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Texas Community Colleges and Characteristics of a Growing Undocumented Student Population

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Abstract: In this study, the researchers examine the undocumented student population in Texas community colleges. The data indicate steady yearly increases in the number of undocumented students and in their percentage of the total student enrollment. The relationships between undocumented student enrollment, college size, and overall Hispanic student enrollment also are studied, and the implications of these findings are discussed.

Resumen: En este estudio los investigadores examinaron la población de estudiantes indocumentados en colegios comunitarios/preparatorios de Texas. La información indicó continuo incremento anual en el número de estudiantes indocumentados y en el porcentaje del registro total de estudiantes. Las relaciones entre estudiantes registrados indocumentados, el tamaño del colegio y el registro de estudiantes hispanos en general también se estudiaron. Las implicaciones de estos hallazgos se discuten.

Keywords: *undocumented students; illegal aliens; community colleges; student enrollment; Hispanics*

Texas has been recognized as one of the six states in the United States experiencing an influx of immigrants (Passel, Capps, & Fix, 2004; Strayhorn, 2006; Szelenyi & Chang, 2002). Within this group of increasing immigrants are undocumented aliens. Undocumented aliens are foreign nationals who are unauthorized to be in the United States. These persons may have obtained their illegal status in one of two ways: (a) They have entered illegally into the United States, or (b) they have extended their stay surpassing the deadline of a valid U.S. visa (Badger, Ericksen, & Yale-Loehr, 2000; Dozier, 2001). There are an estimated 11 million of these individuals living in the United States, with 12% of the total living in Texas. This percentage is second only to California that has an estimated 26% of the total undocumented population (Drachman, 2006). Community college students fitting

these categories have also been referred to as undocumented in educational research (Biswas, 2005; Dozier, 1992, 2001; Drachman, 2006; Markowitz, 1994; Mitchell & Wilson, 2006).

Undocumented aliens have made the trek to the United States for different reasons. Historically, Mexican nationals have been the most predominant group of undocumented aliens crossing into the United States, and more recent figures have indicated a continuing trend (Passel et al., 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Strayhorn, 2006). Their repeated attempts have only added attention to an already recognized heavily trafficked international border (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Some researchers have argued that their migrations have been patterned as a result of U.S. policies, for example, the 1986 Illegal Immigration and Reform and Control Act and the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (Mohl, 2003). Other researchers have indicated that poverty and poor economic conditions in their homelands forced these individuals to seek a better life for themselves and their families (Jenkins, Harburg, Weissberg, & Donnelly, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Seeking out the latter, these undocumented aliens are willing to risk dangerous obstacles to obtain an American lifestyle with the hope of future prosperity (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

Marked by differences in residence, national origins, socioeconomic status, and educational backgrounds, today's immigrants differ from immigrants of past (Portes, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Zhou, 1997). These individuals have exhibited a tendency to reside in large populous cities in the west and southwest regions of the United States. Furthermore, undocumented aliens and other immigrants are increasingly coming from non-European countries with the greater majority having originated from Latin America (Drachman, 2006; Gray & Vernez, 1996; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Zhou, 1997). In addition, these undocumented aliens have brought their children illegally into the United States and have begun to enroll their children in greater numbers into public schools. This situation has created challenges not only for the educational institutions that are trying to meet the needs of these children but also for these children who are trying to make sense of a new culture and educational schooling system (Gray & Vernez, 1996; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, 2004; Vernez, Krop, & Rydell, 1999; Zhou, 1997). These students have begun to complete their secondary education and are now arriving at the footsteps of postsecondary institutions (Brown, 2008).

Community colleges have been characterized as open-admission institutions that educate a greater majority of underrepresented student populations (Ayers, 2002; Boone, 1997; Davies, Safarik, & Banning, 2003; Karen, 2002; Lane, 2001; Nora, 2000) than traditional 4-year institutions. Racially diverse students are drawn to these institutions because of their affordable tuition prices, geographical locations, and remedial education programs (Benitez & DeAro, 2004). Many of these students are of Hispanic and Latino ethnicity, making them the greatest attending ethnic or racial group within community colleges (Gutierrez, Castaneda, & Kastinas, 2002).

Unlike universities, community colleges attract a different student clientele that fluctuates continuously (Bryant, 2001). As growing numbers of minority and underrepresented students continue to enroll in these institutions, administrators will have to contend with policies and procedures to ensure student success. This process will require a close examination and understanding of individual, community college student populations.

In Texas, undocumented students are not barred from attending community colleges. This issue has mostly occurred as a result of no U.S. federal law restricting undocumented students to an education (Badger & Yale-Loehr, 2001). In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) that it was unconstitutional and illegal for a state to deny or exclude children of illegal aliens the right to a free education (Badger et al., 2000; Badger & Yale-Loehr, 2001). Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court differentiated undocumented children from their parents and further reasoned that these children were not responsible for the illegal actions of their parents (Walsh, Kemerer, & Maniotis, 2005). However, this case was argued against the backdrop of students in Texas public schools and not students enrolled in institutions of higher education. Consequently, the *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) case and its application to undocumented students in postsecondary education are not entirely clear to higher education officials (Badger et al., 2000; Drachman, 2006).

In June 2001, Texas passed House Bill 1403 (H.B.) that allowed undocumented students to pay in-state tuition for a postsecondary education (Biswas, 2005; Drachman, 2006). Texas was the first state to enact supportive legislation for these students that also included the receipt of state financial aid (Biswas, 2005; Drachman, 2006). Under specific requirements of H.B. 1403, students must have resided in Texas for three or more years, graduated from a local high school or obtained a GED in Texas, and signed an affidavit stating their intent to apply for legal status at the earliest opportunity they are eligible to do so (Biswas, 2005). This law was revisited and renamed Senate Bill 1528(S.B.) by the 2005 Legislature, which changed certain conditions of the 3-year residency requirement to initiate a uniform residency requirement for all students (Strayhorn, 2006).

These undocumented students have entered Texas community colleges and have been exposed to different experiences in comparison to legal resident students (Markowitz, 1994). Some of these students have struggled with their cultural identity and with the acceptance of an American society, thus providing challenges when confronted with a differing educational system (Gray & Vernez, 1996; Maestas, Vaquera, & Munoz Zehr, 2007; Markowitz, 1994; Suarez-Orozco, 2004). As a result, these students can also be characterized as exhibiting unique behaviors. For example, Dozier (1992) reported these students as being fearful of deportation, having experienced loneliness and depression. Moreover, these undocumented students, having experienced the throes of psychological and emotional distress, may be less apt to seek out college services or may look to establish close relationships with those faculty and staff they can trust with their situation (Dozier, 1992; Drachman, 2006).

The growing number of undocumented students enrolled in Texas and their economic impact on the State has raised public awareness. Citizens and policymakers are concerned with what their education, social well-being, illegal status, and economic prosperity will mean to the future of Texas. A recent study conducted by the Texas Comptroller revealed an increase of 87.8% in average state cost per undocumented student from fall 2001 to fall 2004 in community colleges (Strayhorn, 2006). However, undocumented student enrollments and the specific fiscal burdens they have caused for local Texas community colleges are still unclear. Moreover, researchers have yet to examine holistically undocumented student enrollment within the State of Texas. Regardless, researchers have already demonstrated an increasing impact on the U.S. educational system due to greater numbers of these immigrants (Brilliant, 2000; Cornfield & Arzubigi, 2004; Dozier, 1992; Szelenyi & Chang, 2002; Vernez et al., 1999).

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between Texas community college size and the enrollment of undocumented students?
2. What is the relationship between the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled and the enrollment of undocumented students in Texas community colleges?

Method

This study was nonexperimental and employed quantitative means in which the enrollment characteristics of undocumented students in Texas community colleges were examined. Overall, data gathered from the study provided a descriptive picture of the natural and social phenomenon of undocumented student enrollment within these institutions of higher education. A combination of descriptive, ex post facto, and correlational research designs provided the structural research methods for conducting this study. Selection of a correlational design allowed these researchers to examine the relationship between variables using correlational statistics. In addition, because the data were already collected by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the ex post facto approach provided these researchers an opportunity to examine the relationship of the variables without any manipulation from extraneous factors.

In this study, a total of three variables were investigated in two separate correlation procedures. In both tests, the dependent variable consisted of the number of undocumented students enrolled within each Texas community college for the fall 2006 semester. Representing the independent variables were community college size, indicated as the total fall 2006 enrollment for each Texas community college, and the percentage of Hispanic students, defined as the community college's percentage of Hispanic enrollment in fall 2006.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Texas Community Colleges, Fall 2006 ($N = 63$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Community college size	8,326.91	6,500.78
Total Hispanic enrollment	2,693.29	3,746.25
Undocumented student enrollment	82.65	100.77

Participants for the study came from 63 community colleges within the state of Texas. These institutions of higher education included community, technical, and state colleges. Data for this study were requested from Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and were received in an Excel format. The initial data set contained the number of S.B. 1528 students enrolled by community colleges between 2002 and 2006 but did not include the total number of enrolled students in the fall 2006 semester or the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled. These researchers used the 2006 College Profiles: Public Community and Technical Colleges of Texas report to find these data. On locating the data, the initial data set was coded to include appropriate total enrollments and the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled.

Results

Descriptive statistics were calculated for student enrollment, undocumented student enrollment, and specifically Hispanic student enrollment. These values are depicted in Table 1. The fall 2006 total average enrollment of those Texas community colleges examined was $M = 8,326.91$. Hispanic student enrollment across these same institutions averaged $M = 2,693.29$. The average undocumented student enrollment was recorded at $M = 82.65$. Although the average mean of undocumented students enrolled was smaller in comparison to the community colleges' average overall enrollment and Hispanic student enrollment, a closer look at the number of undocumented students enrolled in these same institutions has revealed a growing enrollment trend.

In Table 2, readers can see the undocumented student enrollment as a percentage of total student enrollment for 2002 through 2006. Means of undocumented student enrollment were also calculated for the aforementioned years. In 2002, the mean average of undocumented students enrolled was $M = 14.35$. Since this year, undocumented student enrollment has continuously increased. As previously mentioned, the average undocumented student enrollment for fall 2006 was $M = 82.65$.

Whereas the first two tables provide descriptive statistics for all of the Texas community colleges, Table 3 shows the total undocumented student enrollment for the top 10 community colleges in the State of Texas. Houston Community College enrolled the most undocumented students in fall 2006 at 499. In addition, most of these community colleges are located in only a few, large metropolitan areas in the

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Texas Community Colleges Total
Undocumented Student Enrollment (*N* = 63)

Year	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2002	14.35	20.37
2003	26.00	36.23
2004	48.08	67.34
2005	66.06	90.44
2006	82.65	100.77

Table 3
Top 10 Texas Community Colleges With Highest Numbers of Enrolled
Undocumented Students for the Fall 2006 Semester

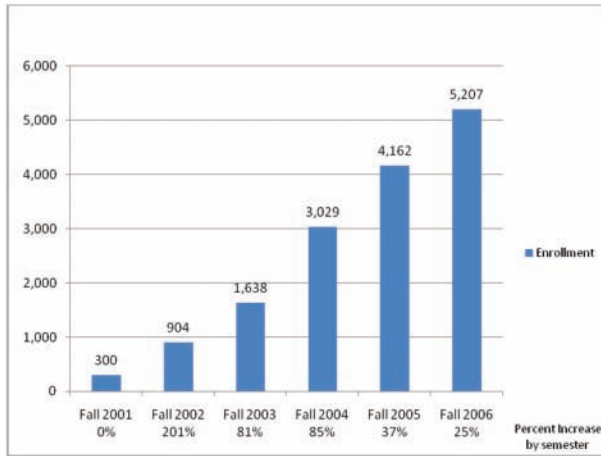
Community College	Undocumented Student Enrollment
Houston Community College	499
Austin Community College	295
DCCD–Brookhaven College	283
San Antonio College	280
DCCD–Richland College	269
South Texas College	263
NHMCCD–North Harris College	246
DCCD–Eastfield College	199
DCCD–Mountain View College	190
San Jacinto College–Central Campus	185

state of Texas. For example, these institutions represent major cities such as Houston, Austin, Dallas, San Antonio, and the greater Rio Grande Valley.

A visual depiction of the rising increase in undocumented student enrollment can be seen in Figure 1. In fall 2001, the state recorded 300 students enrolled under S.B.1528, formerly known as H.B. 1403. Texas community colleges have experienced an enrollment increase every subsequent semester thereafter, with no undocumented enrollment increase less than 25%. As of the fall 2006 semester, the total number of undocumented students in the state was 5,207 (Strayhorn, 2006).

Next, a correlation coefficient was computed between community college size (fall 2006 semester total enrollment) and the number of undocumented students enrolled in each institution for the fall 2006 semester. For statistical significance, these researchers required a *p* value less than .017 (i.e., Bonferroni correction procedure, three correlations calculated resulting in $.05/3 = .017$). The results of the analysis revealed that the correlation between the two variables was statistically significant, $r(61) = .761$, $p = .0001$. Moreover, the Pearson correlation coefficient

Figure 1
Texas Community College Undocumented Student Enrollment
by Fall Semester and Indication of Percentage Increase



represented a strong relationship between the two variables with 58% of the variance of undocumented student enrollment explained by the total number of students enrolled within a Texas community college in the fall 2006 semester. In general, these results suggest that Texas community colleges with larger total student enrollments are more likely to experience larger numbers of enrolled undocumented students.

A second correlation examined the relationship between the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled and the number of undocumented students enrolled in a Texas community college for the fall 2006 semester. The result of the second analysis revealed that the correlation between the two variables was statistically significant, $r(61) = .556$, $p = .0001$. With a Pearson correlation coefficient considered medium in size, 31% of the variance of undocumented student enrollment was explained by the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled within a Texas community college in the fall 2006 semester.

Discussion and Conclusions

Findings from this study have revealed that undocumented student enrollment has continued to increase in community colleges throughout Texas. These students seem to have taken advantage of S.B. 1528 to gain access to Texas community colleges. It is unlikely that Texas community college educators will see a decrease in the number

of enrolled undocumented students in the near future given that this supportive legislation is in place. Other reasons presented in the research literature that may continue to attribute to undocumented student enrollment growth have pointed to the committed open-access philosophy of community colleges, their affordable costs, and their ease of admission (Ayers, 2002; Benitez & DeAro, 2004; Boone, 1997; Davies et al., 2003; Karen, 2002; Lane, 2001; Nora, 2000). There is reason to believe that these community college characteristics have appealed to the undocumented student pursuing a postsecondary education.

In addition, data indicated an enrollment pattern for the fall 2006 semester in which Texas undocumented students preferred larger community colleges in more populous cities. This finding may be attributed to previous findings of researchers who have reported that undocumented aliens in general have exhibited a tendency to domicile and reside in only a few states; furthermore, this settlement pattern may be related to their successful pursuit of low-paid menial jobs in major cities where there is a need and abundance of employment (Camarota, 2004; Gray & Vernez, 1996; Mohl, 2003; Passel et al., 2004; Portes, 2002; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001; Zhou, 1997). Parents and family members who are undocumented aliens and seeking these jobs bring with them their children who are then enrolled in secondary schools. On completion, these undocumented students are ready to pursue a postsecondary education. These students, normally lacking the financial means, enroll into the local community college for aforementioned reasons (Dozier, 2001).

Finally, a statistically significant relationship was found between the number of undocumented students enrolled and the total number of Hispanic students enrolled. This finding suggests that undocumented students are first considering the overall size but particularly the ethnic makeup of the community college they attend. Undocumented students may be enrolling in these institutions because they themselves are Hispanic, thus associating with the dominant enrolled student population. This finding may be the case considering Texas' proximity to Mexico and that over half of the undocumented aliens in the United States have historically been Mexican nationals (Camarota, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

One may also further reason that these students look to these predominantly Hispanic institutions as an opportunity to remain inconspicuous. Researchers have stated that these students, because of their immigration status, are fearful of being deported and investigated; thus, they experience bouts of depression (Dozier, 1992, 2001; Drachman, 2006; Markowitz, 1994). Texas community colleges with a greater than average enrollment of Hispanic students may provide the degree of safety and assurance undocumented students are seeking when attending a postsecondary institution.

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