

The Implications of Using Creative Writing as a Way of Coping With the Socio-  
Emotional Challenges of Undocumented College Students and Graduates

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Madre,           mi fuego inextinguible  
                          usted es amor  
                          entre huracanes feroces  
                          usted es mi luz  
                          en las tinieblas del abismo  
                          usted es pasión  
                          entre volcanes furiosos  
                          usted en mi razón  
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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore the implications of using creative writing as a means of coping with the mental and emotional challenges of undocumented university students and graduates in the San Francisco Bay Area. Although progress has been made with the passage of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), most undocumented young people in the United States can still be deported, cannot legally work, and cannot put their education and abilities to use. To better understand these implications, I conducted a qualitative study using Grounded Theory, with six undocumented individuals who engage in creative writing. They included three male and three female university students and graduates and were undocumented at the time of the study. Data were collected through one-on-one, open-ended interviews and analysis of students' original creative writing work. This study revealed that creative writing is an effective way of healing, making personal connections, and coping with the socio-emotional challenges of undocumented young people.

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**CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

*The high school campus is nearly empty and the sun has long set as I sit in the staff room planning the next day's lesson. Suddenly, an email from the Human Resources manager pops up on my screen. "Julio, I have your W-2 in my office. Please come see me." My mind drowns among a million thoughts.*

*The following day goes by in slow motion. The anxiety builds up inside of me as the clock in my classroom ticks the seconds away. When the school day is over, I'm ready to face my truth. I slowly walk to her office, pause, take a deep breath.*

*"You wanted to see me?" My voice shakes.*

*"We received this letter from the Social Security Administration," she says, as she hands it to me, "I think we have your number wrong. Can you check your social security card and get back to me?"*

*I feel as if the room is shrinking; I am trapped with no way out. I battle the knot in my throat, force myself to smile, and say, "Sure, I'll check when I get home."*

This was January 2011 during my fourth and final year as a Spanish high school teacher. In recent years, the debate over immigration policy in the United States has focused primarily on the undocumented population. Undocumented immigrants are foreign nationals who: (a) entered the United States without authorization; or (b) entered legally but remained in the United States without authorization (USC Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, as cited by Amaya et al., 2007). The Pew Research Center

(2006) estimates that approximately 11.5 to 12 million undocumented immigrants reside in the U.S.; 15%, or 1.8 million, of those immigrants are under the age of 18 (Gonzales, 2007). However, the politicized debate over our nation's immigration problems has largely ignored the plight of undocumented youth. Although a majority of undocumented young people, 18-30 years of age, have attended elementary school and high school in the United States, without a remedy to adjust their immigration status, attending college proves a difficult challenge. A projected 65,000 undocumented students, who have lived in the United States for five years or longer, graduate from U.S. high schools every year; however, only between 5 and 10 percent of these students go on to college (Gonzales, 2007). In 2001, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act proposed a path to legalization for undocumented immigrant students; the legislation, unfortunately, has failed to pass through Congress. In 2010, the DREAM Act passed the House of Representatives, but was five votes short of reaching the necessary 60 votes to end the Republican filibuster in the Senate (Hing, 2010).

Former President George W. Bush was a supporter of comprehensive immigration reform; however, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, immigration reform fell out of the national agenda (U.S. Immigration Support, 2012). Instead of a comprehensive immigration process, the Bush administration created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), increased funding for border security and deportations, and turned local police officers into immigration agents (Hesson, 2012). The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) was the last time any real "mass" legalization program was implemented in the U.S. (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.). The result of

the lack of a comprehensive immigration process has been a generation of undocumented children who are now reaching adulthood and entering the labor market without any means of adjusting their immigration status (Gonzales, 2010).

Of the total number of undocumented students who graduate from U.S. high schools every year, approximately 40% or 26,000 reside in California (Pew Hispanic Center, as cited by Amaya et al., 2007). Consequently, California has led the country in enacting laws that ease access to higher education for undocumented students. In October 2001, California passed Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540), a law that makes any student, regardless of immigration status, who has attended a California high school for at least three years, eligible to pay in-state tuition at public institutions of higher education (Pérez, 2010). To be eligible, students must sign an affidavit stating that they will legalize their immigration status as soon as they are eligible to do so, although there has been no path created by the federal government to legalize their status. Furthermore, in 2011, California passed Assembly Bill 130 (AB 130) and Assembly Bill 131 (AB 131), two laws that together comprise the California DREAM Act. AB 130, which went into effect on January 1, 2012, makes undocumented college students in the state of California eligible for privately funded grants and scholarships. AB 131, which went into effect on January 1, 2013, makes California undocumented college students eligible for publicly funded grants and scholarships, such as Cal Grants.

Although states, such as California and Texas, are enacting laws to make college more accessible to undocumented students, the complexity of the situation of undocumented students remains; undocumented students can be deported at any time,

cannot legally work in this country, and cannot apply their educations and abilities to the best possible use due to work restrictions (Gonzales, 2007). However, one group that supports undocumented young people in pursuit of college, career, and citizenship is Immigrant Success Through Activism, Networking, and Defense (I-STAND). I-STAND is a pseudonym that I created for this study in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants. This non-profit organization, based in the San Francisco Bay Area, receives funding from a group of Silicon Valley technology leaders. Among those funders are Jeff Hawkins, inventor of the Palm Pilot; the family foundations of Andrew Grove, co-founder of Intel; Mark Leslie, founder of the former Veritas Software Corporation; and Laurene Powell Jobs, widow of Apple Inc. co-founder Steve Jobs (Jordan, 2012). According to the group's Web site, since 2006, I-STAND has offered scholarships, legal services, career internships, and a peer network for undocumented students in the San Francisco Bay Area. Although I-STAND and their funders are actively engaging resources to support undocumented young people, the number of such organizations in the country is extremely limited, leaving most undocumented students to fend for themselves. Consequently, even after college graduation, many undocumented students find themselves in limbo in regards to their future careers.

On June 15, 2012, in response to growing pressure by the undocumented youth movement, and a corresponding lack of action by Congress, President Barack Obama announced that his administration would be granting certain undocumented immigrants who meet stringent criteria work authorization and relief from deportation. According to the U. S. Department of Homeland Security (2012), the Deferred Action for Childhood

Arrivals (DACA) program grants work authorization and protection from deportation for two years to undocumented immigrants under the age of 31 who entered the country before the age of 16, have resided in the U.S. for at least five years, have graduated from high school, and do not pose a threat to national security. Although this program is a step in the right direction, it is not a permanent solution to our immigration problem, nor does it provide a path to citizenship. According to the U. S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Office of Performance and Quality (OPQ) (2012), a total of 102,965 DACA cases had been approved as of December 13, 2012. During his announcement on June 15<sup>th</sup>, President Obama responded to a reporter's argument against the program by saying, "It is the right thing to do for the American people. And here's why—Here's the reason: because these young people are going to make extraordinary contributions, and are already making contributions to our society" (The White House, 2012).

Due to the many burdens that come with living as an undocumented individual in the United States, undocumented young people must cope with countless socio-emotional challenges. Minority children in general are affected by environmental factors, such as poverty, violence, lack of resources, and discrimination (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). However, the immigration status of undocumented students adds an extra layer of systemic barriers that prevent them from fully enjoying most social and financial benefits (Pérez et al., 2010). Plagued with these barriers, along with the sense of shame and discrimination that accompany many undocumented individuals, it is extremely important to find outlets of support and encouragement to help cope with the socio-emotional and academic challenges.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Even with the passage of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), most undocumented young people in the United States can still be deported at any time, cannot legally work in this country, and cannot put their educations and abilities to use (Gonzales, 2007). Furthermore, even for those individuals who have been granted DACA or another form of relief, the negative emotional and mental effects of the many years of living as undocumented in the U.S. do not vanish with a simple work permit (Avila, 2012).

### **Background and Need**

Although the 1982 U.S. Supreme Court case *Plyer v. Doe* ruled that undocumented children must be provided access to a free K-12 public education in order for these students to function in society and contribute to the development of the United States, most undocumented students are barred from actively contributing to society in any meaningful way by exercising their education (Gonzales, 2007). In the last 10 years, the country has debated comprehensive immigration reform, as well as the DREAM Act, which has not been enacted nationally, leaving states to tackle issues of immigration on their own. Several states, including California and Texas, have passed laws to ease college access for all. Across the country, there are a limited number of organizations that support undocumented students. However, the majority of undocumented young people find themselves living in the shadows of U.S. society. Indeed, their tenuous circumstances and severe challenges due to their immigration status cause numerous

socio-emotional and academic hardships, including homelessness, stress, depression, poverty, and family conflicts, among others (Pérez et al., 2010).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the implications of using creative writing as a means of helping to cope with the socio-emotional challenges of undocumented university students and graduates in the San Francisco Bay Area. To better comprehend these implications, I conducted a qualitative, Grounded Theory study with six individuals who participate in the creative writing program at I-STAND. Using Grounded Theory analytical procedures, theory emerged from the data collected. The six individuals who participated in this study were all undocumented Latino/a and Asian immigrants and have all engaged with creative writing. They wrote about not being able to return to their homelands, the challenges and fears of living in the shadows, and about wanting to be accepted as Americans. As an undocumented individual myself, it is evident that our stories need to be documented and shared, with the hope that they can inspire change in our communities and serve as a model to other undocumented individuals who may not have access to programs that can support them in expressing their stories creatively.

For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms were used throughout this study. Data were collected through one-on-one, open-ended interviews and analysis of students' original creative writing work. Grounded Theory allowed me to reach data saturation in order to fully support the themes that emerged from the interviews and analysis of creative writing. Grounded Theory was the most appropriate approach to study this group because this method provides the tools and structure to better understand the implications

of using creative writing as a way of coping with the socio-emotional challenges of undocumented university students and graduates.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions pertaining to this study were as follows:

- What did the literature reveal about the ways in which undocumented students are affected by their immigration status?
- How do undocumented students cope with the effects of their immigration status?
- What are the implications of using creative writing as a means of coping with the socio-emotional challenges of undocumented university students and graduates?

### **Significance to the Field**

The participants received no direct benefit from this study, apart from receiving a copy of the findings. However, educators, along with the broader community of undocumented students in the United States, would greatly benefit from understanding the implications of using creative writing as a means of coping with socio-emotional challenges. No research was found in the literature in regards to the use of creative writing in a supportive environment to help undocumented young people cope with their socio-emotional difficulties. Consequently, this study aims to fill this gap in existing literature. However, many subsequent studies are needed to adequately explore the implications of using alternate coping mechanisms by and for undocumented students.

### **Definitions**

- *Socio-emotional*. The impact of an individual's immediate environment on their emotional and mental state (Becker & Luther, 2002, and Santrock, 1997, as cited by Pérez et al., 2010).
- *Undocumented Immigrant*. Individuals who entered the United States without authorization; or entered legally, but remained in the United States without authorization (USC Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, as cited by Amaya et al., 2007).

### **Limitations**

I, the researcher, am the coordinator of the creative writing program at I-STAND and I actively participate in the creative writing classes. As the coordinator of this program, I have accessibility to a special group of creative writers who have a unique story to tell concerning their undocumented status in the U.S. and how they have come together in a supportive environment. Although this study has provided us with a unique narrative on these students that could serve as heuristic guidance for those interested in supporting undocumented young people, the findings only apply to this group and, thus, are not generalizable to other contexts, groups, or social environments. However, Grounded Theory, as an analytical procedure, did allow for comparing and contrasting the findings with what is known in the field. Due to the sampling methods, the small number of participants, and the fact that I am a participant observer in this group, this study had inherent bias and thus may not be representative of undocumented students as a whole.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study was discussed with Dr. Juan Necochea at NHU on March 14, 2012. Dr. Necochea approved the research project. The study was conducted ethically, and was reviewed and approved by the National Hispanic University Internal Review Board. All participants remained completely anonymous, were fully informed about the study, and gave their written consent.

### **Summary**

Over 25 years have passed since a path toward legalization was available for the majority of undocumented immigrants living in the United States. Without action from Congress, undocumented young people have been forced into the shadows, and barred from fully contributing and participating in our society. In the absence of support from society, a self-forming group of undocumented students has provided a safe space to use creative writing as a way of processing, healing, and becoming empowered by the harsh realities of growing up as undocumented in the United States. This group offers a unique perspective into the lives of undocumented young people, and brings hope to what may otherwise be a daunting challenge. This study aims to tell the story of this particular group, and of how they have used creative writing as a way of coping with the socio-emotional challenges brought about by their immigration status, or lack thereof.

## CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

Debate continues over the proposed Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, a federal bill that would provide a path to legalization for undocumented young immigrants. More recently, the prospect for broad immigration reform has also been debated in Congress. Meanwhile, undocumented young people have been left to fend for themselves; dealing with the reality that they can be deported at any time, they cannot legally work, nor can they apply their educations and abilities beyond higher education (Gonzales, 2007). A handful of states, including California and Texas, are providing in-state tuition and financial aid to undocumented students, and few organizations exist to support undocumented students through their academic journey. However, these supports are insufficient in contrast to the many challenges that undocumented college students face. Using Grounded Theory, this study shares the story of a group of undocumented young people who gathered regularly in creative writing activities, which on the surface appeared to serve as an outlet for their legal status, as well as a supportive environment.

This section presents an overview of relevant literature related to undocumented students. Through reviewing the literature on undocumented young people, I realized that the small but growing research on this population focuses primarily on undocumented students who are pursuing higher education. By excluding the experiences and challenges of undocumented young people for whom higher education is not a possibility, the literature fails to paint a clear and complete picture of the many barriers that confront undocumented young people. The literature reviewed in this section, therefore, aims to

provide a more comprehensive understanding of the many challenges that undocumented young people face.

Although the literature on the topic is vast, the focus here is on several subthemes which are deemed most relevant to the essential premise of this research: (1) the barriers faced by undocumented young people, and their effects, (2) ways undocumented young people cope with their immigration status, and (3) the use of narrative therapy to help treat mental and emotional health issues. The review of literature pertaining to undocumented young people appears to make these themes prominent.

### **Barriers Faced by Undocumented Young People, and their Effects**

Apart from the environmental factors, such as poverty, violence, lack of resources, and discrimination faced by minority students, undocumented students face an extra layer of systemic barriers that prevent them from being full and active members of society (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). Many of the obvious barriers faced by undocumented young people have already been stated in the first chapter. The lack of legal immigration status prevents undocumented people from legally working in this country, keeps them from obtaining a driver's license or any form of U.S. government-issued identification, bars them from accessing most financial aid for higher education, and keeps them in constant fear and risk of deportation (Gonzales, 2007). Undocumented immigrant youth in the United States have legal access to a K-12 public education, but they face legal restrictions and economic barriers to higher education and the workforce (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Without recourse to adjust their immigration status, undocumented youth face countless societal, structural and legal barriers that make it

almost impossible to avoid a life of poverty and hardship (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Abrego and Gonzalez (2010) also argue that beyond the school setting, undocumented students may face pressure from their family to contribute financially. This leads many undocumented youth to seek employment in order to pay tuition, transportation, and contribute in their homes.

For many undocumented students who are faced with these overwhelming barriers, the result is an uphill battle with feelings of anguish and disappointment; which often cause emotional setbacks (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). These students face tremendous mental and emotional health challenges due to the many factors that negatively hinder their social and economic mobility (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Hispanics that experience economic challenges, cultural exclusion, alienation, lack of support networks, and emotional and psychological problems are at high risk of committing suicide (Wadsworth & Kubrin, 2007). For undocumented individuals, these factors are almost always present. Wadsworth and Kubrin (2007) concluded; “across U.S. metropolitan areas, Hispanic immigrants commit suicide at a higher rate than their native-born counterparts (Wadsworth & Kubrin, 2007).” The tragic story of Joaquin Luna, an 18-year old undocumented immigrant who shot himself in 2011 the night after Thanksgiving, is a heartbreaking example of this reality. Joaquin left letters behind expressing his frustration and anxiety due to his immigration status (Vargas, 2011).

Cristini, Scacchi, Perkins, Santinello, and Vieno (2011) conducted a quantitative study to examine the link between perceived discrimination, depressive symptoms, cultural identity and social support at school reported by immigrant adolescents. Their

results confirmed the hypothesis that perceived discrimination is linked with higher levels of depressive symptoms. The results also confirmed the relevant role of school context and especially the role of support from adults in this context, as the only significant protective factor for psychological well being of immigrant adolescents (Crisitni et al., 2011). Furthermore, there is a strong association between feelings of discrimination, as a result of blocked opportunities, and violence. Such feelings are often a source of frustration and anger, which manifest themselves through aggressive and violent behavior (Mesh, Turjeman, & Fishman, 2008).

The research literature indicates that undocumented students face an enormous amount of societal, academic, programmatic, and professional barriers due to their immigration status. The research articles that were evaluated in this section provide recommendations for improving the circumstances of immigrant adolescents in order to avoid creating a legal disenfranchised class in our society. However, the recommendations focus strictly on external changes, failing to include any sort of internal tactics to help undocumented immigrant youth cope with the socio-emotional challenges caused by their immigration status. The current study aims to fill this gap.

### **Ways Undocumented Young People Cope with their Immigration Status**

Undocumented immigrant youth are faced with enormous challenges as the limitations imposed by their status become evident. A majority of young students who are undocumented are either struggling to succeed in college, or could not continue their education beyond high school (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). The literature reviewed in this section examines the experiences and coping mechanisms of undocumented young

people. Coping is defined as what an individual does to deter or alleviate a stressful or threatening situation, it must have the dual function of problem-solving and regulation of emotional distress (Rutter, 1988 as cited by Pérez et al., 2010). Through conducting research on this topic, I found that very little research is available that speaks directly to the methods in which undocumented young people cope with their immigration status. Instead, the research presents recommendations for policy changes and ways in which educators and community members can support undocumented young people.

Providing a viable pathway to citizenship is the most common, and perhaps most important, recommendation. This pathway to legalization would lift undocumented people out of poverty, integrate them into society, and give them opportunities to compete for financial aid and jobs (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Regarding education, undocumented students greatly benefit from the social networks they build with peers, teachers, counselors, and other educators, in part because these networks provide a safe space in which they can engage in mainstream activities and be contributing members of a mainstream institution (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). Consequently, teachers, counselors, and other professionals working in educational institutions are crucial to guiding and supporting undocumented students by providing them with access to information about, and assistance in applying for, higher education (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010).

Undocumented young people are often faced with setbacks due to their immigration status. For many of them, the only way of coping with these setbacks is to suppress their feelings of despair (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010).

Undocumented young people are in need of community services that address education,

occupation, and physical and mental health issues, in order to ensure they grow up healthy and can actively contribute to society (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, and Coronado (2010) identified parents, institutional agents, peer influence and support, campus support programs, and civic engagement as the five main entities that undocumented Latina and Latino college students attribute to helping them cope with their challenges of their immigration status. The authors provide a list of intervention strategies that may be implemented to help undocumented Latina and Latino college students seek the support they need without fear or threat. These interventions consist of training college faculty and staff in working with and advising undocumented students, establishing multicultural support programs and services, fundraising for undocumented students, establishing coalitions, expanding and improving college outreach, and revamping health and clinically oriented services (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010).

Perhaps the most effective and influential coping mechanism employed by undocumented young people is the advocacy efforts that made changes, like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), possible. Since 2001, undocumented young people have been advocating for the DREAM Act, with actions like the trail of dreams, a fifteen-hundred-mile journey to the nation's capital, dream graduations, coming out of the shadows rallies, civil disobedience actions that resulted in arrest, public actions stopping traffic in major cities, and countless other non-violent actions (Wong, Shaddock-Hernández, Inzunza, Monroe, Narro, & Valenzuela Jr., 2012). The immigrant youth movement has allowed undocumented young people across the country to feel

empowered by their identity, to find an accepting and supportive community, and to create positive change and opportunities for all immigrants (Wong et al., 2012).

### **Use of Narrative Therapy to Help Treat Mental and Emotional Health Issues**

Extensive research exists on the effects and outcomes of using a narrative approach to mental and emotional health problems; however, none of these studies were conducted with the undocumented population. This section aims to present, and assess the effectiveness of, methods of using narrative therapy to help treat socio-emotional health problems. It is important to note that the participants of this study participated in a creative writing class, not narrative therapy; however, the creative writing process is part of the narrative therapy approach (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009).

Using narrative therapy as a client-centered approach allows people to be experts in their own lives; it separates people from problems and assumes that people have many qualities that can help them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives (Vishwanatha & Hirisave, 2008). Furthermore, narrative therapy allows an individual to externalize a problem, effectively removing it from the person's identity, allowing the individual to focus on the problem rather than their identity with the problem (Rappleyea & Munk, 2008). Ultimately, a narrative therapy approach aims to reinforce the premise that beliefs, practices, feelings and attitudes are distinctly separate from the person (Rappleyea & Munk, 2008).

Doctor of Philosophy candidates of Marriage and Family Therapy at Texas Tech University, Damon L. Rappleyea and Adam C. Munk (2008) describe an approach grounded in narrative therapy to help youth examine their reactions in difficult situations

and explore more adaptive solutions. Using a narrative therapy intervention, which invited adolescents to think critically about their current responses to difficult situations, and then reflect upon other ways of reacting to the same situation, the authors found success in being able to “change the stories” of the youth they work with (Rappleyea & Munk, 2008). Furthermore, they claimed that the “unique outcome derived throughout this experience liberated adolescents in their continued efforts toward coping with the changing landscape of their emotional responses (Rappleyea & Munk, 2008, p.42).”

In another study conducted with children ages 9-12 that examined the feasibility of using the narrative approach for managing childhood mental health problems, researchers found that there was a decline in teacher-reported problems in all cases of students who had experienced narrative therapy (Vishwanatha & Hirisave, 2008). These results support the core belief of narrative therapy that people have the power to reduce the impact of problems in their lives; they also suggested that narrative therapy may be useful in dealing with the mental health needs of school going populations (Vishwanatha & Hirisave, 2008). Writing can also serve as a transformative tool to help individuals change traumatic events into an empowering and “life-giving” story (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009). Furthermore, in order for therapeutic writing to be effective, it requires a safe and enriching environment (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009).

The research literature indicates that narrative therapy can be an effective way of managing, coping with, and healing from emotional and mental health problems and challenges. The research articles that were evaluated in this section provided great insight into the various uses and results of using narrative therapy. However, none of these

studies focus specifically on undocumented youth living in the United States. The current study aims to understand the implications and effects of using creative writing as a way of coping with the socio-emotional challenges of undocumented students.

### **Summary**

The research studies reviewed in this chapter indicate that undocumented students encounter a tremendous amount of societal, academic, programmatic, and professional barriers due to their immigration status. These students also face many socio-emotional challenges and must find ways of coping with these challenges. Additionally, the research indicates that narrative therapy can be an effective way of coping with socio-emotional challenges. However, the research literature does not address any internal method of coping with the socio-emotional challenges experienced by non-Latino undocumented immigrant students. The current study would contribute to the existing literature by conducting a qualitative study to better understand the implications and effects of using creative writing as a way of coping with the socio-emotional challenges of undocumented Latino and Asian immigrant students.

### CHAPTER 3: Methodology

After reviewing existing literature, it was evident that more research is needed to understand the implications of using creative writing to cope with the socio-emotional challenges of undocumented university students and graduates. In light of the societal, academic, programmatic, and professional challenges faced by undocumented students, along with the lack of research addressing internal methods of coping with these socio-emotional challenges, I decided to explore the implications and effects of using creative writing as a coping mechanism. Although one of the limitations of the study is its generalizability, the findings may be useful in assisting educators, the broader community of undocumented students, and other individuals who may be experiencing similar challenges to better understand the implications of using creative writing as a means of coping with socio-emotional challenges. The purpose of this study was to gain knowledge about a specific group of undocumented college students and graduates in the San Francisco Bay Area who already engage in creative writing, in order to share the story of this group and how they support themselves.

In order to achieve this purpose, my study asked the following questions: What did the literature reveal about the ways in which undocumented students are affected by their immigration status? How do undocumented students cope with the effects of their immigration status? What are the implications of using creative writing as a means of coping with the socio-emotional challenges of undocumented students?

In conducting this research I employed qualitative research methods under the Grounded Theory approach (Creswell, 2005). Grounded Theory, often used in

exploratory studies like this one, is meant to build theory rather than test it; to generate explanatory propositions that correspond to real-world phenomena. The goal is to reach saturation of data or the point at which no further substantial information can be added. Grounded Theory provides tools for handling masses of raw data, beginning with a basic description of the data, followed by conceptual ordering (organizing data into discrete categories), and then theorizing (conceiving concepts and formulating them into a logical, systematic, and explanatory scheme; Patton, 2002). This established analytical method was employed in this study in order to tell the story of the group of undocumented students and how they support themselves through their many creative writing interactions.

For this study, I used inductive and deductive processes to reveal and inform what is already known about this particular subset of the population (Creswell, 2005). I gathered data using both one-on-one interviews and my analysis of original creative writing work. The narrative data from the interviews were transcribed, coded, and categorized into themes related to the research questions. This approach allowed me to collect the most detailed, personalized accounts of the experience of using creative writing as a means of coping with the socio-emotional challenges faced by undocumented university students and graduates in the San Francisco Bay Area.

### **Setting**

In order to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants of this study, the specific locations, names, or other identifying information, other than the group meets in the general San Francisco Bay Area, have not been revealed. The creative writing

classes were held in a conference room with only the instructor and the students in attendance. The group met once a week over a period of six weeks. I conducted a total of six one-on-one interviews, one with each of the six participants. The interviews, which occurred from August to October 2012, were held at cafes and participants' homes.

### **Sample/Participants**

#### **Sampling**

The sampling procedures employed were convenience and purposive sampling (Creswell, 2005). The participants were restricted to those who have participated in the creative writing program that I coordinate at I-STAND, a nonprofit organization that supports undocumented students. Participants of this study included six undocumented, Latino/a and Asian, college and post-graduate students ages 23-24. This particular group was targeted due to their undocumented immigration status, their involvement with creative writing, their academic level, and their willingness to participate.

#### **Description of Participants**

Because I conducted a qualitative study, I was more concerned about exploring a small number of students' experiences as deeply as possible than I was about representation or generalizability to the theoretical population (Creswell, 2005). The six participants in the study included: two Mexican male undocumented college graduates, one Salvadorian female undocumented college student, one Mexican female undocumented college student, one Chinese-Peruvian male undocumented post-graduate student, and one Filipina undocumented college graduate. Participants were fluent in English, but also spoke and understood Spanish and Tagalog. All participants came from

lower socio-economic backgrounds, immigrated to the United States during childhood, and attended universities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Data from this study spoke to the effects of using internal methods, such as creative writing, to deal with socio-emotional challenges.

### **Research Instruments**

For this qualitative study, I used open-ended questions (see Appendix A for a complete list of questions and sub-questions) to conduct one-on-one interviews with participants, consistent with Grounded Theory methodology (Creswell, 2005). The interview questions were presented as open-ended statements and corresponded to the research questions. The questions were: Tell me about your immigration history. Tell me about your academic background. Tell me about what it's like to live as an undocumented immigrant in the United States. Tell me about your experience in the creative writing program at I-STAND. Tell me about your writing experience.

The questions were written as statements to minimize assumptions and bias about the topic, and to stimulate open-ended responses and conversations from the participants. Each open-ended question included probing sub-questions that were sometimes asked for elaboration or clarification when the student mentioned certain topics or areas pertinent to the study. For example, if a student mentioned an obstacle she had faced, I would ask if she had faced other challenges due to her immigration status, and if so, how she dealt with those challenges. At all times, care was taken to minimize leading questions that would guide the participant to answer in a particular way. The interview questions fell

under three categories: background information, socio-emotional challenges, and creative writing as a way of coping.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Validity of the descriptions and interpretations was attained by the accurate compilation and account of data gathered from the interviews, memoranda written throughout the data collection process, analysis of students' creative writing work, and coding practices (Creswell, 2005). Throughout the study, written memoranda chronicled my assumptions, analysis, and observations. It was important for me to conduct one-on-one interviews to provide a private space for participants to share their stories and thoughts.

For the interviews, I employed these procedures (Creswell, 2005): Obtained written consent from interviewees and explained confidentiality beforehand, located a suitable place for conducting the interview, audiotaped questions and answers to have an accurate record of the conversation, took brief notes in the event the tape recorder malfunctioned, used probes to obtain additional information, was flexible to follow the conversation of the interviewee while following the interview questions, and maintained professionalism and courteousness throughout. Within a month of conducting each interview, each respective participant received the transcribed interview for review and personal validation of the data. Participants were allowed to ask questions and make corrections to the transcription; however, none of them did.

### **Data Collection/Procedures**

The data were collected through one-on-one, open-ended interviews and analysis of original creative writing work (Creswell, 2005). The interviews were conducted individually with participants at a location selected by each participant, including cafes and participants' homes. Interviews were face-to-face dialogues using the interview questions with the purpose of acquiring information from participants and answering the research questions. The open-ended questions appeared to be successful in allowing participants to freely share their experiences and perceptions of their immigration status, the challenges they faced, and the role the creative writing group played in their lives. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audiotaped for accuracy. Audio recordings were transcribed by a third party and myself and then shared with the participants for comments and confirmation of contents. Participants were also asked to provide their original creative writing work for analysis; each participant submitted from three to seven writing pieces. The written work was analyzed for overall themes and content to more fully tell the story of the participants and answer the research questions.

### **Data Analysis**

This qualitative research utilized the Grounded Theory method for a thematic analysis of the data (Creswell, 2005). The collected qualitative data, in the form of interviews and writings, were analyzed by transcribing, coding, and analyzing for themes and patterns. The data were organized in computer folder files, marked by hand for reoccurring themes, and divided into parts. The coding process involved dividing the data into segments, labeling each segment with codes, examining the codes, and collapsing the

codes into broad themes (Creswell, 2005). Through this coding process, I critically analyzed the interview transcriptions and original creative writing work, pulling out important quotes and information pertaining to the goals of this study. The data were categorized in terms of research questions and emergent themes. The themes became visible through the individual interviews and analysis of creative writing work. As patterns became evident, the data were organized into a limited number of themes and issues that spoke to the research questions (Creswell, 2005). Quotations that shed light on the emerging themes and concepts were selected from the interviews and the students' original creative writing samples.

### **Summary**

The stories of undocumented young people are each multifaceted and dynamic in every way. It would be nearly impossible to include every aspect of the many stories that comprise the struggle of the undocumented population. However, this study aims to use Grounded Theory to paint a broad picture of the stories and struggles of this particular group. The Grounded Theory analytical method provides the essential tools and processes to wring the most powerful stories out of this group, with the goal of shedding light on the implications of using creative writing as a way of coping with the socio-emotional challenges of undocumented college students and graduates.

**CHAPTER 4: Results****Introduction**

*Set sail.*

*On metal ships we ride.*

*Dragged across the earth.*

*To a new horizon, beneath a broken sky.*

*Inconsequential, our mistake.*

*Legalities of travel, we partake.*

*But we will overstay our day in the romanticized dream.*

*One small suitcase for the boys.*

*Mostly full of witnesses, toys.*

*Mom and Dad, they carry sin.*

*They carry Zihuatanejo within.*

“Passage,” a poem written by Franco, one of the participants in this study, beautifully conveys the emotions and realities of immigrating to the United States. Undocumented students are under an enormous amount of pressure that may be difficult to perceive by those not part of the undocumented experience. This thesis aims to give an insight into the sometimes-misunderstood lives of undocumented young people growing up in our communities. The six students whose worlds you are about to enter are all part of the creative writing program at I-STAND. This study will tell the story of how these students came together to support themselves and one-another in using creative writing to

re-enter, process, and share their experiences as undocumented young adults living in the shadows of U.S. society.

### **About the Participants**

#### **Mayra**

Mayra is a 23-year old, first-generation college student at the University of California Berkeley (UC Berkeley) majoring in ethnic studies. In 2003, her father emigrated from El Salvador to the United States with a visa. Mayra's father made the decision to relocate in search of financial prosperity and his idealized version of the American dream, of which Mayra says, "eventually I guess he learned that it doesn't work that way, but he learned it the hard way." During a phone conversation with her father, he convinced her to leave her life in El Salvador and move to the U.S. He told Mayra that it would be a lot easier for her; since she was young and smart she would get a scholarship. In 2005, at the age of 15, soon after her first year of high school in El Salvador, Mayra followed her father.

The change in environment was challenging for Mayra. In El Salvador, Mayra and her family lived in a big house. They belonged to the upper middle class and could afford to send Mayra to an all girls, private Catholic school. In Southern California, she and her father lived in a mobile home. Mayra enrolled in public high school and was placed in the English as a Second Language (ESL) track. She noticed that many of her peers were involved in gangs, and many of the girls were getting pregnant. Mayra longed for more. She sought information about the Advance Placement (AP) and honors courses offered at her school. Mayra asked her teachers to recommend her for AP and honors

courses, but they hesitated. The summer after her sophomore year, Mayra did all the readings required to enroll in AP, but when school started her class schedule showed she was not enrolled in any AP courses. Refusing to give up, she met with her counselor. The counselor explained that teachers were concerned about her English skills and could not enroll her into AP courses because of this. Mayra then met with the vice principal of the school and told him that she was not willing to settle for less. Hesitantly, he changed Mayra's schedule, but warned that if her teachers felt that she was not performing as well as her peers, she would be placed back in ESL classes. For the next two years, Mayra worked hard, took classes over the summer, and in 2008 she graduated in the top ten percent of her class.

**Mark**

Mark is a 24-year old graduate student pursuing a master's of science in Construction Management from California State University East Bay (CSU East Bay). In 2010, he graduated from UC Berkeley with a bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering. In 2001, Mark emigrated from Peru to the United States at the age of 12. He and his cousin were visiting relatives in San Francisco over summer vacation. Mark's family stayed in Peru. His uncle, whom he was staying with in the U.S., decided to enroll him in their local middle school. Mark's father was born in China, and had immigrated to Peru in search of better work opportunities. However, because Peru was not doing as well anymore economically, he was planning on moving to live in the U.S. His brother, who is a U.S. citizen, had already petitioned for him. Mark says, "after 9/11 happened, all the

applications were delayed, but in his mind we still had a lot of time. So he thought, by college for sure, he would have his interview and his paperwork.”

In San Francisco, Mark attended part of middle school and all of high school. He struggled, especially in his humanities courses, but eventually drove himself to take Advance Placement courses. After high school, Mark moved out of his uncle’s house in San Francisco to Berkeley, where he attended university as a Civil Engineering major. “I was at a disadvantage,” Mark says, “I definitely had to do all the tutoring I could get, all the extra help that I could get. There were always review sessions happening for classes. I felt that I was trying to fill in the gaps.” During his second year at UC Berkeley, Mark’s father finally received his interview to proceed with the immigration petition; however, by that point Mark’s parents had divorced, and his father had made the decision to return to China.

### **Beyonce**

Beyonce is 24 years old; in 2011 she graduated from UC Berkeley with a bachelor’s degree in Political Science. At the age of four, she immigrated with her older brother and her father to the United States from the Philippines with visitor’s visas. Her mother had immigrated to the U.S. years earlier. Beyonce recalls segments of her immigration journey. “I remember everything we packed into two giant suitcases, and I remember going with my dad to check in at the counter and then later on, on the airplane, my dad asking me if I wanted something to eat. That’s pretty much all I remember about the actual journey,” she says.

Beyonce started school in the Philippines at the young age of three. She remembers receiving academic awards and learning the English alphabet. In the U.S., she and her family moved into a suburb of the San Francisco Bay Area. By kindergarten, Beyonce was already reading. She attended preschool, kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, and high school in the same neighborhood. She maintained high academic achievement through high school and into college. Not wanting to reveal her immigration status to her counselor, she navigated the college application process alone. Her older brother had not pursued education beyond high school because he was deterred by the social security number question on the applications. “My parents were the ones telling me, well you actually can’t go to college,” says Beyonce, “I kept pushing anyway because I wanted to make sure I didn’t stop there.” She sought help from teachers and friends, and without telling her parents, submitted four college applications. Beyonce had already submitted her statement of intention to register at the University of California San Diego (UC San Diego), when she finally told her parents. “Being accepted by the colleges definitely affirmed the fact that this [immigration status] may be a part of my identity, but people are accepting me for it anyway,” shares Beyonce. However, after realizing that financing an education at UC San Diego was nearly impossible without financial aid, she enrolled at a local community college in the San Francisco Bay Area.

### **Franco**

Franco is 24 years old. He graduated in 2010 from the University of California, Merced (UC Merced), with a bachelor’s degree in Political Science and a minor in Philosophy. When he was six years old, he and his family emigrated from Mexico to the

United States with visitor's visas. His parents told him and his brother that they were on vacation to visit Disneyland. In Mexico, Franco's parents worked as teachers. His mother also co-owned a clothing store with a business partner. However, after disagreements and court disputes, the two ended their business relationship. Shortly after, the family's home burned down. "We took it as a sign that we weren't safe in Mexico anymore, and my mom really wanted a better life for my brother and myself, so they decided to bring us to the United States," shares Franco. We took a plane to San Francisco, and moved in with an aunt for a few months. Franco realized that the move was permanent when his family moved into their own apartment in East Palo Alto.

In Mexico, Franco's mother taught multiple subjects and his father taught math. However, their teaching credentials were not recognized in any U.S. school system. Upon arriving in the country, his mother began working as a babysitter, and his father sought employment as a day laborer outside of the Home Depot. Eventually, his mother began selling Royal Prestige products, and his father secured a stable job as a carpenter. In Mexico, Franco attended a private school where he had begun learning English. This helped him very much when he enrolled in school in the U.S. Franco has always been passionate about learning; he quickly excelled in the English language and in school in general. His achievements continued through elementary school, middle school, and high school in East Palo Alto. "It wasn't until high school that the whole immigration thing came to the forefront of my life," says Franco. At that point, Franco started learning about his immigration status and its implications in pursuing higher education.

**America**

America is a 23-year old student at San Francisco State University majoring in Latino Studies. In 1996, at the age of seven, she and her family immigrated to the United States from Mexico. America lived with both her parents and her younger brother in San Francisco. Two years later, her mother returned to live in Mexico because she was unhappy with the lifestyle in the United States. America's father stayed in San Francisco to work and pay off the house the family bought in Mexico. For the next eight years, America lived with her mother and brother in the state of Mexico. "My father would go and visit us and come back, and he would always cross the border. It was very risky every time, but he got used to it," shares America. When America was 15 years old, her mother and brother returned to live with her father in the U.S. America stayed with her grandparents in Mexico because she was in the process of receiving her visa. Her meeting with the U.S. embassy had already been scheduled when she learned that her mother was pregnant and had given birth. Her mother and the newborn baby were in very critical condition at the hospital. "I just went crazy," says America. She knew of another family who was traveling to San Francisco and decided to make the trip across the border with them. "I didn't even tell my dad until I was in Tijuana. I just called him and I was like, hey I'm going to cross this week so you better get the money 'cause I'm going to be there soon." Five days before her 16th birthday, she crossed the border and reunited with her family in San Francisco. Regrettably, America's newborn baby brother passed away a month after he was born.

America attended 15 different schools in the U.S. and in Mexico. Her first time in the U.S. as a seven year old girl, she experienced difficulty in school because she did not speak the language and was in culture shock. When she returned to Mexico, she attended private and public schools through her second year of high school. The second time she came to the U.S. she felt more comfortable in school because she already knew English and had made some friends. However, soon after her arrival, the family found themselves struggling financially. The traumatic experience they had endured with her mother's pregnancy was aggravated because of the hospital expenses and the expense of America's crossing. The family experienced homelessness, and America saw the need to work. She began working at a restaurant that her aunt managed. "It's a seafood place. I was very spoiled back in Mexico, and then coming here and having to work was devastating. I didn't tell my grandma how bad it was, cause she would get mad at my dad," says America about the experience. For the next three years of high school, America worked on weekends while she excelled academically, played soccer, volleyball, softball, and led several school clubs.

**Ricardo**

Ricardo is a 24-year old graduate of the University of California Berkeley. In 2012, he received his bachelor's of art in gender and women's studies. When he was a year old, his parents left to work in the United States for four years while Ricardo stayed with his grandparents in Colima, Mexico, his birthplace. In 1994, Ricardo's parents returned to Mexico for him. However, by that time Ricardo was very attached to his grandmother and his aunts. His parents told him they would be taking him to Disneyland

as an excuse to convince him to leave with them. With their child in hand, Ricardo's parents crossed the border by foot to continue their new life in the U.S. On their first attempt at crossing, they were caught and detained by immigration. Ricardo and his mother were held in a detention facility with other women, and his father was held separately with other men. Ricardo was afraid of the immigration officers and cried because he wanted his baby bottle, but his mother had gotten rid of it on the trip. After several hours, they were released back in Mexico. Ricardo and his mother reunited with his father and crossed the border again the following day.

Being separated from his grandmother was difficult for Ricardo. "I didn't forget about her. My mom tells me that I would ask her, when are we going to see my grandma again?" Ricardo's family settled in Anaheim and years later his two younger siblings were born. "Growing up I was really invested in school. I really loved reading, I really loved math, and I did really really well in school," says Ricardo. In 2006, he graduated from high school with honors and was admitted to the University of California Berkeley. After visiting the campus, he was convinced that it was the right place for him. However, due to the challenges of financing an education inherent to undocumented students, Ricardo decided to attend two years of community college in Riverside, and then transfer to UC Berkeley.

### **Realities of Living as Undocumented**

The stories of undocumented young people, although part of the broad fabric of immigration stories that constitute part of American culture and society, are each unique and complex. Each individual experiences and deals with the effects of their immigration

status in different ways; however, there are underlying commonalities in their stories. The following themes are the result of using Grounded Theory methods to analyze and interpret the data collected in the form of one-on-one, open-ended interviews and original creative writing work. These themes speak to the ever-present challenges of living as undocumented in the U.S., the fears that many undocumented young people experience, the reality of depression among the undocumented immigrant community, issues around identity, family and home dynamics, as well as longing for full acceptance and inclusion in U.S. society.

### **Not Yours**

Have you ever felt out of place, even when you were home? Imagine a life in which you were forced to feel that way every single day. Everywhere you look is a reminder of all that's out of reach—this is how undocumented people live every day of their lives. “It’s really limiting,” shares Franco. He explained:

Just having a proper form of identification is a hassle, even for simple things like having a bank account. They’ll take your money, no problem, but when you’re trying to withdraw money it’s like an FBI investigation; it’s ridiculous. Also getting into clubs, if you use your Mexican ID, a lot of times people are rejected because it’s not a valid form of ID. Driving, you can’t have a driver’s license so that makes it really hard to get anywhere. You can’t vote, you can’t leave the country; my grandpa passed away and we couldn’t go to this funeral. We can’t get a job without a valid social, and the jobs that we can get are not jobs in which we can use the degree that we graduated with, so it’s very limiting and... scary.

Indeed, living a life without legal status is extremely limiting and scary. This is due, in part, to barriers such as poverty, violence, lack of resources, discrimination, and additional systemic barriers that prevent undocumented young people from being full and active members of society (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). For Beyonce, the

realities of a life without status became crystal clear on a night she stayed out with friends and was confronted by law enforcement. She shares her experience in this creative writing piece titled “Donut Holes.”

*It’s Saturday night after finals. After a week of tests and presentations, my three best friends and I are anxious for adventure. Much to our parents’ distaste, staying out past midnight each weekend (but within city limits) is just the right amount of thrill.*

*We usually don’t have anywhere to go. This borrowed car is the only private space we can call our own. After driving aimlessly just to appreciate the glow of streetlights, we park the car. We feel safe, nestled in a dim, residential parking lot. We devour potato chips and unwrap piece after piece of Hershey’s chocolates. In between mouthfuls of junk food, we trade anecdotes about our eccentric AP Government teacher and exchange insults and criticisms about that stupid girl who stole my boyfriend (her bras were obviously padded).*

*But as we are in the final stages of high school, our carefree hangouts are occasionally interrupted by serious concerns.*

*“Are we ever going to get sick of this?” someone asks.*

*Will we ever grow too old to go hiking in the middle of the night armed with a flashlight in one hand and cookies in the other? Will losing sleep to count shooting stars ever seem senseless? Indeed, will our friendship remain the same after high school?*

*The car grows quiet as we each ponder the answer to this last question.*

*But then a car stops near us. It's a police car. The officer approaches the front passenger side where I am sitting. He shines his flashlight through the window. It's the brightest light I've ever seen. It's so bright that it blinds me. He asks us what we are doing.*

*"We're just eating donut holes," one of us cries out. Someone else offers the officer a donut hole.*

*He wants to see identification. I can hardly contain my fear. I sputter that I've only brought my school ID. I hope he doesn't ask why I don't have a state-issued license with me.*

*He collects our IDs and disappears from the window.*

*While he's gone, I panic. I hate myself for putting my family in jeopardy just because I wanted to stay out with friends at night and eat junk food. I hate myself for being so stupid, so irresponsible. I'm afraid he has entered my name into a mysterious database. He will see something suspicious, something that requires further investigation. He will unravel my life story and find the thread that ties me to my birthplace, a foreign country.*

*Curse words explode from my lips. My friends wonder why I am so distraught. It's not a big deal to them. They aren't at risk.*

*I imagine the police officer taking us into the police station. They'll call my parents. We'll all get caught. Good-bye to the house that they bought. Good-bye, America.*

*The policeman reappears. He tells us this is a private neighborhood.*

*Someone complained because our music was too loud. He returns our IDs.*

*We all drive home. We never stay out late again.*

During our interview, Beyonce shared that she wrote this piece in order to convey her experience in a universal and relatable way. “I feel like I’m accomplishing a goal, like I’m furthering the social justice movement because I’m able to provide a different narrative from what’s provided in mainstream media that criminalizes and has a very negative image of immigrants.” In her case, writing is a way of changing the dialogue about immigrants and immigration, and making undocumented individuals seem more human.

For undocumented children who grow up feeling every bit a part of American culture and society as their peers, the realities of their immigration status usually begin to materialize through the college application process. “When I was younger, I didn’t really know what it meant,” says Beyonce, “I can’t work, I can’t drive, but not really understanding that it also means not being able to have financial aid, and having less opportunities available.” For many undocumented students, the barriers of accessing higher education are sometimes too numerous to surpass. The literature supports the fact that for many undocumented students, the overwhelming uphill battle often results in feelings of anguish, disappointment, and emotional setbacks (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). These students, as was the case with Beyonce’s older brother, are forced to stop their education after high school. For those who decide to pursue an education beyond high school, the hurdles usually begin with paying for college

applications and exams. “I was struggling a lot to pay for applications because back then there was not enough support, well there still isn’t, but there was less support for undocumented youth,” shares Mayra. “Especially in Azusa, there were only a couple of people who were undocumented who were trying to get into school.” Paying for the applications is the beginning, but once an undocumented student is accepted to college, the real challenge becomes paying tuition and other school related expenses.

Both Mayra and Ricardo experienced extreme hardship while enrolled at UC Berkeley. They struggled with not having enough money for tuition and for supporting themselves while living far away from their families. “There was a year that I had a really really rough time at Berkeley, where I just didn’t have any money whatsoever, but I remember I just told myself, I’m not going back home, there’s nothing for me to do back home,” shares Ricardo. Mayra says, “In the beginning I wasn’t even doing enough reading, I wasn’t even doing my reading at all... just because I was focused on— well the first part of my undergraduate years were about surviving.” Their situation intensified to the point where the two were driven to homelessness. Mayra shares their experience in this creative writing piece titled “My Nights at Eshleman”:

*Last year on a hot summer afternoon I met up with my friend Ricardo to get burritos at Pancho’s. At the bus stop, we started talking about the scholarship interview we both had the week before. I kept listening inattentively until he said:*

*“Yeah, I mentioned to the committee how we used to spend the nights at Eshleman Hall. It’s funny remember? How we would freak out about getting caught.”*

*When I heard the word Eshleman, images of the third floor, the smelly girl's bathroom and lonely halls at midnight flooded my mind. I had forgotten about that chapter in my life. Sometimes I try to block memories from the past, perhaps as a defense mechanism because they are too painful to remember. But fortunately, my friend Ricardo reminded me of them.*

*It was the first semester of my sophomore year. I was at a point where I could no longer bear commuting late at night, walking through the dark and empty streets of West Oakland, especially after being chased by a guy on my way home. I was at the corner of Union and 12th Street when, all of a sudden, I see a man biking from afar. He gets closer, and closer. Then he yells at me. I was so scared that I couldn't remember any of the words he said. He got off his bike and started running after me. Luckily, I was only a couple of blocks away from home. I ran as fast as I could.*

*"FIRE! FIRE!" I yelled*

*And people started looking out their windows. The man stopped chasing me as I started desperately knocking on the door of the house where I used to live, screaming; "OPEN THE DOOR, PLEASE!" with tears on my eyes. Scariest experience ever.*

*I decided to 'move in' to Eshleman after the incident. Around the same time, I learned that my friend Ricardo didn't have a place to live. I suggested that we both spent some nights at one of the student offices in the building. The first days were rough, but soon we got used to the routine. I would sleep on this old*

*yellow couch and he would sleep on the carpeted floor. At 5am, the Latina in charge of cleaning the offices would come to take out the trash. She reminded me of my mother. Always wearing a ponytail, comfortable t-shirts and jeans.*

*Every time we heard the door to the hall opening, we just had to make sure to be awake and pretend to be on the computer or something. We tried to be extremely friendly with her when she came into the office.*

*Ricardo would often make compliments about her dedication to her hard, back-breaking job.*

*“¿Cómo está señora? Qué duro trabaja usted. [How are you ma'am? You work so hard.]”*

*“Sí mire, la vida del pobre, [Yes look, the life of the poor.]” the woman would say.*

*Ricardo was almost done eating his burrito. “It’s crazy how we used to do that. Sigh. The life of an undocumented student,” he said between bites.*

*I nodded.*

*Ricardo said, “Remember how one day we were so sick of waking up at 5am that we were like ‘fuck this’ and did not care if the lady would see us sleeping?”*

*“Yeah.”*

*As we walked out of the restaurant, I looked around and wondered how many other undocumented students have done what Antonio and I did. I’m sure there are many.*

For Mayra, writing allows her to remember painful experiences that she's blocked from her memory as a way of protecting herself. "It's helpful to remember things even if it hurts sometimes," shares Mayra. "If I don't think about the past, then that'll just make me take things for granted." She describes the writing process as therapeutic.

### **Fear**

Apart from the legal and financial barriers of a life without status, undocumented people must also endure a life of fear. Mark shares his experience in the following excerpt from a creative writing piece he wrote titled "Dreams." It speaks of the ever-present fear and anxiety that live in the subconscious minds of many undocumented individuals. "It's subtle, but it's there. I don't live with fear. I'm not afraid of going out to the streets, but if I'm dreaming about being stopped, or interactions with cops, I know something is going on," explains Mark.

*Dreams of getting arrested have been sleeping with me for weeks now, more terrifying each night. Tonight, my dream starts at the San Francisco International Airport with immigration officers surrounding me and forcing me to the ground. My lips crack and I can taste the salty ground and sweet blood. One officer kicks me in the stomach and I curl up in the fetal position. Another puts his black leather boot on the side of my face. I am covered in a mixture of dust and sweat. Two of them pick me up, throwing my arms around their shoulders, like good Samaritans. I hope they have realized that I contribute more to this country than I take away from. [...] My torso springs up from the mattress. I feel as if I have been holding my breath all night. The pores of my skin have been open like*

*faucets, pouring sweat all through my dream. The chilling sensation from the cooling of my sweat reminds me I am awake and not dreaming anymore. Reality hits me: I have woken up from my biggest fear to be faced with my biggest fear. My flight leaves in 3 hours.*

These emotions are embedded in every aspect of the lives of these young adults. For Mark, almost every decision he makes comes back to his immigration status. “I’ve always been the person to play it safe, like let’s not drink and drive, or let’s not get into a fight at the bar,” says Mark. “Maybe it’s my personality, but I think it also has to do a lot with my immigration status. Don’t put yourself in a risky situation. Or don’t even go out at all. There have been a couple of times where I’ve declined an invitation to go out because of that, because I feel that the risk is too high.” Living with fear is a theme that was present in the story of each of the participants in this study.

In each instance, when students wrote about fear, it helped them confront and begin to deal with those emotions. This might be due in part to the fact that narrative therapy, in this case in the form of creative writing, separates people from problems and assumes that people have many qualities that can help them reduce the influence of problems in their lives (Vishwanatha & Hirisave, 2008). Creative writing for Mark became a healing process, a bonding process, and a learning process. “I didn’t realize how much impact it would have, because every process of creative writing you’re doing self-reflecting and validation,” explains Mark, “hearing other people’s stories was definitely also healing.” Franco shares a similar point of view; he feels that although we have the means in everyday life to communicate exactly how we feel to other human

beings, we rarely do. “We rarely have sit down, heart to heart, pour your soul out conversations and I feel that with writing, I can just do that,” shares Franco.

For Beyonce, sharing your story through writing is important “because there are so many things about being undocumented that seem almost unreal. Nobody else knows or can imagine the type of things we have to worry about,” she says. “Like living in fear every day, every particular kind of fear is so normalized in the community, nobody else sees it.” Ricardo has this to say about confronting his fears; “Part of the creative process has been confronting those fears of things I’ve gone through in life, but also those fears and those insecurities that always come up as a creative individual.” When we step back and begin to realize the vast effect that immigration status has on an individual, it becomes easier to understand the reason why fear is such a vivid emotion in the lives of undocumented people.

### **Depression**

For undocumented young people living with the weight of their lack of status on their shoulders while attempting to persevere despite the odds, depression can be a constant struggle. Franco shared,

I definitely went through bouts with depression in the past, and there were times when I just couldn’t see myself having a fulfilling life because of the fact that I couldn’t work in any field that was of interest to me.

Although depression is very prevalent within the undocumented community, it’s something that is seldom at the forefront of discussions about this population primarily because the majority of discussion about undocumented individuals focuses on the legalities of their status; immigration reform, economic impacts, and so forth. However,

the literature review shows that Hispanics that experience economic challenges, cultural exclusion, alienation, lack of support networks, and emotional and psychological problems are at high risk of committing suicide (Wadsworth & Kubrin, 2007). Since these factors are almost always present in the lives of undocumented people, depression and socio-emotional health are subjects that need to be discussed and dealt with appropriately.

Ricardo shared:

After I got out of freshman year, I remember I hit this really intense phase of depression, because I felt I had worked so hard to leave home and really explore something new, but when that wasn't possible because of my status I just felt really overwhelmed ... So I was depressed for I would say a good six months or a year after high school, and during that time I was going to community college.

The review of the literature revealed this very issue. Undocumented students who see no other option than to forfeit their chance to attend a highly selective university are faced with feelings of anguish and disappointment, which result in significant emotional setbacks (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). Students like Ricardo are everywhere; undocumented young students who work so hard to achieve their dream of attending a four-year university and experience life away from home, but instead are forced to put their dreams on hold because they lack a nine-digit number. Ricardo commented:

During that time, in my mind I just kept telling myself, you're going to go to Berkeley, but it's going to take a little bit longer and it's going to be in a different way ... I also felt so unaccomplished going from high school to community college, because everyone around me had this expectation of Ricardo's going to Berkeley and then came this moment of, oh he's not going to Berkeley. I just felt really unfulfilled.

This combination of feeling like outsiders in a place they call home, living a life in fear, and knowing that their dreams of higher education are almost impossible to reach, drives many undocumented youth into depression.

During our interview, America described the experience of moving back and forth between Mexico and the United States as traumatizing, due in part to the fact that when she lived in Mexico she missed her father, and now that she lives in the U.S. she desperately misses her grandmother. “The biggest challenge is not being able to go to Mexico and just seeing my grandparents. How easy is that? But I can’t do it.” Shares America. She expresses her emotions through this poem titled “*Suicidio*” (Suicide):

*me vi caer  
como un pájaro azul, azul rey y de pecho blanco  
rompiendo el viento frío de primavera*

*el mundo inhumano cerró mis ojos  
quemó mi sueños  
fantasías de papel que escribía con mi dedos*

*hoy estoy ciego  
estoy cansado*

*esperé y rogué y peleé  
por el día en pudiera escribir en la palma de tus manos  
en tus uñas largas y rojas  
en tu bella piel tersa y arrugada  
con mis ásperos dedos*

*quiero hundirme en este río paralelo al cielo  
quiero abrazarme de su fuerza  
ahogarme en tu tristeza*

*para no llorar*

*para que la corriente arrastre mis rezos  
mis velas blancas derretidas  
mis rodillas hinchadas de penumbra*

*mis versos de infierno*

*que se lleve todo*

*he caído*

*no tuve la paciencia de vivir*

*de ser valiente o débil*

*de verte a través de la luna*

*de cantar sin tu voz*

*quiero morir así*

*como un pájaro hermoso que vuela hacia ti*

*como un pájaro que oculta sus alas azules al volar*

[I saw myself falling  
like a blue bird, king blue and white chested  
breaking the cool spring wind

this inhumane world closed my eyes  
burned my dreams  
paper fantasies that I used to write with my fingers

today I'm blind  
I'm tired

I waited and I begged and I fought  
for the day when I'd be able to write on the palm of your hands  
on your long and red nails  
on your beautiful, smooth and wrinkled skin  
with my rough fingers

I want to sink in this river parallel to the sky  
I want to embrace from its strength  
drown in your sorrow

to not cry

so that the current can drag my prayers  
my melted white candles  
my knees swollen of gloom  
my infernal verses

take it all

I've fallen  
I didn't have the patience to live  
to be brave or weak  
to see you through the moon  
to sing without your voice

I want to die this way  
like a beautiful bird flying toward you  
like a bird that hides its blue wings in flight]

The literature review revealed that the pressures of living as undocumented are sometimes too much to cope with. Joaquin Luna, the 18-year old undocumented immigrant who committed suicide in 2011 after the DREAM Act failed to pass through Congress, is a heartbreaking example of this reality (Vargas, 2011). For America, writing is a way of easing difficult emotions. “I kind of just write for myself, to figure something out, or to release something. It helps me with stress,” explains America. “I can start to write something creative about something stressful, and it’s like crying.”

Undocumented young people struggling with depression might feel isolated, or they may think they are the only one confronting these emotions, due in part to the fact that the topic of depression isn’t at the forefront of the conversation about or within the undocumented community. Furthermore, for the individuals who acknowledge and desire mental and emotional health support, accessing the right help becomes another insurmountable hurdle. “I also went through a lot of depression my first year so I went to the counseling center,” shares Mayra.

I talked with a psychiatrist and they actually gave me medication. I took that medication for like a year, but then at the same time I was talking to a psychologist, and I decided there’s no point in taking the medication because it’s not like it’s going to make me documented. My life is still going to be as miserable as it is now, I’m just going to feel happier, but how does that change my situation?

Undocumented students paying tuition at an institution of higher education have access to the mental and emotional health services offered at their institution. However, those who don't have access to this help are forced to find other ways of coping and healing.

For Mark, talking to his mom, being alone, thinking and reflecting on the things that are under his control and can be changed, have served as coping mechanisms. "It's almost like self-therapy," Mark explains, "it's been helpful. Swimming is also very helpful because you have time to think of things while you swim. And writing of course, creative writing." The other participants in this study shared similar sentiments regarding the benefits of engaging in the creative writing process. For Franco, writing is "a way to vent out frustrations or emotions that aren't so easy to communicate in person." He describes the writing process as therapeutic. Ricardo shares that engaging in creative processes is what has helped him in his process of healing for himself. The time and energy he invests in creative processes have helped him cope with and overcome challenging experiences and depression. Ricardo explains, "Definitely engaging in a much more creative practice has been really fulfilling for me in terms of really finding ways to discuss and engage with those ugly feelings or experiences that I've had."

However, for other undocumented young people, there simply isn't a way of dealing with the stress. Beyonce expressed the difficulty of speaking with other people because they often didn't understand that she is undocumented, and she felt that she couldn't tell them. "I just became very sad or depressed," she says, "it was very stressful, and I don't think I dealt with it. I just lived the next day for the next day." This is a sentiment that is common among many undocumented people. As the literature revealed,

for many undocumented individuals the only way of coping with the setbacks of their immigration status is to suppress their feelings of despair (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010). The realities of living without status go beyond what meets the eye, and a lot of work is needed in order for undocumented young people to process, cope with, and heal from the effects of their immigration status.

### **Identity**

For undocumented youth, who grow up feeling every bit as American as their neighbors, friends and classmates, the topic of identity can be difficult to discern. Imagine living in a place that doesn't recognize you as part of that society, simply because you were born in a place that's foreign, even to you. Add on top of that the reality of feeling forced to hide your identity around people who do not know about, or may not be supportive of, your legal situation. For Beyonce, identity evokes a constant feeling of hiding.

I've ended up compartmentalizing my identity ... With my high school friends, I don't really talk about politics; I don't talk about what being an immigrant means to me. But in Berkeley, people know me because I'm undocumented and the work that I've done surrounding that on campus. ... I feel like that's where I'm truer to who I am.

Franco shares similar thoughts regarding disclosing his immigration status with different people. "I've always disclosed my immigration status with my closest friends, because they wouldn't be close friends if they didn't know who I am," he explains, "but if I don't disclose my status to a person then I see them as an acquaintance because they can't really see who I am entirely." The truth is that for many undocumented immigrants, their immigration status is very much a part of their identity. Deciding when to disclose this

part of their identity is challenging because of its implications, leading many undocumented young people to hide part of themselves, even with the people they care about most. Beyonce explores this topic in this creative writing piece titled “Secrets”:

*Early January:*

*I visit your apartment in Berkeley for the first time. It is spotless with everything put neatly in its place. I am surprised to find yet another reason to like you. But your lack of furniture makes things awkward. Six chairs, but no couch. We must take turns sitting at your computer desk.*

*Suddenly you ask, “Did you remember to submit your FAFSA?”*

*The form for federal financial aid was due three days ago. It’s an innocent question, but I know where it will lead to.*

*Hesitantly, I say no.*

*“Why?”*

*“I don’t qualify.”*

*With a cheeky smile, you ask, “Is your family really rich?”*

*Again, I say no.*

*“Why not?”*

*“I just can’t. It’s complicated. Please don’t pressure me to tell you things. It’s not that I’m hiding anything from you or that I don’t trust you. I’m just not ready to talk about certain things. Besides, it’s not that important. Well, actually it is. But, it’s only specific or important to me. It doesn’t affect our relationship. Or, at least, it shouldn’t. But, I really do trust you!”*

*You are confused, maybe even hurt. "Let's just drop it," you say. "Let's go to dinner."*

*It is getting easier for me to tell people about my secret. I don't burst into tears anymore. It's not that I am ashamed or that I am afraid of what would happen if you told other people. I know you wouldn't betray me or my family. But my secret has become more than a circumstance or a label. It has become the reason for everything I do. It consumes me. Could I bear the emptiness if I gave you my reason for being and then you left? It is precisely because you mean so much to me that I can't tell you.*

*I am sorry that my secret sours our moods. Our evening is only just recovering when I ask you what your middle name is, just out of curiosity. I know it begins with a C, just like mine.*

*You answer, "I'm not going to tell you. It's complicated. I'm not ready to tell you."*

*It is getting late now. We exchange good nights, but neither of us wants to let go. We embrace each other in all our mysteries.*

*Summer:*

*Typical of weekday evenings, you initiate a conversation with me over the Internet. Sometimes, it's awkward between us. Sometimes, I miss you terribly. Sometimes, you irritate me. But we are both honoring the promise we have made to each other to stay friends.*

*Minutes of silence pass after I tell you that I am preoccupied with a writing*

*assignment. Something occurs to me and I wonder if you'll remember.*

*Slyly and with a smile, I break the silence. "Hey, what's your middle name?"*

*You reply with five uppercase letters: "NEVER."*

*But I know better than to say "never." After all, I never expected that I could care about someone so much. I'll be able to tell you one day. It's precisely because you mean so much to me that I want to share all of my secrets with you.*

During our interview, Beyonce shared this about engaging with creative writing: "[Creative writing] helped me to come to terms with my identity and to feel empowered and not limited by it." As the literature revealed, narrative therapy, creative writing in this case, allows individuals to externalize a problem, removing it from the person's identity, allowing the individual to focus on the problem rather than their identity with the problem (Rappleyea & Munk, 2008). Being undocumented is certainly a prominent part of the identity of the participants in this study; however, it is not the only thing that defines them.

Three of the participants in this study self-identify as queer. In recent years, undocumented individuals who also identify with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community have coined the term "undocuqueer." These young leaders are doing an enormous amount of work to build bridges between immigrant and LGBTQ communities. For undocuqueers, the issues around identity, hiding, and coming out, are doubled and intensified (Wong et al., 2012). Ricardo shared:

*Growing up I always knew I was gay ... School really came into play ... to make up for what I wasn't, which was straight, I made up for it in smartness. In high school specifically, I remember telling myself, you've got to be super smart. Even if you're going to be gay, they won't ask you about it because they're going to be*

copying your homework. It was kind of like a survival tactic that I developed and it worked really really well for me.

Finding tactics for survival, which sometimes require individuals to omit an important part of their identity, is very common among both undocumented immigrant communities and LGBTQ communities. Ricardo saw college as an opportunity to get away from home in order to be able to be gay. Ricardo explained:

When I started college it was really different because then I started understanding; oh wait, I'm also undocumented and getting a college education is really difficult because there's a lot of rules and regulations that I have to go through and there's a lot of stuff that I don't qualify for because of my status.

This double feeling of being different and excluded only deepens the emotional and mental health challenges of undocuqueer individuals. During our one-on-one interview, Mark shared that he's gone to therapy, on and off since high school. "It wasn't just because of my status," he explains, "it was because of my sexual identity. Those are the two big things, being gay and being undocumented, that have always brought me back to therapy." The issues and challenges that come with being gay and undocumented must be dealt with and processed in order to be able to come to terms with and honor both identities. Therapy is most definitely an effective way of finding mental and emotional health and happiness. Additionally, engaging in creative processes can be beneficial, as is the case for Ricardo. "Dealing with my family's homophobia, or like my father's homophobia, that's stuff that I feel like I'm still trying to sort out for myself, and the creative process has been really essential for that," says Ricardo. The following creative writing piece is an example of how Ricardo uses creative writing as a way of sorting out these emotions.

*2011. Memories, a sudden rush of fear. My senses escape, a sudden blow. A collection of memories. Her voice whispering in my ear. Voz sabor a miel; piel ardiente canela. [Voice the flavor of honey; cinnamon burning skin.] My grandmother's soft hands. El cucuy. [The bogeyman.] My grandmother's handwriting; México. El olor a tierra mojada. [The smell of wet earth.]*

*Everything stopped. STILL. SILENCE.*

*It brought me to my mother. Crying in silence; llantos [cries]. I would sit and listen, tears. Violent waves clashing; sabor a mar [flavor of sea]. He perdido mis sentidos. [I've lost my senses.] Complete loss of sense. And then it began to sting. The stinging of his hand across my face. "Sí, soy maricón." ["Yes, I'm a faggot."]*

*I know vergüenza [shame]. Papá, I remain hidden behind your last name. Fear. Maricón [Faggot] Silence. Traitor. Foreigner. I bite my lip. Mal criado. [Spoiled.] The stinging of your hand across my face.*

Similar to Beyonce's sentiment about needing to compartmentalize her identity in order to protect herself and her family, Ricardo feels that engaging with creativity has meant looking into himself in many different ways. "What I mean about looking into myself is to look at myself in terms of how I've managed to split myself," he explains, "Ricardo the researcher, Ricardo the artists, Ricardo the queer, Ricardo the undocumented immigrant." Certainly, we all have multiple aspects that make up our

identity; however, for undocumented individuals, having an identity that is so politicized and that carries very severe risks and consequences, makes understanding and honoring our identities very challenging.

### **Family and Home**

It's almost impossible to speak of the lives of undocumented young people without exploring their family relationships and dynamics. All six participants of this study have written creative writing pieces about their parents, and in most cases they have used the writing process as a way of better understanding and coming to terms with these relationships. For Mark, writing about his mother has served as a way of healing and considering other perspectives; "more than anything it's helped me cope with my family conflicts," he says.

I haven't really written about my dad. It's funny because they haven't even read the stories. So it's not about sharing them with them, it's really a lot of internal coping; just changing my perspective. It's not like I'm on bad terms with anyone in my family, but there's a lot of grudges that I hold, and I think creative writing has helped me get rid of some of that.

The follow excerpts come from two short stories, titled "Architect" and "Visa." written by Mark.

*The sunlight always manages to enter my dad's room despite the heavy navy blue curtains. His room is long and awkward. It was supposed to be a normal square room, but the architect made "minor changes" to our house because his gravity-defying design was going to crumble down, just like my parent's marriage. The first change was the shape of my dad's room. The second change was the addition of a column right in the middle of our living room. I*

*picture my parents having tea in the living room with this column obstructing their view of each other. I imagine my parents having a big house party, and awkwardly dancing in the living room dodging the column. [...] My mother hung an old bed sheet in the hallway where the construction had ended. It was her way of pretending that we had a real house, to hide the fact there was a column in the middle of the living room. This column was supposed to bolster the house, to support the weight of my family, to fix the architect's mistakes. But like an old car that has been repaired too many times, the house and my parent's marriage were headed nowhere.*

*The sign of our restaurant read "Sorry, we're closed," the neon lights on the porch were turned off, the gates to the front entrances were shut closed. No waiters, no cooks, no customers. It felt almost like it was the end of the world and we were the only survivors. Our flight left at 3:30pm; we were flying to Lima that afternoon so we could make it to our interview with the American embassy to get our visas. It was moments like this where I felt the happiest. My parents seemed like they were pretending to get along. They even called each other nice things. They have never spent more than a couple of hours together without getting mad at each other. And now they seemed like two high school sweethearts. I wanted this trip to last forever. If getting a visa was all it took to solve my parent's problems, I wanted to get a visa every single day for all the countries of the world.*

Sadly, Mark's parents eventually divorced. He has been living in the San Francisco Bay Area away from his family since he was 12 years old. Mark's mother and brother still live in Perú, and his father returned to live in China. "After my parents got divorced, he sort of just left the family and he stopped calling, stopped maintaining communication with us," says Mark about his dad. Divorce is a challenging experience in any family, especially when there are children involved. For undocumented youth, the pressure they are already experiencing due to their status is only magnified when dealing with their parents' divorce.

In 2003, Mayra's parents also separated, after her father moved to the United States. In 2009, Mayra's mother also immigrated to the U.S.; however, she's been living in Texas since and has not seen Mayra in more than seven years. During our interviews, Mayra shared that her father "would always be frustrated about life and his lack of status. He always blamed people about his problems and he was actually more worried about paying the bills than supporting me in my quest trying to get into college." The following is one of Mayra's creative writing pieces, titled "Living the Trailer Lifestyle," which explores her relationship with her father and her estrangement with her family.

*Me llaman la traicionera [They call me traitor] because I have never been attached to my family, especially after I moved to college. At this point my relatives don't even ask why I don't go back to visit.*

*The truth is that I am afraid of going 'home' to Azusa. It feels like... a PHOBIA. I haven't had a word with my dad since last Christmas. The last thing*

*he said to me was that I won't go to heaven because I've chosen to disengage from all forms of institutionalized religion.*

*"Fine" I said. "We'll see each other in hell, then."*

*That was over the phone. The last time I went back to Azusa was to attend a scholarship banquet last summer. Anxiety overwhelmed me as I got in the bus. My hands were sweating and I couldn't stop thinking about the past during that 8-hour bus ride. Bad memories kept coming and going. Don't get me wrong, I am proud of who I am and where I come from, but going back brings unwanted thoughts.*

*I got home. As I walked into the trailer, I noticed that the way objects were arranged hadn't changed since the last time I was there. The old dusty TV was in the same corner next to the couch where I used to sleep. My stepmother's clothes were scattered all over the place. And the same kind of food was in the pantry: cup of noodle soups, Mac 'n' Cheese, Coca Cola bottles, and sweet bread of all sorts. Cockroaches would occasionally run around the floor scaring Lola, the little Chihuahua that replaced Nemo, another Chihuahua that was run over by a car the year before.*

*As I looked around I felt as if I had returned to the past. I remembered it was in the trailer when my father felt frustrated about life and blamed his problems on other people. It was in the trailer when he told me that studying was not going to make me successful in life after I mentioned how afraid I was to take the AP History test the following day.*

*When I was in high school, I would go outside the trailer after 9 p.m., which was bedtime for my parents, to finish my homework with a tiny flashlight in the freezing winter cold. I was determined to finish those damned physics problems. One time my dad was mad at me for staying up so late that he locked me out of the trailer. An hour later he walked out and without saying anything, he pushed me against the wall and tried to choke me.*

*Tears ran down my cheeks. It hurt. I couldn't breathe.*

*"Déjala! Stop!" said my step-mother. Because she knew that she was the only person in this world that he would listen to. She knew that he cherished and valued her above anyone else, even his children.*

*Sometimes I cried in silence out of desperation when I was alone in the trailer. But I had made up my mind. My plan was to leave Azusa.*

*Eventually I left home and became the first person in my family to attend college. I have survived poverty, homelessness, registration blocks, humiliation...I have learned how to live with pain in a nation that doesn't want me here.*

*Pero los fantasmas del pasado van y vienen. [But the ghosts of the past come and go.] I heard that my father only works a few hours a week. My stepmother was fired back in February from the thrift store where she worked after her boss started checking employees' status. Since then, they've been selling tacos whenever they can to make ends meet.*

*Pero la lucha sigue. Yo sigo aquí con la cabeza en alto y con una extra dosis de ganas. [But the fight continues. I'm still here with my head held high and with an extra dose of desire.]*

*¿Por qué? [Why?]*

*Porque quiero hacer felices a mi bisabuela y a todos las matriarcas de la familia que vinieron y se fueron de este mundo antes que yo. [Because I want to make my great-grandmother and all the matriarchs of the family who came and left this world before me happy.]*

*Porque no quiero que mis padres y mis hermanos sigan viviendo así. [Because I don't want my parents and my siblings to keep living like this.]*

*Porque se puede y se quiere. [Because it's wanted and doable.]*

*Things will change, I promise. One day we will cease to be foreigners trying to survive in the shadows. No hay mal que dure cien años ni cuerpo que lo resista. [There's no evil that lasts a hundred years nor body that can resist it.]*

For Mayra, “writing is a form of survival.” She uses writing as a way of releasing some of the frustrations she experiences because of her immigration status; she refers to this a form of “creative rant.” Mayra says, “I’m not writing to try to appeal to rich people, [...] it’s more of like I have to do this in order to survive.” She remains optimistic that things are going to get better, and she hopes that her writing might compel others to do something about the issue of immigration.

Another interconnected theme that surfaced in this study is the theme of home and homelessness. The number of undocumented young people, like Mayra, Ricardo, and

America, who have experienced homelessness, is unclear, but the feeling of longing for home is almost universal among the undocumented community. The concept of home is difficult to define and grapple with in this context. Is home the place where someone lives? It is the place where family members live? Is it the place where someone was born? Or is it something more abstract? Undocumented young people are constantly attempting to define home for themselves, and this often leaves a sense of emptiness within.

Because Mayra's relationship with her family has suffered, she has found a home in other spaces. "Something that has really helped me has been organizing and being in several safe spaces for undocumented youth, being part of spaces where I'm allowed to fully express myself." Says Mayra. As is the case with most people, we feel most comfortable and at home when we are safe to fully express ourselves. This is supported by the literature, undocumented students greatly benefit from the social networks they build, in part because these networks provide a safe space in which they can engage in mainstream activities and be contributing members of a mainstream institution (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). For Mark, sentiments surrounding home were evoked the first time he reunited with his mother since he immigrated without his family to the United States at the age of twelve. He wrote the following creative writing piece about his experience:

*I brought one picture with me to the United States: of my mom and I. We were sitting on a bench with palm trees in the background. [...] It had only been two years since I had seen my mother. Not only did it feel like ten years had gone by, my mom looked as if ten years had gone by. I was at school when my aunt and*

*uncle went to pick up my parents from the airport; I met them at the mall after school. I was expecting my mom to look the same as I had left her, with her freckles and her Cleopatra hair. But the woman from my picture now had strands of gray, way more freckles, and let's not even get started with the clothes she was wearing. We hugged for quite a while. Her smell remained intact; it was the only reason I was sure she was my mother, and not someone else trying to pass as her. I can never quite forget and yet never quite remember her fragrance. After we hugged, we held each other's forearms and stared at each other for a while. I looked at her, she looked at me. I did not say anything to her, but I've mourned her youth ever since.*

Perhaps for Mark, home lies in a distant past. Perhaps home lives in childhood memories of Perú. Whatever it may be, it's clear that Mark writes with the purpose of remembering important parts of his life. "My writing is for myself. It's for the 12 year old me who just arrived in the U.S., and doesn't know what's next for him," explains Mark.

It's for the 24-year old me who may have finally reached his American Dream. It's for the 36-year old me who is going to want to hold on to those bittersweet moments of being an American without papers. I write as the 24-year old so that the 36-year old does not forget about the 12 year old.

For a population labeled as undocumented, it is undeniably essential to take ownership of documenting our own history.

Many undocumented young adults, who immigrated to the United States during infancy or childhood, preserve cherished memories of their birthplace; the place they once knew as home. For Franco, thinking of home evokes heartfelt emotions of a faraway place. He reminisces about a life that once was in this poem titled "The Ties that Bind."

*We walk beneath a welcoming sky  
The sun has long been blown out  
Warmth envelop me*

*The air feels warm  
My mother's hand feels warm  
Our bonds feel warm  
I belong*

*My father  
My mother  
Me, the beach, our Mexico  
Reminisce, my parents reminisce*

*About walks taken before I was born, they talk  
Listen, I listen  
About the ties that bind, I dream*

*The sand cold  
The waves hot  
We walk into the night*

These memories convey a small portion of the life that Franco and his family left behind in Mexico. During our interview, Franco shared this about his writing; “The most influential force in my life is love, and love is what I try to communicate in my writing.” The feeling of love is definitely present in Franco’s poetry and other writings, in a somewhat vague, but certain, way. When asked about the vagueness in his poetry, Franco shared “Vague is one of my favorite languages. I think that it’s incredibly beautiful to communicate something tragic or something momentous in a fragmented way that pushes readers to try to figure out what exactly happened.” Another participant who at times utilizes a similar writing style is Ricardo. For Ricardo, engaging in creative processes, like writing, has been “very therapeutic and healing in many different ways.” “It’s good

medicine for my heart,” he says. Ricardo expresses his thoughts of family and home in this following creative writing piece called “Madre(patria)” [Mother(homeland)].

*2011. Mother. She tells me stories. Me cuenta de su México. [She tells me about her Mexico.] Y de vez en cuando algo sobre papá. [And once in a while something about dad.] Pero aún se mantiene en silencio. [But she still remains in silence.] Callada. [Silent.] “Ricardo, todo tiene su tiempo.” [Ricardo, everything has its time.] Tiempo. [Time] Silence. Stillness. Tristeza en su cuento. [Sadness in her story.] Melancolia. [Melancholy.] Me cuenta para poder olvidar, [She tells me to be able to forget,] to heal from the pain of his departure.*

*It is a cyclical sense of movement. Ni de aquí, ni de allá. [Not from here, nor from there.] Nostalgia. Loss. A seamless site of return, there is no home to go back to – there never was. Mother, the scars of your memories are a site of home. Español, [Spanish,] a site of return. Memory. Cuentos, [Stories,] my mother’s whispers in the dark. Yearning. Longing. Su México. [Her Mexico.]*

*There is constant movement; a flow of tongues whispering. Our words travel, lost in this journey. Language holds memories, always coming and going. They call from afar. Mourning. Betraying my memories. I carry them with me, speaking in tongues. They travel with me. They speak to me. Waves. In silence. Seamless ocean.*

*Mother, you remain hidden. In shadows. You tell me to remain silent, that I cannot risk what we have worked so hard for. “Qué lengua la tuya.” [“That tongue of yours.”] My words slither off my tongue. Your hands cannot hold my memories. Your back cannot hold my words. To you, I speak in tongues. I am a foreigner. The white man burns my flesh. You tell me - el inglés [English], the oppressor’s language. To you, I speak in tongues. I speak foreign.*

*Mamá, es un sueño fálico. [Mother, it’s a phallic dream.] Papá [Dad] is gone. A ghost, always coming and going. Mother, speak. Your watered down English.. Mamá, speak. Your broken language. Papá is always present in your voice. En tu cuento triste. [In your sad story.] Crawling under my skin. He has not left.*

*Regresar [Return] - there’s no home to go back to. Mother, speak. Together in tongues.*

### **Acceptance**

Undocumented young people find themselves in between worlds, physically, mentally, and emotionally. They often feel estranged at school, in their communities, and within their families. Mark has this to say about his experience in grad school “I’m not out to anybody. I do feel that I’m different from the rest of the cohort. Everyone is older, everyone has work experience, and I don’t.” Due to this constant feeling of exclusion, undocumented young people are constantly seeking to be accepted into U.S. society as American. For Mark, this sense of longing to be accepted emerged the tragic morning of September 11, 2001. He recalls the experience in this piece titled “That Morning:”

*Monday, 6 am. The phone rings. My aunt comes out in her bathrobe and picks it up. "We are okay," she murmurs, still half asleep. It is my uncle in Hong Kong; I can hear he is worried about something. I want to hear what they are talking about, but I have not come to America to be late to school.*

*Mr. Berry is not in class when I arrive. Katrina, a girl from the Philippines, says he is talking on the phone and looks awfully worried. When the classroom door finally opens, it reveals a defeated Mr. Berry. His eyes are downcast, as if to avoid looking at us. I can tell he has been crying. I am sure someone he loves has gotten hurt. What if something terrible happened to my mom? Would I ever be able to laugh again? Would I leave America and go back to Peru for her funeral? Katrina asks Mr. Berry if one of his relatives has gotten into an accident. He is silent for a second, then clears his throat with a weak cough and announces, "America has been attacked."*

*That morning, the World Trade Center's Twin Towers became ground zero. The only thing I knew about the Twin Towers was that they were the tallest buildings in the world and that they were in New York. I had never been to New York (I had only been in America for seven months), and I definitely had no loved ones in New York. Mr. Berry had no loved ones there either, but for all I knew, those buildings could have been inside his very body. He seemed to be bearing the pain of the attack: the clouds of smoke made him cough; the meltdown of steel created an overflow of liquefied metal that ran down his cheeks in a tear.*

*I realized how much Mr. Berry loved America. I, too, wanted to feel the same closeness to this nation. I wanted to have the Twin Towers inside of me, to feel the same pain Mr. Berry felt. I wanted to be part of the infinite family, the American family. I wanted to be American.*

In the midst of this national tragedy, Mark yearned to feel the same pain that clearly identified his teacher and classmates as Americans. He longed to be accepted. In 2012, President Obama created the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, as a way to provide relief from deportation and work authorization for countless undocumented young people (The White House, 2012). This milestone change is the biggest in immigration policy since the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. DACA gave many undocumented young people the hope and acceptance that they had been fighting for since the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was first introduced in congress in 2001. However, the reality is that the DACA program is temporary and excludes many undocumented people. America expresses her thoughts on DACA in this poem called “On Deferred Action:”

I'm thinking  
I will no longer work with a fake social number  
no longer be intimidated by my legal co-workers  
no longer afraid of E-Verify  
la migra

I will no longer drive without a driver's license  
no longer be afraid of the police  
of any random motorcycle speeding behind me

I will no longer carry my matricula consular [consulate identification card]  
no longer embarrassed by a bartender

I think  
I will no longer be treated or seen as a criminal  
I will no longer be illegal  
wrong

I think  
I will find a better job; a well paid job  
no more sixteen-hours shifts  
minimum wage in cash  
no more dishes, floors and toilets to clean  
no more burns on my skin  
cuts on my fingers

I'm becoming human

I will try to behave like a university student  
not like a busser, a janitor, a dishwasher

But I'm quite offended  
offended because my humanity; my transformation  
from beast to prince  
hangs on the lips of one man  
lies on a political race

After all, I'm no better than a serial killer  
I have no rights

And I'm offended  
because my immigrant parents will always be aliens  
illegal aliens  
disrespected, discriminated  
exploited

In the end  
we are like beautiful birds  
trapped on a ghetto cage  
brainwashed labor machines  
we are the slaves of this land  
we believe in the American Dream

America, Mark, and Franco have been approved for DACA and have received work authorization. America's parents, on the other hand, have been left out of the

equation. Ricardo is in the process of receiving work authorization as well through DACA. However, this is not the case for all undocumented young people. Mayra's complex situation makes her ineligible for DACA. Mayra came to the U.S. with a visa; however, there is a mistake with her date of birth on her birth certificate. "I told my family to help me make the changes to that paperwork through a lawyer in El Salvador, but then never did," says Mayra. This mistake on her birth certificate makes Mayra ineligible for the DREAM Act or DACA. "Now's it's too late, because people are going to assume right off the bat that I'm committing fraud," she explains. "I'd rather not get myself into that situation." Apart from cases like Mayra's, a vast number of undocumented young people do not qualify for DACA because they do not meet the age requirements, they do not have access to the required supporting documents, they've been previously deported or caught coming into the country, or they've had a DUI or other encounter with law enforcement that makes them ineligible.

The struggle for a broad immigration process, that includes parents and the rest of the undocumented community, continues. Meanwhile, undocumented young people continue to fight for acceptance and to be recognized as Americans. Specifically for the participants of this study, creative writing has served as a vehicle for documenting our stories and making connections with non-immigrant communities. Beyonce uses her writing to reach broader audiences and making the feeling of being undocumented universal. "It was easy because it feels very natural to be funny in a piece, or to provoke certain emotions in other people through writing," says Beyonce. "I've told stories so many times, it's very powerful in its ability to make the experience relatable." Her latest

piece, “How to Tell Your Story in Six Steps,” is a perfect example of how this group of young writers are using their talent to build bridges and open the door of communication with non-immigrant communities.

*How to Tell Your Story in 6 Steps*

*1. Introduce setting and characters and their relationships.*

*You: a dorky, charming boy. Interested in technology and science.*

*Me: the protagonist. The highly visible, and yet sometimes still in the closet, activist.*

*We find each other. We connect. Two microphones plugged into a home karaoke system. We sing 90s pop songs into each other’s ears for what seems like decades.*

*2. Introduce conflict into your narrative.*

*Months later, our differences come out.*

*You don’t like desserts. I basically only eat desserts.*

*I am a morning person. You thrive at night.*

*I see the world through the lens of politics. You analyze the world through the scientific method.*

*But for dinner, we can agree on a Thai restaurant. One of us (me) begins a casual dinner conversation on the subject of ICE raids and unjust detentions and deportations.*

*And you ask, “But isn’t ICE just deporting people that shouldn’t be here?”*

*I fumble, trying to walk you through the labyrinth of immigration law, economics, and foreign policy with a side of pad thai. They do not go well together.*

*3. Heighten the drama with pauses and varying the cadences of your speech.*

*My thoughts are tossed and mixed and fried – a generous dollop of loneliness, a steamy helping of nausea.*

*Either I could tell you that I am one of those “people that shouldn’t be here.” I could tell you that I came here as a child, found out when I was sixteen, and didn’t stop blaming my parents until I learned better. I could tell you how I struggled to pay for college on my own; how I was rejected from scholarships and cried silently into my sleeves on BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] to avoid disturbing passengers on my way home. I could tell you how I joined the movement; how I advocated for the DREAM Act with hundreds of people even when comprehensive immigration reform was a third rail issue. I could tell you how I feel trapped every day, unable to imagine a bright future for myself even with a degree; how I will always feel like a “foreigner” if I stay or if I leave. I could tell you. I might be able to change your mind. But I could tell you and fail to win you over, too.*

*4. Add humor to relieve the tension.*

*I could make a grand exit: “‘People that shouldn’t be here’? You mean people like me? Fine, you can eat dinner alone!”*

*I could walk out with my head held high, fist in the air, imagining people applauding and giving me high-fives on my way to the door.*

*But who would pay for dinner? And who would drive me home? I could hang out in parking lot with my pride and my values keeping me company.*

*If I walked out on you, who else am I giving up on?*

*5. Communicate the purpose with your audience.*

*Of course I'm down for the cause.*

*I've had my share of anger and oppression and struggle.*

*I've also lobbied and rallied and protested the shit out of everything.*

*What would you do?*

*Every day we have a choice:*

*We can fortify ourselves in our comfort zone in communities of people that think like us.*

*Or we can choose to have conversations with everyone else – people who would otherwise not understand who we are and what we value. But if this is truly a movement to bring justice into our society, then shouldn't we be including as many people as possible?*

*This is our challenge and our responsibility: discovering where our values meet even when we don't expect them to; finding points of connection even when our opinions are polarized.*

*6. Conclude your story.*

*I don't walk out in protest.*

*Instead, we finish our dinner. I reach across the table and say, "Let's talk. Tell me your story and I'll tell you mine."*

### Summary

Mayra, Beyonce, America, Franco, Mark, and Ricardo are just six of countless courageous, undocumented young individuals who are taking a stand and using their talent to document and share their experiences. They have been dealt some of the most difficult hands, and have been forced to live in the shadows of American society simply because of the place they were born in. However, it is clear that when a group of young individuals is faced with these monumental obstacles, forming close knit groups, like the creative writing group at I-STAND, is an effective way of supporting one another. “I felt like each creative writing workshop session was just group therapy,” says Franco. “We all talked about our experiences as undocumented students, and people cried and laughed and talked about their experiences, and I’d never been in a space where people talked so openly about it. Especially with people my own age,” he continues.

Whether it relates to the realities of living a life with fear, feeling excluded, knowing that so much is out of reach, dealing with depression, understanding your intersecting identities, longing for home, or wanting to be accepted, undocumented young people are using intimate spaces as a way of processing, healing, and making connections. The deep-rooted challenges of living as undocumented in the United States can be difficult to cope with; however, these young writers are proving that creative spaces can be used for mental and emotional healing, as well as taking ownership of our own stories. “I write because my existence needs to be documented. Holding a pencil in my hand and being able to recreate my trajectory enables me to document myself,” shares Mark. “No immigration officer can take my stories away. Even if they remain unopened

in a computer folder or an email attachment, my experiences and dreams now live somewhere outside my mind, and that feels so liberating.” The following is a letter written by Franco to his child self. This piece is titled “Letter to a Child.”

*Thrive, you must thrive. Be brave young man. Inevitable hardships lie ahead.*

*Rocket ships, airships, ships to navigate life’s current. Drown, you will drown, once or twice. But your fire will remain intact.*

*Pave, your own path, you must pave. The road less traveled by, they say illegal.*

*Tell them that you are undocumented. Reacting to an antiquated system of broken laws, you are. On the verge of a new discovery, a pioneer, a pilgrim, a saint, and a sinner. Set sail.*

*Grow, you will grow, faster than your soul can carry you. You will grow to love your new tongue. It’s an acquired taste. You will grow to hate bigotry. Hell, you will give the naysayers hell.*

*Love, you will love. Suffer, because of our bonds we do suffer. Ethereal beauty lies within the ties that bind us. Protect those bonds with fierce conviction.*

## **CHAPTER 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

This qualitative study uses Grounded Theory methods to examine the implications of using creative writing as a way of coping with the socio-emotional challenges of undocumented university students and graduates. A review of relevant literature pertaining to the prominent themes of this study revealed the various challenges that undocumented young people face, and ways in which these young individuals cope with the barriers brought upon by their immigration status. The literature review also showed that narrative therapy, sometimes in the form of creative writing, can be an effective way of managing, coping with, and healing from emotional and mental health problems and challenges. Through open-ended, one-on-one interviews with six undocumented college students and graduates that regularly engage in creative writing practices, and an analysis of their creative work, this study paints a vivid picture of the ways in which this particular group engages with creative writing, and the outcomes of this process. The stories of these six undocumented young individuals support and expand upon the themes that emerged through the review of the literature.

### **Discussion of Findings**

A thorough analysis and massaging of the data resulted in these six relevant themes: not yours, fear, depression, identity, family and home, and acceptance. Specifically, these themes speak to the realities of all that is out of reach for undocumented people, the ever-present fear that lives in the conscious and subconscious minds of the undocumented population, the difficulties of dealing with depression, coming to terms with and understanding intersecting identities, family dynamics and

longing for home, as well as wanting to be accepted into U.S. culture and society. These themes carry enormous power in telling the story of the six undocumented young people who had the courage to share the complexity of their immigration status to better inform the narrative on immigration reform. These students have the exquisite ability to tell in blood and flesh what it really means to feel rejected by the country they see as their own, with often the only difference between them and other Americans being a 9-digit number. While the unnecessary pain, struggle, suffering, and misery is palpable, their resiliency, beauty, and powerful human connections are also manifested in empowering ways that vividly illustrate what happens when resolute individuals come together to share their deep humanity.

The themes explored in this study tell a complex story from the genuine voices of those in the trenches, undocumented young people who come together in a supportive environment. These stories contribute to the growing narrative on the undocumented population, and they clearly demonstrate how limiting and frightening a life without status can be. These six undocumented students talk about the fear of being separated from their families, the difficulties of accessing and financing higher education, the barriers and detriments with lack of mobility, the fear of encountering law enforcement, the struggle to earn a living, among other. The profound effects of these realities often manifest themselves through subconscious fears and anxieties. Often times, their decision-making process is based upon assessing the risk to their safety as it pertains to their immigration status.

Perhaps one of the most important findings of this study is the detrimental effect of lack of immigration status on mental and emotional health. All of the participants of this study reported experiencing some level of depression directly related to their immigration status. These mental and emotional health challenges are intensified by the lack of resources to address these needs and begin the healing process. Mayra, Mark, Beyonce, Franco, America, and Ricardo found great benefit in engaging in creative processes in a safe space in which they could begin to process and share their experiences. For the particular group of this study, creative writing served as a way of coping with difficult experiences and emotions.

All six participants expressed gaining some form of benefit from engaging in creative writing. They describe the writing process, and the experience of sharing their stories with others, as therapeutic, as a way of humanizing the dialogue about immigrants and immigration, and as a way of remembering and processing painful experiences. This was evident in each of the participant's writings. In each case, writing about the difficulties of living as undocumented helped the participants confront, and begin to deal with, those experiences and emotions. Furthermore, the process of creating an intimate space within the group to unearth these experiences resulted in the creation of a healing, learning, and bonding process for the members of the group. At the most basic level, creative writing served as a method by which the participants could document themselves: their stories, experiences, thoughts and emotions.

Another benefit of creative writing is its impact in helping writers explore, feel empowered by, and come to terms with their identity. For undocumented young people,

identity is something that they're always trying to define for themselves. They often tend to compartmentalize different parts of their identity, because they're forced to hide who they truly are. This is even clearer in the cases of undocumented and queer individuals. These intersecting identities often intensify the mental and emotional health challenges faced by undocumented individuals. Whether it relates to understanding our identities, feeling like outsiders, living with fear, constantly being reminded of all that's out of reach, or simply longing to fit in, the lives of undocumented immigrants in this country are beset with what seem like insurmountable challenges. The undocumented students who participate in the creative writing program at I-STAND have successfully used creative writing as a tool for exploring, processing, and healing from these challenges.

### **Recommendations**

It is evident that a lot more work is needed in order to aid undocumented people to process and heal from the effects of the many challenges bought upon by their immigration status. Subsequent studies can expand on this research by exploring the implications of using alternate coping mechanisms or forms of creative expression with the broader community of undocumented immigrants. With broad immigration reform currently being debated in congress, it is important to keep in mind and address the mental and emotional health needs of this community. The socio-emotional challenges faced by this population will not vanish, even with the passage of comprehensive immigration reform. We must directly address these challenges, first, by speaking about the issues of depression and socio-emotional health; and second, by providing access to

resources, such as support groups and mental health professionals, for undocumented individuals who desire those services.

On April 16, 2013, the United States Senate presented “Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act,” a bill to provide comprehensive immigration reform for the approximate 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country (Lal, 2013). The proposed bill would provide a path to citizenship for unlawful immigrants who entered the country before December 31, 2011, with a faster, five-year pathway to citizenship for DREAM Act-eligible individuals (Lal, 2013). In the next several months, policy makers will continue shaping the various provisions and language in this bill. While this is definitely a move in the right direction, the numbers of deportations that persist under the Obama administration are astounding. Even while immigration reform is being debated in congress, well over a thousand people are still being deported each day (Foley, 2013). According to Foley (2013), the administration is well on its way to reaching 2 million deportations by 2014. It is imperative for lawmakers who are currently debating immigration reform to understand that the future of countless undocumented people lies in their hands. They have the power to positively influence the socio-emotional, and overall health of millions of individuals living in and contributing to our society. In order to make the most informed decision on the matter and to have a better understanding of the phenomenon they are currently addressing, lawmakers must listen to the real life stories of the people whose lives they are directly impacting.

### Conclusion

The benefits of creative writing are twofold. Internally, creative writing provides a structured process for accessing, processing, and healing from difficult experiences and emotions. Being able to externalize these experiences and emotions through writing can be extremely healing and therapeutic. Externally, creative writing is a powerful tool for building connections with those who are not part of the undocumented experience, and a way of humanizing the issues about immigrants and immigration. These benefits are heightened when the creative writing process takes place in an intimate and safe group setting.

On January 2011, I was called into the Human Resources manager's office at the high school where I used to teach Spanish. She asked me to check my Social Security card and get back to her with the correct information. At that moment, I realized that my silence would no longer protect me. I realized that although I could do well for myself, the injustices that my family and my community were enduring would not vanish until we all took a firm stand for justice.

*When my mom comes home from work that night, she finds me working frantically on a substitute lesson plan. Her Clorox-stained clothes and the wrinkles on her hands caused by the house-cleaning chemicals remind me that I have a lot to be thankful for. I invite her into my room to give her the news.*

*"Tomorrow will be my last day."*

*"How are you feeling, mijo?"*

*“Bien, mami. Everything’s going to be okay.” I try to sound as normal as possible. I don’t want her to see how much this hurts; I don’t want her to worry.*

*“God has a plan for all of us. He has something better planned for you.” Her words are comforting.*

*The following morning, I arrive on campus early. My classroom feels peaceful. I can see my own reflection on the whiteboard, clean and ready for a long day of teaching and learning. The bookshelf on the corner contains prearranged rows of Spanish books waiting to be read. My massive desk in the back of the classroom reminds me what a waste of space it’s been, given that I never use it during class. I feel a sense of pride as I carefully examine the student work on the walls. The bell rings too quickly, before I know it, my students are at the door. I go through the day as if nothing is happening, pretending like I’m not hurting inside, knowing that this is the last time I will see my students.*

*“This weekend there is no homework.” I announce.*

*“Maestro, are you feeling well?” a student asks, knowing that “no homework” is not in my character.*

*I nod, not wanting to give anything away with the sound of my voice.*

*I wish I could tell them what is really going on. Tell them what an honor it has been to teach and see them flourish in so many ways. Tell them how proud I am of all their work and of how much they have grown. Thank them for everything they’ve taught me. Tell them that it is true that anything is possible when you set*

*your mind to it. I wonder what they will think of me when I stop showing up, without a reason, without saying goodbye.*

*My heart skips a beat when I hear the last bell ring, signaling the end of the school day, screaming at me that my time is up. I walk to the H.R. manager's office, convinced that this is the end, only to find that she's already gone.*

*Determined to get it over with, I call her cellphone.*

*"What's going on?" she answers.*

*"I need to speak with you about the letter you received." My voice shakes as I begin to speak. "The number you have in my file is the number I gave you, there is no other number."*

*A long pause...*

*"You don't need to tell me any more." She says.*

*My instinct is to say more, but my nerves don't allow it. I did what I had to do, in reaction to the situation society has placed me in. This is the country that has seen me grow and learn, and I owe so much to this place. Teaching has been the most rewarding way of giving back.*

*These words did not find a way out.*

*"I need to check with our lawyers. Stay home on Monday, we'll call you to follow up."*

*I sit there, in silence, frozen in time. Everything I have worked, so hard to achieve, all my schooling, preparation, the countless hours spent grading,*

*planning, and teaching; none of it matters at this point; nine numbers stand between me and my dreams.*

*God has a plan for all of us. I know that something better awaits.*

As undocumented individuals in the United States, we find ourselves in a constant state of limbo, which often results in feelings of exclusion and uncertainty. We, the undocumented population, are fighting to be able to fully participate and contribute in U.S. society; we long to be accepted as Americans in every way. We all have a shared obligation to treat all people with dignity and respect, and to not deny any member of our communities, even those who are undocumented, to use their talents and education for our shared prosperity. Furthermore, we have a basic responsibility, as human beings, to accept and recognize all people, regardless of birthplace or immigration status, as valuable and contributing members of our communities.

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**Appendix A****INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

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***Background***

1. Tell me about your immigration history.

*Possible probing questions:*

- a. *Where were you born?*
- b. *What year did you migrate to the United States?*
- c. *How old were you when you migrated?*
- d. *What cities have you lived in, in the United States?*

2. Tell me about your academic background.

*Possible probing questions:*

- a. *Did you attend school in your home country? What grades?*
- b. *What schools have you attended in the United States?*
- c. *What is/was your major?*

***Socio-emotional Challenges***

1. Tell me about what it's like to live as an undocumented immigrant in the United States.

*Possible probing questions:*

- a. *Have you faced challenges due to your immigration status?*
- b. *If so, what have you done to deal with those challenges?*

***Creative Writing as a Way of Coping***

1. Tell me about your experience in the creative writing program at I-STAND.

*Possible probing questions:*

- a. *How did you first join?*
- b. *How has this experience affected you / your life?*
- c. *Would you recommend this program to other students in your situation?*

2. Tell me about your writing experience.

*Possible probing questions:*

- a. *What is your writing process like?*
- b. *What is it like to write personal narratives?*
- c. *What is it like to share your writing(s) with other participants in the creative writing class?*
- d. *What is it like to share your writing(s) with other people?*

\*Probing questions will only be asked if the subject has already entered the particular topic of the question.

## Appendix B



### CONSENT FORM

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*You are invited to take part in a research of the implications of using creative writing as a way of coping with the emotional and mental challenges of being an undocumented student. You were chosen for the study because you are part of the creative writing program at Immigrant Success Through Activism, Networking and Defense (I-STAND) (pseudonym). This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.*

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Julio Navarrete, who is a master’s student at The National Hispanic University.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the implications of using creative writing as a means of coping with the socio-emotional (emotional and mental) challenges of undocumented college students and graduates.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Be present during observations at the creative writing sessions between July and August 2012.
- Submit your original creative writing work for analysis.
- Partake in a one-on-one, audio-recorded open-ended interview with the researcher, which could last approximately one hour. If needed, a follow-up interview may be required.

#### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you want to be in the study. No one at Immigrant Success Through Activism, Networking and Defense or the creative writing program will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind at any time during the study. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal or wish not to respond to.



## **CONSENT FORM continued**

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### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Due to the nature of the topic being discussed, participants may experience strong emotional reactions while answering the research questions. Participants may be inconvenienced by the one-hour time commitment for the one-on-one interview. The risk to confidentiality will be minimal: only the students who provide the responses will know that particular source of the information, the information will be anonymous to everyone except the researcher.

Participants will be given a copy of the findings of this study. They will also be invited to the defense of the thesis. Educators, along with the broader community of undocumented students in the United States, would greatly benefit from understanding the implications of using creative writing as a means of coping with socio-emotional challenges. Subsequent studies would be able to explore the implications of using alternate coping mechanisms by and for undocumented students.

### **Compensation:**

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

### **Confidentiality:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. Appropriate pseudonyms for participants and the organization will be used throughout the study. All physical data that is collected will be stored in a locked cabinet. All electronic data will be saved in a password-protected database. The researcher will not use your information for any purpose outside of this research project. Furthermore, the researcher will not include your name, the organization's name, location, or anything else that could identify you in any report of the study. All precautions will be taken to ensure that your information is always kept confidential.



## CONSENT FORM *continued*

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### Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via phone or email. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, please call the NHU IRB office at (408) 273-2695. An NHU IRB representative can discuss this with you. NHU's approval number for this study is 50 and it expires on July 16, 2013.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

### Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement.

Printed Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date of consent \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C****INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS**

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(DATE)

(ADDRESSEE)

(ADDRESS)

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am conducting a study on the implications of using creative writing to cope with the socio-emotional (emotional and mental) challenges of undocumented students as part of my master's thesis at The National Hispanic University. The goal of this study is to explore the implications of using creative writing as a means of coping with the socio-emotional challenges of undocumented college students and graduates.

The format of the study will be based on a whole-group observation and a one-on-one interview, which could last approximately an hour. The interview, which includes an audio recording, is an opportunity for you to tell your personal stories as an undocumented student living in the United States and how you use creative writing in your personal life.

I would deeply appreciate your participation in this research study. This project could help educators and undocumented students understand the implications of using creative writing as a means of coping with socio-emotional challenges. If you are interested in the findings of this research, I would be more than willing to share the

information with you at the end of the project. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me via phone or email. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Julio Navarrete

**Appendix D****INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO ORGANIZATION**

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(DATE)

(ADDRESS)

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am conducting a study on the implications of using creative writing to cope with the socio-emotional (emotional and mental) challenges of undocumented students as part of my master's thesis at The National Hispanic University.

The format of the study will be based on a whole-group observation of one of the creative writing sessions, as well as a one-on-one interview with six of the creative writing participants, which could last approximately an hour. The interview, which will require audio recording, is an opportunity for participants to tell their personal stories as undocumented students living in the United States and how they use creative writing in their personal life.

I would deeply appreciate your permission to conduct this study within the creative writing program. This project could help educators and undocumented students understand the implications of using creative writing as a means of coping with socio-emotional challenges. If you are interested in the findings of this research, I would be more than willing to share the information with you at the end of the project. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Julio Navarrete

**Appendix E**

**Protecting Human Research Participants Certificate**



## Appendix F

### Internal Review Board Approval Letter

Dear Julio,

The IRB panel reviewed your revised IRB application and it is with great enthusiasm that I inform you that your IRB proposal is APPROVED.

You can now start your data collection to prepare your thesis project.

Your application number is: 50

The expiration date is: July 16, 2013

Please make sure you use the approved consent forms.

The IRB panel would like to congratulate you for your progress in your graduate studies and wishes you the best in the completion of your thesis.

Best Regards,  
Isabel

**Isabel N. Vallejo**  
**NHU IRB Chair**