Undocumented Students’ Experiences With Microaggressions During Their College Choice Process

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Background/Context: Although millions of undocumented students are enrolled in and guaranteed free public K–12 education, their postsecondary education opportunities are stifled. Some of the barriers encountered by undocumented students include discriminatory public policies, limited availability of information and insensitive college choice processes, and fear of immigration status disclosure.

Research Question: The research question that guided this study was: How, if at all, do undocumented students experience microaggressions during their college choice process?

Research Participants: A total of 15 undocumented immigrants were interviewed and consisted of 10 females and 5 males. Twelve identified as Latina/o and 3 as Asian. Two participants never enrolled in postsecondary education. Of the 13 participants who enrolled in postsecondary education, 12 enrolled in a New York State public institution (one attended a public out-of-state university). Nine of the interviewees initially attended a four-year college, and 4 originally enrolled in a two-year institution.

Research Design: This qualitative phenomenological study included in-depth semistructured interviews with 15 undocumented students who attended New York City high schools.

Findings: The findings identify nine themes in the area of microaggressions that research participants faced during their college choice process: discriminatory financial aid policies, restricted college choice information, constrained life opportunities, denial of college opportunities, insensitive behaviors, insensitive college choice processes, narrowed college expectations, fear of coming out, and undocumented immigrant blindness. Every respondent who participated in our study encountered multiple episodes of these microaggressions in their college choice process. We found that the participants faced cumulative and negative messages,