

# THE BUTLER CENTER

## NEWSLETTER

### HOW FAILURE STIGMAS FAIL STUDENTS: ON WE ARE NOT DREAMERS, CHAPTER 2.



By Thecla Shubert

Over the last two blocks, the CC community has been reading and discussing **We Are Not Dreamers** as part of the Antiracism Book Club. Much of our focus was on Chapter 1 by Joel Sati - as detailed in last week's newsletter. Today, I'd like to turn to Chapter 2, "Undocumented Students Navigating Academic Probation and Unrealistic Expectations" by Grecia Mondragon. Alongside Mondragon's work, we will also be pulling information from a variety of articles in order to explore how academic cultures that are hyper-focused on narratives of success actually harm their students by stigmatizing failure and not recognizing the competing priorities and basic humanity of their undocumented and otherwise underprivileged students. Essentially, narratives that unrealistically portray success as the *only* option stigmatize failure and academic struggles, shame students with competing life priorities, and make it harder for students to reach out for support.

I approach this discussion from two perspectives: first, as a staff member who deeply wants to see my students succeed and reach their full potential, and second, as a former student myself who desperately wanted the security to fail when school could no longer be my top priority. As my own mental health forced its way into the number one priority of my life and I struggled to perform academically, the messages I received were almost universally the same: *If you fail you'll ruin your life. You'll throw away this opportunity.* Universities tend to blame academic struggles on a student's internal characteristics or capabilities, "suggesting that often the issue is merely procrastination and laziness." while also catastrophizing the impacts of failure. (1) These messages put false pressure on them and shame them for their struggles. It suggests that a student is failing because of who they are rather than because of their circumstances. It also suggests that failure is not something students can recover from. These messages fail to recognize that students are more than scholars - they are family members, advocates, employees, and complex human beings with a variety of competing needs and priorities.

These pressures, as Mondragon explains, are particularly acute for undocumented students and also directly affect graduation and retention rates (2). Studies have shown that underrepresented students are disproportionately overrepresented on academic probation and that marginalized students are more likely to face academic difficulties than their peers (3). When looking specifically at the struggles that undocumented students face we see that they are more likely to face financial instability due to their and their family's work eligibility as well as the lack of financial aid available, more likely to face social isolation from their peers and community, and likely to have trauma from the uncertainty of their legal status, from family members being deported, or from other causes. All of these things make it harder for undocumented and other underrepresented students to perform academically and to prioritize school. Dismissal or academic probation can also be particularly harmful sanctions for undocumented students because it means they would no longer be able to rely on school resources like food pantries, counseling services, and more.

An anonymous undocumented student in "The (Un)Embraced: The Experience of Black Undocumented Students on College Campuses," a study by Felicia Russel and Jesus Cisneros, described her experience thusly: "My undocumented status affected my grades because I had to do a lot of advocacy just to survive. I just wanted to graduate and I did not care if I had a 3.0 GPA." (4). In an idealistic world, every college and university would have the funds and capacity to provide comprehensive support structures and resources such that no student ever has to worry about survival or subsistence. But in the current world we are living in our student support structures are often woefully inadequate. Many students are forced to prioritize subsistence and work, their families, or their mental health over their academic performance. The institution's response is all too often to penalize these students, creating further stress and barriers to success, rather than offering meaningful support and empathy.

Students who struggle academically often feel too ashamed to seek support. One student shared, "Being on subject to dismissal was scary and confusing and I was not sure how to seek help. I was ashamed of disclosing this information to anyone because it made me doubt my potential." (5) The rhetoric universities often use - of being the best institution or the place where the best students come - can alienate and stigmatize struggling students. Furthermore, undocumented students face extra pressure because of the stereotype of the "good immigrant" as presented by the "dreamer" metaphor which "equates their worthiness and humanity solely with their academic excellence." (6).

When students *do* reach out for help they are all too often met with stigma, microaggressions, and shame. A student known as Esperanza shared her experience after her father left the United States to care for an ill family member, knowing that because of his immigration status he would not be able to return. Esperanza became the primary financial caregiver for her family. She had to balance finances and work with classes and her academic performance suffered. She shared, "My body started to just shut down." (7). When she did reach out to the counseling office and told them about her difficulties she was told, "Everyone works, that's not an excuse." (8). Rather than being met with empathy she faced cynicism, microaggressions, and increased barriers to support.

The way we talk about failure and academic struggles creates further barriers between students and reaching out for support. The stigmatization of failure not only disproportionality impacts undocumented and marginalized students, but also feeds rhetoric that implies that academic failure impacts an individual's worth as a human. Destigmatizing failure is vital to supporting all underprivileged students, our antiracist commitments, and supporting students more holistically.

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1. Grecia Mondragon, "Undocumented Students Navigating Academic Probation and Unrealistic Expectations," in Leisy J. Abrego and Genevieve Negron-Gonzales (ed) *We Are Not Dreamers*. Duke University Press, 2020., 45.
  2. Ibid.
  3. Ibid, 46-47.
  4. Felecia Russel and Jesus Cisneros. "The (Un)Embraced: The Experiences of Black Undocumented Students on College Campuses." In *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. November 2, 2023. Pg 4. Emphasis mine.
  5. Grecia Mondragon, 49.
  6. Ibid, 46.
  7. Ibid, 52-63.
  8. Ibid, 58.
  9. Ibid, 61-62.

All of this being said, the fact remains that as staff the fact remains that we want to see our students succeed and reach their fullest potential. How do we destigmatize failure and better support struggling students? Based on our research and experience, we offer the following recommendations:

### **Practical Recommendations:**

- Focus on referring students to support services *before* a crisis occurs (9).
- Don't catastrophize. Recognize that whatever the consequences of a student's failure are there will always be future opportunities for success - even if those opportunities end up being outside of higher education.
- Recognize that students are humans *first* and scholars second (or third or fourth, etc). Students carry a multitude of identities based on their race, ethnicity, legal status, family status, economic class, and more. Each of these comes with its own set of challenges that may impact academic performance.
- Remind students that their worth as a person is not dependent on their academic success. There are so many wonderful things about them intrinsically that academic performance - good or bad - cannot change.
- Let students let go! Often we talk about success in terms of taking on more - bolstering grad school applications, doing extracurriculars, etc, but remind students it's okay to let things go. It's okay to have a rough block or a class you don't perform as well in. It's okay to take time off, to be less active in clubs, or make whatever adjustments you need to prioritize your wellbeing.
- Don't promote perfectionism and don't shame students for struggling. Remind students that a single low grade or a single low test score, etc won't ruin their future. It's okay to not always be at your best. It's okay to struggle. When students are struggling the last thing we want is for them to feel too ashamed to ask for help!
- Focus less on policies designed to punish and more on supporting students! Build programs to support students economically, mentally, etc. And be sure that students who have failed still feel welcome in academia and free of shame or stigma. When drafting policies be sure to consider the disproportionate impact they may have on already vulnerable students.

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### **Bibliography**

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Sabaner, Can and Karen D. Arnold. "Mental Health in the Transition to College: Experience of Six Low-Income, High Achieving Students." in *Journal of College Counseling*. Volume 24, April 2021. Pg 276-289.

Valdez, Mercedes. et al. "Legal Vulnerability and Campus Environment: Assessing Factors that Affect the Academic Engagement of Undocumented College Students." in *Journal of Latinos and Education*. Vol 20, no 3. 2021. Pgs 276-289.

Felecia Russel and Jesus Cisneros. "The (Un)Embraced: The Experiences of Black Undocumented Students on College Campuses." In *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. November 2, 2023.

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

### Galilea Berthon

**She/Her**

**Film and Media Studies Major. Global Health Minor**

I'm Galilea Berthon (she/her), a Film and Media Studies Major and Global Health Minor, and an international Student from Bolivia and Guatemala. I started at the Butler Center in 2022 as a Program Assistant, and today, in 2024 I work as an Office Coordinator. I seek to combine my major and minor to work in media inside the Healthcare sector. After culminating my studies at Colorado College, I wish to attend grad school in Europe focusing on Public Health Development or International Humanitarian Action. Outside school, I enjoy doing videos for YouTube, painting, going to the gym, and skiing. I currently volunteer for the United World Colleges (UWC) National Committee in Bolivia and as a university counselor.



ADEI was a pretty new topic for me when I started college; I had previously learned a lot about it in my Canadian boarding school and wanted to gain even more knowledge about it at college. If there is something I think CC could do better, it is growing its international community. This is because I believe there is a myriad of areas in an institution that could benefit from being surrounded by different perspectives and different ways of life. Nevertheless, having been in different schools over time I learned that none will ever be perfect and that's ok. A fun fact people might not expect from me is that I used to do Robotics in middle school and even went to an international tournament.

## UPCOMING EVENTS



# CALL FOR PERFORMERS

The Queer and Trans Collective is hosting their first drag show! We are looking for 5 students, staff, and/or faculty performers. If you are interested in performing, please fill out the form below. Compensation is provided for performers!



*Please complete the form no later than 5pm February 29th*

Check out our drag show opportunities!



### Drag Show Info Session

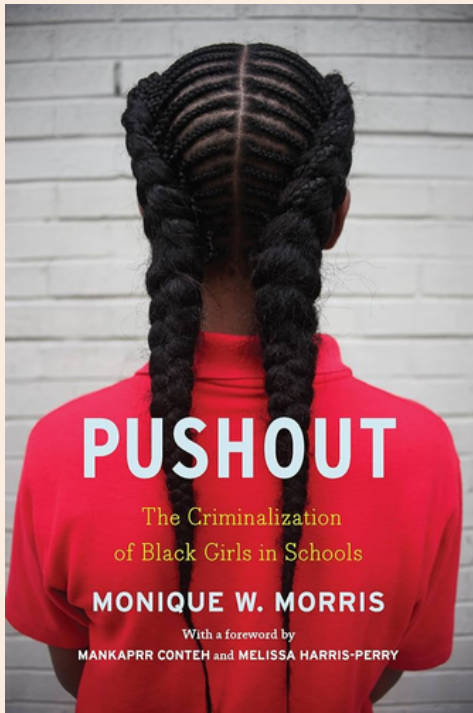
Are you interesting in performing drag? Come learn more about how to be involved with the Queer and Trans Collective's drag show

When: Thursday, February 22nd  
Time: 1PM  
Where: RTD Lounge

Follow us on Instagram!  
[@the\\_qtc\\_cc](#)

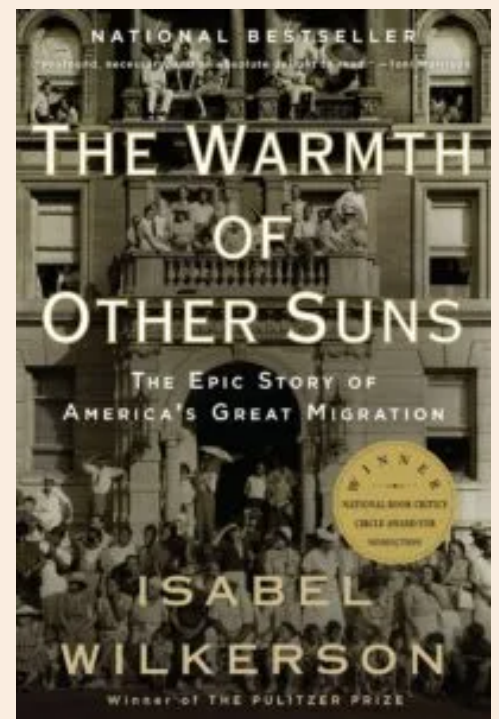
## WEEKLY PAIRINGS - BOOK RECOMENDATIONS

### Black History Month Nonfiction Books



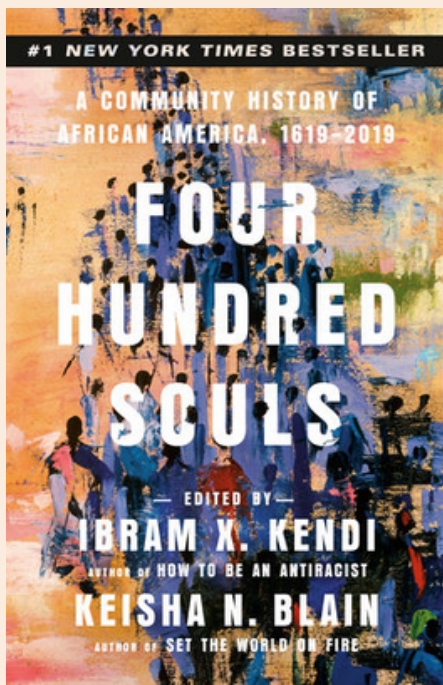
Black girls are the fastest growing population in the juvenile justice system. Monique W. Morris strives to understand why in her powerful book, ***Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools***. Morris seeks to uncover the school-to-prison pipeline and address a gap in the literary canon which tends to focus on the impacts of the systems for males. There are a variety of threats against black girls, including higher poverty rates, rates of violence, murder, sex trafficking, and other forms of abuse as well as lower rates of employment and compensation. Furthermore, black girls are stereotyped as “loud, aggressive, and disrespectful.” Morris claims that rather than supporting Black girls as they face these forms of oppression and systemic discrimination, schools, teachers, and administrators are perpetrating more harm through zero-tolerance discipline, detention, suspension, and expulsion. Filled with personal stories and heartwrenching primary accounts, *Pushout* exposes how public education systems fail our youth. Kirkus Reviews describes *Pushout* as “a powerful and thought-provoking book” and the Washington Post calls it a book “for everyone who cares about children.” This book may be triggering for certain readers and contains descriptions of abuse and sexual violence involving minors.

***In The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration***, Isabel Wilkerson explores the exodus of almost six million people who fled the US South from 1915-1970. Not only does Wilkerson detail the lives of individuals who survived sharecropping and went on to see the rise of the Obama administration, but she also looks more broadly at how this movement impacted our cities and country, as well as how this migration movement compares to others throughout history. This makes her work both deeply personal and intimate as well as expansive in nature. Wilkerson’s “ambitious debut” draws on more than 1,200 interviews and achieves an unprecedented level of scholarly credibility. But non-academics shouldn’t worry as, according to Kirkus Reviews, “focus[ing] on the personal aspect lends her book a markedly different, more accessible tone. Her powerful storytelling style, as well gives this decades-spanning history a welcome novelistic flavor.” This is a must-read for Black history.



## WEEKLY PAIRINGS - BOOK RECOMENDATIONS

### Black History Month Nonfiction Books



***Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019***, an anthology edited by Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain, has received far too many accolades to mention. Critics universally agree that this book is the *piece de resistance* of Black history in America. The book brings together eighty contributors, including “historians, journalists, activists, philosophers, novelists, political analysts, lawyers, anthropologists, curators, theologians, sociologists, essayists, economists, educators, and cultural critics” and 10 poets. The book begins in 1619 when twenty Black people stepped off a slave ship in Jamestown, Virginia. The book covers the colonial era, Blackness and Indigeneity, and early oppressive laws like the Fugitive Slaves before turning to the Harlem Renaissance, *Brown v Board of Education*, and the Civil Rights movement, and eventually the more modern era, including the war of drugs, Hurricane Katrina, and the Black Lives Matter Movement. Readers will encounter both familiar histories as well as forgotten and intimate stories. Kirkus Reviews calls this book, “An impeccable, epic, essential vision of American history as a whole and a testament to the resilience of Black people.” More than just a book or history, this anthology stands out as a powerful work of art.

So many of our modern policies (gerrymandering, immigration, etc) depend on statistical data and our national definitions of race. But how do we come up with these data sets and classifications? Kenneth Prewitt, former director of the US Census Bureau, explores how the very ways in which classify, document, and talk about race are flawed. Our modern statistical definitions of race are still deeply rooted in systemic white supremacy, phenotypes, and false science. Prewitt explains the lasting impact of the “one drop rule,” why some years the US counts “Asian” as a race and other years counts “Chinese” and “Japanese,” and why “Hispanic” and “non-Hispanic” are the only ethnicities listed on the census. ***What is Your Race*** looks at how political agendas have shaped our definitions of race and how those definitions, in turn, have been used to weaponize policy against marginalized people. Prewitt ends his work with a radical call for change in the very way we perceive and classify race as a nation. This book will change your understanding of the very language and data we use to discuss issues of race.

WHAT  
 IS  
 YOUR  
 RACE?

The Census and Our  
 Flawed Efforts to  
 Classify Americans  
**Kenneth Prewitt**