

Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Challenge the Racial State in California without Shame . . . *SIN Vergüenza!*

By The S.I.N. Collective

It is absolutely essential that the oppressed participate in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as subjects of the transformation.

—Paulo Freire

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On a cold and wet Friday night in January of 2006, thirteen of us gathered together in a small room on campus at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). It was a combination of a need to survive and a feeling of hopelessness that brought us all together for a future of joined hopefulness. We were all first-year undergraduate students who had grown up in California, attended and graduated from California public schools, and gained admission to UCSC. Some of us were born in the U.S., but many of us had migrated here as young

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children, and a few were considered undocumented. There we were at the same university with different histories and backgrounds, but tonight we had gathered with one goal in mind. The goal, if over simplified, sounds something like this: to create an organization in support of AB 540 students, labeled by this nation as *illegal aliens*. AB 540, or the California nonresident tuition exemption, allows any student, including undocumented immigrants, to be exempt from paying non-resident tuition at public colleges and universities in California if they can show that they have successfully attended a high school in California for at least three years and successfully graduated or obtained a G.E.D. Not all AB 540 students are undocumented immigrants; approximately two-thirds of AB 540 students are U.S. born citizens who temporarily left the state and would be required to pay out-of-state tuition if it were not for this legislation. For the purpose of this article, however, *AB 540 student* refers to an undocumented immigrant student. We use this term because it reflects the language used within S.I.N. Little did we know that we were about to kick off a new chapter in our communities, our schools, and our own lives.

On that cold Friday night in January, we gathered together for a six-hour meeting to solidify our purpose as a new student organization called Students Informing Now (S.I.N.). Inspired by Paulo Freire's philosophy of popular education (see Freire, 1970/1999), we used an activity called "the flower" to develop our organizational mission and vision statement. The activity was prepared by one of our founding members, Metztonalli,¹ and it used the analogy of a flower to represent our new organization: the roots, the stem, its center, the petals, the sun and the wind that also contribute to the growth of the flower. The center of the flower represented our organization, Students Informing Now. As a visual, the acronym S.I.N. was written at the center of our flower. The roots represented the social-economic factors that influence our lives. The stem represented the things that support and transmit nutrients needed for the flower to grow. The petals that surrounded the center represented our values. Our first activity in that meeting was to create this flower together by writing in the specifics for each part of the flower. This was our first step in using the tools of popular education in S.I.N.

An important outcome of the flower activity was to agree on our key values of solidarity, unity, and education. Second, we agreed that the "stem" of our flower would be a non-hierarchical structure based on participative democracy, where all of our members regardless of their seniority can vote, as long as they are present at a meeting. After agreeing on these key values, we were ready to develop our vision and mission statement. For this, we used *dinámicas*, which are inclusive dialogue-based activities with specific purposes to gain a better understanding of our present reality, to acknowledge our struggles, to recognize our oppressors, and to challenge the structures of domination in our community and society. Through the *dinámicas*, we analyzed our role as students in a society that denies equal access to higher education for everyone. We discussed that we were facing an institutionalized educational system that had little interest in ensuring that AB 540 students

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have the same opportunities as any other student. By the end of our meeting, we had created the following vision and mission statements:

Vision Statement

- ◆ That one day there will be equal opportunities in education.
- ◆ Education will be free of charge.
- ◆ Eliminate barriers that restrict higher education to the economically and socially privileged.
- ◆ Advocate for a just immigration reform.
- ◆ Eliminate all forms of oppression.
- ◆ Maintain S.I.N.'s legacy long after founding members have graduated.

Mission Statement

Our mission is to help promote higher education particularly in support of marginalized students, especially, but not limited to, AB 540 students. We aspire to develop a safe environment and network where students don't have to be afraid to ask questions about their educational circumstances. By working collectively with the community, we aim to empower and inform, consequently bringing voice to those that are unjustly silenced. We aim to achieve these ambitions by employing Popular Education methodology; everything done without shame...*sin vergüenza!*

This is an article about the development of S.I.N. as a current example of youth activism for greater educational access in the context of the racial state. All of the authors of this article are members and allies of S.I.N. who have come together to document the development of our collective political consciousness and share our experience with others. S.I.N. emerged from the lived experiences and felt struggles of its founding members, and it developed as a site of resistance at the intersection of the youth-led movements for educational justice and immigrant rights. We believe that S.I.N. is a unique student organization because it uses popular education as an organizing strategy.

In this article, we seek to show how S.I.N. serves as a vehicle that makes it possible for undocumented students to engage in the growing youth-led movement for greater educational access and equity. We illustrate how S.I.N. works as a safe space, where testimonies and the creation of trust enable *SINistas* (members of S.I.N.) to speak freely about their experience without fear of being judged and without shame. Thus, S.I.N. provides a zone of safety, enabling undocumented students to develop a political identity as *AB 540 students*. Drawing from the work of Latina feminists (e.g., Dyrness, 2006; Villenas, 2001), we argue that our collective political resistance is made possible, in part, because of the personal transformation that occurs within the context of S.I.N.

Social Context: Intersections of Youth Activism for Educational Justice and Immigrant Rights

Nationwide, an estimated 360,000 high school graduates between the ages of

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18 and 24, and another 715,000 children between the ages of 5 and 17, are considered undocumented youth (The Migration Policy Institute, 2006). These are youth who migrated to the United States before the age of 16, who attend (or graduated from) public schools, but have yet to obtain legal status. Despite the high number of undocumented students, we have observed a problematic lack of information about these students at every level of the educational pipeline, from K-12 schools through higher education. We also observe a notable silence around the issue of undocumented students in public schools—a silence that S.I.N. intends to break as a means of giving voice to our experience.

The formation of S.I.N. occurred within the context of a growing youth activist movement sweeping the nation (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; James & McGillicuddy, 2001; Weiss, 2003; Zimmerman, 2004). In the last decade, we have witnessed a surge in youth-led organizing across the country, and California is often at the center of these efforts (Cervone, 2002). Many of these activist campaigns have involved young People of Color² in underserved urban communities who are organizing around the issues closest to their lives, such as: educational equity and access; criminal justice and racist criminalization of youth; and issues of immigration/deportation (Kwon, 2005; Mediratta & Fruchter, 2001; Pintado-Vertner & Chang, 2000; Weiss, 2003).

As Pintado-Vertner & Chang (2000) and Kwon (2006) have argued, youth organizing efforts can be seen as a response to increasingly punitive and oppressive policies that directly or indirectly target Youth of Color while simultaneously limiting their opportunities. In California, for example, these policies include Proposition 21 (which increased criminal penalties for youth); Proposition 227 (which outlawed bilingual education in public schools); and Proposition 209 (which outlawed affirmative action in public universities). Passed against a backdrop of declining funds for public education, skyrocketing tuition at public universities, and an expanding prison system, propositions such as these have exacerbated inequalities and further marginalized Youth of Color. Increasingly, young people are taking ownership of their lives through political activism to resist these trends and bring about positive community change.

S.I.N. is situated at the intersection of two emerging youth-led social movements: for educational justice and for greater immigrant rights. In the spring of 2006, mass pro-immigrant marches in cities across the U.S. captured the nation's attention and made headlines in all major media outlets. This period witnessed some of the largest mass mobilizations across the country since the Civil Rights Movement. Entire communities and families, from the youngest to the elderly, as well as organizations, political leaders, and students, gathered to participate in several months of organizing, marching, and protesting in opposition to HR 4437, the anti-immigrant bill that passed in the U.S. House of Representatives on December 16, 2005.³ These pro-immigrant mobilizations of 2006 clearly illustrated the integral role of youth in the emerging social movement for greater immigrant rights. In their news coverage of these events, the news media closely followed the

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participation of youth, especially the student walkouts on both high school and college campuses which were a powerful defining feature of youth participation.

Yet rather than highlighting the positive power of their civic engagement, or the educative potential of youth participation in this emerging social movement, the mainstream news media often portrayed youth's involvement as uninformed, careless, and even delinquent behavior. For example, the news media often portrayed student walkouts as a result of laziness or opportunism—as kids who didn't understand the movement but only wanted to cut class (for example, see Clack, 2006; “Protesting students risk backlash,” 2006).

In contrast to this dominant discourse of deficiency, a counter-discourse of youth agency and resistance emphasizes the ways in which Youth of Color exercise political agency despite severe structural barriers to democratic participation (Checkoway, 2003; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Ginwright & James, 2002; HoSang, 2006; Kwon, 2006; Noguera & Cannella, 2006; Nygreen, Kwon, & Sánchez, 2006; Wyn & White, 1997). Rather than locating the problem within ignorant, apathetic, or delinquent youth, this counter-discourse draws our attention to structural barriers that marginalized and disenfranchised young people, the poor, and People of Color (See also Bhavnani, 1991; See also Buckingham, 1999; Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernández, 2003; Rubin, 2007). In this article we offer S.I.N. as an example that strengthens the case for a counter-discourse of youth agency and resistance. We discuss the structural and social barriers that prevented many *SINistas* from participating in political activism in the past, and we also show how S.I.N. acts as a vehicle that enables youth participation in the movements for educational justice and greater immigrant rights. Before telling the story of S.I.N., however, the section below discusses the theoretical framework and methods of knowledge production we used in collectively authoring this article.

Theory and Method: Creating the S.I.N. Collective

The idea for this article began when two university-based researchers, Veronica Velez and Kysa Nygreen, contacted one of S.I.N.'s founding members, Metztonalli, to interview her for a research study of youth activism, which would focus on the creation of S.I.N. After meeting with Metztonalli, however, the idea emerged for a collaborative writing project in which all *SINistas* would play a central role—not as research “subjects” but as co-researchers and co-authors. Through the act of writing as a collective, we sought to embed our theorizing within and through the writing process. This inclusive approach to writing not only highlights the experiential knowledge of *SINistas*, but genuinely and powerfully allows the voices of immigrant and AB 540 students to move from the margins of educational discourse to the center. In this way, we are attempting to put into practice the theoretical principles of popular education and Critical Race Theory that guide the work of S.I.N., including: egalitarian knowledge production, counter-storytelling, and testimony. In this section we briefly outline our theoretical and methodological framework,

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and describe the process we used to form and write together under the authorship of the S.I.N. Collective.

A key feature of S.I.N.'s organizing strategy is the use of popular education. In S.I.N., we define popular education methodology as an organizing and consciousness-raising tool that allows for all our voices and ideas to complement each other through action. Popular education is defined as a democratic process of teaching and learning for political empowerment of oppressed people and groups (Hall, 1978; Hurst, 2002; Prajuli, 1986). Popular education is usually carried out in non-formal educational contexts like labor unions, community-based organizations, and social movements. Popular education is based on the assertion that ordinary people, including oppressed groups, have the power to understand, act upon, and change society (Adams, 1975; Horton & Freire, 1990); they do not need to wait for established organizations, institutions, or experts to rescue them. This tradition of popular education has empowered oppressed groups to lead themselves in democratic social movements rather than being led by experts or professional activists. In the same way, in S.I.N. we lead ourselves in the process of inquiry, action, and reflection. S.I.N. is a truly grassroots effort in that it emerged without the structure of an established organization, growing organically from within our community of students. In S.I.N., we use popular education methodology in our decision-making process, to reach consensus, in the creation of interactive informational workshops, and in our outreach efforts.

Another important aspect of our work is the concept of racism as it applies to the experiences of Latin@⁴ immigrants in the U.S. We borrow from the work of Sánchez (1997) and De Genova (2005) to define “racial nativism” in the contemporary moment as a form of racism that is specifically directed toward immigrants who can be racially identified as Latin@. Although the concept of racial nativism can apply to immigrants of different races, the recent associations of Latin@ immigrants with the rising crime rates, the health care crisis, lower educational standards, etc., in the U.S. (Sánchez, 1997), leads us to define racial nativism in the current socio-political context as a form of hostility directed toward Latin@ immigrants in particular. In this way, our framework extends from Critical Race Theory (Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995) and is best characterized by one of its sub-disciplines, Latin@ Critical Race Theory (LatCrit).⁵ One important aspect of Critical Race Theory and LatCrit is the use of oral histories and counter-storytelling as legitimate data sources and suitable research approaches to analyze the educational experiences of Students of Color, (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). LatCrit recognizes that “. . . the experiential knowledge of People of Color is legitimate and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26).

Within S.I.N., our counter-stories have emerged through a process of testimony or *testimonio* (Brabeck, 2003; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001), a methodological approach that is aimed at resisting oppression by offering “new potential for the marginalized voice to speak on its own behalf and for those in the dominant group to understand that voice because of its unique characteristics” (Brabeck, 2003, p.

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253). Each *SINista* and S.I.N. ally brings a unique personal history and experience of being an immigrant, a child of an immigrant, an AB 540 student, or an advocate for immigrant and human rights. We bring our own experiences to bear on the overall process of our work together, but we also share a collective experience, and *testimonio* is a method that best captures this collectivity: “[U]nlike autobiography, which relates an individual life story, *testimonio* is the expression not of a single autonomous account but of a collectively experienced reality” (Brabeck, 2003, p. 253). In writing this article we have attempted to capture our collective experience by employing *testimonio* as a methodological approach, and by working together to write as a collective of *SINistas* and S.I.N. allies. In making this choice, we are informed by scholarship in the intersecting fields of feminist anthropology (Behar, 1996; Fine, 1994), Women of Color feminisms (Ladson Billings, 2000; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Villenas, 2001), and participatory action research (Hall, 1992; Maguire, 1987; Nygreen, 2006). These works emphasize that knowledge construction is a shared process, and seek for ways to include the voices of traditional research “subjects” in the production of research about them.

To implement the principles of popular education and *testimonio* in practice, we all agreed the writing process should be entirely collaborative: *SINistas* would dialogue, reflect, and write our own stories with the facilitative help of the allies. Together we developed three organizing questions to focus the article: (1) How did S.I.N. get started? (2) How did you get involved with S.I.N.? and (3) Why is S.I.N. important? During the summer of 2006, we learned that we had been invited to submit an article for publication in this scholarly journal. Since we had already left campus for our hometowns across the state of California, we organized two simultaneous meetings in Southern and Northern California, enabling the majority of *SINistas* and allies to attend. The meetings ended with a conference call between the two groups, allowing everyone present to collectively agree on next steps and tasks to be completed.

We created an email listserv to communicate, and our writing process proceeded with individual writing reflections on the three guiding questions. We set dates by which to post individual reflections, as well as “thematic codes” we observed in them. We then organized ourselves into three writing groups to analyze and compile the reflections into sections of the article. The S.I.N. allies helped with providing a theoretical framework and pulling the first complete draft together. During the fall quarter of 2006, time was reserved at each weekly S.I.N. meeting to read, discuss, and revise the article. We held two all-day writing retreats during the winter break—one in Northern California and one in Southern California—to re-work sections of the draft, and final edits occurred via email thereafter. Anyone present at a meeting could participate and comment with equal weight.

Everyone who attended at least one meeting to discuss the article was listed as an author in “the S.I.N. collective,” with our names in alphabetical order. In choosing a collective authorship, we have modeled ourselves after The Latina Feminist Group (2001), a collaborative of eighteen scholars who co-authored the work

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Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios. However, in contrast to The Latina Feminist Group, the S.I.N. Collective is not made up of academic researchers but of undergraduate students working with the facilitative help of two research allies. The final article we agreed upon tells the story of how and why S.I.N. got started, and why S.I.N. is important. We emphasize the role of testimony within S.I.N. and the importance of S.I.N. as a zone of safety that enables the development of a critical consciousness and political identity as AB 540 students. The following two sections tell this story.

From Desperation to Action: How and Why S.I.N. Got Started

In the fall of 2005, two first-year students at UCSC, Metztonalli and Texcalli, met and immediately discovered a common link: they were both AB 540 students. Just eighteen years old and away from their families for the first time, they shared other common challenges associated with their AB 540 status. Both of them struggled to pay for their college education without access to financial aid or student loans: Although AB 540 students are eligible for in-state tuition rates at California public colleges and universities, they cannot apply for government-sponsored financial aid or loans. While some private scholarships are open to all students regardless of legal status, they are so few and the need so great that a small amount of money is spread thinly. In addition to finances, both Metztonalli and Texcalli struggled with the ever-present fear of possible legal repercussions, as well as the social stigma associated with their status as undocumented students. They struggled to find basic information about their options, and other forms of support to help them access resources that are available to AB 540 students in California. But mostly, they struggled to find a safe space to talk openly about their experience and legal status with peers and adults.

As Metztonalli and Texcalli discussed their experiences and challenges with each other, they noticed that UCSC was doing little to facilitate the entry and retention of AB 540 students like themselves. Although a handful of faculty and staff members were very helpful, the university had no systems in place to assist AB 540 students in the process of enrolling and completing their studies. Many students, staff, and faculty members were completely unaware of the AB 540 law, and they did not know that undocumented students were among them in their classes and student groups at UCSC. No mention was made of these students in classes or student organizations, even in organizations that have been established for years to support Students of Color. Essentially, AB 540 students were left alone to figure things out with no place to turn. This institutional invisibility was disturbing to them because AB 540 had passed into law in 2001. Now nearly five years later, there remained both a deep silence and a pervasive lack of information about AB 540 and the existence of AB 540 students in higher education.

Just weeks into their freshman year of college, Metztonalli and Texcalli turned their desperation into action when they decided to put together a forum. With the

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support of two sympathetic staff members, they scheduled the event for November of 2005, and titled it: “Diminished Human Right To Education: An Educational Forum on Policies & Laws Impacting Immigrant Students.” There were three speakers at the forum. One gave her personal experience of growing up as an undocumented student and how she overcame the struggles of attending college as an undocumented student. The other two speakers gave valuable information about what AB 540 students could do to fight these barriers and obtain a higher education. The outcome of the forum was surprising to those who organized the event and far more for those who attended.

Many of the attendees learned about the existence and experiences of undocumented college students for the first time. They learned that many high school counselors and university staff members lacked information about AB 540, and were unable to inform college-bound students about their rights under this law. One future *SINista*, Acapatli, did not even know she herself was an AB 540 student. She had lived in California since she was two years old, and was surprised when she was charged out-of-state tuition for her first year at UCSC. At the forum, she learned that there was a category called AB 540 to describe her status, and a law that permitted her to pay in-state tuition at public California colleges and universities.

The forum opened our eyes, and showed us how many people were misinformed about, or simply not aware of, the AB 540 legislation. We realized then we had to do something to change the system and to inform people about undocumented students’ rights to attend a college or university. After the forum we had a number of informal gatherings, which we now affectionately call our “pre-S.I.N. meetings” because our group did not yet have a name. At that time, we did not even know we would become an organization; we only knew that we had to continue the dialogue that started at the forum. Not all of us were AB 540 students, but all of us were connected to the immigrant experience through our families, friends, high schools, and communities. Some of us had seen close friends in high school choose not to attend college only because they did not know it was an option for them. Sometimes this belief was confirmed by well-meaning teachers or counselors who lacked information about AB 540.

Although the term “undocumented” may conjure up ideas of being foreign or a newly-arrived immigrant, many undocumented students like Acapatli have lived in the U.S. almost their whole lives, and know no other home. They are our friends, cousins, classmates, and neighbors; whether undocumented or not, each of us shared a personal connection to this topic. It was this personal connection that propelled our initial involvement in the pre-S.I.N. meetings. At these gatherings, we shared personal stories, resources, and survival tips for AB 540 students. We connected with each other through rich and intellectual talks about our frustrations and concerns with the issues affecting our lives. The bonding process occurred rapidly, leading to the concept of becoming an organization. We did not want to be an organization that simply talked about issues; we decided to be an organization that took action.

On the day that we were to choose a name for our newfound group, we arrived

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at a scheduled meeting with possible names written on a note pad to be visually judged. We decided that we wanted our name to communicate both who we were and what our purpose was, in a straightforward and non-offensive way. We all felt it was important to share that we were students, which communicated that we were still in the process of learning. We agreed that our purpose was to inform people about AB 540 and the right to higher education for all students, including those deemed undocumented. When defining the purpose of our organization, we discussed the difference between informing and educating. We felt the word “educate” could imply that nonmembers were ignorant and in need of our education. We concluded that “informing” was a more accurate description of our mission than “educating.” What people lacked was *information* about AB 540, not necessarily education.

Finally, we wanted to emphasize the urgency of our work, and our goal to take action now rather than prepare ourselves for action in the future. Therefore, we agreed on the name Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) and immediately chose the slogan *SIN vergüenza*, which translates to “without shame.” With an official name, our next task was to create our mission and vision. Through this process we established a democratic structure and set of procedures for getting things done. However, we chose not to register our group as an official student organization, because we did not want to allow the university to restrict or limit our activities in any way, especially when the existence of AB 540 students at UCSC was an avoided subject.

Once we had built the foundation of S.I.N., it was time for us to get to work. Our first action was to develop a PowerPoint presentation about the AB 540 law, which included the rights of AB 540 students and obstacles they face. With the help of a staff person, we had a blueprint for the PowerPoint. The first time we presented our PowerPoint was for the *Puente* Conference in February of 2006.⁶ The annual northern California *Puente* Conference, which was held at UCSC that year, provides academic and social support to disadvantaged students interested in transferring from community college to a four-year university. Community college students from across northern California attended the conference, and approximately 120 participants voluntarily attended our presentation on AB 540, choosing from a list of concurrent workshops.

By creating a safe space, the information we shared was empowering and ignited a sense of hope for everyone present. At the end of our presentation we received many questions, such as what someone should do if they were an AB 540 student or how they could help others who were AB 540. Many people asked for our contact information so they could keep in touch with us, and we received so many emails with questions about AB 540 that our email account kept filling up over its limit. The *Puente* presentation was a defining moment in the life of S.I.N. because our mission was to raise awareness about AB 540 and it was already happening before our own eyes.

During the winter and spring break, many of us gave similar presentations on AB 540 at our hometown high schools. Later, we arranged to give our PowerPoint presentation to members of the UCSC staff who worked in Admissions, Dining

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and Residential Services, and the Academic Support Services. In this meeting, we shared our own personal experiences and explained the procedures that staff could take to better support AB 540 students at UCSC. We also approached some of our progressive faculty members for support, and we received a mixed response. Although many faculty allowed us to give presentations about S.I.N. in their classes, none of them came forward to take a more active role in S.I.N. Some of us were surprised by this because we had learned in these same professors' classes about the importance of collective action and protest, and often these courses focused specifically on the immigrant or People of Color experience. We believed such professors would be excited at the opportunity to get more involved in a movement taking these issues seriously as we were trying to do. One staff member warned us that the issue of AB 540 students' rights was too controversial and represented a "can of worms" that was best not opened. We believe this comment exemplifies the deep silence and social stigma that surrounds this issue of AB 540 and undocumented students.

Though we initially felt discouraged by the mixed response from faculty, things began to change in March of 2006 when mass pro-immigrant marches broke out across the country in response to HR 4437. This occurrence propelled S.I.N. into an active community role. When we initiated our group's response to HR 4437 we were working alone, but along the way we found aid from the Brown Berets of Watsonville⁷ who were already organizing in the Santa Cruz community.⁸ Together, we organized the march in Santa Cruz on March 17, 2006,⁹ which turned out hundreds of participants. Building from the success of that historic march, S.I.N. took the initiative to create a coalition on the UCSC campus to provide the space for dialogue and action addressing anti-immigration legislation. In response to the nationwide callout, S.I.N. reached out to diverse student organizations on campus. Our engagement with citywide organizing brought S.I.N. into the spotlight and made the issues and needs of undocumented immigrant students on campus a more visible topic.

Finally, in its first year of existence as a student organization, S.I.N. became involved in lobbying the California legislature in support of the California Dream Act (SB 160), which would permit AB 540 students to apply for state-funded financial aid at California colleges and universities. During the summer break of 2006, some *SINistas* met with the bill's sponsor, State Senator Gil Cedillo, and others traveled to Sacramento to rally in support of the bill. Although the California Dream Act passed in the state legislature, it was later vetoed by Governor Schwarzenegger on September 30, 2006. Immediately thereafter, *SINistas* participated in a protest in Sacramento along with members of other AB 540 student groups from across Northern California. Although student protesters came from many campuses, S.I.N. brought the largest number of students—nearly half of the total AB 540 student contingent. Attending the Sacramento protest was S.I.N.'s first major action in the second academic year of existence. This trip provided an opportunity for new *SINistas*—including some first-year students

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and other students who had learned about S.I.N. over the summer—to participate in an immediate action.

Now in its second academic year, S.I.N. has expanded to include at least five new active members, and continues the work of informing, organizing, and sustaining a coalition of student organizations. For example, S.I.N. participated with other student groups on a panel titled “Immigrants and Islam Are Not the Enemy,” as well as a door-to-door organizing campaign by the Santa Cruz-based Resource Center for Non-Violence. As part of this campaign, *SINistas* walked neighborhoods to inform immigrant residents of their legal rights and a new local telephone hotline¹⁰ to assist them with exercising those rights. Additionally, S.I.N. remains an active member of the coalition built during the spring protests of 2006, which has come to be named Movement for Immigrant Rights Alliance. We are currently preparing a resolution that would proclaim the university as a symbolic “safe haven” for immigrants. At the same time, we are coordinating an activist response to a possible anti-immigrant proposition that may appear on the California ballot this year.¹¹ Part of our response will include a dialogue series with out-of-state students, who recently challenged AB 540 in a lawsuit on the claim that it violated the 14th Amendment’s equal protection clause.¹² The objective of these dialogues will be to explore the root causes of high college tuition in general and the lack of equal access to college for *all* students. We hope that through popular education and participatory inquiry around a *shared* problem—prohibitive college tuition—we can begin to address the root causes of educational inequality rather than framing immigrant students as a scapegoat.

Recently, S.I.N. returned to the *Puente* conference for a second year and we had an even larger turnout than expected. Even more so than our first *Puente* presentation, the second year’s presentation was a bittersweet experience; although it was rewarding to inform so many students about AB 540 and their right to attend college, we also felt frustrated that we could not do more to support them in this goal. We shared our personal stories and offered our thoughts about each student’s unique situation. We also passed out a list of scholarships *any* student could apply for, and discussed how to organize AB 540 groups on their own campuses. Yet, the one-on-one individual support we provided seemed to fall far short of the deeper structural change that we believe is needed to make college access a reality for all students. This experience reminds us of the need to continue organizing in addition to our outreach efforts.

Although in existence for only a year, S.I.N. has already organized forums, created workshops, built coalitions, participated in marches, and lobbied legislators at the state capitol. Yet what makes this work even more important is that we created S.I.N., as students, on the basis of our shared experiences, commitments and dreams. We did not listen to people who said our issue was a “can of worms” to be kept closed. We refused to stay silent and we refused to wait for those in power (including our more established student organizations) to take up this cause. Instead, we gathered together and we acted—becoming our own leaders and building our

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own organization from the ground up. But what made it possible for us to take action in this way? What enabled us to discover a political voice and construct a political identity as *AB 540 students*? The next section explores these questions by drawing on the role of testimony within S.I.N., and the role of S.I.N. as a zone of safety for its members. We will argue that S.I.N. provided a physical, emotional, and intellectual space that fostered our critical consciousness and made it possible to construct a political identity as AB 540 students. We seek to illustrate how S.I.N. became a conduit for engaged citizenship that enabled many *SINistas* to become politically active for the first time in our lives.

A Zone of Safety in an Unsafe World

When you are an immigrant without the *legal* title, one thing you are sure to have is fear. First there is the fear of being persecuted simply for living and attending school in a country where you weren't born, even if you were raised here for all the time you can remember. While the fear of legal repercussions is always present beneath the surface, the fear of being stigmatized or marginalized is just as difficult to deal with on a daily basis. "Coming out" as an AB 540 student means exposing yourself and becoming vulnerable. Before S.I.N., the fear of being ridiculed, marginalized, or shamed prevented many AB 540 students from reaching out for help. As a result, many AB 540 students remained isolated from one another and without access to support networks or information.

One day, after much hesitation, a *SINista* named Wallotli confessed her AB 540 status to friends within a *raza* student organization. She had thought of this confession as a significant breakthrough, one she thought long and hard about. And yet, after sharing her story with the group, she found the subject was never touched upon again. After the night passed, she felt confused about whether the revelation was worth the prior anxiety. It was as if the issue of being AB 540 was a forbidden topic, shrouded in a veil of silence, so much so that other students did not know what to say or how to react, even if they were members of a *raza* student organization themselves.

Like Wallotli, many AB 540 *SINistas* found that the university and student organizations did not feel like safe spaces to talk about legal status and the particular challenges it brings. We could not find meeting places with adequate atmospheres to share such crucial details about ourselves, and there were no conversations about immigration that would lead to a comfortable time to share personal experiences. Some of us have gone through economic, emotional, and psychological rigors just trying to survive as students at UCSC, but we did not know where to go for help on campus, or whom we could trust to share our stories.

Today, in contrast, S.I.N. provides a zone of safety and its members have formed an inseparable bond. S.I.N. is more than an organization for its members; it is a family. *SINistas* help each other out, whether it is with financial problems, academic problems or self-esteem issues. S.I.N. is a haven where we can open up

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and share our stories without the fear of being judged. As a result, AB 540 students who were once afraid to claim that category are now making themselves visible, knowing they can count on S.I.N. for support. By working as a collective, S.I.N. is a zone of safety in multiple senses. In addition to being a safe space where its members feel comfortable sharing personal experiences, S.I.N. also provides a level of safety to engage politically as *AB 540 students*. Not all *SINistas* are AB 540 students, but each of us holds a deep personal commitment to the struggle for educational equality and college access for all students. Our different legal statuses are not an obstacle to working together, but rather a strengthening component for the organization. Only by coming together have we been able to speak as one united voice to address the inequalities that affect our lives and those of our families, friends, and neighbors. By working as a collective across different statuses, S.I.N. literally provides a conduit through which many AB 540 students have been brought into political activism for the first time of their lives.

An example from Ehecatl's life will help illustrate this point. Ehecatl heard about S.I.N. from a friend in the summer of 2006, just before her fourth year as a student at UCSC. She joined as a new member of S.I.N. in September of 2006 and immediately became one of the most active *SINistas*. Before getting involved with S.I.N., she had never participated in a political group or activity. Even though she was interested in political issues, as an AB 540 student, she was not able to vote and did not believe her voice could make a difference. Protesting and activism seemed too risky because they made her vulnerable to being discovered as an undocumented student or maybe even arrested. Moreover, the social stigma of being undocumented effectively silenced any potential political voice: What would it look like, she thought, if she were to voice political opposition or make political demands? Even though she had lived in California since her childhood, she had no legal "right" to make political demands; it seemed that to do so would make her vulnerable not just to legal dangers but also to social stigma that comes from overstepping one's bounds. Finally, the central political issue that concerned her most—the one closest to her heart—was precisely her lack of political voice and legal status. But how do you fight for voice and status when you have no voice or status to fight with? How do you demand more from society when you are perceived as having no "right" to place *any* demands on society?

For Ehecatl, S.I.N. was the missing link that enabled her to channel her political interests into political action. In discovering S.I.N., she discovered how the issues that affected her most deeply could be framed as *political* issues and addressed through political action. No longer could she think about her everyday personal struggles and anxieties as strictly private or individual problems. Instead, she gained a new framework for thinking about her life in politicized terms. But even more importantly, she discovered in S.I.N. a *way* to participate in addressing the political issues that affected her life. S.I.N. provided the political voice that she previously thought she lacked.

Not only was this organization articulating and fighting for the issues clos-

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est to Ehecatl's heart, but she could engage in S.I.N. without feeling vulnerable as an AB 540 student. When she spoke out now, she was no longer speaking as an individual AB 540 student, but as a *SINista*. In the context of S.I.N. she could claim a political identity as an AB 540 student and act from that subject position with a sense of confidence. Because S.I.N. is a collective that includes immigrant students, the children of immigrants, and their allies, it provides a zone of safety for AB 540 students to act without having to identify themselves individually in ways that could jeopardize their safety or that of their families.

We believe the effectiveness of S.I.N. is a result of the fact that S.I.N. is a zone of safety—a space marked by *confianza* or trust among our members. In the context of S.I.N., we can share our stories, experiences, struggles, and fears without being judged. Our S.I.N. gatherings, both formal and informal, are spaces of story-telling because we share our personal stories and challenges, and these are affirmed by others in the group. Our testimonies become the basis of developing political consciousness because we come to see our stories as shared and politically grounded rather than individual or private; we also support each other in transforming these experiences of shame into experiences of political empowerment. Other scholars have argued that safe spaces marked by trust can facilitate individual transformation and counter-narratives that, in turn, support more public forms of resistance (Dyrness, 2006; Scott, 1990; Villenas, 2001). Our experience with S.I.N. lends support to this view.

Before S.I.N., many of us experienced social isolation, marginalization, stigma, fear, and shame due to our status as immigrants, and possibly “undocumented” students. But in the context of S.I.N., we affirm our collective and individual value as human beings, our right to attend the University of California, and our deservingness to be treated with dignity as students, community members, and political subjects. In other words, by sharing our stories and building *confianza* (trust), we transform our past experiences of shame into the basis of political power. Our slogan, *sin vergüenza* (without shame), is especially relevant here. S.I.N. is a zone of safety where we gain personal strength as well as our political strength to act together, *without shame*, in solidarity with all students including those who are undocumented.

Conclusion and Implications

S.I.N. has grown in size and strength since that long Friday night meeting when it officially formed as a group. Today, S.I.N. is both a supportive, family-like network as well as a vehicle for engaged political action which allows its members to construct political identities as AB 540 students. By creating a zone of safety for its members, S.I.N. has enabled many of us to discover a political voice and to articulate our interests as political demands within a framework of educational equity and access for all students. The processes of testimony and story-telling serve to validate our experiences and affirm our sense of deservingness to demand equity and access to higher education. This feeling of safety is an essential feature of S.I.N.

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that gives us the strength to challenge the social stigma and anti-immigrant sentiment that prevails in the current historical moment. We believe the story of S.I.N. highlights the importance of these safe spaces for fostering political consciousness and enabling political activism.

Despite the accomplishments of S.I.N. and its impact in our lives, our struggles are far from over. Many *SINistas* still deal with the compounded effects of racism, racial nativism, and economic inequality that shape schooling throughout the educational pipeline. Many of us are struggling to support ourselves financially, with extremely limited access to financial aid, as we juggle work, school, and activism along with all the other stresses that come with leaving home and adjusting to college life. S.I.N. is helping us dream for a better future, but not just for ourselves. We recognize that, despite our struggles, we are privileged to be at the university gaining our education. We are using this privilege to inform and empower others. Immigrant students face many barriers to higher education, but S.I.N. is dedicated to breaking those barriers. Through our work with S.I.N. we try to give hope to those behind us, those who want to attend college but might not know they can. We have learned through our outreach visits to schools, and through stories of friends and family members, that many high school graduates who could qualify as AB 540 students are being robbed of their right to a higher education, *simply because they lack information* about AB 540. Each one of these stories breaks our hearts, and it motivates us to keep working to make a difference.

The need for greater educational equity and access for all students—particularly Students of Color and low-income students—is well-recognized within the broader education research and reform communities. In addition, the growing social movement for greater educational equity is widely supported among educational researchers, practitioners, and reformers. Nevertheless, there remains a disturbing silence about the issue of equity for undocumented students. Seen as a “can of worms” potentially too controversial to touch, undocumented students’ needs are ignored, hidden, and surrounded by deep social stigma.

While we recognize the underlying social causes for this stigma, we formed S.I.N. in order to challenge it, because the costs of this stigma are too high. The fact that these undocumented students who attend U.S. public schools every day are excluded from many conversations about educational justice for Students of Color is unacceptable to us. S.I.N. is fighting for educational equity and access for *all* students, and through this organization we are demanding a place for ourselves within the growing movement for educational justice for Students of Color. We believe all students deserve the right to an education no matter what their immigration status. We believe all students who graduate from high school with outstanding records, if they want to attend a university, deserve the chance to attend. But moreover, they also deserve the chance to attend without shame, *sin vergüenza*.

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Notes

¹ Throughout this article, we have chosen to use pseudonyms when referring to individual AB 540 students among us in order to protect their identity due to the hostile anti-immigrant environment.

² “People of Color” is intentionally capitalized, rejecting the standard grammatical norm, to empower this group and to represent a grammatical move toward social and racial justice. This rule will also apply to “Students of Color,” “Communities of Color,” and “Youth of Color,” used throughout this paper.

³ Called the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act, HR 4437 was introduced by Republican representatives James Sensenbrenner (R-WI) and Peter King (R-NY) in December of 2005. H.R. 4437 proposed that any undocumented immigrant residing in the U.S. will be charged with a felony for his/her “illegal” presence in the country and bars him/her of ever gaining legal status in the U.S. The proposed law also sought to charge anyone, regardless of legal status, with a felony who assists or conceals the status of undocumented immigrant from the U.S. government. This could include school teachers, church clergy, immigrant advocate groups, etc. Although it was voted down in the Senate in the spring of 2006, modified versions of H.R. 4437 are being proposed and debated that could prove detrimental to immigrants and their families. (For more information, please visit National Council of La Raza, http://www.nclr.org/section//immigration_debate/).

⁴ We use the label “Latin@” intentionally to acknowledge the lived experiences of *Latinas* that often go silenced under the more traditional and commonly used label “Latino.”

⁵ Emerging from CRT, LatCrit provides researchers with a lens to explore the role of race and racism in the lived experiences of Latinas/os. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) explain that LatCrit addresses issues salient to the identities and experiences of Latinas/os such as immigration status, language, culture, ethnicity and phenotype.

⁶ The *Puente* website (<http://www.puente.net/>) explains: “The Puente Project is an academic preparation program whose mission is to increase the number of educationally disadvantaged students who: Enroll in four-year colleges and universities; Earn college degrees; and Return to the community as mentors and leaders of future generations. Puente provides three areas of service to students: teaching, counseling, and mentoring. Puente trains school and college staff members to conduct this program at their sites. Puente serves students in 56 community colleges and 36 high schools throughout California. Puente’s staff training programs have benefited over 40,000 students directly and over 400,000 indirectly. Puente is open to all students.”

⁷ The Watsonville’s Brown Berets website (<http://www.brownberets.info/welcome/>) explains: “... Autonomous Chapter of the Watsonville Brown Berets. Activated in 1994, we serve as a community defense force acting for the liberation and amelioration of our barrios. Through this website you can access information about our history, actions and news. Also provided is information about our meetings and alternatives to military recruitment.”

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⁸ Watsonville, CA, is a neighboring small city to Santa Cruz, with a large immigrant population.

⁹ <http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/archive/2006/March/18/local/stories/10local.htm>

¹⁰ In response to the immigration raids that occurred in the Santa Cruz area. <http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/archive/2006/September/09/local/stories/03local.htm>

¹¹ Proposition 1229 would abolish the AB 540 law and many other social services to undocumented people. http://www.ss.ca.gov/executive/press_releases/2006/06_127.pdf

¹² Although the lawsuit was struck down in court, it served as the impetus behind Proposition 1229 that could potentially be on the 2007 California ballot.

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