

## Democracy's College

### Episode 13: The Experiences of Undocumented Immigrants Who Navigate Into and Through Higher Education.

Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at [occrll.illinois.edu](http://occrll.illinois.edu).

In this episode HyeJin Yeo from OCCRL talks with José Ángel N., the author of *Illegal: Reflections of an Undocumented Immigrant*, about the experiences of undocumented immigrants who navigate into and through higher education.

**HyeJin Yeo:** Thank you so much for taking the time to share your thoughts and story. I'd like to start the interview with a question about your book. Can you give us a brief summary of your book, and what do you hope people gain from the book?

**José Ángel N.:** My book is the story of a Mexican man who comes to the U.S. as a young adult trying to find riches and trying to get ahead in society, and who is actually disappointed by what he finds in the states. He is disappointed and grateful at the same time because he did not find what he was looking for. Rather, he found something else, which is access to higher education, which is something he wouldn't have had in his home country. And also he found a family. He was able to marry and have a daughter. It is a bittersweet story.

**HyeJin Yeo:** Can you describe undocumented immigrants a little bit? Because there are some misconceptions or stereotypes about undocumented immigrants. So, based on your journey talk about how you are defining them.

**José Ángel N.:** I will not dare to define people. Every single person, who [is] undocumented, they find themselves in very particular situations. So, I will not dare to try to define them. Our circumstances come as a result of the American economy that demands a certain labor force, cheap labor to do the work that other people won't do. That is how I came. I came here because there were places in Chicago where I could go and earn \$5.75 an hour washing dishes, which is something that I could think of, being Mexican and being poor and working class. But being undocumented simply means not having proper documentation to be in the U.S.. Some people have come with a tourist visa and they have overstayed their visa. They are about half of the undocumented immigrants today. The other 5 million people, they have crossed the border, just like I did, with no proper documentation. Regardless of whichever way you came, the main point is that you do not have proper documentation to be here. This does not mean that you do not work or that you don't pay taxes, because we all do. We all pay taxes. That is one of the biggest misconceptions, to answer the other part of your question, that undocumented immigrants don't pay taxes. That is a notion that we need to challenge, because actually we pay more taxes than the regular American taxpayer, because we don't take out.

**HyeJin Yeo:** Basically, no benefits.

**José Ángel N.:** Of course not, we have no benefits. We are placed at the very bottom of the labor force in this country.

**HyeJin Yeo:** There are many different race, ethnicity, and nationality people who are in the group of undocumented immigrants, right?

**José Ángel N.:** Yeah, only about half, about 5 million people, are of Mexican descent who are undocumented. There are people who are from all over; it affects people across ethnicities and backgrounds.

**HyeJin Yeo:** What advice would you give to administrators and staff working with undocumented immigrants?

**José Ángel N.:** I entered college, as you might have heard in my lecture, by mere accident. It was not something that I was planning on doing. It was something that occurred to me. Like, maybe I can do this. Maybe I can go to college. And I did. I went, and that to me was something I couldn't believe. It was unbelievable. Because in order for you to go to college, back in the place where I come from, you have to have certain financial stability, you have to pass some tests that are very difficult, and before that you have to go through high school. Which I didn't go to. All of those things combined made me think that it was not possible for me to go to college. This is not, going to college is not something that I planned for, and also when I did go to college, the community college scene, I did not know what I was doing. At all. That was a blessing in disguise for me. There was no expectation. I don't even think that my family back in Mexico knew that I was starting college. Education wasn't important to us. We didn't have the means to do something as important as going to higher education, because we had other needs to cover. I had no pressure when going to college. I didn't have a parent telling me that you have to study medicine, or law, or engineering. That was not my case. I was so afraid to make my own decisions. It was the very first class that I had in philosophy that got me hooked on that subject. I thought it was weird for people to make a living talking about ideas. This can't be real. Remember at this specific moment I was a dishwasher. I was washing dishes for a living. It was really hard work. It was really, really tough to go from a place where physical activity was so draining on a daily basis, and to do this activity at night and in the morning go sit in a place where intellectual things were happening. It was so different from my daily life. I was something surreal for me. Like, this doesn't make any sense. Why am I paying for these classes? But I continued. I continued and I went. Since I didn't have anyone to advise me, I was like okay, I will study this. In fact, I received a letter at some point that said, okay you need to come to your advisor, who is going to tell you, who is going to show you some pamphlets and a four-year university that you can go to eventually. That was weird. I was like, so I have to go somewhere else now? Why can't I just stay here? I like this place, why do you want me to go somewhere else? It tells you the amount of ignorance that I didn't know what a community college was. I didn't know that they didn't have four-year careers. I didn't know that I was going to be studying for four years in college. I just knew that I was in college, and that was already an achievement for me, just being able to enter. That is why the lack of guidance for me was a blessing. It gave me the freedom to be able to choose the subject that I wanted. I think that something that's important is that counselors and educators try to identify the strengths and weaknesses of students that they are serving and try to lead them toward the right path, the right career, that is a good fit for them. You can't just tell a person that maybe as you are doing well in biology, maybe you can study medicine. You have to take into consideration where this person is coming from, what is his possibilities are, of going for a career that is going to take like 10 years of preparation and work and all that. Maybe the financial support is not there for him or her to take on such a career. Maybe there is; maybe if the person is so determined to do it that they will find a way to do it. I know that has been my own story. Take the time to explore, to learn about the person as an

individual and their circumstances, what his aspirations are, for sure, but also his circumstances, economic and social.

**HyeJin Yeo:** A great educator, Horace Mann, said education is supposed to be a great equalizer of the conditions of man. How does this relate to your own experience as an undocumented immigrant going through the education system?

**José Ángel N.:** I was saying, in my presentation earlier, I spoke about a person for whom I have a tremendous amount of respect: José Luis González, a Mexican philosopher who came to the U.S. and taught at the University of Chicago. He was an exile. He had such an interesting life. He became an exile because he belonged to the political opposition in Mexico, so he was being persecuted. He was one of the leading intellectual figures during the revolution, which means he already belonged to a different class of people. He belonged to the upper-to-middle class of Mexican society, so he had this advantage over other people. And when he came to Chicago many years later, he was able to teach at the University of Chicago. There is a whole tradition of Mexican authors coming to the states to lecture and to study. They have been doing that for over 100 years. They have also been bringing their children to study, to the U.S., for over 100 years. People like me, people who come to do work like constructing the railways, or working the fields, or in factories, or the meat packing industry, we have also been coming here for about 100 years, since the revolution. And only now in the last 10 years or so, I can't remember all the dates, all different states have different dates when they passed laws allowing undocumented children to go to university. Only now are we seeing that change. It is really a paradigm shift, because historically, the people who have had access to higher education who are Mexican, not Mexican-American, that is a great difference, who are Mexican by birth have not had access to higher education. They finish high school; many times they don't finish high school and they just drop out. That book that you read is entirely right. Now that we have access to higher education, I feel that I am capable of having a conversation with those authors, those intellectuals in Mexico. I can talk to them about our condition here the same way that I can talk to intellectuals in the U.S., because this what education has done for me. It is an equalizer, a social equalizer.

**HyeJin Yeo:** Tell us about possible educational pathways that undocumented student immigrants can follow.

**José Ángel N.:** I honestly have made my way through higher education by paying my way through it. I am working two or three jobs in order to pay my tuition. I understand that is difficult. It is hard. But you have to make the necessary sacrifices in order to get to where you want to be. That is what happened to me, but it also led me to live a very anti-social life. I became increasingly more and more isolated the more I studied and spent time with books rather than with people. I think one of the things that students have to see, is they have to seek advice from people who have gone through a similar experience, to see that it is a lot of work. It is a lot of work, and they have to be willing to put in all the work and time. Life changes once you go to college. It does. You are completely transformed. It may create divisions within your own family. You learn to see the world through different eyes. Your values become different. Your traditional values that you hold dear may change. They may be challenged, and that's a good thing. You start understanding that the world is a very complicated place. For people who have not been to college, like me, it was something difficult to watch and learn and go through. My consolation was that I was becoming a more mature person than I would have been if I hadn't gone through college. Now economically, that's where things get more complicated for many people. I don't

think currently that undocumented people can get financial aid. So, you have to be creative and you have to know your possibilities but also your limits. You have to find the delicate balance to see how much you can do. Maybe you can go full-time to college. Maybe you can go part-time. You also have to think about your priorities. What is more important to you, investing in your education or the other things that are important to you?

**HyeJin Yeo:** How important are policies like DACA or other funding policies to help pursue your educational journey?

**José Ángel N.:** That is a question for legislatures. What are they going to do? You have this problem. I presented myself today before this community of educators and students at Illinois, saying, I am this problem. I have inherited this problem. I have become your problem. How are you going to solve it? How are you going to help solve this problem? What I say is you have to pressure the people who represent you in Congress so they can make changes. You are not dealing with some abstraction. You are dealing with the lives of people, 11 million people. You are dealing with all of us, and we all have needs. We are members of your society. We contribute to it. Your children have played with my children. And this is becoming a more complex and rich society because there are people from all over the world contributing to it. From whatever angle you want to say this problem, be it social, human, economic, the only thing that makes sense is legalization for the 11 million people, for all 11 million people. When you have people come and try to destroy the very fine threads that are keeping people going to college, it doesn't make any sense, financially, humanely. It doesn't make any sense socially, to do anything like this. There is something else going on with those people. It is incumbent on legislators to be able to work something out and to be smart about it. I am very skeptical that anything is going to happen, because I have been seeing this game play out for over 20 years. So, this is not new. Nothing that's happening is new. I think we need to keep fighting. And to find a way to let the young people stay in college and be able to work. We need to be smart. They need to be smart. Yesterday, I saw this rally where Nancy Pelosi was about to talk about the DREAM Act. They wouldn't let her speak. The Dreamers would not let her speak. They were shouting and shouting and shouting. The problem, I understand the anger and the passions, especially if you have parents or siblings who have been deported or who are on the verge of being deported. That is your family; that is who you are. You can't do that. So, I understand the anger. At the same time, I think there has to be a smart way of redirecting that energy. If the Democrats don't vote for you, who is going to do it? If you don't build those alliances, who is going to do it? We have already seen what the Republicans are capable of doing. So, if you don't operate in a strategic way and take a step back and look at the big picture, then it is hard for me to see how they are going to get anything done. The one thing that I'm certain about is that they are not going to be able to shout their way to legalization. That's not going to happen. Another problem that we have right now, right, is with affirmative action being challenged in many different places. You know, I understand that people feel furious about affirmative action, many times. But you have to understand that the people who benefit from affirmative action, many times they are like me. People whose parents are working two jobs just to make ends meet. It is a very difficult topic, because when you talk about affirmative action you also have to think about white Americans who are poor and who might not be getting the same access to education because some people of color might. It is a very complex issue, but one that we as rational people should be able to deliberate, and that simply is cut off. If you want to give access to education, we can, and we should, and we must.

**HyeJin Yeo:** Given all your experiences, what advice do you have for students who are starting similar paths like you?

**José Ángel N.:** Be persistent and work, work, work. That is what we need to do. Not only that. We are not robots. Follow your passion. If you can find something you are truly passionate about, and you can find a way to make it work for you within academia, then the blessings will be many.

**HyeJin Yeo:** Thank you so much for taking your time and great insight about this issue. And thank you for being brave, too.

**José Ángel N.:** Thank you for having me.

**Closing:** For more information about the experiences of undocumented students navigating higher education we recommend you visit José Ángel N.'s [website](#). For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit [occrll.illinois.edu/democracy](http://occrll.illinois.edu/democracy) or send them via Twitter @occrll. Tune in next month when Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher from OCCRL talks with Dr. George Reese, the director of the Office for Mathematics, Science, and Technology Education at the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, about equity in mathematics education. Background music for this podcast is provided by DubLab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.