

Building Bridges as We Walk Them: Underrepresented Students' Perspectives on Surviving Inhospitable Institutions

Tai Do, Chinyere Okafor, Emese Ilyes, Juana Alejandro,
Sheron Davenport, David Gordon, Darlene Laboy, Kia Lor,
Alexandra Piper, Tyra Reed, Yu-Chi Wang, and Robert Weathers

Abstract

Investigating factors that impact student success and engagement in higher education is an essential line of inquiry for students who are marginalized and minoritized. This overview of a 5-year participatory action research project led by undergraduate and graduate students examines the development of *The UnGuide*, an online resource for students who feel “the university was not designed for them.” In this article, we question current assumptions about student success and offer guidance for those who hold power in higher education. Lessons from the lived experiences of students involved in creating *The UnGuide* are shared, including the importance of centering student voices, value of peer-to-peer supports within the university, and strategies for students navigating and dismantling systems of oppression. We also reflect on ways power operates both within this larger project and within our universities, and ways we claimed our power as students with complex lived experiences and perspectives.

Keywords: underrepresented students, *UnGuide*, participatory action research, student success, student engagement



“No nos podemos quedar paradas con los brazos cruzados en media del presente. (We can’t afford to stop in the middle of the bridge with arms crossed.) And yet to act is not enough. Many of us are learning to sit perfectly still, to sense the presence of the Soul and commune with Her. We are beginning to realize that we are not wholly at the mercy of circumstance, nor are our lives completely out of our hands. . . . We are each accountable for what is happening down the street, south of the border or across the sea. And those of us who have more of anything: brains, physical strength, political power, spiritual energies, are learning to share them with those that don’t have. We are learning to depend more and more on our own sources for survival, learning not to let the weight of this burden, the bridge, break our backs. Haven’t we always borne jugs of water, children, poverty? Why not learn to bear baskets of hope, love, self-nourishment and to step lightly? Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar. (Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.)

—Anzaldúa, 1983, p. iv

In June of 2016, six public universities representing the East Coast, South, Midwest, and West Coast from around the United States participated in a student summit funded by First in the World (FITW), a program of the U.S. Department of Education through the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). The goal of the grant was to understand the impact of service-learning and community engagement on various student learning outcomes, such as retention and graduation rates, with an emphasis on expanding outcomes worth

considering, like college students' sense of belonging. In order to facilitate this expansion, the researchers gathered students to be collaborators on the grant, beginning with a college student summit. It was at this large student gathering that the seeds for *The UnGuide* were planted. Here, 55 first-generation, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, Latinx, low-income, and/or disabled students from the six public universities engaged in an identity-mapping exercise (Futch & Fine, 2014) and then engaged in participatory analysis of the identity maps created. In this dynamic and generative encounter, the students began to map out possibilities for a project that could locate barriers, identify supports, and map out creative strategies for getting through college as a first-generation student and/or student of color. Although the focus of the FIPSE project was to examine the role of community engagement in advancing the educational success of underrepresented students, we believe that to fully understand the relationship between underrepresented students' community engagement experiences and their educational success, we must first develop a clearer understanding of how underrepresented students define educational success. This article focuses on building this understanding.

Over the next 5 years, a group of first-generation, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, Latinx, low-income, and disabled graduate and undergraduate students representing each of these six universities formed a participatory action research (PAR) collaborative and continued to build on the project sparked by the student summit. Our PAR collaborative is in conversation with a lineage of liberatory approaches that seek to democratize access to research while committing to social change in the service of collective liberation. PAR has roots in the Frankfurt school of critical theory, Freirean liberation psychology, Lewinian social psychology, Orlando Fals Borda's work, and the Highlander school and is adapted and enacted in dynamic ways by different communities (Stoecker & Falcón, 2022). Foundational to PAR as an epistemology is the role of coresearchers rather than research subjects or participants. Marginalized students are often the subject of scrutiny and extraction in other methodologies, but in our collaborative, all of us were valuable knowledge bearers and leaders of the knowledge construction process.

Our collaborative sought to collectively envision what it would mean to craft an inviting space that is both a resource and a community; that is both local—speaking to issues that our individual universities face—and also inclusive, so anyone from any university can find support. To serve as this space, a website-platform was created. This virtual community does not belong to any specific university nor any specific group of people. The college students involved in the PAR project wanted to offer a space where students could find the tools they need to navigate their undergraduate years when sometimes the institutions that hold these tools do not make them readily available or accessible for them. The intention of the student-built resource is to offer a meaningful space that is dynamically coconstructed, a space that is shaped by each person who chooses to contribute to it, a space that changes with time and the needs that are encountered; a space for and by students titled *The UnGuide* (<http://www.theunguide.org/>). In this manner, we were able to bring together and situate students, and their social identities and lived experiences, as experts who can bring forth meaningful sociopolitical change for current and prospective college students (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009).

The goal of *The UnGuide* is not limited to student support. As the website states, "Because of *The UnGuide*, we hope you feel less alone, less isolated, but we also hope that *The UnGuide* will inspire institutional shift and help create the universities we all deserve." Visitors are invited to use the resource as they need it, whether it is to seek out strategies for survival by sifting through designated keywords, to join the conversation by visiting the social media sites associated with *The UnGuide*, or to offer tools that have been found to be meaningful and useful while navigating higher education. The invitation is both broad and unapologetically inclusive and celebratory. In this article, we discuss our collaborative methodology and the successes and challenges we encountered developing an online platform to situate and center students' voices, perspectives, and lived experiences.

A Note on Our Collaborative Methodology

To write this article, most of us involved in the research collaborative over the past 5

years have come together to reflect on the process and the lessons offered by the resource as well as the experience of building it. We gathered on a virtual platform a few weeks before the 2020 election in the United States and 6 months after the coronavirus drastically impacted all aspects of our lives. Prior to our conversation, we collaboratively drafted questions and prompts we would consider when together. Our unstructured interview and conversation was recorded through a virtual platform. Our virtual gathering was embedded into our real and complex lives as we were interrupted by a smoke alarm, as our children came into the room to check on us, as we were cooking dinner, as our partners were listening to music, and as we received phone calls from our parents. From our individual squares on the computer screen, we asked each other questions, we helped one another piece together past events, we agreed and disagreed. This conversation was later transcribed. In the act of translating our spoken reflections, we have made an effort to change each person's contribution as little as possible. In order to produce this article, retaining our individual and collective perspectives, we organized the conversation so that it may provide an accessible context for those not familiar with the project.

This approach is intentionally designed to challenge our understanding of academic professional engagement and the purposes of academia, a space that many of us inhabit. With this process we align ourselves with other scholars who are holding themselves accountable and radically redefining universities as sites of belonging and as holding potential “spaces of sanctuary” (Abo-Zena et al., 2022; Ayala et al., 2023). Our polyvocal knowledge creation is in response to what we feel are necessary changes that must take place within the academy. We hope to widen the methodological imagination through which we offer a more expansive view of what knowledge construction can look like and feel like in academic and nonacademic spaces (Fine, 2018). With this multivoiced conversation with which we composed this article, we are animating questions such as “How can knowledge production occur in a nonextractive manner?” Literally far from the ivory tower, our article was written in our homes while dinner was burning on the stove and kids were demanding our attention. Recently, scholars have pointed to the sociomaterial aspects of academics' writing

practices (Tusting et al., 2019); that is how academics navigate the constraints of an increasingly extractive and dehumanizing institutional landscape. Our article embodies these particular requirements and facets and considers them a method of ethical knowledge production.

Process for Gathering Student Voices

The UnGuide, being a resource created by underrepresented students (i.e., those carrying systematically marginalized social identities) for underrepresented students, situated our undergraduate students as knowledge and content experts. Therefore, questions and prompts shared prior to the unstructured interview and conversation by undergraduate students were prioritized and uplifted within the virtually recorded conversation. Graduate students' experiences were also emphasized and connected, which allowed us to retain a nuanced conversation and perspective in which struggles, hardships, and complex emotions were shared in addition to instances of affirmation and support.

Lessons From *The UnGuide*

Disrupting Existing Narratives on Engagement, Success, and Legitimacy

The definition of student success endorsed by academic literature (e.g., Kuh et al., 2008) is not necessarily the definition of success that first-generation students and students of color subscribe to and are pursuing (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Carrillo, 2016). Student success is often considered interchangeable with academic success, which includes metrics such as academic achievement, mastery of learning objectives, attainment of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and postgraduation accomplishments (York et al., 2015). For marginalized students, or students who the academy was not designed for, there is much more of a balance, connection, and integration between their home communities and the academic community (Carrillo, 2013). For these students, success does not exist outside these embodied selves (e.g., who they are, what they can do, and the sociocultural capitals that they have accrued; Yosso, 2005). Instead, success requires navigating and threading these worlds together (Holland et al., 1998). College students' skillful weaving of their personal (e.g., familial and cultural capital and obligations), social, and academic lives

together is not always taken into consideration within the literature documenting factors that impact student success.

The threading of these worlds, of the academy and their home communities, often involves students considering the impact they are able to have on, and the social responsibility they feel about, their home communities as a result of their access to higher academic spaces (Langhout & Gordon, 2019). The metrics within the dominant student success literature do not explore the commitments and approaches to success that first-generation students and students of color deeply value, such as bringing back to their home communities what they had learned in the academy (Kezar et al., 2022; Yosso, 2005). These instances of engagement from students of color and first-generation students are a form of resistance to erasure and oppression; a form of resistance that is often not recognized as resistance within psychological literature that does not recognize this form of agency and instead often adopts a deficit-framed lens (Giroux, 1991; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021; Rosales & Langhout, 2020).

Students who began to craft the resource that would eventually become *The UnGuide* were aware of the harm of these institutional practices and how formalized knowledge is often a tool of white supremacy, an issue that Heinrich et al. (2010) alluded to when noting that a majority of psychological studies are based on WEIRD: White, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic populations. A very small proportion of the population is studied within psychology, yet often the findings are universalized to humans in general. As a result, academic ideas, findings, and recommendations are often normed around whiteness. With this pattern in mind, rather than an “official” guide for other students, the collaborative decided to offer an “unguide,” both to express hesitation to claim legitimacy within institutions that both delegitimize and erase, and to question what legitimacy means. For many students participating in the development of *The UnGuide*, legitimacy is experienced through validation and affirmation (Torres-Olave et al. 2021). Many first-generation students and students of color experience imposter syndrome at their predominantly White campuses (Gates et al., 2018). *The UnGuide* allows students to reflect on this shared experience and center their social identities, lived experiences, and

cultural capital. Rather than pathologizing these students, *The UnGuide* allows people to name and validate their feelings. When the person is validated and perceives important interpersonal connections with others, they are more likely to perceive that they matter and belong in higher education (Museus et al., 2017; Salazar et al., 2022; Stebleton et al., 2014).

Building Our Own Experiences

The participatory team felt that when student experiences are discussed within the academic literature, they are described as “correct” ways to approach both student success and community engagement. Guides and systems, developed from this literature, present strategies for student success as either correct or incorrect (for examples, see National Academies of Sciences, 2017; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2017; Zins et al., 2007). The students constructing *The UnGuide* wanted to avoid this false dichotomy and any prescribed paths. With the resources (e.g., students were able to make public posts at any time) offered by the contributors to the website, students can build their own resources based on their lived experiences and on the gifts that they bring to enrich academic institutions (Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Yosso, 2005). This freedom to exist wholly and unapologetically as themselves allowed students to disrupt what success and belonging mean, as well as prescriptions for their own success and belonging provided by institutional agents (e.g., faculty, administrators, and practitioners). One group of students at a large public Southern university, for example, were particularly motivated to rethink engagement after interacting with a group of peer college counselors from a large public university on the East Coast. Meeting these peer college counselors who were first-generation, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, Latinx, and low-income students themselves allowed the students from the Southern university to see that their lived experiences were a source of wisdom and deep knowledge that could significantly benefit other students similarly grappling with unjust systems. Students saw their experiences as uniquely enriching their institutions. This encounter allowed them to understand that—in contrast with dominant narratives—community engagement is not about privileged students going into underserved communities. Instead, this encounter gave the students a tangible concept of how they can offer

their own lived experiences to support other prospective students' survival in academia. This way of "helping others" legitimated their own experiences and skills while concurrently destabilizing white supremacist notions of community engagement.

These student-centered understandings of success and engagement were not only in conflict with the larger academic literature but also with the FITW grant that *The UnGuide* was embedded in. Though very much aimed toward thoughtfully expanding metrics of success and engagement, the requirements of the larger federal grant were focused on outcomes that higher education researchers deem desirable, such as retention and graduation rates. This line of literature has found community engagement and service-learning to be high-impact practices that promote student academic outcomes in higher education (e.g., Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh et al., 2008; Soria & Thomas-Card, 2014). According to this research, students' participation in these practices can help to foster their motivations toward graduation and/or continuing to the next semester. The goal of the grant was to study the connection between service-learning and student success as one pathway toward bridging the campus and community and eliciting underrepresented students' sense of belonging. The underrepresented college students involved in *The UnGuide*, however, frequently raised criticisms of service-learning. For example, in the literature, service-learning at many predominantly White institutions (PWIs) has been critiqued as students going into communities—often communities of color—to "save" them (Mitchell et al., 2012). When reflecting on the purpose of the grant, students began to provoke deeper questions that unearth the assumptions beneath concepts like *success* and *engagement*. Rather than damage-centered narratives about saving the marginalized communities they came from, the research team promoted a concept of engagement and service-learning that did not present communities as having deficits; instead, community engagement meant having the joy of supporting their rich communities that are full of gifts. This stance allowed students to speak about their culture from a place of power and empowerment, which then opens the door for others to do the same (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005).

How Students Define Success

Researchers have documented that high-impact practices can have different results in different communities (Song et al., 2017). Whereas the grant continued to in part measure outcomes like retention, graduation rates, or GPA, *The UnGuide* was designed to allow students to explore different definitions of success. For example, a subset of researchers on the grant conducted focus group interviews with students in community engagement programs to learn more about what success meant to them. One finding was that students themselves defined success in a range of ways. Spaces like *The UnGuide* validate these qualitative approaches so that students can more confidently pursue those different definitions of success. The stories offered by students to *The UnGuide* helped us understand that confining definitions of success to metrics validated by academic studies and higher education institutional agents can lead to perpetuating systemic inequalities. Providing a space for students to define their own metrics for success and outcomes that matter to them offers an avenue through which inequities can be disrupted and equity can be explored.

The categories "marginalized" and "first-generation" students are often treated as monolithic groups by university researchers, as though everyone had the same life and academic experiences (Nelson et al., 2020; Pyne & Means, 2013). This project highlighted that this is not the lived reality of students, as students who live in the same zip codes often have completely different experiences. *The UnGuide* highlights this lived reality and allows for a deeper conversation about what equity in education looks like.

The Value of Spaces That Allow Students to Find Each Other

The conversations that emerged in the participatory action team developing the resource, and within the resource of *The UnGuide* itself, highlight the value of spaces that allow students to find one another. Our research team members noted that the resource worked as a catalogue of "cheat codes" as students provided stories about their experiences navigating challenging institutions. Though the team itself represented six public universities from six states around the United States, we often found that even if our regional circumstances were

different, similar dynamics were at play, and sharing our individual perspectives would empower others to take ownership over their own college experience.

These feelings of ownership are made possible when students can find one another and share the experiences and lessons of marginalized people navigating academic spaces (Carter, 2020). Even when adjustments to higher education programs or policies occur (e.g., Kezar et al., 2022), these adjustments may not necessarily benefit marginalized groups. The research team noted that rather than meeting the needs of students, changes can seem performative and mainly aimed at managing perceptions of institutions and institutional leadership. Students talking to other students about navigating the reality they face each and every day is an important way to enable ownership and sustain the work needed to continue in higher education.

The UnGuide invites participation from anyone the university was not designed for, such as students with intersectional identities, rather than single-identity categories with labels such as marginalized or underrepresented (Santa-Ramirez et al., 2020). Postings for the resource are not policed or restricted. If a person feels that they are negotiating spaces that were not designed for them, they can share whatever they wish on the website. This broad invitation ensures that whether a first-year or a senior, whatever a person's need, they can curate their engagement to meet this need. This space was designed to enhance accessibility for marginalized groups who are often barred and/or discouraged from academic spaces, whether explicitly or implicitly. For some members of our research collective, this broadness and ambiguity was powerful. In later sections, we will discuss the ways this ambiguity did not work for everyone.

When *The UnGuide* was initiated in 2015, the world, and our own individual worlds, looked different. Near the end of 2020, everyone in our collaborative was taking online courses at our universities. Some of us were forced to move back in with our parents. Many of our cities were filled with daily protests against police violence, and some of us had lost family members to the COVID-19 pandemic. For some of us, 2020 was marked not only by a global pandemic but also by racial inequities that continue to escalate and brutalize lives. Our worlds are dramatically different from 2015, and a

space like *The UnGuide* is more needed than ever, especially as students are recovering from increased loneliness, lack of belonging, and connectedness experienced during the pandemic (Ernst et al., 2022). Students whom higher education was not designed for were also in danger of not being considered as higher education experience was redesigned and recalibrated during the crisis of the pandemic. As a result, many of us reflected on how we felt as if we were being swept away. Not only are students whom the institution was not designed for having to perform normalcy amid such extraordinary circumstances, but they have to do so while resources are being taken away at many public universities. Additionally, these students are often tasked with the burden of serving on various university diversity and inclusion task forces as advocates for adequate resources, tools, and support to enact any meaningful change. Meanwhile, work is happening from home spaces that may not be safe or predictable, and many of us were expected to continue to provide for others while managing these uncertainties and struggling to care for ourselves academically, socially, and professionally. *The UnGuide*, with its emphasis on community, broadness, and independence, was able to hold the complexity of the present moment and respond to the pandemic, authoritarianism, and systemic violence in ways that did not allow institutions to stifle or co-opt student activism, perspectives, and voice.

In addition to holding the complexity of students' lived experiences, *The UnGuide* allows for meaningful and supportive encounters when students need them the most. Many students faced limited options for connecting with others. Campus interactions before the pandemic allowed students to gather resources for surviving academia through many unexpected encounters with peers and mentors. Even if universities offer virtual resources, it can be difficult to get the information to everyone. *The UnGuide* encourages informal peer-to-peer connections, which can better support the dissemination of these resources when they are needed the most. For some of us who identify as first-generation students of color, the university experience can be extremely isolating. What allowed us to remain in school was finding a community of older student mentors who helped us to navigate interactions with faculty, identify sincere faculty support versus performative faculty engagement, and find useful

resources. Even as this community-building is more important than ever, it may not be easily accessible to many students who are experiencing the university virtually, either synchronously or asynchronously.

When students are able to find each other on *The UnGuide*, similarities and differences within their universities are made more visible. As students who visit the website platform are exposed to different communities and different strategies for community-building, new possibilities are revealed, whether it means advocating within their universities for these supports or creating spaces for themselves. However, the broadness of *The UnGuide* can also be experienced as intimidating or unclear to some students. For those of us who appreciate focus and more clarity, the holding space of “anyone the university is not designed for” was so broad that we required more clarity as to how to engage with the resource. The tension between holding all the complexity and providing scaffolding for using the resources so that students could more easily engage is an ongoing conversation within the research collaborative.

Ultimately, one of the greatest powers of *The UnGuide* and the reason we maintain this broadness despite its drawbacks is the stories that are captured from contributors. Students who identify as first-generation, students of color, LGBTQIA+, Latinx, low-income, and/or disabled generously offered their stories that illuminated the way institutions work for them and do not work for them, and in many cases seem to intentionally work against them. When a single space is created to hold these different stories, the mechanics of marginalization are made more visible, and thus, counterspaces and counterstorytelling can be initiated. *The UnGuide* is best approached with what Weis and Fine (2012) described as critical bifocality, to ensure that both the individual and the power structures at work are in focus, as the contributors intend.

Challenges of Creating These Spaces Where Students Can Find Each Other

Despite the value of these student-led communities, we have found significant challenges when encouraging engagement—mainly from institutions. Creating a student-centered space that held the complexity of lives and experiences grappling with institutional violence required us to address significant challenges and respond

to frequent institutional resistance. We are aware of the impact when we use the word “violence.” We choose to use this strong term, based on the theoretical framework of Patton and Njoku (2019), who drew on the experiences of Black women in the academy, who have historically experienced epistemological harm as well as psychological and emotional damage from navigating higher education. This concept of institutional violence is also reflective of our lived experiences as those who identify as first-generation, students of color, LGBTQIA+, Latinx, low-income, and/or disabled. The consequences of harmful spaces must be named, just as we feel them, before they can be addressed.

As an example of institutional resistance, some of us worked as coach counselors and struggled with inviting higher education investment. When engaging with college counseling offices and opportunity program spaces, we would share information about *The UnGuide* with the hopes that staff would share the resource with students. Unfortunately, the responses we received were often defensive because the offer of a new resource was taken as a judgment on existing institutional services. We were then forced to explain that their services are valuable but that peer advocacy is also important.

As a result of these tensions with established institutional programs, *The UnGuide* relied and continues to rely heavily on interpersonal relationships. Whether it was relationships with other students or with university staff, the collaborative struggled to sustain these connections through life changes. Over the course of these years, we graduated from universities and adopted new roles and have struggled to establish a system that would integrate younger students into the collaborative so that they may feel fully invested in the project. Life events and changes such as graduations and full-time jobs, or interruptions like summer breaks, or major academic milestones like finals and dissertations, remain ongoing challenges of sustaining *The UnGuide*. An unexpected learning opportunity also arose from our conversations with students regarding the legitimacy of *The UnGuide*. A resource without institutional support was perceived as unsafe; however, a resource branded by a higher education institution also suggested a potentially hostile climate. Like the other challenges mentioned, this

conflict was a rewarding learning experience that the collaborators struggled with while creating a space in which students can share and support each other.

Why Centering Student Perspectives Matters

Despite these ongoing challenges, *The UnGuide* is a powerful reminder that centering student perspectives is necessary for any kind of institutional shift toward equity and justice. Stories matter, and the stories about students that faculty and those in power currently hold impact the students' experience, and often serve to perpetuate a deficit-lens cycle of marginalization. The stories of marginalized folks (students of color and/or first-generation students) matter, not only in terms of the future direction of institutions, but also to create space for students to support each other and their home communities. This movement and support of our home communities is rarely emphasized by the university and is, in fact, devalued. This devaluing could look like accusing students of being unengaged, unfocused, and uninterested in school when the reality is that students the university was not designed for are dealing with many other things (e.g., cultural and familial obligations; Jehangir et al., 2022). That school is only one part of a full, dynamic, meaningful life is evident in stories contributed to *The UnGuide*.

These stories center the experiences of students who do not feel fully valued by institutions, and radical solidarity becomes and is made possible. Both on our research team and in the stories in *The UnGuide*, we see that despite dramatic differences in identity, geographical location, and life histories, students are often facing adversity and marginalization when it comes to accessing and experiencing higher education. Despite higher education's constant attempts at implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives, it is usually student leaders who have to pick up the middle ground and advocate for peers, as well as potentially create counterspaces (Choi, 2023), so that others can not only navigate the messiness of the institution and find resources they need, but also, and importantly, survive higher education with less trauma and harm. On our team, we frequently reflect on the ways we have in the past sought out and continue to seek out stories as a strategy for personal survival. Stories allow for connections that sustain and nourish us in inhospitable

spaces (Del Tufo et al., 2020). Many of us spend significant energy trying to collect stories that reflect and validate our lived experiences.

However, it was not always easy to convince students that their stories and experiences are valid and that they are able to contribute to *The UnGuide*. Even if students accessed the resources, we would hear of their hesitation to submit their own experiences, often questioning whether their stories can benefit others. This hesitation is an illustration of the effect of the dominant narrative surrounding the lived experiences, perspectives, and voices of systemically marginalized students (McLean et al., 2018). Even if students come to the site and read the description and understand what the site is about, this engagement is happening in the context of constantly being told, implicitly or explicitly, that their voices do not matter, and that there is a right way to say things.

Centering Student Perspectives Identifies Circuits of Power and Dispossession

It is through the centering of student voices that dominant narratives about marginalized students are most effectively disrupted. It is not something that can be achieved through studies that seek to lift "unheard voices" in the name of justice because, as Macleod and Bhatia (2008) noted, this process to amplify so-called unheard voices can actually reproduce the process of speaking for others. *The UnGuide* centers students' voices, highlighting the fact that they are experts about their own experiences and that students are in a great position to name what is happening and dispel what Ignacio Martín-Baró called the "collective lie." In this holding space offered by *The UnGuide*, students can not only voice their concerns (publicly and anonymously), but also offer support for other students. *The UnGuide* invites peer-to-peer support, and these encounters further destabilize the deficit-lens narratives often attached to first-generation students and students of color.

When students can feel heard and understood about what they are going through without having to explain or justify or defend it, it is powerful. Through *The UnGuide* we see that collectively students are experiencing similar acts of marginalization and are affected by the same circuits of dispossession (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) despite coming from different circumstances. However, this knowledge serves as a way

of recognizing that our experiences are not particular to a specific institution nor brought out by a few destructive characters; instead, these are experiences that cut across many institutions and regions. Most importantly, this knowledge helps marginalized students reject attributions of failure and lack of effort, and instead consider the context and environment in which these attributions exist and proliferate (Payne et al., 2021).

The Struggle to Keep Student Voices From Being Co-opted

The research collaborative working with *The UnGuide* had a radical ethical commitment to centering student voices, yet we found that we could not always keep these voices from being co-opted. We were constantly reminded that structural power can creep in and change things, and even once this force is named and recognized, it might be too late to interrupt it. Our role within the larger grant served as a microcosm of how student voices are symbolically invited but when heard are frequently resented within academic spaces. *The UnGuide* was difficult to untangle from the demands of the grant and expectations of faculty. We asked ourselves at certain points whether *The UnGuide* was moving in the direction that students need or was focused on grant deliverables, having to balance both demands. We also asked ourselves whether the stories we gathered would be fragmented and dissected and used to justify how institutions currently function. Without vigilant reflection and unapologetic centering of student voices, power can insert itself into the process to reinforce existing structures and narratives.

The UnGuide was part of a larger grant investigating student outcomes and service-learning, which made *The UnGuide* more vulnerable to being co-opted by the outcomes and deliverables of the larger project. Even though *The UnGuide* was tasked with centering student voices, when the team amplified them and our own voices when interacting with the larger research team, we were met with surprise for our insistence on communicating and were even silenced. These experiences made us wonder what it means to center voices when that centering is pushed to the periphery and margins. It made us aware of potential inherent contradictions in a research project like this that is providing funding for our team, but that may also be perpetuating the very ideas we are

seeking to dismantle. These were tensions that impacted our process as a team and our ability to cultivate trust and legitimacy with students who are all too familiar with being misled and mistreated by institutions.

The Future of The UnGuide

At the time of our initial drafting of this article, we were in the midst of a devastating global pandemic and a volatile election of Donald Trump that fanned the flames of division and civil unrest in the United States. During the final stages of our editing process, the World Health Organization declared the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency, and we once again found ourselves preparing for another controversial election. Since the seeds of *The UnGuide* were planted, the world seems to have shifted on its axis several times. Our own individual worlds have similarly been dismantled and rebuilt over and over again. Many of us have finished our degrees. Many of us have lost family members. Many of us found jobs and lost jobs. Many of us submitted endless applications that were mostly met with an unbearable silence.

Today, some of us in the research collaborative continue to have relationships with academia. In our positions as researchers and professors, we continue to invite students to shape *The UnGuide* into the resource they need it to be. The pandemic only increased the urgency for these sites of belonging. Research investigating minoritized students' sense of belonging during the pandemic has found that racial/ethnic minority students were most impacted (Barringer et al., 2022; Lederer et al., 2021). There is an even greater need for a space that refuses to silence and refuses to delineate success from the top down. *The UnGuide* is more needed than ever. Our goal continues to be to allow ownership to be carried by a collective of students from a number of public universities. Furthermore, we intend for these students to fully own the possibilities represented by *The UnGuide* and to make it what they need.

Solidarity and Caring Commitment to Seeing Each Other Thrive

Both in our research collective and in the stories found in *The UnGuide*, we continue to revel in the power of solidarity. Although *The UnGuide* does not offer easily replicable formulas to address the violence perpetrated against systematically marginalized

students in higher education, what we have uncovered are guiding concepts that should be considered to offer a more equitable education that minimizes harm and marginalization. We also highlight the promise of using a website-platform as a holding space, in which dominant narratives can be countered or redefined.

In closing, we offer a few of these core lessons from *The UnGuide*. First, student voices should not be used as an opportunity to bolster the perception of universities. As one of the authors of this article said, “It’s hard to go where you want to go when your stories are a fuel for somebody else’s car.” Second, it is not possible to cultivate trust without recognizing the ways in which everyone is complicit in upholding power structures. The liminal space occupied by *The UnGuide*, which is not quite

part of a university but very much situated within and inhabits universities, required us to name the contradictions of our project and to build trust from this place of honesty and vulnerability. Third, when student voices are centered—that is, actual student voices and not academic interpretations of voices—the priorities of the university can then better align to serve the students. During this moment in history, as we are looking for paths toward ethical ways of addressing our festering racial inequities, universities cannot afford to tiptoe toward justice. Instead, universities need to follow the students who have been building the bridges as they walked them, so that together we may march toward equity, justice, and our collective survival.



Author Note

First, second, and third authors contributed equally to the writing of this article.

Acknowledgment

The contents of this article were developed in part under grant #P116140033 from Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, First in the World program, the U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and endorsement by the Federal Government should not be assumed.

Authors

University of Minnesota: Tai Do, Kia Lor, Tyra Reed, and Yu-Chi Wang

City University of New York: Emese Ilyes, Juana Alejandro, Darlene Laboy, Chinyere Okafor, and Robert Weathers

University of Memphis: Sheron Davenport

University of California, Santa Cruz: David Gordon and Alexandra Piper

References

- Abo-Zena, M. M., Jones, K., & Mattis, J. (2022). Dismantling the master's house: Decolonizing "rigor" in psychological scholarship. *Journal of Social Issues, 78*(2), 298–319. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12519>
- Anzaldúa, G. (1983). Foreword to the second edition. In C. Moraga & G. Anzaldúa (Eds.), *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color* (pp. iv–v). Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press.
- Ayala, J., Fine, M., Mendez, M. D. C., Mendoza, A. N. J., Rivera, J. C. G., Finesurrey, S., Villeda, A., Thelusca, H., Mena, V., Azzam, K., Galletta, A., Houston, A., Jones, V., & Mungo, D. (2023). ENCuentros: Decolonizing the academy and mobilizing for justice. *Qualitative Inquiry, 29*(3–4), 417–431. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800420960161>
- Barringer, A., Papp, L. M., & Gu, P. (2022). College students' sense of belonging in times of disruption: Prospective changes from before to during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Higher Education Research & Development, 42*(6), 1309–1322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2138275>
- Brydon-Miller, M. (1997). Participatory action research: Psychology and social change. *Journal of Social Issues, 54*(4), 657–666. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1997.tb02454.x>
- Brydon-Miller, M., & Maguire, P. (2009). Participatory action research: Contributions to the development of practitioner inquiry in education. *Educational Action Research, 17*(1), 79–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790802667469>
- Carpenter, A. M., & Peña, E. V. (2017). Self-authorship among first-generation undergraduate students: A qualitative study of experiences and catalysts. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 10*(1), 86–100. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0040026>
- Carrillo, J. F. (2013). I always knew I was gifted: Latino males and the Mestiz@ theory of intelligences (MTI). *Berkeley Review of Education, 4*(1), 69–95. <https://doi.org/10.5070/B84110069>
- Carrillo, J. F. (2016). I grew up straight 'hood: Unpacking the intelligences of working-class Latino male college students in North Carolina. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 49*(2), 157–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2015.1086247>
- Carter, D. S. (2020). Neoliberalism in higher education and its effects on marginalized students. In A. Palko, S. Sapra, & J. Wagman (Eds.), *Feminist responses to the neoliberalization of the university: From surviving to thriving* (pp. 19–30). The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.
- Choi, Y. H. (2023). Counterspaces as sites of fostering and amplifying community college Latinas' resistance narratives in STEM. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000489>
- Del Tufo, A., Fine, M., Cahill, L., Okafor, C., & Cook, D. (2020). The power of bearing wit(h)ness: Intergenerational storytelling about racial violence, healing, and resistance. In C. Squire (Ed.), *Stories changing lives: Narratives and paths toward social change* (pp. 99–120). Oxford University Press.
- Ernst, M., Niederer, D., Werner, A. M., Czaja, S. J., Milton, C., Ong, A. D., Rosen, T., Brähler, E., & Beutel, M. E. (2022). Loneliness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review with meta-analysis. *American Psychologist, 77*(5), 660–677. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001005>
- Fine, M. (2018). *Just research in contentious times: Widening the methodological imagination*. Teachers College Press.
- Fine, M., & Ruglis, J. (2009). Circuits and consequences of dispossession: The racialized realignment of the public sphere for U.S. youth. *Transforming Anthropology, 17*(1), 20–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7466.2009.01037.x>
- Futch, V., & Fine, M. (2014). Mapping as a method: History and theoretical commitments. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 11*(1), 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2012.719070>
- Gates, L. R., Manar-Spears, C. A., Johnson, C., & Gumbs, B. (2018). Utilizing narrative

- pedagogy to disrupt impostorism: Strategies for community college faculty to support students of color. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 25(2), 47–56.
- Giroux, H. A. (1991). Border pedagogy and the politics of postmodernism. *Social Text*, (28), 51–67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466376>
- Halkovic, A., & Greene, A. C. (2015). Bearing stigma, carrying gifts: What colleges can learn from students with incarceration experience. *The Urban Review*, 47(4), 759–782. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-015-0333-x>
- Heinrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). Beyond WEIRD: Towards a broad-based behavioral science. *Behavior and Brain Sciences*, 33(2–3), 111–135. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X10000725>
- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W. Kr., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Harvard University Press.
- Jehangir, R. R., Collins, K., & Molengraff, T. (2022). Class matters: Employing photovoice with first-generation poor and working-class college students as a lens on intersecting identities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000417>
- Kezar, A., Hallett, R. E., Perez, R. J., & Kitchen, J. A. (2022). Scaling success for low-income, first-generation in college, and/or racially minoritized students through a culture of ecological validation. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000401>
- Kilgo, C. A., Sheets, J. K. E., & Pascarella, E. T. (2015). The link between high-impact practices and student learning: Some longitudinal evidence. *Higher Education*, 69(4), 509–525. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9788-z>
- Kuh, G. D., Cruce, T. M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(5), 540–563. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2008.11772116>
- Langhout, R. D., & Gordon, D. L. (2019). Outcomes for underrepresented and misrepresented college students in service-learning classes: Supporting agents of change. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 14(3), 408–417. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000151>
- Lederer, A. M., Hoban, M. T., Lipson, S. K., Zhou, S., & Eisenberg, D. (2021). More than inconvenienced: The unique needs of U.S. college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Health Education & Behavior*, 48(1), 14–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198120969372>
- Macleod, C., & Bhatia, S. (2008). Postcolonialism and psychology. In L. Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *Qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 576–589). Sage.
- McLean, K. C., Lilgendahl, J. P., Fordham, C., Alpert, E., Marsden, E., Szymanowski, K., & McAdams, D. P. (2018). Identity development in cultural context: The role of deviating from master narratives. *Journal of Personality*, 86(4), 631–651. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12341>
- Mitchell, T. D., Donahue, D. M., & Young-Law, C. (2012). Service learning as a pedagogy of Whiteness. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 45(4), 612–629. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2012.715534>
- Museum, S. D., Yi, V., & Saelua, N. (2017). The impact of culturally engaging campus environments on sense of belonging. *The Review of Higher Education*, 40(2), 187–215. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2017.0001>
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Supporting students' college success: The role of assessment of intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24697>
- Nelson, S. L., Davenport, S. T., & Guy Kolheim, S. D. (2020). Lani Guinier, democratic merit, critical race theory and higher education admissions. In V. L. Farmer & E. S. W. Farmer (Eds.), *Critical race theory in the academy* (pp. 259–278). Information Age Publishing.
- Patton, L. D., & Njoku, N. R. (2019). Theorizing Black women's experiences with institution-sanctioned violence: A #BlackLivesMatter imperative toward Black liberation

- on campus. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32(9), 1162–1182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1645908>
- Payne, T., Muenks, K., & Aguayo, E. (2021). “Just because I am a first gen doesn’t mean I’m not asking for help”: A thematic analysis of first-generation college students’ academic help-seeking behaviors. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000382>
- Pyne, K. B., & Means, D. R. (2013). Underrepresented and in/visible: A Hispanic first-generation student’s narratives of college. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 6(3), 186–198. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034115>
- Rodriguez, S. L., & Blaney, J. M. (2021). “We’re the unicorns in STEM”: Understanding how academic and social experiences influence sense of belonging for Latina undergraduate students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 14(3), 441–455. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000176>
- Rosales, C., & Langhout, R. D. (2020). Just because we don’t see it, doesn’t mean it’s not there: Everyday resistance in psychology. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 14(1), Article e12508. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12508>
- Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., Savitz-Romer, M., Ott, M. W., Swan, A. K., & Liu, P. P. (2017). Finding conceptual coherence: Trends and alignment in the scholarship on noncognitive skills and their role in college success and career readiness. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research, Volume 32*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-48983-4_4
- Salazar, C., Liwanag, A. M., Zheng, J., & Park, J. J. (2022). Marginality and mattering: Inequality in STEM majors’ relationships with higher education practitioners. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000440>
- Santa-Ramirez, S., Wells, T., Sandoval, J., & Koro, M. (2020). Working through the experiences of first-generation students of color, university mission, intersectionality, and post-subjectivity. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 35(2), 109–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2020.1783012>
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103>
- Song, W., Furco, A., Lopez, I., & Maruyama, G. (2017). Examining the relationship between service-learning participation and the educational success of underrepresented students. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 24(1), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mjcsloa.3239521.0024.103>
- Soria, K. M., & Thomas-Card, T. (2014). Relationships between motivations for community service participation and desire to continue service following college. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 20(2), 53–64. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0020.204>
- Stebleton, M. J., Soria, K. M., & Huesman, R. L., Jr. (2014). First-generation students’ sense of belonging, mental health, and use of counseling services at public research universities. *Journal of College Counseling*, 17(1), 6–20. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1882.2014.00044.x>
- Stoecker, R., & Falcón, A. (Eds.). (2022). *Handbook on Participatory Action Research and Community Development*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Torres-Olave, B. M., Torrez, M. A., Ferguson, K., Bedford, A., Castillo-Lavergne, C. M., Robles, K., & Chang, A. (2021). Fuera de lugar: Undocumented students, dislocation, and the search for belonging. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 14(3), 418–428. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000182>
- Tusting, K., McCulloch, S., Bhatt, I., Hamilton, M., & Barton, D. (2019). *Academics writing: The dynamics of knowledge creation*. Routledge.
- Weis, L., & Fine, M. (2012). Critical bifocality and circuits of privilege: Expanding critical ethnographic theory and design. *Harvard Educational Review*, 82(2), 173–201. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.82.2.v1jx34n441532242>

- York, T. T., Gibson, C., & Rankin, S. (2015). Defining and measuring academic success. *Practical assessment, research, and evaluation*, 20(1), Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.7275/hz5x-tx03>
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>
- Zins, J. E., & Elias, M. J. (2007). Social and emotional learning: Promoting the development of all students. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 17(2–3), 233–255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474410701413152>.