Enhancing Institutional Undocu-Competence through Establishing Undocumented Student Resource Centers: A Student-Encompassed Approach

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ABSTRACT

In response to the barriers that undocumented students face in postsecondary education, some colleges and universities are striving to enhance their undocu-competence – the capacity to serve, support, and advocate for undocumented students. One way that institutions are demonstrating this is by establishing Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs). This qualitative study examined the ways in which USRCs support undocumented students and contribute to institutional efforts at enhancing undocu-competence. Findings indicate that USRCs are student-encompassed spaces that provide customized and comprehensive care for undocumented students. Moreover, despite being under-resourced, their impact is campus-wide, largely through building and sustaining undocu-allies. Implications for research and practice are included.

Keywords: undocumented students, identity-based centers, Undocumented Student Resource Centers, student centered, diversity, inclusion

Undocumented immigrants continue to make immeasurable, positive contributions to schools and communities (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Gonzalez, 2008). Yet, with respect to postsecondary education, this population of students faces a number of unique, structural barriers at the federal and state policy levels as well as at the institutional level. The most pressing barriers relate to college access as undocumented college students are unable to receive federal financial aid (Higher Education Act, 1965), and, depending on the state of residence, may face exclusionary in-state resident tuition (ISRT) and/or state aid policies (Ali, 2017). Additionally, undocumented students have reported navigating unwelcoming and, in some cases, hostile campus climates (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Moreover, the precarity of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program serves as a source of stress for undocumented students and their families (National Immigration Law Center, 2019).

Considering these barriers, there is a growing body of scholarship that aligns with immigration activists' urgent calls for colleges and universities aim to increase their undocu-competence (Tapia-Fuselier, 2019; Valenzuela et al., 2015). For the purposes of this paper, undocu-competence refers to the capacity to serve, support, and advocate for undocumented students. One of the most tangible results of the call for undocu-competence is the emerging trend of Undocumented Student Resource Centers (USRCs).

Enhancing Institutional Undocu-Competence

Undocu-Competence

This concept was introduced by Valenzuela and colleagues in 2015 in their conceptual article that proposed institutional undocu-competence – an institutional capacity framework that community colleges can utilize to strengthen their support for undocumented students. This framework challenges institutions to actively reduce barriers and support the success of undocumented students in a variety of ways. In addition to institutional undocu-competence, scholars are also examining undocu-competence at the individual level. For example, Neinhusser and Espino (2017) found that community college professionals had disparate levels of comfort, ease, and understanding respective to serving the undocumented student population, prompting them to propose the Undocumented/DACAmented Status Competency (UDSC) as a framework to be "systematically incorporated into higher education professionals' practice" (p. 11).

There is still room for continued examination of undocu-competence. Although some institutions have established training programs for faculty and staff, publicly advocated for undocumented students, and created space and support for undocumented student groups, researchers assert that colleges and universities could do more to institutionalize support for undocumented students (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015; Muñoz, 2018; Tapia-Fuselier, 2019; Tapia-Fuselier & Young, 2019).

Undocumented Student Resource Centers

(USRCs) are an embodiment of undocu-competence because they represent an institutional commitment to serve, support, and advocate for undocumented students. Cisneros and Valdivia (2018) released the first substantial report on USRCs on college campuses, published through the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions. In their exploratory study, they defined USRCs as "physical structures on campus designated as centers that provide a space for undocumented students and students of mixed-status families to obtain institutionalized support" (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2018, p. 2). Currently, there are 59 established USRCs in the United States (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020).

USRCs, despite their relatively new and emerging nature, follow a long tradition of identity-based centers on college campuses (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). Black Culture Centers (BCCs) began to emerge on college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s as spaces of support for Students of Color (Liu et al., 2010; Lozano, 2010; Patton, 2006; 2010). This is important, because despite the values of diversity and inclusion held by many colleges and universities in the United States, higher education institutions were not built with the success of marginalized students in mind. The emergence of these centers onto college campuses was largely a result of activism "rooted in a struggle for students to hold institutions of higher education

accountable" (Patton, 2010, p. xiv). The birth of the Black Culture Center gave rise to other identity-based spaces, such as Latino Culture Centers, Asian American Culture Centers, LGBT Centers, and most recently, USRCs.

Patton (2010) wrote that the student activists who led the charge to establish BCCs "were resistant to the lack of change and extremely active during this period of unrest. In order to practice resistance, they galvanized to form coalitions and identified spaces where they could continue resistance" (Patton, 2010, p. xiii). The same could be said for the emergence of USRCs. The development of these spaces is largely attributed to the activism and advocacy of undocumented students and undocu-allies, demanding that their institutions create a more welcoming climate and intentional spaces of support (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). USRCs have emerged and developed in the last decade as the socio-political climate regarding immigration, particularly undocumented immigrants, has evolved.

Cisneros and Valdivia (2018) explained that USRCs have four essential goals: (a) providing access to college opportunities for undocumented high school, transfer, undergraduate, and graduate students, as well as students from mixed-status families; (b) create a welcoming and supportive environment that will enhance students' college experience; (c) promote undocumented students' civic and community engagement; (d) enhance

undocumented students' mental health and well-being (p. 2). USRCs do this by facilitating a wide range of student services that are customized to the needs of undocumented students. It is important to note that many of these services are collaborative efforts with USRC affiliates in a variety of functional areas. (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2018).

The research on USRCs is emerging but remains limited. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to this growing body of scholarship by examining the role that USRCs play in building undocu-competence on four-year college campuses by answering three research questions:

1. How do USRCs support undocumented students?

2. How do USRCs contribute to institutional undocu-competence?

3. What challenges do USRCs face in contributing to undocu-competence?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study has two components. First, I considered the Weick's (1976) concept of institutions as loosely coupled systems. Departments within a college or university are inherently connected, yet that connection is often weak, allowing each individual unit to maintain a sense of individual identity in addition to some semblance of separation from other

units (Weick, 1976). Because of this, large-scale changes, such as establishing diversity and equity initiatives, are hard to achieve (Kezar, 2001; Weick, 1976).

Second, I leaned on the aforementioned concept of institutional undocu-competence (Valenzuela et al, 2015). Institutional undocu-competence challenges institutions to actively reduce barriers and support the success of undocumented students in a variety of ways. There are eight categories within this framework: policy and assessment; training faculty and staff; visible advocacy; outreach and recruitment; financial aid; institutional support for student groups; health and psychological services; and welcoming campus environment (Valenzuela et al., 2015).

Taken together, this conceptual framework allowed me to understand the ways in which USRCs support undocumented students and contribute to institutional undocu-competence. Additionally, this lens allowed me to explore the limitations that USRCs may face in working to enhance institutional undocu-competence.

Methods

I designed an exploratory qualitative study to answer my research questions. I determined eligible USRCs based on Cisneros and Valdivia's (2018) report, in which they identified 28 USRCs on four-year college campuses. Acknowledging that USRC professionals are valuable sources of knowledge relevant to the purpose of the study, I recruited USRC professionals to serve as participants via email and eight USRC professionals participated in the study. I collected data through in-depth semistructured interviews conducted virtually. All data collected was protected to maintain confidentiality, an issue of critical importance given this topic. Pseudonyms are used for each participant to present findings.

Analysis

Analysis was ongoing throughout the process of data collection (Hesse-Biber, 2017). During each interview, I took notes of initial impressions and spent time reflecting after each interview. Thematic analysis techniques were utilized to derive findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, the data was coded using open coding strategies. Then, initial interpretation began through analytical coding. Finally, categories were constructed to represent themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to establish trustworthiness, I relied on peer review, engaged in member checking, and achieved data saturation. Importantly, member checking including giving the participants an opportunity to confirm transcript accuracy as well as review and comment on preliminary findings.

Positionality Statement

Prior to and throughout the data collection process, I was engaged in critical reflexivity in order to account for my own positionality to the study (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). I am a U.S. citizen, so I do not

have the lived experience of being undocumented. I am also white, which is important to name as today's anti-immigration rhetoric is inextricably linked to racism and white supremacy. I not only acknowledge this privileged social location but continue to wrestle with how my identities may have posed potential limitations to my research design, data collection, analysis, and reporting of findings. I treat this task with great seriousness. My critical reflexivity practices included written reflections as well as conversations with like-minded colleagues. I believe that I was able to establish trust and rapport with each participant as all were engaged in our interviews with openness, vulnerability, and generosity.

Findings

At the conclusion of the data analysis process, and after member checking, final themes were identified. The findings are presented here with respect to each research question.

RQ1: How do USRCs Support Undocumented Students?

In order to understand how USRCs contribute to undocu-competence at the institutional level, I had to first understand the functions of the USRC. As indicated in the first research question, I aimed to learn how USRCs support students and found that there were two salient themes related to student support: being student-encompassed, and providing customized, comprehensive care.

Student-Encompassed

One of the most compelling findings of the study was that all of the participants described USRCs revolving around students in critical ways. Students were not only being supported through the work of the USRC, but were integral to the establishment, evolution, and current function of the USRC. In analyzing the data, it was clear that USRCs were operating in a way that was beyond "student-centered." In fact, I found that USRCs were "student-encompassed." I use the framing of student-encompassed to indicate that students were not simply being passively served by the USRC. Rather, students played a critical role in the inception and creation of the USRC, participated in carrying out the mission of the USRC, and were included in USRC operations in meaningful ways. Students both surround the USRC and exist within the functions of the USRC; they are included comprehensively. Moreover, the word encompassed can be used to describe the cause of something to take place or be brought about. This is exactly what every participant described – students played a large, important role in the origin of USRCs. For example, when asked about the origin of their campus's USRC, Martha stated, "I think it's very important to recognize that the [USRC] exists because of student activism."

Similarly, Cristina said:

This would not have happened if it hadn't been for that student group approaching our president... As staff, we had seen the need for this, you know… but unless the students make the case for it and make their voices the loudest, then, you know, it's not going to happen.

In addition to students being the impetus for the USRCs, they continued to play a role in the evolution of the USRC. For example, Natalia described that the students who pushed the administration to create a USRC on her campus continued to hold the administration accountable to fulfilling promises and giving the USRC resources. Moreover, the work of USRCs is incredibly focused on meeting the needs of students. As Alexandra described, "we are proud to work with and for undocumented students, and so it's really important that in every phase, in everything that we do, it's based on what students need and what students are asking for." All of the participants described students being incorporated into the work of the USRC in formal and informal ways. For example, Laura noted that some student leaders within the USRC on her campus help to coordinate and facilitate campus and community presentations. Other USRCs work with and support student organizations to host events, workshops, and trainings.

All in all, the participants made clear that the purpose of the USRCs is directly related to student needs. Brenda made this clear, saying the purpose of the USRC is to:

Serve the students and their needs, whatever their needs might be. I don't want to specifically say like, "Oh to help the students find scholarships" or things like that, because that's not the need for everybody... It all depends on the needs of the student, and that's how we're going to help assist the student.

Customized and Comprehensive Care
Although housed within various divisions and structured in different ways depending on the institution, USRCs were found to provide customized and comprehensive care to students. I use the word "care" with intention here, as it was clear that the participants in this study went above and beyond simple service provision. Rather, they demonstrated a level of sincere care in the ways in which they support undocumented students. Overwhelmingly, the USRCs were described to be a safe space for students. Said another way, Brenda described that the USRC she coordinates is really "a home for students… they build community, they get to know each other." This kind of space is critical for students because, as Martha described:

The [USRC]… for some of them, it's the first time that they're experiencing a space on an educational campus… to have a space to just be real, to be free, and to not have to hide or be ashamed of their undocumented status.
Laura echoed this, noting that her aim is to ensure that the students who use the USRC can "experience their full humanity."

There are many offices on campus that provide general student support. However, considering the unique barriers that undocumented students face in higher education, USRCs can deliver, or collaborate to deliver, the same support in a relevant way. Cristina said, the USRC is "a place for our students to come and feel safe and be able to have access to any of the resources that they would already, but in a way that removes those extra barriers."

USRCs also serve as a space for customized one-on-one work with undocumented students. One component of providing customized care is attending to the diverse immigration statuses of students. The findings indicated that USRCs pay great attention to the diversity of immigration statuses, crafting resources and services for undocumented students with DACA (sometimes referred to as DACAmented), undocumented students without DACA (sometimes referred to as unDACAmented), and students from mixed-status families (e.g., student is a U.S. citizen and parents are undocumented). DACA allows for students to be able to work without fear of deportation. However, undocumented students without DACA are often ineligible to work and receive a paycheck from a public institution; they must be paid through stipends or scholarships. USRCs often take on the role of figuring out creative ways to ensure undocumented students without DACA are able to secure on-campus employment. For example, Natalia described getting external funding to create a USRC internship program

that pays student staff members through stipends. This is an opportunity that undocumented students without DACA are eligible for.

Despite the USRC professionals' enthusiasm and interest and supporting undocumented students, providing comprehensive support is a complex task as student needs stretch across various institutional functional areas including admissions, financial aid, academic advising, legal services, student organizational support, etc. Natalia explained this, saying, "I had to be an expert in every step of the way that the students have to navigate, from the moment they apply to the moment they graduate." In many cases, the programs and resources USRCs provide are a result of necessary collaboration with on-campus and off-campus partners. All of the participants described the importance on on-campus collaboration in order to provide financial, academic, and co-curricular support to students. Additionally, most of the USRCs represented in this study house book lending libraries, support student organizations, provide various programming for students (e.g., welcome week programming), and work collaboratively with on-campus mental health services to ensure that undocumented students' wellness is supported. Martha summed up the overarching goal of USRCs, asserting that they are meant to empower "holistic undocu-success."

RQ2: How do USRCs Contribute to Institutional Undocu-Competence?

In addition to the function of serving undocumented students, USRCs help to enhance the undocu-competence of the institution of which they are a part. The impact USRCs have on the overall campus is widespread and is largely a result of building and sustaining undocu-allies.

USRC Impact is Widespread

All of the participants explained that undocu-ally trainings are a major part of their work. Undocu-ally trainings range in size and scope, but essentially are trainings put on for staff, faculty, students, and community members in order to increase awareness around the issues impacting undocumented college students. These trainings are often offered for general attendance or are requested by individual campus units. Each participant described the utility of these of trainings and how they contributed to a more welcoming campus climate. Cristina said, "I think it's really changed the way people think about immigration… rather than as this black and white thing, really helping them see the gray. And so, it's created a lot more empathy on campus than there was before, as well as interest." Martha echoed this, noting that the undocu-ally trainings have positively impacted the campus. She described:

Even just in my one year here, [I've heard] countless stories of when allies really went above and beyond, and when a student was able to get an answer immediately, because the person they talked to was like, 'oh, yes, I know what that is.'

And if they didn't know the answer, they know where to get the answer. So, it has really created a campus climate that is far more supportive and far more welcoming.

USRCs become the point of contact on campus for, "anything and everything [related to] undocumented students," according to Laura. Therefore, USRC professionals assist units across campus in evaluating and revising existing policies and procedures in order to ensure they are inclusive of undocumented students. Cristina described collaborating with the admissions and financial aid offices to ensure that undocumented students are coded correctly in internal systems. This was critical to undocumented students receiving accurate information and being treated within state law that affirmed undocumented students' eligibility to receive in-state resident tuition. Brenda also shared an example of collaborating with an academic department to ensure their scholarship opportunities were not excluding undocumented students.

Some participants reported that support has come from unlikely places. In part, this is due the current political climate that has been hostile, in both rhetoric and policy, towards undocumented immigrants. For example, Antonio described this happening particularly after the Trump administration attempted to rescind DACA in 2017. He explained that an academic department worked with the USRC to put on a fundraiser in order to raise funds to support

undocumented students on campus.

Building and Sustaining Undocu-Allies
Participants also described the importance of having undocu-allies across campus in order to best serve undocumented students. As mentioned, the USRCs offer undocu-ally trainings as a way to build undocu-allies. Generating the necessary knowledge, awareness, and skills to serve undocumented students is critical. Martha commented on this task, noting that any kind of trainings conducted by the USRC serve to "knock down myths" around immigration and clarify misconceptions. In addition to building undocu-allies, USRCs work hard to sustain their engagement. Laura described one strategy that USRCs use to do this is. She described that they frame allyship "as a verb and not a noun… in order to be an ally, you have to do things."

In one case, Natalia described an unsuspecting faculty member who reached out to the USRC to start a scholarship for undocumented students in the name of an undocumented student who had tragically passed away. "That's what allyship is," Natalia said. She went on to say that her relationships on campus are critical to her being able to support her students. She described, "at every department, I have my one… person… that I like pick up the phone and I'm like, 'Hey girl, how's it going?! Good?! Listen – I have this student issue…' (laughs). That's literally how I'm able to do my work…" Although these

relationships, and the support that comes as a result of these relationships are critical, it shows the limits of the campus's efforts to institutionalize undocu-competence. This is evident as Natalia continued. "If I didn't have those relationships, the students would have to go downstairs to the window where they're not trained on supporting undocumented students and they come back to me crying because they were told the completely wrong thing." Without an ally in the department, an undocumented student could receive wrong information and potentially be treated poorly.

Sustaining undocu-allies also relies on relationship building across the campus. Some USRCs can facilitate this more easily depending on the structure of the center. For instance, centers that are housed alongside other identity-based centers may find relationship building to happen organically. This was how Martha described the USRC on her campus, as it is physically housed alongside other identity-based centers. She said:

So, it has this feel of like its own little neighborhood, right… because students come in, and usually what happens is they go to the one center they identify with. And then they're like, 'wait, what's going on next door? What's happening over there?' And so, there's a lot of mixing… and that was intentional… it allows for students who don't identify [as undocumented] to be supportive and to be allies. So, all of the centers are open. You don't have to identify with the community to use it. You just have to be willing to learn.

She went on to describe how this structure has helped sustain undocu-allies across campus. By having the USRC open, accessible, and situated within a larger network of cultural centers, students and staff who might not have been aware of the unique issues facing undocumented students are now aware and committed to advocating for undocumented immigrants.

Ultimately, sustaining undocu-allies is incredibly important given the current political climate with respect to immigration. Courtney explained this, saying:
The student group [that helped to establish the USRC] dropped off. They're no longer active and it's really unfortunate, you know… I think that they experienced some burnout… and then because of family separation over the summer, it created a lot more anxiety. It really exacerbated the issue. As well as the fact that now DACA's been back and forth in limbo for over a year. I think that fatigue is just catching up with everyone. So, it's really important at this point, at this junction, that we get our allies to step up… our faculty, staff, and student allies.

RQ3: What Challenges do USRCs Face in Contributing to Undocu-Competence?
In addition to understanding the ways that USRCs support students and contribute to institutional undocu-competence, it is important to understand the challenges these centers face. All of the participants made clear that their USRCs face a capacity challenge related to financial and human resources. This underfunded and understaffed reality posed limitations to the USRCs achieving their goals and fulfilling their missions. Moreover, participants described being limited in terms of their power to affect systemic change, acknowledging that this type of work is ongoing and never fully complete.

Limited Resources
Most notably, all participants described the need for increased financial and human resources support. The centers are often operating on small budgets, even when compared to other identity-based centers at their institutions. Antonio described how frustrating this can be, explaining, "the institution is having a really good time highlighting the work that we're doing, right, which is awesome… But at the same time, our operating budget for the entire year is $5,000." This sentiment was expressed by all of the participants. For example, Martha stated that the USRC she coordinates "is still very much underfunded." Similarly, Laura said the center "needs more permanent funding." In the absence of being fully funded, USRC professionals reported gaining formal and informal fundraising skills in order to bring in money to the center.

In addition to financial resources, USRCs are often limited in human resources as well. Many of these centers only have one professional staff member. Some of the centers have part-time graduate student or undergraduate student support staff. Yet, considering the amount of work these centers are responsible for, the current staffing

situations are simply unsustainable. Cristina described the limitation of her human resources as a one-staff member center, explaining that she often has to turn down opportunities to conduct trainings in the community, even with critical community partners such as local school districts, because there is simply not enough bandwidth to engage in those opportunities.

The Work is Never Done

USRC professionals described the frustrating, but realistic feeling that the work is simply never complete. Particularly in today's political climate, the participants described a "fragile" environment full of "pervasive uncertainty." They also made clear how difficult it can be to work with a student population where some student issues cannot be simply resolved by a USRC. For example, Alexandra said:

It's like, you want to do more for them, but sometimes it's out of your control, right… like, you can feel, to some extent, helpless because I mean… I can't just get you papers, right, or I can't help with very specific things. If you don't qualify for the [state's in-state resident tuition policy], like, I can't change that. We create such a big impact, but at the same time, you can't change the systemic issues… I can't, on my own, change the system.

Additionally, as the USRCs continue to emerge on campuses across the country, there are still issues in getting buy-in from campus stakeholders. Teresa explained that sometimes:

There's still a lack of understanding… from people who are above me. So, I think that's tough. It's tough to also have to educate someone, you know, on and on and on, or having have this discussion as to why – why do they deserve this, and why do they need this.

When asked about long-term goals of the USRC, Martha echoed this point:

As far as the [USRC's] role on campus goes, I think getting to a place where the center is accepted and valued by the majority of the campus. And not just the liberal part of campus, right… like, a true understanding that these are students first and they deserve the experience of any other college student.

Additionally, this type of buy-in can be difficult to achieve in the community outside of campus. Cristina described being out in the community for an event and was approached by a community member who asked, "Well, won't your center just close if DACA is fixed?" She explained, "No, it won't because they're still half of our students are unDACAmented, and even beyond that, you know, we have our refugees and TPS holders… mixed-status families… it's not going away anytime soon." Other participants commented on this issue as well. For example, Laura has had to push back on conversations in which people say, "once we have a progressive president, we are going to be okay… or, once we have the Dream Act, we'll be good to." These examples of oversimplifying immigration issues and debates about whether or not USRCs will be

needed long-term are challenges that USRC professionals will likely continue to navigate.

Discussion

The findings from this study affirm some of the emerging literature on USRCs. For example, Cisneros & Valdivia (2020) found that students themselves are the driving force behind USRC development on college campuses. This study builds upon that and asserts that students are not only the impetus to establishing USRCs, but that they are integrated into all facets of the center including its origin, evolution, and function. USRCs are beyond student-centered; they are student-encompassed. Additionally, this study affirms that USRCs provide a myriad of support mechanisms for undocumented students (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2018), deploying customized and comprehensive care in order to empower undocumented student success.

Additionally, this study contributes to the body of scholarship on undocu-competence, demonstrating that USRCs positively contribute towards enhancing institutional undocu-competence, but still face challenges in being able to do this work. The primary challenges are being underfunded and

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understaffed. Institutional undocu-competence, as a framework, is helpful in empirically examining undocu-competence on a campus and, based on the findings in this study, USRCs contribute to all eight areas identified within the model. However, the findings from this study also illuminate the fact that institutions are loosely-coupled systems. Although the USRC is dedicated to serving, supporting, and advocating for undocumented students, not all units within the institutions share and operationalize that mission in consistent or sustained ways. Even for campuses with USRCs, undocu-competence does not seem to be fully institutionalized in the sense that it is "embedded in the actual value system of the organization" (Kezar, 2014, p. 168).

Implications

There are several notable implications for research based on this study. It is evident that USRC professionals have an important perspective and can serve as a valuable population to learn from as USRCs continue to emerge on campuses across the country. Future research might examine the personal and professional experiences of the professionals in these roles. Additionally, it was abundantly clear that USRCs are underfunded and understaffed. A comprehensive study that would examine the financial and human resources of USRCs

would be beneficial in gaining a clear picture of the current status of these centers. Moreover, this kind of study could potentially generate a compelling argument for institutions to increase the funding and staffing of USRCs.

There are also implications for practice. First, a student-encompassed model could be a useful model for other campus units, ensuring that students play an integral role and are included comprehensively in the centers designed to serve them. Considering that student activism is the broader impetus for the existence of USRCs, it is also important to empower students to lead on the issues impacting them on campus. Giving students the space, support, and agency to advocate for themselves can push campuses to achieve fruitful outcomes, such as the establishment of USRCs or other efforts to enhance institutional undocu-competence. JCA

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