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# Undocumented Students at the University of San Diego: Using Testimonios as a Theoretical Framework to Understand Their Meaning-Making Process

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**Undocumented Students at the University of San Diego: Using Testimonios as a Theoretical  
Framework to Understand Their Meaning-Making Process**

Isela Reyes

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July 19, 2021

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research was to understand how undergraduate undocumented students navigate the University of San Diego. My research questions are: How can I understand the meaning making process of undocumented students as they navigate the University of San Diego (USD)? How can I cooperate with undocumented students at USD to improve the support services for them? This research uses Kolb's Learning Cycle and *Testimonios* to understand and engage with the participants as they navigate a predominantly white institution. The cycles include individual testimonios, and multi-testimonios to honor their immigration and undocumented identity. Students created an *Ofrenda* and a poem together to represent their journey in the United States. All students identified as DACAmented and as first-generation students.

*Keywords:* undocumented, DACAmented, testimonios

## **Undocumented Students at the University of San Diego: Using Testimonios as a Theoretical Framework to Understand Their Meaning Making Process**

Based on my personal values, I decided my action research must be rooted in them. For me humbleness (*humildad*) is a core value I have been reminded of constantly throughout my life. As I conducted my research with undocumented students, it was important for me to remember the students I am working with are the experts of their experience and I need to approach them with curiosity and respect. Another value important to me is the importance of equity and inclusion; at the University of San Diego (USD), our undocumented students represent a small percentage of our population, but I personally believe this does not mean they should have fewer resources than others. As I implement these values, I feel I will be able to include my passion and portray authentically why I decided to work with our undocumented students.

As a higher education professional, I try to bring these values in my daily work and personal life. As a *Mexicana* who migrated to the U.S. at the age of ten and the first to graduate from college in my family, I had to navigate various systems by myself. It was not until I met others who had similar backgrounds like me and shared their stories that I understood the importance of storytelling. At and after my time at Mills College I started to become proud of my heritage and my journey, and I began to comprehend the importance of community building and support.

The undocumented community at USD and in the U.S. is constantly living in the shadows, and it could be because of the lack of documentation. In fall 2020, USD had a total of 26 self-disclosed undocumented students (23 undergraduates and 3 graduates). Through my research, I highlight to the students the importance of sharing their stories for others to

understand their experience. My hope is through their *testimonios*, our undocumented students feel empowered and motivated as they reflect on all they have accomplished without documentation. I do not want this research to only become a learning experience for those who might read about these students, but also for the participants to empower each other. There was a total of four participants, and all of them are Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) recipients, which means they obtain work authorization and “lawful status” in the U.S. The research questions I utilized for this research are:

1. How can I understand the meaning making process of undocumented students as they navigate the University of San Diego?
2. How can I cooperate with undocumented students at the University of San Diego to improve the support services for them?

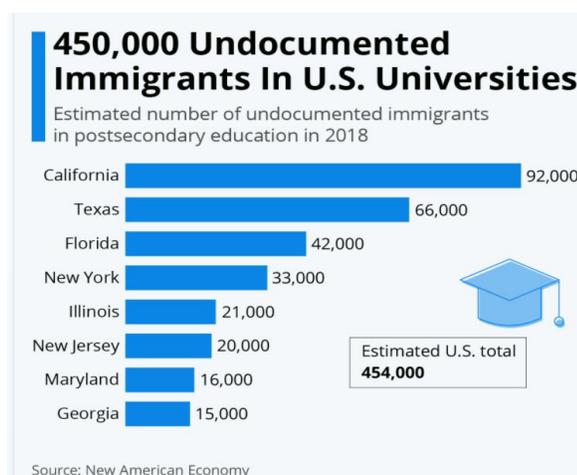
### **Background**

I am currently working with the Career Readiness Program at the USD. The Career Readiness Program is a current graduation requirement and was designed to promote exploration of career development for traditional students. Our non-traditional students, like undocumented students might encounter barriers to some of our resources, especially if, for example, they require a social security number to obtain an internship. Generally, undocumented students must first disclose their undocumented status to USD staff or administration professionals to assist them properly. Raza et al. (2019) share how undocumented students navigate their disclosure process; this could be helpful for career development professionals to become more aware on how to approach all conversations with students. Students need to feel secure while disclosing their undocumented status, which takes time, and that is why it is important for the career development professional to avoid making assumptions (Raza et al., 2019, p. 4).

While understanding the experience of undocumented students is important, it is also important how laws and policies affect these students. Rincón (2008) highlights how politics can negatively or positively affect undocumented students. These laws and policies are constantly changing, and while it is difficult to stay up to date, it is important to serve these students in the best possible way. Redden (2020) discusses how there has been an increase in undocumented immigrants enrolled in higher education, with more than 450,000 undocumented students currently enrolled. This represents about 2% of the student population in the U.S., which is about 4.3% of the 10.5 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. As shown in Figure 1, California is the state with the most undocumented immigrants in higher education (McCarthy, 2020). It is important to note an increase of undocumented students in higher education institutions also means a need to increase resources and support for them to succeed.

### Figure 1

#### *Undocumented Immigrants in U.S. Universities*



The Campaign for College Opportunity (2018) includes data that shows how the lack of financial aid can prevent undocumented students from attending a higher education institution. In 2017-2018, more than 10,000 students applied for California Dream Act Application to receive federal aid, but none of them received it because it was only awarded to Cal Grant applicants.

Puntí and Wright (2019) describe that DACA provided some people with an opportunity to have a work permit and removed a barrier to access higher education. However, DACA also exposed those who qualified and their families to share their information with the government. In 2018, only 52% of those who qualified applied, and that could be because of fear of being exposed. Unfortunately, not all undocumented students qualify for DACA. Andorra (2019) explains how only those who had continuous residence in the United States since 2007 before they were 16 years old can apply for DACA. This means those that were older or did not meet the entrance to the United States date, or left the country and then came back, did not qualify. In addition, DACA is not a path towards permanent citizenship in the US, and it can be removed at any time. Some families had some children who qualified and others who did not, which created more mixed status families. Perez (2009) explains how undocumented students who were in the top 5% in their class had fewer opportunities to attend college, even though some students were accepted to higher education institutions. This was in part because “typically families make lower income, as they are often undocumented” (Perez, 2009, p. 12) and have lower paying jobs.

Crawford et al. (2019) introduce the “triple- minority status,” which describes how these students are typically low income, part of a marginalized racial/ethnic background, and undocumented. This came up in their article in a border school district in Texas; the students at USD might have a similar experience since San Diego is also next to the border. It is important to understand how undocumented students navigate their triple minority status in a higher education institution to advocate for this population. Capturing this information from students can increase awareness and understanding of that undocumented students need to succeed. Garcia (2013) notes sometimes undocumented students do not find out they are undocumented until they see other people around them applying for their driver’s license or applying to college.

This is when the “triple minority status” stands out, and students might get discouraged from attending college. Puntí and Wright (2019) suggest how a sanctuary campus could alleviate some of the stress undocumented students encounter at higher education institutions. This is useful because my understanding is USD is not a sanctuary campus. While sanctuary campuses cannot prevent Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to enter a property with a warrant, undocumented students might feel a greater sense of belonging if the university took a strong stance (Immigrants Rising, 2020). This research might assist the USD community to understand how actions like ICE attending a career fair can create fear. In addition, when the university promotes other “signature” events or requirements, such as study abroad, voting, or even just speaking about traveling around the country as an institution we are not taking into consideration the undocumented community.

### **Context**

The organizational setting for my action research was conducted at the University of San Diego (USD). It is a private, four-year Roman Catholic university located in San Diego, with a total enrollment of about 9,000 students (University of San Diego, 2019b). In addition to my role as the Career Readiness Program Assistant, I am also the liaison between my department and our undocumented students at USD. During my first month in my role, ICE requested to attend our Fall Career Fair. From my perspective, my department has little knowledge on how to manage this request, which led to miscommunications, specifically to our undocumented population at USD. This marked my personal commitment to become a resource for those students within my department and a sense of responsibility for the future. This action research project is a tool for me to understand my responsibility to support undocumented students at USD.

During this research project, the United States had a presidential election year in 2020, and the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service reported a decline in DACA applications in 2019. One of the reasons could have been the fear of DACA ending or fear of deportation if the government had the information of those who applied for DACA. This decline might also relate to Trump’s negative comments about DACA recipients in 2019, stating some DACA recipients are not “angels,” which could have decreased a sense of belonging and safety for DACA recipients (Rupar, 2019). Figure 2 provides an overview of the DACA renewal requests and how many were accepted from 2014- 2019. It shows how from 2017- 2019, there was a decrease in applications, keeping in mind DACA gets renewed every two years (Petts, 2020). All this political and social context is important to understand because it impacts the participant's environment and safety at the University of San Diego.

## Figure 2

### Figure Title

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Number of DACA Renewal Requests Submitted	122,249	391,878	198,520	470,668	287,709	406,586
Number of DACA Renewal Requests Accepted	116,424	363,544	187,354	427,257	258,060	384,586

Source: USCIS Form I-821D Datasets. Immigration data is reported per fiscal year, not per calendar year. The USCIS fiscal year runs from October 1 to September 30. Official data is limited to what USCIS provides. Since DACA is not a visa, the Office of Immigration Statistics does not report on DACA in its Yearbook of Immigration Statistics the way it does for other forms of legal immigration like refugee resettlement and immigrant population segments like new arrivals, asylees/asylum seekers, and international students.

## Methods I/Action Research Model

### Needs Assessment

At the University of San Diego, there is still a very low percentage of undocumented students. While some are outspoken about their status, others still live in the shadows of the

University. In fall 2018, ICE wanted to attend a career fair hosted by the Career Development Center (Cdev). There was no communication to the students about this, and their safety was in jeopardy. I reached out to the Director of Neighborhood & Community Engaged Partnerships who works closely with the undocumented population at USD. She spoke to me about how the students navigated this experience. One of the main themes was a loss of trust towards the Career Development Center and worry about their safety at USD. Many CDev staff and students also learned USD is not a sanctuary campus. For me, knowing USD is not a sanctuary campus made me critically think about my presence and privilege as a documented person, and is the reason why I reached out to those students. I reached out to the student organization on campus to introduce myself and asked them what they would like to know about Career Development. After this initial meeting, I meet at least twice a semester with students to check-in with them and to offer my personal support in their career development. While this is something, I am committed to doing, there are still undocumented students I have not reached. I may not have reached them because I might have not gained their trust yet, or they do not want to be open about their status. As a career development center staffer, I noticed how my department navigated the request from ICE, and even after that, there was no follow-up or active intervention to support our undocumented population with their career development. My perspective is this follow up did not happen because we do not care, but because we do not know how to support them effectively.

When I started my master's program at USD, I wanted to explore more how undocumented students make meaning of their experience at USD. I let the director of neighborhood & community engaged partnerships know and three student leaders who identify as undocumented about my plan to collaborate with them in this action research project. While

my intention is to understand how undocumented students make meaning of their experience at USD, I also wanted the students to celebrate and acknowledge their journey and community.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2018) highlights the political barriers that can negatively influence how career centers support undocumented students. While acknowledging the limitations undocumented students might encounter when looking for jobs is important, it is critical for career counselors to stay up to date with political changes to support undocumented students effectively. This article also emphasizes building trust with the student from the beginning allows the student to disclose their undocumented status. The article notes how it is very common for undocumented students to be confused with international students when they attend a career counseling session because the conversations might introduce the topic of lack of citizenship. Based on USD's website for undocumented students, the Career Development Tab does not cite any specific resources they offer to these students; it only shows links to mainly outside resources (University of San Diego, 2020a). The only specific resource included is an assigned staff member to support undocumented students.

During this project, it was important to understand how politics and education have negatively or positively affected undocumented students. While conducting this research, I tried to stay up to date with politics. In the summer of 2020, the Supreme Court will decide if DACA will still be a resource for some undocumented people in the United States. The participants for this research are undocumented students at USD. I have been building relationships with some undocumented students on campus for the past two years, which became helpful when we had to transition to remote operations in Spring 2021. During my initial research and conversations with people at USD, I noticed there was not much around how these students stay motivated to

continue at USD. That is why my research focuses on understanding their meaning making process, and I tried to create a space for them to share their needs to succeed at the USD.

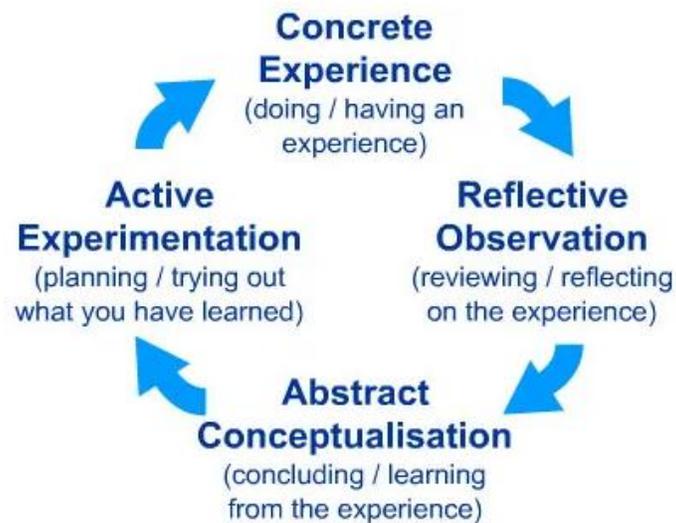
### **Methodology**

The inspiration for my research came from interactions with the undocumented and DACAmented community, both in my personal and professional experiences. All the participants for this research identified as first-generation females and the oldest child in their family. To capture their experience, I used Kolb's (2015) learning cycle and incorporated a *testimonios* lens throughout the cycles. *Testimonios* served as the method to acquire information and understand how undocumented students make meaning of their experience at USD. Perez (2009) describes *testimonios* as a method that produces academic data, disrupting the traditional Eurocentric process. The use of *testimonios* provided me with the framework to value the power of the story telling and to create a space in which the participants feel empowered and valued.

Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycle guided me through my action research project. The model includes: 1) having a concrete experience, 2) making observations and reflections, 3) formulating abstract concepts/generalizations, and 4) testing implications of concepts in new situations. This method aligns with the use of *testimonios* because the whole process allowed me to go deeper into the data and emphasize the reflection stage. The second and third cycles of Kolb's (2015) model function as a second reflection process, which became useful to reflect and implement new facilitation strategies with the students during the next cycles. I wanted to implement *testimonios* and Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycles to remove the deficit thinking people typically have about undocumented students. Throughout the cycles, I wanted to understand and highlight the strengths and the value the participants bring to USD. All this research was conducted virtually through zoom meetings.

**Figure 3**

*Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Cycle*



### Cycles and Results

#### Cycle I: Testimonios

##### *Concrete Experience*

During cycle one, I conducted four individual *testimonios* with the participants through Zoom. I recruited participants from the Torero's Dream organization on campus. I decided to reach out to them because these are students who are already comfortable talking about their experience to their peers. The advisor of the student organization shared my recruitment email to the students, and the students contacted me directly. Through this process, I was able to build rapport with the participants, as I had only met one of the participants before starting this research. I asked the students to review the Research Participant Consent Form (Appendix C) and to reach out to me if they had any questions about the research.

Each participant had the opportunity to view the questions that were going to be asked, and they also had the opportunity to skip a question they did not feel comfortable answering; none of the participants opted to skip a question. I allowed the participants to review the questions because I understood that sharing information about themselves, their family, and their community is personal information. To me, their safety and wellbeing was my main concern, and I did not want them to answer any questions that would create anxiety or fear.

This cycle consisted of 18 questions to guide the conversations with the participants (see Appendix A). All the questions were open ended, which allowed participants to expand and explore other ideas they thought were important and relevant for them to share. The first set of questions focused on the student's background and environment, and the second set of questions asked about their experiences within higher education, focusing on USD. I recorded the testimonios in Zoom and used Descript to transcribe the conversations with the students. I found themes based on the number of times students shared specific experiences around their undocumented or DACAmented identity.

### ***Reflective Observation***

The four participants in my research identified as females, three out of four are DACA recipients, they are all the oldest in their family, and migrated to the United States before they were five years old or younger. Figure 4 shares the participants' demographic information.

### **Figure 4**

#### *Demographics of Participants*

	Pseudonyms	Sex	Race/Ethnicity	Standing at USD	Arrived to the US
1	Nabil	Female	Mexican	First Year	4 years old

2	Debra	Female	Mexican Indigenous	Third Year	5 years old
3	Mia	Female	Hispanic American	Second Year Transfer	4 years old
4	Fiona	Female	Mexican	Third Year	3 years old

During the *testimonios*, there were four major themes that emerged: a sense of responsibility (n=4), using their privilege of having DACAmented status (n=4), the uncertainty that having DACA also created (n = 3) and the community they found at USD (n = 3). Each participant spoke about these ideas in relation to their experiences in making meaning of their experience in higher education.

Based on the number of mentions through the *testimonios*, the sense of responsibility these participants had to attend college was the most prevalent theme. This sense of responsibility is related to being the oldest child in their family, and the first in their family to attend college. Mia explains why she believes this is an important motivation as she navigates USD:

I am the oldest of my family. Also the first to go to college, so I guess that I've kind of wanted to create a pathway for my siblings to follow, especially being Hispanic Americans, it's kind of hard for us to, you know, pave the pathway. I was very determined to pursue secondary education in high school.

Nabil, also the oldest in her family, has a similar sense of responsibility as she attends USD:

I feel like being the oldest child makes college harder. But I feel like I need to motivate my siblings, and I need to figure it out for them. Because they see me doing good in school and stuff. And I feel like, especially my little sisters, they kind of look up to me

cause they're young and they see what I'm doing, and I want to be a good influence to them.

In relation to this sense of responsibility, the participants expressed how being DACA recipients was a privilege, and this also increased their sense of responsibility to their family and community. Fiona expresses how DACA empowered her, but she still had to be careful:

It wasn't until high school when I felt empowered because I had DACA, some type of temporary status which meant I was now going to be protected, and like, I knew that nothing was going to happen to me. I could finally start being more open about my status, but obviously like not really sharing, like my mom's status or anything like that. Always like talking more about my own story and my journey. Um, so I think that [DACA] had an impact on me to become more active in my community and now at USD.

Debra supported Fiona's perspective on the possibilities DACA provides:

Once DACA came out, um, that's where I started getting more motivated. And that's kind of where I saw the possibility for my labor to produce fruits. And so, I think DACA gave me the push to continue going, kind of like the light at the end of the tunnel, that my parents had been helping me push through.

While Debra acknowledges the motivation DACA provided, she also explained how the re-application process limits her and does not guarantee she will continue to have DACA, a "plan B" has always been part of the conversation:

Since an early age I always had to think about another plan, if I couldn't go to college here, or if, you know, if it just didn't work out here, I might have to leave and look for a job in Mexico. I think that was a conversation I had with my parents, but more with myself. I always see that as a possibility, even now. Just because I still do not like living

the way I do, where everything is so ambivalent, there's nothing that's always guaranteed.

That always being like in the “maybe” still makes me very anxious.

These students spoke about how they make meaning of their experiences, and they added the importance of the community they found at USD to succeed in higher education. Fiona mentioned how she found this support:

I remember my first year going from the financial aid office to one stop, multiple times, I was just going back and forth. After I met Maria and Greg, who are the supervisors of our Torero Dream program at USD, they were the ones constantly, just constantly being there to support students. During our Torero Dream’s meetings, they were always asking if we needed support with financial aid or if we needed help in academics. I think that they're doing this because they care, but I also think that the whole university should be able to support DACAmented and undocumented students.

Nabil also speaks to the comfort and support the Torero Dream’s community provided her, even though her meetings were through Zoom as a first-year student:

The Torero Dream organization kind of does like the most helping. I feel like, this organization kind of carries a bigger job in supporting me. When I found out about the organization, I excited because I knew I was going to meet people like me, and I feel like it made it easier to be more open about my undocumented situation. I met all of them through Zoom for the first time and I still feel supported.

The students offered their various perspectives around the responsibility they feel they have being the oldest and using their privilege of having DACAmented status to help others. In addition, they describe the uncertainty that came with having DACA or being undocumented and highlighted how the community they found at USD supports them navigate that uncertainty.

### ***Abstract Conceptualization***

Participating in these *testimonios* made me reflect on how similar these participants are demographically, yet so different. There were obvious differences between each participant, which led me to analyze how I might approach conversations with undocumented students in the future. Something I noticed during my interactions with these participants was how starting with general questions about their backgrounds and community made it easier for students to speak about their undocumented/DACAmented identity. I believe it allowed me to create a better virtual environment with the students and showed them I was interested in learning about them versus just their experiences around their immigration status. Initially, I was surprised my participants were the oldest in their family and first to go to college, but it was a good reminder for me that DACA and resources for undocumented students in general are limited and relatively new in the United States.

### ***Active Experimentation***

As I moved toward cycle two, I was seeking to understand how these students reflect about their values in relation to their immigration status and their experience at USD. I hoped my initial interaction with them allowed me to create a space in which students can express themselves with me and the other participants. During the next cycle, I planned to include less questions and have the students lead the conversation and comment on each other's perspectives. I wanted to observe how the participants react to USD's values from their website and if they align with their own personal values.

### **Cycle II: Values Activity**

#### ***Concrete Experience***

The second cycle included a relationship-building activity through a multi *testimonio* model through Zoom. During this cycle, I asked students to create a tree to represent their values and background; there were two participants during this cycle. Before the students started creating their tree, I asked them to identify their values and then select their top four (see Appendix B). Each student had the opportunity to decide how they wanted their tree to look. As the facilitator, I did not include an example to allow each student to draw their tree on their own without my influence. The only guidance I provided was to include their values as their roots, the trunk should include positive words to describe them, the branches should include their identities, and their leaves should include ways their identity impacts them as they navigate USD. Each student shared their tree and what each section represented. It is important for me as the facilitator to participate to increase trust with these students, but I went last to remove any kind of influence my representation of the tree might have. After we shared our trees and our values, I then shared USD's values, as shown in Figure 5. I went over each value and definition with the students and used the following six guiding questions to frame our conversation around their values in relation to USD's values on their website:

1. First thoughts and reflections?
2. Do your values align with USD's values?
3. Do you think there is some overlap between your values and USD's?
4. Are values important to you?
5. How do you think USD shares its values with you?
6. What value would you like USD to add or remove?

The questions allowed the students to comment on each other's perspectives and experiences. Since there were only two participants during this cycle, and they knew each other from previous

interactions in their classes and the Torero Dream organization, the conversation was predominantly led by both participants. They fed off each other's comments and expanded on their peer's perspectives.

## Figure 5

### *Figure Title*

#### **ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE**

The university pursues academic excellence in its teaching, learning and research to serve the local, national and international communities. The university possesses that institutional autonomy and integrity necessary to uphold the highest standards of intellectual inquiry and academic freedom.

#### **KNOWLEDGE**

The university advances intellectual development; promotes democratic and global citizenship; cultivates an appreciation for beauty, goodness and truth; and provides opportunities for the physical, spiritual, emotional, social and cultural development of students. The university provides professional education grounded in these foundations of liberal learning while preparing students to understand complex issues and express informed opinions with courage and conviction.

#### **COMMUNITY**

The university is committed to creating a welcoming, inclusive and collaborative community accentuated by a spirit of freedom and charity, and marked by protection of the rights and dignity of the individual. The university values students, faculty and staff from different backgrounds and faith traditions and is committed to creating an atmosphere of trust, safety and respect in a community characterized by a rich diversity of people and ideas.

#### **ETHICAL CONDUCT**

The university provides a values-based education that informs the development of ethical judgment and behavior. The university seeks to develop ethical and responsible leaders committed to the common good who are empowered to engage a diverse and changing world.

#### **COMPASSIONATE SERVICE**

The university embraces the Catholic moral and social tradition by its commitment to serve with compassion, to foster peace and to work for justice. The university regards peace as inseparable from justice and advances education, scholarship and service to fashion a more humane world.]

*Approved by the Board of Trustees on February 22, 2004.*

### ***Reflective Observation***

As the students reflected on their values and shared their tree, they noticed how some of their values stayed the same for a long time. They assumed their values were influenced by their experiences and environment. For example, Fiona shared how her top value is “gratitude” and includes the next four values in her list:

I chose “gratitude.” I think that I always try to be like, *agradecida*, that's something that I feel my mom has taught me and something that my family does, like any time. I try to be grateful and thankful for what I have and for anything that happens or anything that comes my way. So, I think that is like the number one value, um, just because I've always grown up with it. And then the other ones that I chose were balance, compassion, family, and kindness.

Like Fiona, Debra also adds how her top value is also influenced by her family:

My number one is “God’s will ...” similarly to Fiona, I think that that's kind of been my base or my rock. In all circumstances that I've been through by my family to rely on my faith to help me move forward. In times of celebration or pain I always go back and think about God's will.

The students expanded to share how these values change and why that might be. Debra explains:

In my head, I think my values kind of hold a different weight...I don't want to say hierarchy, but there are some that I find more important and more prevalent in my life than others. And they are constantly changing for me or the order of them just kind of changes depending on my experiences. As I get older and as I kind of learn to value different things or different parts of who I am evolving, I think all of this influences my values.

After the students reflected on their values and drew their tree to represent how their identity impacts them, this was represented by the leaves of the tree. Both participants spoke about having a sense of responsibility to lead or become a leader despite their immigration status and the barrier it might create. Fiona expressed the following:

I think for me being undocumented is an identity that impacts me negatively but keeps me motivated. I think that is because of the experiences this identity has brought, like having one of my parents get deported and like me not being able to see him, that has really shaped me because I feel like that's like what pushes me to do what I'm doing right now at USD and in my community. I want to be in a position where I help my community in the future and to hopefully lead something to prevent other people go through what I have experienced due to my immigration status.

Debra also mentioned she has been given a leadership role within her family:

I think I'm privileged in being the oldest for being trusted, even though, like, I feel like I've always been given that trust, by them (referring to her parents). I did notice that at an early age, I was given this responsibility to kind of be a leader amongst my siblings. I also tend to take on kind of leadership roles, I guess you could call them, in some of the responsibilities that my parents...I don't want to say they should have, but yeah. That they could have done, but not really because there has always been a language barrier. I'm thinking about when we would go to doctor's appointments and I'd be the one filling out forms or being a translator because I was the first one to learn English in my family.

After the students reflected on their own personal experiences in relation to their values, they had a conversation about USD's values. Overall, the students agreed with the values, but they felt a disconnect between the values and some of the decisions USD has made in the past. Debra mentioned that after looking at the values, she thought about "who are the values for, who implements it, and who they are serving." Fiona adds how in a ceremony during her first year at USD, it was mentioned USD was increasing the number of undocumented and DACAmented students, and in general the diversity of the school was increasing. Now, as a third-year student

she feels “the term diversity and inclusion always gets thrown around, and USD is not living up to it and not really supporting those students they are bringing to USD.”

Regarding the “community” value, Debra mentioned she did not feel community at USD in her first year. She mentioned in her first semester they learned about the possibility of ICE attending a career fair at USD, and expressed the following:

I am thinking about community and USD’s relationship to that word, and who it accounts for. The relationship USD has to the undocumented community at USD and the Linda Vista community was not clear in this situation. I don't understand how USD was thinking about it because, even if they invited ICE just for the fair they must pass by Linda Vista. The sense of safety is not there, even when I see a white car with the green lights, I do not feel safe. Even if they didn't arrest or detain anybody, just their presence, the presence of their vehicle going through their community would have increased their sense of fear.

While none of the students' top values aligned with USD’s values, they expressed the importance of practicing the values USD promotes to support students like them.

### ***Abstract Conceptualization***

This group of students mentioned similarities in their relationship with their values. Both had gratitude as part of their top five. This might relate to the idea of giving back to their community, and how they feel the responsibility to support their family. It was great to see how the students were able to reflect on their values and how they might evolve and change depending on their environment or experiences. This group uncovered great conversations supporting how they see themselves within USD. Based on the experiences they shared, students find community and support outside of the classroom, with their peers and community to keep

them motivated. When asked if they would like USD to add or remove any values, both of them said no. Debra's perspective was "if the University of San Diego is not necessarily showing their commitment to their current values, changing or adding them might not change the actions the institution makes."

### ***Active Experimentation***

Cycle two was extremely useful to understand how students reflect about their values in relationship to the institution they attend. Seeing how their understanding of how their personal values evolved and how they are influenced by others was very powerful. I noticed a strong sense of agreement to each other's statements. This information was helpful for my last cycle. The students had the opportunity to share their individual story in the first cycle, and during the second cycle they were able to hear from each other.

### **Cycle III: Ofrenda and Poem Activity**

#### ***Concrete Experience***

This last cycle was a communal creative process in which the students were able to create a closure activity with me as the facilitator. During this cycle, there were three participants, and this was a two-part cycle. The activity included a community poem, in which each participant included a hope they had for themselves, USD, and the world around their undocumented identity. After they created their statements and added them to the Jamboard, I compiled them in the order I received them and created the community poem. In addition to the community poem, we also created an *ofrenda* to honor their process in the research cycle and their legacy for participating. This activity was inspired by one component of the Day of the Dead ("Día de Muertos") tradition of the Mexican culture to honor those that have died (Brades, 1997). The *ofrenda* includes food, pictures, and other objects those who died liked to celebrate them and

remember them. I wanted to use this in my research to give the opportunity to my participants to honor and remember their past and current experiences as an undocumented person.

Participants were asked to use Jamboard and add images that represented their community, background, and undocumented identity. For these two sections, I asked the students to complete these on their own and met with them virtually one last time to go over their contributions. I did not ask the participants to share their specific contributions; instead, I asked them to reflect and share their process, ideas, and feelings as they were adding to the Jamboard.

### ***Reflective Observation***

As mentioned before, during this activity participants shared their thought processes as they created their section; for this cycle, there were three participants. One of the components for this cycle is the community poem, as shown in Figure 6. The poem was divided into three sections labeled “For Me,” “For the University of San Diego,” and “For the World,” all of them referring to a hope the participants had. For the first section titled “For Me,” Nabil mentioned the following:

There is an importance of always remembering that all I do is not only for me, it is also for my family. I think that if I ever were to think only about me then I would be a *desagradecida* to those that have supported me.

Nabil also spoke about the importance of remembering that she has received support from others in her community:

It was interesting for me to think about this section and I had to include my community in this section too. I have always received support from my family and other people in the community when I arrived to San Diego as a young girl. Similarly, to Nabil, and like I mentioned in the values activity I participated in last time, gratitude is in my top five

values. If I did not think about giving back, then I would be missing a huge part of who I am.

When I asked the students to share their reflections on their statements under the section “For the University of San Diego,” they shared about wanting to be visible and valued at USD. For example, Debra mentioned the following:

For me, this section was, I think the most difficult part, I am not sure why. I think I kept wondering what would be realistic, for some reason I kept telling myself “oh not that”. I wonder if it was because I was thinking “oh that would be too much to ask,” or something like that. At the end I just came up with something that seemed simple, but important. As a DACAmented student I would like to be valued and respected like any other student. Sometimes people feel bad, and I get it, it is hard to be undocumented, but I would like to see more than that financial support. I think the financial support is something to keep us happy. What is USD going to do when there are more of us?

In addition to what Fiona stated, Debra added the following regarding this section of the poem:

I am not sure why, but it also took me longer to write it down. I kept thinking about how much I try to be part of the USD community and I try to share my story whenever I have the opportunity, to increase awareness at the university. But sometimes I feel like it is the same people that are there, and I appreciate them a lot, but how are others going to learn? I am not sure if I feel valued sometimes, and I would like to see more of that from the community at USD. This includes faculty and staff, but also from my peers.

The last section included in the poem is regarding their hope “For the World.” Nabil made a very interesting comment about her reflection for this section:

Now that I go back and realize what I wrote, I think that for this section I used “the world” to symbolize the U.S. unconsciously. The reason why I say this is because, I have lived in this country for most of my life and when I read my phrase, I notice that I do not know how the rest of the world view undocumented people, or migration in general. The only experience I have around what other people think about undocumented people, is from those in the United States. For the most part, if I go outside my bubble or comfort zone, I tend to experience negative situations, due to my status.

Fiona added that for her, this was a goal she wrote for the world but also what she wishes to improve:

In this section I think I took into consideration, yes, how I would like the world to be or change in regards to the undocumented community, but also what kind of actions I would like to take myself to create this vision I have of the “perfect world.” I think that is why I am part of organizations outside of USD to support the undocumented community in San Diego.

## **Figure 6**

*Community Poem*

## Community Poem

### For Me

"I hope to continue to look back at the trajectory of my life and find strength in the efforts of my family and community to move forward and overcome all endeavors.

I hope to continue to make myself and my parents proud. I hope to one day be able to help people who identify as undocumented.

I hope to continue to support my community in whatever ways I can and continue to make myself and my family proud.

### For the University of San Diego

I hope USD can become a more unified and diverse community and engage with undocumented students.

I hope USD can reflect on the way that itself as an institution and its members engage with undocumented people. Treating them as members of the community that ask for a reciprocal relationship, protection, and compensation for the labor.

I hope that USD can support their undocumented and DACAmented students beyond just financial support. I hope they can have a center and full time staff to support this community.

### For The World

I hope the world can one day unify and realize prejudice is unnecessary.

I hope the world comes to realize that legality is a power play, and that there is nothing inherent about anyone's status of legality but luck. Understanding legality as a power play would aid in understanding contemporary issues in a humanitarian way, and hopefully leading to an increase in allies and organizers.

I hope that one day this world can realize the worth and the resilience of the undocumented community."

The next section for this cycle included the creation of an *ofrenda*, and similarly to the poem, the participants were asked to share their experience as they created this. Fiona started the conversation for this section:

This was a beautiful activity, it reminded me of the barriers I have encountered, but also about the community I have found at USD, and in my community in San Diego. For this section I wanted to portray that, and that is why I added pictures around community organizing and some that represented that generational knowledge. I also wanted to include in my pictures the idea of helping and supporting the next generations. This is represented by the picture of the four females braiding each other's hair. I don't think I have ever taken the time to honor my journey, I do not think I have ever thought about honoring myself, until now.

Debra mentioned how she added pictures to reflect the empowerment she has developed recently:

Since I was able to apply and qualified for DACA my life changed. While it is not a permanent solution, it gives me the privilege to use my voice more. That is why for this *ofrenda*, I wanted to honor this opportunity. I added some pictures to show that “undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic” perspective. This is something I try to keep in mind as I navigate higher education and the world overall. To me, practicing this mantra makes my parents' decision to leave our country worth it. Sometimes I think my parents feel bad about all the barriers we must navigate, but I think that if they see me constantly working towards a goal, that motivates them and my siblings.

During this section, Nabil wanted to remember and honor the journey of those that risk their lives as they crossed the border:

The border is just an imaginary line, but a very dangerous one, and the reality is that some people do not understand how difficult it is to make the decision to leave everything behind, with no guarantees in the new country. I wanted to honor those that have lost their lives and those that are separated from their families due to these borders we have. I think that I tend to forget how privileged I am to have my whole family together. Regardless of our barriers due to our documentation status, we are still together. We can support and rely on each other whenever we need to, some people are here by themselves and I cannot imagine how difficult it must be.

## **Figure 7**

*Ofrenda*



Mexicana

### *Abstract Conceptualization*

Before I started this cycle, I wondered if I was asking too much from the participants. After I heard their reflections and how much they enjoyed this process, I felt more comfortable in guiding the conversation. Some of the students mentioned they rarely have the time to reflect on these topics. For example, during the first half of our conversation, we focused on the creation and process of creating the poem, and the students were able to write down what they would like to see. Nabil mentioned that “writing it down was therapeutic, it felt real” and explained that after hearing the other two participants speak about their experiences, gave her hope to think other people had similar experiences and perspectives to her. One of the points that stood out to me from Nabil was when she referenced her section about “the world” was more focused on her experiences within the United States and reminded all of us that part of the undocumented community is not familiar with their birth country. This idea relates to the desire to create a better world or environment for the undocumented community within that “University of San Diego” section. Fiona referenced this in her reflection, acknowledging she “hopes to create

spaces or environments in which undocumented people do not have to be afraid to share their experiences, because this is their home, this is their country.”

During the second section of this cycle, we focused on the representation of the *ofrenda*. I was able to sense the deep thought process students went through to select and add the pictures they wanted to use. Something that stood out as like the previous cycles was the importance of community. For example, Debra acknowledges the privilege she has with DACA, and uses “that privilege to speak to other people about what it is like to be undocumented in this country, to increase empathy and understanding.” This relates to how Nabil portrayed the sacrifices people make to live in the United States, and some people assume people migrate “just because they want to steal others’ jobs.”

During this section, the participants spoke about dismantling assumptions around the undocumented community in the United States. Fiona referenced how she wanted to portray the community and how “community organizing is very important to create change and increase support for undocumented people.” Overall, the students used this *ofrenda* to honor their personal journey and support system and at the same time honored the importance of creating awareness at USD.

### ***Active Experimentation***

Although this final cycle concluded my research, I wanted to make sure I extended how honored I felt to hear from them. At the end of this cycle, I shared my appreciation and how humble I felt to gain trust from them to share personal experiences. These experiences were not only about them, but also about their family and friends. I understand opening about this particular topic might not feel safe, but the participants shared valuable and personal experiences, and I think they also gained some insight to their journey.

### **Limitations**

There were a variety of limitations to my action research. The first relates to student participation. I only had four participants, and I met three out of the four participants for the first time over Zoom. Additionally, all participants were female students from Mexico. My research left out people from different backgrounds and with various identities. Some students at USD might not feel comfortable or do not want to speak about their experiences due to safety concerns. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted my recruiting practices. My original plan before the COVID-19 pandemic was to go to the Torero Dream's club meetings to build rapport with the students and facilitate my introduction to my research. I was not able to do this, therefore, a lot of my communication to recruit was mostly through the student leaders of the organization to share my goals.

Another limitation was my research required more time from my participants, because all the cycles required live interactions with them. I think this limited some participants to volunteer to be part of this research project due to the time commitment required. After going through the cycles, I noticed students have more responsibilities in addition to school. Two out of the three cycles required organizing time with other students; in comparison to surveys or other tasks they could have completed, these participants had to be virtually present to share their insights.

### **Major Findings and Recommendations**

Throughout this research I was able to understand more about how undocumented students make meaning of their experience in higher education. Throughout these cycles I noticed four major themes: responsibility, self-advocacy, uncertainty, and trust. All the students in my research were first-generation college students, identified as females, and were the oldest sibling in their family. These factors contributed to the sense of responsibility as they navigated

higher education, and they spoke about how they felt a sense of responsibility to teach their younger siblings. Additionally, they also feel a responsibility to their community. These students can advocate for themselves within the university setting and promote that outside to their community. The participants used their learning and resources to support community organizations that help the undocumented population. The theme of uncertainty was also constant throughout the research, as laws are constantly changing for those who have DACA. The students spoke about having another plan if they ever have to leave the United States. To navigate this uncertainty, the participants shared how having a support system they can trust and rely on is essential to succeed in higher education. As a result of these findings the recommendations I captured were the following:

### **Increase Training Access**

There is already an optional UndocuAlly training for the USD community. However, making this training a requirement for faculty and staff is important. I believe going through this training will increase empathy and understanding to improve the services for the undocumented and DACAmented community, and I understand some faculty and staff might also be members of the undocumented or DACAmented communities. Making this training accessible and a requirement yearly might be beneficial, as laws are constantly changing.

### **Increase Research**

Learning and hearing from the undocumented and DACAmented community at USD is essential to create and improve resources. The students mentioned three recommendations in the community poem they would like to see:

I hope USD can become a more unified and diverse community and engage with undocumented students.

I hope USD can reflect on the way that itself as an institution and its members engage with undocumented people. Treating them as members of the community that ask for a reciprocal relationship, protection, and compensation for the labor.

I hope that USD can support their undocumented and DACAmented students beyond just financial support. I hope they can have a center and full-time staff to support this community.

If more research is implemented, it might become easier to know what this community needs. Sometimes resources and support are implemented without asking those that will be impacted directly by those changes.

### **Resource Center with a Full-Time Staff**

The recommendation of a resource center with a full-time staff member might be one of the most difficult ones to implement, but one of the most important ones. If mandatory training and research is implemented, there might be a greater understanding of why a resource center and a designated staff member is beneficial. The resource center does not have to be a large space. A resource center with a full-time staff member can create a safe space for the undocumented and DACAmented students to gather and create a sense of *comunidad*. Currently, the students meet in a shared space with other student organizations at USD, so the current environment might limit students from having access to a confidential space. It is important to note this recommendation requires understanding of the needs of this community at USD.

### **Reflection**

Overall, my action research project allowed me to change my perspective on how I will work in the future with undocumented and DACAmented students. Regarding the action research process, I was also able to participate with these students and learned if I listened more with curiosity and respect, I could improve the ways I support these students. Regarding the process of the cycles and COVID-19, the importance of being creative and utilizing resources

was a key learning. Personally, I was hesitant to use Zoom as a tool to interact with the students for the first time and ask them to share personal experiences. However, after completing these cycles, I think the importance of any setting and any first interaction is to create a space where students feel comfortable and respected.

I am hoping to continue my relationship with these students through my current role in the Career Development Center at USD. Understanding the relationship between my role, USD, and the community in which it is located is one of the most important learning experiences. Personally, I believe since USD is in the Linda Vista community, which is next to the U.S.-Mexico border, understanding these relationships are key to developing as a professional. There are 28,000 DACAmented/Undocumented young adults between the ages of 16–24 in San Diego, and these might be our students or our friends (Migration Policy Institute, 2018). In addition, understanding the power that higher education institutions have as we continue to research and share this information with others is key to improving resources. Before starting my research, I did not know how much data and information I was going to be able to gather from my participants. I am thankful for their vulnerability and support. It is not easy to share information that might put their safety and the safety of their loved ones at risk. This journey has been powerful, and I feel privileged to be able to capture the students' experiences at USD and how they make meaning of their journey.

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## Appendix A

### Testimonio's Questions

1. Please tell me about yourself. If someone really knew you well, what would they say about you?
2. How would you describe your academic/education experience?
3. How did your family/mentors/guardians impact your education experiences in the US?
4. When you think about the challenges that you've faced in terms of your educational path, does one story or experience come to mind?
5. When and how did you make the decision to pursue a graduate degree?
6. How has your advanced education impacted your life, and your family? How do you think it impacts your future?
7. What is essential to know about your educational experiences?
8. If you were to write an autobiography, what about your education would you include?
9. What kinds of messages regarding higher education were conveyed to you in the past?
10. What was your most positive experience at USD?
11. What was your most negative experience at USD?
12. Can you share an artifact that represents the best of your USD experience ?
13. ...and Can you share an artifact that represents the worst of your USD experience?
14. Did you ever give any thought to the idea of leaving USD? If so, what made you change your mind?
15. Are you part of any student organizations on or off campus that have impacted your academic experience at USD?
16. If you could change anything about USD to improve your academic experience at USD, what would it be and why do you think that is important?
17. Do you think your immigration status has impacted your academic success at USD? Why or why not?
18. What advice would you give to an aspiring college student with a similar immigration status to yours? *Testimonio's* Guiding Questions

# Appendix B

## Values Worksheet



**THE CONSCIOUS LEADERSHIP  
ACADEMY**

*Engaging deeply. Building capacity for  
leadership that matters.*

### CORE VALUES

*Knowing What Matters*

Acceptance	Decisiveness	Healthy	Preparedness
Accessibility	Dedication	Helpfulness	Privacy
Accomplishment	Dependability	Heroism	Prudence
Accountability	Determination	Honesty	Purpose
Accuracy	Devotion	Honor	Realism
Achievement	Dignity	Hope	Reason
Activeness	Diligence	Humility	Reflection
Adaptability	Directness	Humor	Reliability
Adventure	Discipline	Imagination	Resilience
Agility	Discovery	Independence	Resolve
Alertness	Discretion	Initiative	Respect
Ambition	Diversity	Innovation	Responsibility
Appreciation	Drive	Inspiration	Restraint
Approachability	Duty	Integrity	Rigor
Assertiveness	Education	Intelligence	Sacrifice
Attentiveness	Effectiveness	Joy	Security
Authenticity	Efficiency	Justice	Self-control
Availability	Elegance	Kindness	Self-discipline
Balance	Empathy	Knowledge	Self-reliance
Beauty	Encouragement	Leadership	Sensitivity
Benevolence	Endurance	Learning	Service
Boldness	Energy	Liberty	Simplicity
Bravery	Entertainment	Logic	Sincerity
Calmness	Enthusiasm	Love	Skill
Candor	Equality	Loyalty	Spirituality
Capability	Excellence	Mastery	Stability
Caution	Excitement	Mindfulness	Status
Challenge	Experience	Modesty	Strength
Change	Expertise	Monogamy	Success
Clarity	Exploration	Motivation	Support
Cleanliness	Fairness	Neatness	Teamwork
Collaboration	Faith	Open-mindedness	Tolerance
Commitment	Family	Optimism	Tradition
Compassion	Fearlessness	Order	Tranquility
Competence	Ferocity	Originality	Trust
Confidence	Fitness	Passion	Truth
Conformity	Flexibility	Patience	Understanding
Connection	Fluency	Peace	Uniqueness
Consistency	Focus	Perceptiveness	Unity
Contentment	Freedom	Perfection	Valor
Cooperation	Friendship	Perseverance	Variety
Courage	Fun	Persistence	Vitality
Courtesy	Generosity	Philanthropy	Warmth
Craftiness	God's Will	Playfulness	Wisdom
Creativity	Gratitude	Pleasure	Wonder
Credibility	Growth	Power	Zeal
Curiosity	Happiness	Pragmatism	
Daring	Harmony	Precision	

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[CONSCIOUSLEADERSHIP@SANDIEGO.EDU](mailto:CONSCIOUSLEADERSHIP@SANDIEGO.EDU)

## Appendix C

### Research Participant Consent Form

**University of San Diego  
Institutional Review Board  
Research Participant Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:  
Undocumented Students at the University of San Diego: Using *Testimonios* as a Theoretical Framework

#### **I. Purpose of the research study**

Isela Reyes is a student in the Masters in Higher Education Leadership program at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to understand how undocumented students at the University of San Diego make meaning of their experience as they navigate higher education.

#### **II. What you will be asked to do**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

1. (1 hour) During the first cycle. You will participate in a values activity. You will be asked to draw a tree and share how your values are represented or not at USD.
  - During this activity, you will be asked to share how your identities interact with one another and how your values are reflected in your educational journey at USD.
2. (1 hour) The second cycle will be the *testimonios*, you will be asked some questions to understand your experience at USD. You may ask to receive the questions ahead of time.
3. (1 hour) The third cycle will be an activity we all create together. During this activity, we will use an *Ofrenda*. We will create a virtual board to share a personal hope you have for yourself, the world and USD.

You will be audio recorded during this interview for the researcher's assistance only.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 180 minutes/ 3 hours. Each cycle will happen every other week. Each cycle will be an hour long.

#### **III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

**Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, please contact the University of San Diego Counseling Center at (619) 240-4655 for further assistance. You may also call the free San Diego Crisis Line at (888) 724-7240.**

#### **IV. Benefits**

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand how undocumented students navigate higher education institutions like USD.

#### **V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually. All zoom calls will have a passwords and will only be shared to those who are participating in the research.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and **may not** be used in future research.

#### **VI. Compensation**

**If you participate in the study, the researcher will give you** a \$15 dollar gift card at the end of the spring semester (2021) via email. Regardless of how long you participate.

#### **VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this**, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

#### **VIII. Contact Information**

**If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:**

**1) Isela Reyes**

**Email:** ireyes@sandiego.edu

**2) David Karp**

**Email:** dkarp@sandiego.edu

**I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.**