2021), campus groups can help educate and build networks for allies interested in creating research opportunities inclusive of liminal status. Looking ahead, researchers can also explore alternative ways that liminal status students participate in community-engaged research. For example, we may better understand how liminal status can inform projects on topics not directly associated with immigration as well as the dynamics of peer relationships between students on mixed-status research teams.

At the time of writing, DACA—one of a few lifelines for undocumented students—is once again facing urgent legal challenges. Even so, no clear path to citizenship, and the relative security and stability that come with it, is on the horizon. As our liminal status students face persistent marginalization and intimidation, campuses must continue to interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions about inclusion. Beyond the immediate political moment, there are other troubling trends that speak to the importance of our attempt to shift the conceptualization of “citizen science”. Higher education institutions continue to proclaim themselves to be “sanctuary campuses” or “undocu-friendly”. Despite these claims, college and universities are often implicated in law enforcement and systemic racism that remain unsafe for undocumented students (Buenavista 2018; Teranishi et al. 2015). Yet, in the face of institutional barriers, liminal status students and their allies continue to re- make higher education and its attendant norms to better align with their “freedom dreams” (Soltis 2015). Our project contributes to this wider movement by demonstrating how community-engaged research can engage liminal status on epistemological and applied levels to arrive at more inclusive and just possibilities for public science.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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