

**The Next Step: Reframing the Vulnerability and Difficulties of Undocumented
Students Through Higher Education Milestones**

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, undocumented students have been given access to the American dream of pursuing higher education which opens the doors to economic and social mobility. While undocumented students can pursue higher education, they can only achieve half the dream. The existence of education access policies are not enough for these students to access the benefits of higher education. This project seeks to understand the experiences of undocumented students as they pursue higher education with the existence of the following education access policies: Assembly Bill 540 and the California Dream Act. These two laws open the doors to higher education for undocumented students in California by providing access to in-state tuition and state financial aid, respectively. Through this project, I sought to learn what barriers these policies fail to address and how the experience of undocumented students differs with DACA and no DACA. My thesis will center on three higher education milestones: high school to college, navigating undergrad, and post-college graduation. I structured my interview guide around these three milestones to understand how my participants experienced these transitions. In the 11 interviews I conducted, I found themes of self-advocacy, exclusion from the typical college experience, the necessity of high levels of resilience, and differences in how both groups of students (DACA and no DACA) experience the transition post-college graduation. Undocumented students must achieve high levels of resilience and self-advocacy to persevere through the barriers they face pursuing higher education. I argue that pursuing higher education provides undocumented students without DACA protection from the limitations of their immigration status while DACA students are able to access the benefits of higher education. Lastly, I conclude that the existence of education access policies are not sufficient to support the journey of undocumented students pursuing higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

"I never really thought about the future when I was younger because I knew I was undocumented. When you're a kid, you don't really understand things. You just know that you're different, and there are limitations because you're different, right?" – Milagros.

Milagros didn't want to think of her future because she knew it would be different and challenging. From a young age, she felt the heavy weight of her undocumented identity and how it could limit her future: "I didn't think about the future at all. My imagination for my aspirations was limited because of [my undocumented status], and it always felt like I didn't even allow myself to think of [college] when I was that age because of the limitations that I felt." As she reflected on her path to college, Milagros told me that she grew up knowing she was different from others, and despite not knowing exactly what it meant to be undocumented, she at least knew that she was at a disadvantage.

"My parents kept it a secret that I was born in another country, and I found out in seventh or sixth grade. When I was [applying] to college, I started getting a bit scared because I was very overwhelmed with the differences and the things that were out of my reach. I wasn't like everybody else, and I didn't talk to anybody who was like me. I felt very isolated." - Joe

Joe on the other hand didn't know he was an undocumented student until his parents told him about his background in middle school. As a young student, Joe told me he didn't grasp the situation of his undocumented identity. It wasn't until he began applying to college that he learned what it meant to be undocumented.

Both Milagros and Joe experienced the limitations of their undocumented identity at a young age. Even before pursuing higher education, both of them already had an understanding that they were different and were restricted by their status. Milagros' reluctance to think about her future due to her immigration status highlights the need to understand the experiences of undocumented students in higher education. The existence of Assembly Bill (AB) 540 and the

California Dream Act provides access to higher education for undocumented students. Despite having these policies in place for the past decade, undocumented students still face uncertainty about their future. Milagro's and Joe's stories highlight the hesitancy undocumented students may experience when choosing to pursue higher education. For those that chose to pursue higher education their path to graduation was anything but linear. Through this project, I demonstrate that undocumented students must exhibit high levels of resilience and self-advocacy to persevere through college. In addition, I argue that a college education provides undocumented students without DACA a safe haven from the reality of their immigration status, while students with DACA are able to partake more in-depth in the common experiences of a college education and are able to complete the transition post-college graduation.

Since 2001, California has incorporated policies to increase access to higher education for undocumented students. AB 540 provided undocumented students access to in-state tuition, the first barrier that caused them to refuse to pursue higher education. Prior to AB 540, there was no affordable way for undocumented students to pay for college as they had to pay non-resident tuition, which is often three times that of in-state tuition. A decade later in 2011, the California Dream Act was signed into law, making state aid available for undocumented students. With access to in-state tuition and state financial aid, more undocumented students were able to pursue higher education. The last significant policy for this project is DACA which gave undocumented students who qualified access to work authorization aiding their journey to higher education. In what follows, I review the existing literature on the experience of undocumented students prior to DACA, AB 540, and the California Dream Act. I first start by exploring the barriers faced by first-generation low-income students to then show the added barriers an undocumented identity adds to this sub-population of first-generation low-income students. Then, I discuss the

scholarship on undocumented students and explore the concept of "transition to illegality" by Roberto Gonzales.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I review the literature on undocumented students to draw attention to the need for more research on how undocumented students navigate higher education transitions with the most prevalent being the transition from to post-college graduation. Existing literature on undocumented students tends to focus on the transition from high school to college. Roberto Gonzales and Leisy Abrego are two scholars who investigated how undocumented students pursued higher education prior to AB 540. Abrego has also looked at the experiences of undocumented students after AB 540, and more literature has focused on the barriers undocumented students must navigate, financial and mental health barriers, to persevere through higher education.

The existing literature serves as a map to understand the experience of undocumented students prior to the education access policies in California. However, it's been over a decade since the policies have been in effect, and it's important to analyze the impact the policies have had on the educational journey of undocumented students. In particular, now that more undocumented students have been able to pursue higher education, we must understand how undocumented students experience the last milestone of college: graduation and post-graduation. DACA provides work authorization and protection from deportation. Students who qualify for DACA have the opportunity to apply for jobs and pursue financial stability. How does this transition compare to students without DACA? How do they experience this final milestone?

In addition to investigating the experiences of students through this final transition, research is needed to understand if barriers to education for undocumented students have changed or remained the same since the start of AB 540 and the California Dream Act. Before examining the existing literature on undocumented students, I'll start by exploring the literature on first-generation students in higher education to explain how the undocumented identity of students compounds the difficulties of being a first-generation student.

ACCESS AND BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

When pursuing higher education, first-generation students are often at a disadvantage. In a study conducted on the importance of institutional agents in promoting higher education success, McCallen and Johnson (2020) found that first-generation students often come from a low-income background, work full time to support their needs, and lack social capital which limits their institutional knowledge. The lack of social capital results in first-generation students not having the support needed to navigate higher education. Other research on the first-generation identity of students has even found family relationships as a barrier students must navigate. (Ruth 2018; Rogers 2022; Walley & Knight 2018; Chavarria et al. 2021). For instance, first-generation Latinas in higher education often face the pressure of choosing between their families and school, forcing them to negotiate some family-school balance in order to focus on their academics (Gloria & Castellanos 2012). Undocumented students in higher education have to navigate the intricacy of their immigration status as well as the barriers presented with either their first-generation identity. The interrelatedness of these identities adds to the challenges undocumented students face as they try to navigate the complex and overwhelming college application process.

In addition to the complexity of the situation, there are few resources and guidance available for undocumented students. Federal programs like TRIO, which originated to address the support gap for first-generation and low-income students are unavailable for undocumented students (Gonzales 2010). Not only are support systems limited for undocumented students, but even access to higher education varies across the United States. In states like South Carolina and Alabama, undocumented students are prohibited from enrolling at public institutions and receiving financial aid (Diaz-Strong et al. 2011). In California, AB 540 grants undocumented students in-state tuition revoking a barrier used by other states to limit the access to education for undocumented students (Peña 2021). Furthermore, the California Dream Act allows undocumented students to receive state and/or institutional financial aid (Peña 2021). These education access policies in California have greatly assisted in making higher education accessible for undocumented students, but fail to support these same students through college.

Literature on undocumented students in higher education has found the following barriers: limited financial aid and funding options, lack of work authorization, family responsibilities, lack of information on resources, deportation fears, and mental health difficulties (Ruth 2018; Walley & Knight 2018; Chavarria 2021; Gloria & Castellanos 2012; Colleen et al. 2016). The intersectionality of their identities as first-generation and undocumented are factors that compound the complexity of their journey in higher education. Navigating higher education as a first-generation student is in itself an overwhelming experience and being undocumented further compounds the barriers these students must persevere through.

First-generation and low-income students often have access to federal grants, work-study programs, or federally funded programs to support their journey to and through college (Kantamneni et al 2016; Gonzales 2010). These resources are not available to undocumented

students and it's important to assess how the lack of these support systems and resources impact their experience in college. As stated previously, California is one of the states with legislation that has made higher education a reality for undocumented students. Prior to the increased access to higher education for undocumented students, Leisy Abrego was one of the first scholars to investigate the educational barriers faced by undocumented students. Abrego (2006) explores the barriers undocumented students faced when pursuing a postsecondary education prior to AB 540. In her study, she found limited financial aid and knowledge of future barriers to college attendance deterred the motivation of students. Abrego (2006) shared stories of students that were forced to enter the low-wage labor market to provide financial support to their families. The lack of financial aid and lack of work authorization further deterred undocumented students from pursuing college as paying for college out of pocket was not a feasible reality. Prior to AB 540 undocumented students in California were forced to pay non-resident tuition which tends to be tripled that of in-state tuition. The inability to qualify for in-state tuition even made it difficult for students to enroll in community college because they could not afford the non-resident tuition (Abrego 2006). Most importantly, Abrego (2006) used these stories to point to the way undocumented students are set up to remain in a low economic status due to a lack of upwards mobility through education.

Roberto Gonzales has been another scholar that has made significant contributions to the literature of undocumented students. Through his twelve-year ethnography, Gonzales learned how undocumented youth experienced their transition to illegality and found that their immigration status impacts life-course transitions. Gonzales' concept of "transition to illegality" provides a framework that seeks to understand and examine how undocumented students come

to terms with their immigration status. During this transition, students lose the legal protections they received prior to being 18 years-old (Gonzales 2011 & 2016).

In the United States, access to a K-12 education for undocumented students is protected under the Constitution. The Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe* declared undocumented youth as ‘persons’ and are therefore entitled to equal protection under the 14th Amendment (Kantamneni et al. 2016). Once undocumented students reach the end of their high school career and become legal adults at 18-years-old, they must come to terms with their immigration status. Gonzales (2011) found that this transition causes mental distress to students and similar to Abrego’s findings the lack of financial aid would often force them to give up pursuing higher education (Gonzales 2011; Gonzales 2016; Abrego 2006). Undocumented students experience a variety of barriers and hardships from their immigration status, the literature demonstrates the negative impact the restriction of their status had on their mental health. Before the education access policies in California, the mental stressors on top of financial barriers deterred students from pursuing higher education. A critical aspect for students that persevered through higher education were those with a support network and access to mentorship resources.

While literature on undocumented students in college gives us insight into how undocumented students experience life after high school, the research is outdated because of the changes in legislation. At the time of the studies conducted by Abrego and Gonzales, there was no access to financial aid or scholarships through the California Dream Act until 2013 (Peña 2021). Additionally, the implementation of DACA in 2012 (Peña 2021) provided undocumented students who met the eligibility to access work authorization. The ability to gain work authorization gave undocumented students with DACA an additional outlet to fund their education. For the most part, the current literature on undocumented students focuses on the

transition to college, their journey navigating college, and the life and decision-making process of those that chose not to pursue college. Therefore, it is important to shift our focus to how the education access policies in California impacted the educational journey of undocumented students and how DACA may have alleviated some of these barriers for those that qualified.

Undocumented students who choose to pursue higher education must navigate and persevere through multiple obstacles ranging from financial barriers to deportation fears. The difficult path these students face may often lead them to experience multiple stressors that impact their well-being. Diaz-Strong et al. (2011) found that undocumented students often attend community college part-time because it's the only option they can afford. Some students are able to rely on financial support from family members while others must work to support their education as well as their family (Diaz-Strong et al. 2011; Colleen et al. 2016; Walley & Knight 2018; McCallen & Johnson 2020). The lack of institutional knowledge hinders students' ability to navigate life on campus (McCallen & Johnson 2020) and the additional barrier of their immigration status leaves them unsure of where they can reach out for help. In addition to financial strains, undocumented students may experience food insecurity (Chavarria et al. 2021), and higher levels of stress and anxiety caused by deportation fears (Chavarria et al. 2021; Colleen et al. 2016). As they navigate these barriers, they must also be cautious of who they can disclose their identity to which may cause undocumented students to feel isolated. (Ruth 2018). While the majority of literature has expanded our understanding of the barriers undocumented students must overcome, it's important to examine how the policies in place fail to address the barriers these students face.

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Undocumented students must navigate a variety of barriers as they pursue higher education. The barriers to higher education are not only limited when students transition from high school to college. These students constantly experience barriers in their educational path from high school graduation all the way to college graduation. In order to persevere through higher education students must overcome barriers when applying to college, navigate exclusion during the undergraduate time, and figure out how to manage the post-college graduation transition.

From the start of their undergraduate journey, undocumented students don't have the same experiences as their US citizen peers because they are unable to participate in typical college opportunities like study abroad, internships, and work-study (Kantamneni et al 2016; Gonzales 2010). While they may not be able to participate in all aspects of a college life, they are able to delay their uncertainty of having to figure out what comes next for a couple of years. When college graduation approaches, undocumented students must now face their "transition to illegality" (Gonzales 2011). Gonzales used this concept to explain the experience of undocumented students who reached high school graduation and were confronted with overwhelming uncertainty. As students approached the end of high school, they began to realize how limited their futures were due to their immigration status (Gonzales 2011). While Gonzales created this concept for the transition after high school, I argue that the "transition to illegality" is delayed for undocumented students who pursue higher education. Instead of confronting the limitations of their status in high school graduation, these students now confront the transition upon reaching college graduation.

In the last year of their undergraduate career, students begin to explore their post-graduation options. As students near the end of their college journey, they shift their

priorities to securing a job or pursuing graduate education. Upon reaching graduation, uncertainty awaits undocumented students. The pathways post-baccalaureate are blurred by the legal uncertainty that awaits these students (Gonzales 2010). Some students choose to pursue higher education and others may be forced to enter the low-wage labor market. (Gonzales 2010; Lara & Nava 2018; Abrego 2006). For many undocumented students, the lack of work authorization hinders their ability to complete the post-graduation transition and continue onto the next life stage: adulthood (Gonzales 2011). During this transition, it is crucial for college institutions to provide undocumented students with the resources needed; to understand the resources that these students require, it is important to have a clear understanding of the factors surrounding their post-baccalaureate decision-making. Through my thesis, the questions I seek to answer include: How did undocumented students navigate their transition to college and how does it compare or differ as they are navigating their transition post-college? How do undocumented students make sense of their situation, and what factors play a role in what these students deem is their next best step? Are AB 540 and the California Dream Act enough to get students to and through college?

Originally this project was meant to focus solely on the experiences of undocumented students reaching college graduation and trying to figure out what life looks like for them after completing their degree. However, after speaking with my research participants, I learned that there are far more barriers before even reaching college graduation. Some students expressed a hard time accessing crucial information for college decision-making and even barriers to accessing basic necessities like housing and medication. Learning about their obstacles from their senior year of high school to senior year of college taught me that there are far more vulnerabilities beyond the ones I initially wanted to focus on. After reflecting on the stories, I

chose to shift my focus from college graduation and post-graduation to the barriers in three higher education milestones: high school to college, navigating undergrad, and post-college graduation.

This project reframes the vulnerabilities and barriers of undocumented students by centering the voices and stories of students themselves. As I go through the stories, my goal is to demonstrate the importance of studying the experiences of this group of students. AB 540 and the California Dream Act have been in effect for over a decade and it's important to see the impact that these policies have had for undocumented students in higher education. How meaningfully are they affecting the experiences of the students? Are these policies addressing the barriers that undocumented students face? If these policies are successful in addressing such barriers, to what extent are they relieving them?

To answer these questions, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with undocumented students with and without DACA. I interviewed 11 students, three students without DACA, and eight students with DACA. The interviews were conducted remotely through the preferred platform of the participant (ex., Zoom or phone call). I organized my interview guide (Appendix B) into three milestones in higher education (high school to college, navigating undergrad, and post-college graduation) and used this same format to organize my findings from the 11 powerful stories shared with me. In the following section, I will describe in more detail my recruitment process, interviews and participant group.

METHODOLOGY

My research project is centered around the experiences of undocumented students in higher education with the existence of AB 540 and the California Dream Act; therefore, my

participant population was restricted to students in California. For this project, I chose to focus on three higher education milestones: high school to college, navigating undergrad, and college graduation to post-college graduation. In order to learn of the experiences of students in their final transition, college graduation to post-college graduation, I further limited my participant sample to undocumented students who were college seniors at the time of the interviews or students who were recent college graduates. In addition to learning about the experiences of students in higher education, I wanted to compare the experiences and decision-making process of undocumented students with DACA and students with no DACA. Consequently, my recruitment efforts focused on securing interviews with undocumented students with DACA and no DACA who were pursuing higher education in California.

DACA is not required to qualify for aid in California, as long as students qualify for AB 540 and the California Dream Act, all students in California regardless of their immigration background qualify for in-state tuition and financial aid (Peña 2021). In restrictive states, only DACA students have access to in-state tuition and financial aid (Higher Ed Immigration Portal 2022). California opens a path for all undocumented students to pursue higher education and by focusing on California only, I'm able to remove the variability to access from my study sample. The advantage of having the same education access policy background is that I can focus on how the policies in the state impact students with DACA and no DACA.

Interviews were the best method for me to conduct my research because they allowed me to listen to the experiences and stories from the participants themselves. I chose not to conduct a survey because it would not give me the ability to understand how respondents strategize and navigate the post-college process as well as semi-structured interviews would. Although I used an interview approach, an ethnographic approach would have provided me the opportunity to

learn first-hand the day-to-day experiences of undocumented students as they navigate their transition. However, the limitations of my time and capacity as an undergraduate student prevent me from pursuing an ethnographic approach. Therefore, interviews were the best method for me to still have direct interaction with participants to understand the impact of their immigration status on their post-college graduation decisions and develop my narrative style with the stories shared with me.

From December 2022 to January 2023, I conducted 11 interviews with undocumented students who pursued higher education in California. I recruited participants by relying on the major role social media plays in our lives, and reaching out to undocumented community support networks. Through my involvement in extracurricular and volunteer opportunities, I've been able to learn of support programs and networks for undocumented students which became starting points for my participant recruitment. I recruited participants by sharing my IRB-approved recruitment materials in the public forum of Undocumented Professionals and through my field contact at the Boys and Girls Club of the Peninsula (BGCP). Undocumented Professionals is a network of undocumented students, professionals, and allies that aim to support undocumented students by providing workshops and resources to guide undocumented youth through higher education and professional careers. The public forum of Undocumented Professionals allows members to share any opportunities opened to undocumented students. BGCP supports first-generation students on their path to higher education and has recently increased efforts to support undocumented students. One of their recent program additions is the BGCP Oasis group which is a space for undocumented students to meet monthly, check in with each other, and build community.

Upon receiving IRB approval, I began recruitment and shared my flier (appendix A) in the public forum of Undocumented Professionals and my field contact shared it with students participating in the BGCP Oasis group. My field contact also added the flier to the newsletter that gets sent out to students in the post-secondary mentorship program. To reach more students, I posted my recruitment flier on my social media platform. Instagram accounts that share resources for undocumented students also reposted my flier on their instagram accounts. I immediately received messages from interested participants and began to go through the criteria questions with each of them. For this research project, I sought to only interview recent college graduates and current college seniors in California. I would first confirm the students met the criteria for my participant group and would follow by sending more information about the study and scheduling an interview.

I received more messages from students with DACA than students without DACA. The students with no DACA that I later got an opportunity to speak with, mentioned their hesitancy about reaching out and only did so after the study was shared by activists they know or by instagram accounts they trust like UndocutendProfessionals. Their words highlight the importance of working with individuals and platforms trusted by this community to reach students with a vulnerable status.

As I went through the messages I received, I had received requests to participate from many students that were not from California. The students told me they would be happy to share their story and experiences pursuing higher education in their respective state. One student was from South Carolina and she wanted to share her story of how difficult it is to pursue higher education in a state that prohibits students like her from enrolling in public institutions. I explained to the students that for the purposes of the study I could only interview students at

institutions in California. The students thanked me and also told me I could reach out if their stories could be helpful in any way. I even had a high school student reach out to me saying that although she was not in college, she had gone through so many challenges and barriers to get to high school and felt her story needed to be heard. The immense interest I received from students outside of California points to the need to create a safe platform for students to share their experiences, and the necessity for future research to analyze the access to education for undocumented students across the country.

For the students that met the criteria for my research project, I followed up through a secured and encrypted email with further details about the study and consent form. If the student agreed to proceed with their participation in the study, we scheduled the interview. All interviews took place through the preferred platform of the participant: Zoom or a phone call. Before the start of the interview, I informed the students of the steps I was taking to keep their information confidential and anonymous. We continued by reviewing the consent form and after all questions or concerns were addressed I assigned the student a pseudonym and began the interview. Only two participants chose to have their interview through a phone call and the rest were conducted over zoom. The majority of the participants had their video on and were very open as we spoke on their journey to college.

I started the interviews with what I referred to as a warm-up question. I didn't jump straight into asking students about their undocumented experiences. I wanted them to share a little about themselves and their values before we jumped into the most vulnerable and emotionally draining aspects of their life. The warm-up question was: Tell me the most important things someone should know about you. The majority of students mentioned characteristics and values that are important to them, such as being resilient, hardworking, or resourceful, while

other students shared activities they enjoy, such as reading or spending time with their family. Once we broke the ice a little, I asked the students to tell me about when they first knew college was an option for them. My intention through this question was to learn about any resources students may have relied on or figuring it out if the students were aware of the policies making higher education accessible to them. After the students shared their views about their access to higher education, the rest of the interview was organized in three components: journey to college, navigating college and post-graduation. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using AI transcription software. Upon completion of the interview transcripts, any personal information accidentally shared by the students throughout the interview was redacted and the audio was deleted. After redacting identifiable information from the interview transcripts, I proceeded to code and separate the stories in the three milestones described by following chapters: high school to college, navigating undergrad, and college graduation to post-college graduation.

My findings from the 11 stories I collected are shared through three chapters. Each chapter represents a milestone in higher education: high school to college, navigating undergrad, and college graduation to post-college graduation. In Chapter 1, "The Path to Higher Education," I explore the barriers undocumented students face when choosing to pursue higher education. Some of the barriers I analyze include financial barriers, lack of supportive counselors, and the crucial aspect of self-advocacy that was needed for them to even be able to access information to resources that should make their application process easier. Then Chapter 2, "On the Journey to Graduation," will bring into conversation the college experience of undocumented students as they navigate barriers, limitations, and exclusion from status. Chapter 2 will focus on the exclusion of career development opportunities, hardships in accessing basic necessities, and the

importance of Dream Centers and campus organizations that help contribute to a thriving environment and community-oriented space for undocumented students. Finally, Chapter 3, "The Next Step," will cover the last key transition in their higher education journey: college graduation, post-graduation, and review the post-graduation process between students with DACA and those without DACA. This chapter provides insight into the overwhelming uncertainty students without DACA face and the thought process of students with DACA if they were to one day lose DACA. In the end, I summarize my findings, discuss further directions and conclude by highlighting the unwavering resilience of undocumented students.



CHAPTER 1: THE PATH TO HIGHER EDUCATION

In this chapter, I explore the first milestone of higher education: the transition from high school to college. As students near the end of high school, they may start to consider pursuing higher education. The higher education path is open for undocumented students in California. AB 540 gives them access to in-state tuition and the California Dream Act allows these students to receive financial aid. These policies open the doors to higher education for all students regardless of immigration background, but what happens if students are unaware of these policies?

When AB 540 was signed into law, Rincon (2008) found that California lacked a funded statewide campaign to inform undocumented students of the new law and their eligibility for in-state tuition (p. 124). The lack of proper dissemination resulted in undocumented students often being charged out-of-state fees turning these students away from higher education. In 2011, a decade after AB 540, the California Dream Act was signed into law and granted undocumented students access to in-state tuition. With over a decade in existence, these policies have opened the door to higher education for undocumented students. However, despite having these policies in place to make higher education possible, many undocumented students continue to remain unaware of the resources available to them and believe higher education is not accessible to them.

In this chapter, I argue the lack of knowledge of these policies and failure from high schools to share information about the education access policies deters undocumented students away from college and forces them to develop higher levels of resilience and self-advocacy to get to college. I share the story of Alexa and Emily who highlight the need for schools to be knowledgeable about the resources available for undocumented students. Alexa's story teaches

us the critical self-advocacy undocumented students must develop in order to continue their degree and fill the gap left by failure of the state of California and high schools to disseminate information about the laws that make access easier for undocumented students. I continue exploring the path to college for undocumented students by sharing the stories of Joe, Jenny, Angel, Oscar and Milagros on how financial barriers and political attacks on the undocumented community play a role in the college decision making of undocumented students. I then conclude this chapter by highlighting Jenny's and Leslie's experience with mentors and programs that show the importance of having resources that facilitate the path to college. Lastly, through these stories I show that resilience and self-advocacy are key aspects needed by undocumented students with minimal knowledge of access granting policies and minimal support from their high schools.

LACK OF INFORMATION

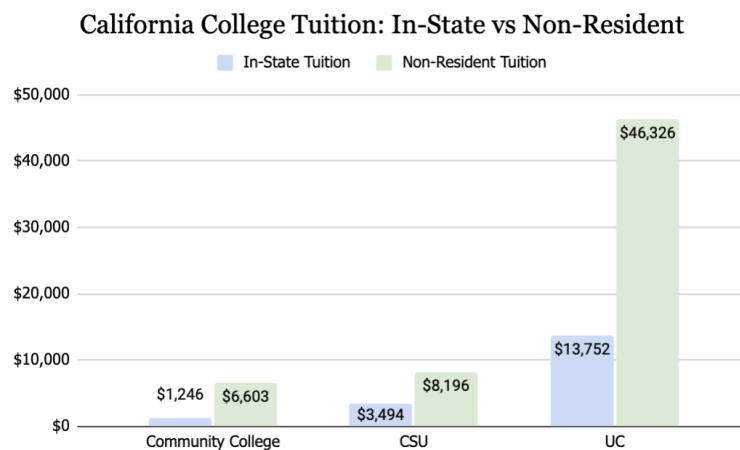
In this section, I demonstrate the negative impact caused by a lack of awareness of education access policies that turns undocumented students away from college. Alexa and Emily are two students who expressed their hesitancy and struggle to continue with college after high school because they were not aware of the resources available to them.

For many undocumented students, the path to college is uncertain and complicated. California legislation makes higher education accessible to them, but not being aware and not knowing how to navigate these resources, AB 540 or California Dream Act, increases the hurdles they face when pursuing higher education. I started the interviews by asking my study participants to tell me when they learned college was an option for them. I followed up by asking them what resources they were aware of when they applied to college. My intention with this question was to learn more about any gaps in information access.

My first interview was with Alexa, a DACA recipient and a current senior at a California community college (CCC). At the time of the interview, Alexa was wrapping up her last semester of community college before transferring to a four-year institution. Alexa's higher education journey did not begin right after graduating from high school. College became an option for Alexa in 2012 when DACA was implemented. She was initially unable to pursue college because she was a full-time caregiver to her mother and did not have the funds to pay for her education. At the time of her decision, Alexa was not aware of the financial aid and scholarships available to undocumented students. In addition, having to take care of their mother and her financial limitations, Alexa had no choice but to defer her route to college.

In the decade before, legislation began to open doors for undocumented students to access higher education in California. In October 2001, AB 540 allowed undocumented students who met the criteria to pay in-state tuition at public colleges and universities (Rincon 2008). Prior to AB 540 undocumented were required to pay out-of-state tuition which is typically triple that of in-state tuition (Figure 1). The ineligibility for in-state tuition even caused undocumented students to be priced out of community college.

Figure 1. College tuition comparison between in-state and out-of-state residents



AB 540 made tuition more equitable for undocumented students. Ten years later, Governor Brown signed AB 130 and AB 131, known as the California Dream Act, into law. These two bills allowed undocumented students to receive aid from California institutions and state financial aid (Whaley 2012). Starting in 2012, UC institutions could use privately funded scholarships to support undocumented students and in the fall of 2013, undocumented students were able to access Cal Grants, state aid (Whaley 2012). These resources were available when Alexa graduated from high school making this path an option for her; however, when she graduated she was not aware of these resources that could've helped her earn a degree by the same year she decided to go to college.

Undocumented students are already disadvantaged from their socioeconomic background (Ruth 2018), and the poor dissemination of education access policies makes it difficult for undocumented students to pursue higher education. The lack of awareness of these resources develops financial barriers and hardships. In 2017, Alexa enrolled at her local community college and began her dream of becoming a psychologist to one day provide support to undocumented students like her. Through our conversation, Alexa mentioned that she was struggling to pay for her education out-of-pocket as she had only learned about the California Dream Act in March of 2022:

I was having a hard time because I didn't know that there was the Cal Dream Scholarship. I barely found out this year [2022] and I have been going to college since 2017. I've been paying out of pocket. I only knew about FAFSA and I was not allowed to [apply to] FAFSA. I didn't know that there were scholarships out there for [undocumented students]. I'm still learning right now as I go.

Alexa was completely unaware of the resources available to her until she sought out therapy. Her community college offers students six free therapy sessions. In these sessions, Alexa shared with her therapist how her undocumented status has impacted her emotionally, and

mentally. After sharing more about her background and struggles, her therapist was able to point her to resources and workshops that talked about the resources available to students with her status: “she gave me all the information I needed and was able to contact the right person and have the right person guide me through the application.”

From the interviews I conducted, Alexa was the only student that verbally expressed frustration and anger. As she shared her story, I could pick-up on her frustrated tone and disbelief of what she was going through. She explicitly explained her frustration came from not knowing about any resource until March of 2022 even though she began going to college in 2017. At the end of the interview, Alexa told me this was the first time she got to share her story and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to chat with me because her “story and struggle felt unheard”. Unfortunately, Alexa is not the only undocumented student to have struggled to pursue higher education due to a lack of information, Emily faced the same obstacles due to poor guidance from her high school:

When I got out of high school, I really did not think I could go to college because I didn't have any resources at my high school. It was just the media that I consumed. The undocumented identity was really big when I [graduated] and Trump was in office. It was really scary thinking about what my next step should be after high school. College was out of the question.

Emily found herself in a similar situation as Alexa. Emily was hesitant to pursue college because she was not aware of the resources available. In her case this transition was happening at the same time as former president Trump was elected to office. The aggressive political climate towards immigrants created by former president Trump caused Emily and other study participants fear and uncertainty about disclosing their status and reaching out for help. Emily eventually ended up learning about AB 540 through a social media post she came across and

enrolled in her local community college. Similar to Alexa she was not aware of the aid through the California Dream Act:

I actually paid for my first year in community college. I didn't have the California Dream Act, but I did have AB 540 and I knew about that through the admissions staff, but they didn't tell me about the California Dream Act. I didn't know about it until I met with a counselor in my second year. My first year was just completely out of pocket.

Prior to the California Dream Act, undocumented students chose to enroll at community college because it was the only affordable option to them (Raza et al. 2019). After AB 540, Ngo and Astudillo (2019) found an increase of undocumented students enrolling at community college. When the California Dream Act came into effect, undocumented students were able to receive aid to make four-year institutions more affordable. Students who are unaware of the financial aid they can receive, are turned away from pursuing four-year institutions.

Both Alexa and Emily are undocumented students that began their journey at a community college because they were unaware of the aid available and chose the most affordable options for them. Now aside from having to figure how to afford their education, they must also figure out how transferring will work for them. After some struggle, both Alexa and Emily were able to learn about the funding available through the California Dream Act just before transferring to a four-year institution, helping them just in time as they went on to the next step to complete their degree. Upon inquiring on how her experience would have been different if she knew of the resources available, Emily shared:

I would have been more confident about the path that I was taking. My status brought a great deal of insecurity. Not just financially, I really don't know how else to explain it. I think it is primarily financial, but because it compounds and affects me emotionally and mentally. It impacted my education, my grades, and I didn't do as well as I probably would have.

Despite the existence of education access laws, students like Emily and Alexa continue to struggle because of a lack of awareness of the policies. The lack of information and socioeconomic background of undocumented students can completely deter them from pursuing college as it did for Alexa. Furthermore, the complexity of the situation of undocumented students can have a negative impact on their mental health and well-being as it did for both Alexa and Emily. Both of their stories point to a need for high schools to have college counselors and/or teachers knowledgeable on the resources available to undocumented seeking to pursue higher education.

FINANCIAL AND POLITICAL BARRIERS

I start this section by explaining the financial barriers undocumented students face through the stories of Joe, Jenny, and AngeL. Then, I share how Oscar was impacted by the political and legal attacks on DACA. Financial hardship was a recurring theme throughout the cohort I interviewed regardless of whether or not they were DACA recipients. An unexpected barrier I learned of was how the attacks on DACA impact the college decision-making process of DACA recipients.

Jenny is an undocumented student with DACA currently pursuing a Master's Degree in Public Health. As we spoke about the start of her higher education journey, she shared that both of her parents did not go to school. As she navigated the college application process she knew asking her parents for help was not an option. In contrast to Alexa's story, Jenny's school provided programs that helped shape the idea of college in her mind. She reminisced on leadership workshops at UC and CSU institutions. These programs allowed her to spend a week on the campuses they visited and helped her see herself at one of those campuses. When she started high school, Jenny joined the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)

program. AVID is a four-year high school program that provides first-generation and low-income students with high school support and college guidance regardless of their immigration status.

AVID played a critical role in Jenny's path: "I'm also a first-generation and just really navigating it and kind of doing it on my own. Something that I learned even along the way is that I can't ask my parents because they didn't go to school... If I would have not had that guidance from AVID, I would have been totally lost."

Despite having support and guidance, Jenny still debated pursuing college due to the uncertainty of how her immigration status would impact her journey. Despite the uncertainty, Jenny chose to continue the college application process but came across financial barriers. As she received acceptance letters to four-year institutions, she knew the financial aid offered would not be enough to help her meet the expenses and decided to enroll in her local community college.

For Alexa and Emily, financial barriers to education originated from a lack of awareness of the financial aid available and the inability to seek other funding sources not available to undocumented students such as federal grants or scholarships only for US citizens. Despite the financial barriers, Jenny was able to pursue an education right after high school by benefiting from programs that gave her early exposure, provided guidance, and pointed her to the resources needed for her to make the decision on pursuing college. Although she had the information needed, her undocumented status still posed barriers to her college application journey. Both Alexa, Emily, and Jenny point to financial factors as big decision-making influences. Alexa did not pursue an education until five years after high school graduation because she was unaware of financial aid and scholarships. In contrast, Jenny received acceptances to private and four-year universities, but the financial aid offered was not enough for her to meet the expenses needed to

attend. Emily was unaware of the aid and had to pay out-of-pocket for her education. All these three students demonstrate the financial barriers undocumented students face.

Joe had known about college from a young age, his parents had instilled the idea of college from a young age by reminding him to do: “[his] best academically and then eventually get to a good university so [he] could have a good degree and be a professional.” One thing his parents failed to mention was his immigration status. When he was applying to college, Joe began to understand his undocumented identity. He further understood the restrictions with the differences between the application process for him and his US citizen peers. Joe did not qualify for federal aid. He had to complete separate forms, California Dream Act, which his counselors were not as familiar with. The co-learning along with his high school counselor further increased his stress and anxiety throughout the process. A difference between the previous students and Joe is that he does not have work authorization to support his tuition. In the stories of Alexa, Jenny, and Emily we learned that even with access to DACA, they still faced financial barriers, so for Joe, a student without DACA and work authorization, this barrier was an even bigger hurdle for him to overcome:

A big factor was obviously the financial side, it was just harder for me. I think that scared me and persuaded me to go to specific schools. I don't want to be like a financial burden on my parents, so I would obviously want to work a job. But if I don't have work authorization, how could I get a traditional job? And that was a big factor in when I was applying.

Similar to Jenny and Joe, Angel had to navigate the college application process as a first-generation student with limited financial resources. Angel's story pointed to family responsibilities that also impact the journey of undocumented students. In her story, Angel demonstrated how the multiple barriers undocumented students face compound to have a negative impact on their well-being:

The barriers that would come were financial barriers. [My family] is low income. I'm the oldest and the oldest daughter and just navigating that in itself is very difficult. I know this sometimes doesn't correlate to education, but I think it's something important to add if you're not in a good mental state of mind or you have a lot of trauma, sometimes you have a harder time because you're pushing yourself to an extreme where you're causing yourself a lot of harm.

As undocumented students pursue higher education, one of the biggest barriers they must learn to manage is the socioeconomic background and the financial hardship it leads to when pursuing college. While Oscar's college selection was also dictated by financial barriers and the financial aid available to him, he had to consider an additional critical which was the possibility of DACA ending:

I chose the college I went to mainly because it was the closest to home. There's always that fear that DACA was going to go away. So the last thing I want to do is be across the country, and then my legal status goes away. I wanted to make sure that I was close to my support system in case anything went wrong

Oscar's consideration of DACA ending when choosing where to go for college points to the relevance of what would happen to undocumented DACA recipients if DACA were to end. His story led me to develop questions that can be answered by further research on this group of students: How would out-of-state students return home safely? What protections if any will the government offer recipients? How are out-of-state DACA students taking care of themselves?

SELF-ADVOCACY

In this section, I highlight the need for undocumented students to self-advocate in order to reach college. For Alexa self-advocacy was an essential part of her path to college. As Jenny shared with me undocumented students also identify as first-generation students meaning they must advocate for themselves and figure out this journey on their own. What happens when undocumented students lack support and even face discouragement from the very own people

who should be supporting them the most? When undocumented students don't have access to the proper support networks it's up to them to access the resources they need. Alexa shares the immense amount of self-advocacy she needed to get to college:

I was not expecting how hard it was going to be being undocumented and having to navigate the system and advocating for yourself. Because if you don't do it for yourself, nobody else is going to do it. A lot of the counselors were not helpful. Even my own type of people were the ones telling me like, You're not going to make it. You're not going to be able to handle this. So it was the opposite of what I expected. Like classes. Obviously, they're going to be hard, but I didn't know how hard it was going to be every semester trying to get the right paperwork and having them process the paperwork. You know, it's been hard

Once Alexa found out about the potential financial aid available to her, she reached out to the financial aid office and experienced frustration and a lack of communication from the office. It worsened her college experience and forced her to have to constantly advocate for herself and follow up with her financial aid office. Undocumented students need to submit their paperwork to prove their AB 540 eligibility and if the paperwork goes missing or does not get processed, the students are categorized as non-residents and are charged out-of-state tuition. For students with Alexa's status, this type of error can worsen the anxiety of students already at odds with the financial cost of college. For Alexa, seeing an unexpected \$10,000 student bill made matters worse:

It's been rough because I've been having to advocate for myself, so it is constant. Following up. When I applied, I had to prove that I was a California resident because when they asked me if I was a U.S. citizen, I said no. So they were like, Well, we need to have your AB 540 and we need to have your school transcripts. They gave me a timeline where I have to provide everything. My deadline was October 1st. I provided that before September 30th or something like that. I did all that. And then on November 28, they're charging me \$10,000. And I'm like, Why are you charging me \$10,000? And they're like, Well, because you are an international student.

No, I'm not. I turn in all my paperwork. I did every single guideline. So it's frustrating because it's always been like that with [my institution], where I have to constantly follow up and try to get people's names to keep them at all accountable because you're charging me \$10,000 that I have to pay by the end of the day. It's frustrating because as [an undocumented student], you have to take those extra steps to be even and accepted. I even thought about not going anymore because I'm tired of constantly jumping all these loops that are in front of me

The lack of responsibility from the financial aid office of Alexa's institution depicts the extra steps undocumented students must take to advocate for their education. Institutions that are not committed to providing support to undocumented students cause additional anxiety and frustration to students. The additional stressors from having to constantly self-advocate may even cause these students to reconsider pursuing an education, just like it did for Alexa.

In addition to poor communication from financial aid institutions, counselors who are not supportive of undocumented students can cause them to experience uncertainty and additional hurdles. Angel is an undocumented senior without DACA who shared her frustration with her high school counselor. Her counselor would only focus on supporting students going to competitive universities rather. Angel's counselor would make her feel alienated by not only excluding her from the students he was interested in helping but also by failing to help her learn of the resources and steps undocumented students need to take to pursue college:

My senior year I got waitlisted to [a UC institution], and I was actually going to go to [a CSU institution], but my counselor wasn't trying to be very supportive compared to my other classmates who were getting into UCLA. It made me feel bad for myself, like, 'Oh, maybe I'm not worthy.'

I had to be the one asking ‘How do I apply for this? How do I do this?’ While compared to some of my classmates, he had tucked them into his wing. He took them into his office and showed them how to apply for scholarships, and FAFSA. I was probably one of the few undocumented students in my high school. He came into my class one time teaching everybody how to do FAFSA, and I was just there because I don't do that. It was just a lot of me pushing rather than getting guided or receiving support. I would be persistent with my counselor. I knew that there was some support. I just had to chase after my counselor because I didn't know how to navigate it myself.

In order to even make it to college, Angel had to constantly self-advocate to receive some guidance and support from her high school counselor. Both Alexa and Angel, had to go out of their way to receive the support they should have received from their counselors and institutions. The lack of proper support even impacts the way students view themselves as seen by Angel who described feeling unworthy. The poor support expressed by the counselors can further isolate undocumented students who may already feel vulnerable reaching out due to their status. Alexa's and Angel experiences demonstrate the self-advocacy and resilience needed by undocumented students to gain access to college.

FACILITATORS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

In this final section, I share the experience of undocumented students who had access to a supportive network. Their experiences demonstrate the significant need for high schools to better support undocumented students. In contrast to Angel and Alexa, Leslie had a more positive experience pursuing higher education. Her experience differs because she was part of a supportive and empowering community that gave her access to role models who succeed in pursuing higher education:

My sister is also undocumented and doesn't have DACA. So it made me realize that I could also apply to college. But I feel like what really motivated me and where I got inspired to apply to college was when I attended a conference my junior year for Chicano and Latino students. It was a conference where we learned about college, careers, and community. I met other people there, including my peer mentor. That was kind of eye opening seeing firsthand someone who was undocumented and was going to college. It not only inspired me to pursue higher education, but also helped me be comfortable disclosing my status.

The students that were able to participate in college access programs, have family members and mentors to guide them through the process, had a better experience and attitude when applying to college. Their positive experiences and the negative experiences of Alexa and Emily call for the need of schools to better support undocumented students to prevent them from struggling on their own.

In Chapter 1, I shared the stories and realities of undocumented students as they pursue higher education. The students shared stories of frustration and disbelief. Alexa in particular shared how challenging her journey had been trying to navigate college without having all the tools at her disposal. Oscar shared the reality of DACA students as they pursue higher education with the constant attacks on DACA and the possibility of the program ending. Multiple students conveyed the mental toll their undocumented identity has had on them and how the complexity of the barriers they must navigate exacerbates the negative impacts on their well-being. As students complete the transition from high school to college, students without proper support networks need to develop higher levels of resilience and self-advocacy. With the first transition completed, undocumented students must now find a way to navigate their undergraduate institutions. Chapter 2, "On the Journey to Graduation" will explore the exclusion undocumented students' experience in college and the need for supportive networks to continue to develop their resilience to overcome these barriers and persevere through higher education.



CHAPTER 2: ON THE JOURNEY TO GRADUATION

“My expectations don't meet up with reality.” - Joe

In the previous chapter, I focused on the barriers undocumented students face and must overcome to transition from high school to college. Students lacked information on the policies that make access easier for them, received little to no guidance during the process, and emphasized the self-advocacy and resilience needed to overcome these barriers to even enroll in college. With this transition completed, undocumented students must now learn to navigate their college institutions with the constraints from their immigration status.

As students begin their undergraduate journey, they face the exclusion their immigration status brings as they are unable to pursue “common experiences of American higher education” (Gamez et al., 2017). For the purpose of this chapter, the following will be considered common college experiences: campus jobs, internships, study abroad opportunities, and international trips with friends. Gamez et al. (2017) found that DACA gives undocumented students the opportunity to participate in the common experiences of higher education. DACA gives students the opportunity to work and use “advance parole”¹ to travel outside of the country. What happens to the students without DACA? How do students without DACA experience and navigate college?

In this chapter, I argue that policies regarding access to higher education are not enough to provide undocumented students without DACA full participation in higher education and fail to meet their basic needs. Additionally, the barriers undocumented students face as they navigate college demonstrate the critical necessity of support networks for these students to persevere through college. AB 540 and the California Dream Act make college more accessible to undocumented students, but it doesn't guarantee full inclusion of the college experience. The

¹ permission granted by the Department of Homeland Security to temporarily travel outside the U.S.

students I spoke to encountered exclusion from work opportunities, study abroad opportunities and even exclusion in their college social life. Through these stories we learn of the lack of aid towards the basic needs of undocumented students and the hardships they encounter as they try to access housing, food, and even medication. In order to overcome these barriers, undocumented students must rely on support networks. The stories in this chapter will convey the significance of having support geared towards undocumented students and will also demonstrate the importance of having mental health resources for this vulnerable group of students.

EXCLUSION FROM THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

In this section, I share the stories of Joe, Oscar and Laura to demonstrate the exclusion undocumented students face when pursuing career and professional development opportunities. After I finished talking with the students about their journey from high school to college, I shifted the focus of the conversation to their experience navigating college. I started the new topic by asking the students if anything had surprised them when they started college and then asked them to tell me more about the barriers they may have encountered. The recurring challenges that resonated with the students in the study were limited access to internships, jobs, and scholarships.

Joe is a senior at a California State University (CSU) institution. Joe is one of many undocumented students whose immigration status remained uncertain after a Texas judge blocked new DACA applications from being accepted. Throughout his interview, Joe described the restrictions he has encountered due to being unable to apply for DACA:

I can't apply to the internships the school is referring me to. It's disheartening and lonely because there's so much work and passion that I want to give. I can't work for anything traditionally. I can apply to some internships that are unpaid, but in my situation I can't afford to do that. As a student from my background who doesn't come from wealth or money, I can't afford to set aside time for an unpaid internship. It's a sad reality because obviously paid internships are out of my reach.

Joe's inability to apply for DACA left him without work authorization and caused him to encounter exclusion when pursuing internships. His reality highlights the limited opportunities undocumented students have for professional development. More importantly as a low-income student, Joe is unable to accept unpaid internships. His story highlights the double restrictions non-DACA students from a low-income background face. These students are unable to participate in opportunities that provide both a source of income and career development. Undocumented students without DACA have no access to work opportunities outside of their institutions and even face limited access to opportunities within their institutions.

In addition to not being able to pursue professional development opportunities, undocumented students are unable to participate in opportunities that would deepen their understanding and experience in their area of study. For example, Oscar graduated with an anthropology degree and shared how his status caused him to miss out on study abroad opportunities:

In anthropology, it's very common for people to do some study abroad programs either archaeological study or fieldwork outside of the States. Because of my status, it was very difficult to do that. I [graduated] in 2020 when DACA was being dismantled and threatened by Trump. I wasn't able to take advantage of those opportunities because of DACA. There were just a lot of missed opportunities which I wish I could take back and redo.

Oscar's experience contradicts the findings of Raul Gamez. Gamez et al. (2017) argued that DACA permits undocumented students the opportunity to participate in common college experiences and even study abroad programs. While their findings remain true for DACA

students who can access work opportunities, it is not the same for students who want to participate in study abroad programs. In addition, Oscar's story highlights a political perspective missing from the conclusions of Gamez et al. (2017). When Trump started the attacks on DACA, the lives of DACA recipients became uncertain.

Even before the attacks on DACA, students were aware of its limits. For example, students who knew about advance parole, permission to travel outside of the country, knew entrance back into the US is not guaranteed. The frustration from the limitations of DACA is a sentiment shared by many of the study participants with DACA. Mary, a DACA recipient, shared that studying abroad is not worth the risk of not being able to come back to the country: "one thing is being able to study abroad and travel the world to learn different cultures. In my mind, advance parole does not guarantee that you'll come back into the country. So that's why I never tried to venture out, because it's not worth the risk for me." Mary and Oscar point to the limits of DACA in providing students access to the same opportunities as their US citizen peers because there are additional risks they must consider when thinking of participating in study abroad opportunities. Additionally, Oscar highlights the political climate DACA students need to keep in mind as they decide whether or not to partake in study abroad programs. In sum, these students demonstrate that policies for access to higher education are not sufficient in letting undocumented students participate in the same career and professional opportunities as their US citizen peers. Lastly, Joe shows us that it's even more restrictive for students without DACA.

The undocumented status of students without DACA not only impacts their internship prospects, but it even has a negative impact on their college social life. Joe was one of the students that shared how his status limits the extent to which he is able to participate in social events:

I'm not legal here, and it becomes very difficult to talk about it when I'm in an organization. This happened to me when we were planning a retreat outside of campus. They mentioned we have a retreat planned down in San Diego. I have this idea that the closer I get to the border, the more likely it is for checkpoints and it's very risky for someone in my position. So that's one thing that I've had to miss out on.

Joe's perception of places that are risky for undocumented individuals limits the social events he is able to participate in and shows how undocumented students may be placed in a position where they have to share their immigration status to explain the need for alternative plans or inability to partake in a social event. Joe's story reveals the social exclusion undocumented students without DACA face in college in addition to the exclusion from internships and study abroad opportunities. The exclusion from common experiences in higher education demonstrate that policies to access college are not enough to support these same students when there are no policies guaranteeing them inclusion in all aspects of a college experience.

BASIC NECESSITIES

In addition to not being able to fully participate in the common college experience, the immigration status of undocumented students hinders their ability to access basic necessities needed to support them outside of the classroom. Ngo and Astudillo (2019) found that undocumented students fall under more "resource constrained" circumstances because of the lack of access to federal aid which may cause them to front the money to pay for what state aid and scholarships fail to meet. The circumstances of undocumented students forces them to juggle multiple barriers on top of their academic needs. For example, Laura shares how overwhelming and exhausting it was to balance work and her academic needs: "my biggest obstacle is getting financial assistance. There were many times where I didn't get enough funding from school, so I had to pay a lot of money out of my own pocket. I had to work all throughout college, sometimes 8 hours. I would still do homework at night and then I would wake up very exhausted to even go

to school.” Laura’s experience demonstrates both the physical and mental strain undocumented students have to endure. Laura had to work two jobs to be able to afford college and the physical demand of both jobs had a negative impact on her academic performance. From her experience, I conclude that financial barriers are a big stressor that impact the college experience of undocumented students with and without DACA.

In addition, the need to prioritize tuition payments results in undocumented students facing food insecurity. Ayon et al. (2022) conducted a survey with 1,277 undergraduate college students and found 59% of the participants (n=678) experienced food insecurity. Emily is an undocumented student without DACA and one of my study participants that experienced food insecurity. In college, Emily was dependent on her institution’s food pantry because her immigration status disqualified her from accessing CalFresh: “I utilized [the institution’s] food pantry a lot as well because it was very difficult to buy groceries. I used their food pantry a lot just to get by... There were other resources that were specific for low income students that I didn't qualify for. CalFresh was a big one that I didn't qualify for.”

Both Laura and Emily point to the additional obstacles undocumented students face. The financial demand to pay for her education caused Laura to work two jobs while being a full-time student. For Emily, a student without DACA and work authorization, it resulted in her experiencing food insecurity and not being able to rely on CalFresh for assistance. The experiences of these students continue to demonstrate how education access policies fail to support these students once they are in college and point to the need for policies that acknowledge their needs beyond higher education access. While scholarship on the barriers undocumented students experience often mentions financial barriers, a student from my study sample informed me of a barrier I had not been aware of: housing insecurity. Sebastian is an

undocumented student without DACA who shared how his immigration status caused him to experience housing insecurity while attending a UC institution:

In that campus housing is very limited for students. Usually freshmen are guaranteed housing in dorms. But beyond that you have to find your own housing, Most students have to find off campus housing through the apartments around campus. I was very lucky that I had a group of friends to find an apartment with and were very accommodating to my situation. They actually ended up being the first group of people that I disclosed my status to. I was worried about landlords asking for ID because I only had my school ID.

Sebastian's immigration status and lack of California identification caused him to experience housing insecurity and put him in a position where it was necessary to disclose his immigration status to receive aid from his friends. In addition to worrying about housing, Sebastian mentioned that his undocumented identity even limits the medication he has access to. He explained that for US controlled substances, a US ID is needed to be able to purchase the medication. Undocumented students without a California driver's license are unable to use a valid ID to purchase the medication they need. Sebastian's foreign ID was not helpful to access the cold medication he needed. He had to send a friend to purchase the medication and expressed frustration with how his status can impact access to basic necessities like housing and medication: "it seemed very unnecessary and difficult for something that is a necessity." In September 2022, three months prior to this study, Governor Newsom signed Assembly Bill 1766 "California IDs for All" in which California residents may receive a state ID regardless of immigration status². While this policy will help address the concerns Sebastian experienced in worrying about having a valid ID for housing applications and medications, it will not be in effect until 2027. Until then, undocumented students without DACA will continue to experience obstacles just as Sebastian did.

² California, S. O. (2022, September 23). *California IDs For All* | *California Governor*. California Governor. <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2022/09/23/california-ids-for-all/>

MENTAL HEALTH

Even from the previous chapter, we saw the complex and challenging journey for undocumented students begin way before college and as students face barriers on all steps of the way, it takes a toll on their mental health. Ayon et al. (2022) found elevated levels of anxiety, depression and stress in undocumented undergraduate students, and these same students are less likely to seek out help compared to their citizen peers. In my study, a prominent theme that came up across the interviews throughout all three milestones (high school to college, navigating undergrad, and post-college graduation) was managing their mental health while pursuing higher education. Undocumented students in my study sample even experienced difficulties accessing mental health resources. Angel shared the depression she experienced when the attacks on DACA began. She struggled to balance her personal well-being on top of her academic life:

During these times it was kind of heavy to go to class and pretend everything's fine and that I didn't have to worry about my status. I had classes to worry about when in reality my status was very essential. It was very essential for my whole component to be there and to be here in this country. One of the biggest things for me was the battle I had navigating and trying to look for a therapist that would understand my experience. I went through multiple therapists until I found the one that worked for me. She worked in the undocumented center, but she was so overbooked that you had to get on a waitlist for her.

I needed to have more accessibility to providers that were going to be understanding of the experience of an undocumented student, Latina or a first generation low income student, because it does come with a lot of trauma. [My identities] were a big factor for my whole higher education experience because I had to navigate through a very severe depression.

On top of having to manage her severe depression, Angel also experienced difficulties accessing the resources she needed. When she was able to get help, she describes how challenging it was to find a therapist that understands her background without having to explain what it's like to be undocumented. Ayon et al. (2022) found that students in his study also experienced the same obstacle; finding a provider that understood the undocumented experience. For the students in his

sample, this same reason caused them to avoid seeking help. Angel's perspective sheds light on the burdens that undocumented students must learn to juggle as they continue their education. Undocumented students are constantly facing obstacles caused by their immigration status and must even learn to manage the mental distress caused by the political and legal attacks against DACA. Colleges must provide resources specific for undocumented students to help them manage their well-being as they pursue their education with constant stressors.

DREAM CENTERS AND PEER SUPPORT

In this final section, I'll explore the support networks needed by undocumented students to overcome the continuous exclusion and mental health stressors they experience while pursuing higher education. Gamez et al. (2017) found high levels of resilience in undocumented students who were part of support networks. These students often created and found the support networks themselves which points to a lack of institutional support as undocumented students must self-construct the support they need. In my study, the students I spoke with supported Gamez's findings as participation in support networks for many of these students developed their resilience and played a critical role in creating the aid they needed to overcome the barriers they faced in college. For students like Emily who received minimal support from high school counselors, she assumed college would be the same and had no expectations: "everything seemed so unclear when I got out of high school and when I transferred, it surprised me that there were communities in these institutions that were specifically for undocumented students and they had resources like advisors and counselors that really were determined to help us navigate through higher education."

The minimal counseling she received in high school influenced her perception of college and she started her journey with a lot of uncertainty. As Emily reflected on the resources she

used, she recalled how shocking it was to know that there were institutions with resources for students with her background. Her initial uncertainty depicts the loneliness undocumented students encounter without support as they try to navigate higher education institutions by themselves. Other students in my sample attended institutions that provided students community and comfort through summer programs created to ease the transition from high school to college for marginalized students. Abrego (2006) and Gonzales (2011) found that as undocumented students reached the end of their high school career, they would start thinking more in-depth about their immigration background and their identity. For Angel, the summer program her institution offered played a critical role in helping her understand her identity in relation to her education and validate her feelings as a first generation college student:

The undocumented student program within the university and a summer program that was supportive to nontraditional students and helped them navigate the UC system with the lens of coming from these backgrounds. Coming from an undocumented or low income first generation background. It was very informative because it allowed me to understand my identity. I wasn't at fault for maybe not understanding classes or my fault for not knowing how to navigate. It was more kind of like an institutional type of problem.

The summer program gave Angel the opportunity to develop a strong understanding of her identity and the role support networks provide. The safety and community this summer program offered Angel was the first step to build her resilience and knowledge of resources she can depend on to navigate college. Importantly, all the participants I interviewed attended public institutions with a dream center. The students who engaged with the dream center at their institutions mentioned the positive impact the dream center had on their undergraduate careers. Students received multiple types of support including financial assistance for DACA renewals, helping them find paid opportunities and even providing a place of solace for students. For

Angel, her dream center provided legal services, helped cover the \$495 DACA renewal fee and even provided her a job:

[The dream center] had a positive impact. I got the opportunity to finally work, and through the undocumented center, I got legal services for free. They would pay for my DACA application every time I had to renew. The same legal services that were supporting me, also offered me a job that allowed me also to be more involved within my community.

Dream centers paying the DACA renewal fee can be crucial for students already facing financial stability. Oscar had mentioned that when his dream center paid for the renewal fee it brought him great relief because the money he had could be repurposed to buying groceries. In addition to financial assistance and legal services, dream centers provide students an opportunity to reach out for help and leave their own mental bubbles. Joe mentioned that before knowing about the dream center, he felt lonely and down trying to navigate everything on his own:

At my school we have the dream success center, which allows students like me to go and talk with counselors and navigate post-grad conversations in a safe space. I'm also in an organization that focuses on undocumented students, which is also a good resource because it gives me a good place to look at other students for guidance because they share my background.

I was very reserved, and nervous to share my immigration status. When I first got to college, I didn't tell anybody, I didn't really look for assistance and it was very lonely. I felt very sad that I had this big part of my life in the background as I was navigating school. Not having anyone to talk to about it was just very lonely and disheartening.

Joe was able to overcome the loneliness he felt when he started college by finding a safe community through his institution's dream center. Similar to the positive impact depicted by my study participants, Ayon et al. (2022) found that participation in an undocumented student resource was associated with an approximately 20% higher likelihood of accessing on-campus mental health services. Joe was navigating mental health strains and while he did not seek out mental health resources, he experienced a positive change in his well-being by becoming more active in the dream center. Joe's story supports Ayon's conclusion that demonstrates the crucial

need for higher education institutions to have dream centers as they have positive impacts on the undergraduate experience of undocumented students.

Another prominent source of community and empowerment for students are clubs and organizations that center undocumented students. Milagros shared her experience finding a support network through the undocumented organizations on campus:

I met so many undocumented people working for the undocumented center in my school. I was around the community a lot. I had friends who had organizations who centered undocumented people. It was amazing. It was so empowering and uplifting to be around all of them. I felt a lot more empowered, inspired and uplifted. I didn't let [my immigration status] influence the way I navigated the institution. I didn't feel held back by myself.

The empowerment that Milagros received through her peers helped her have a more positive and resilient attitude towards her immigration status and higher education journey. The students in my study found crucial support through dream centers and peer networks. Dream centers play a critical role in filling the gap for the resources undocumented students need that education access policies fail to provide. Oscar stated that not having to worry about the DACA renewal helped him not worry about buying groceries. Regardless of whether or not they sought out independent mental health resources, both Joe and Milagros experienced a positive influence in their well-being by gaining an outlet for mental health support through their dream centers. Lastly, Milagros showed the power and positive influence of peer organizations that give undocumented students examples of resilience. The community offered by these resources empower undocumented students and help them develop the resilience needed to continue their higher education despite the barriers they encounter.

In this chapter, I shared the barriers undocumented students face as they pursue their bachelor's degrees: the most prominent barrier being the exclusion from the common higher education experience. Students without DACA are excluded from work opportunities, study

abroad programs and may even face obstacles as they try to enjoy the social aspect of a college experience. While DACA students are able to partake in more aspects of a common college experience, they have to take into consideration the risks they are taking if they choose to pursue study abroad programs. In addition to exclusion, I shared the stories of Sebastian and Emily who taught us that undocumented students face hardships accessing basic needs like housing, medication and even food. The struggle to pay for tuition and having to cut corners caused them to experience food insecurity. These students receive less assistance because their undocumented status makes them unable to qualify for programs like CalFresh. These students encounter many barriers as they pursue their education and it causes a strain on their well-being that may be worsened by the feelings of solitude. Joe, Milagros and Angel found community and empowerment through dream centers and their peers helping them develop the resilience and support needed for them to navigate the barriers they encounter. Dream centers are crucial for undocumented students as they fill the gap from policies that get these students to higher education but fail to support them through it.

The final chapter “The Next Step” will focus on the last milestone of higher education: college graduation. In the following chapter, I argue that college provides students without DACA a delay in their “transition to illegality” while those with DACA are able to partake and complete the post-college graduation transition. I will discuss the transition to illegality for undocumented students upon reaching post-graduation and how it differs between students with DACA and no DACA. Lastly, I’ll address the limitations DACA imposes on undocumented students.



CHAPTER 3: THE NEXT STEP

In this chapter, we reach the final transition in a college student's life: post-college. The past two chapters have taught us about the barriers undocumented students face pursuing college and getting through it. Chapter 1 focused on the self-advocacy and resilience required by undocumented students to access higher education when they lack information about policies making access to college possible for them. Chapter 2 demonstrates the exclusion from common college experiences, hardships accessing basic necessities, mental health strains, and the needed presence of support networks to help them persevere through these challenges.

In this last transition, I share stories of uncertainty, fear and hope for the future of the students I spoke with as they reach the end of their undergraduate career and share how their perspective and options change with access or no access to DACA. This chapter contributes to the gap in literature on the decision making of undocumented students post-college graduation with the existence of DACA and education access policies.

As I go through the stories and experiences of these students, I aim to expand on Roberto Gonzales' concept of "transition to illegality." Through his work, Gonzales explored how undocumented youth experienced the limitations of their status as they approached high school graduation. At the time of his study, the access to higher education was more limited than it is now because there was no state aid or DACA available for the students at that time. The concept of "transition to illegality" came to be after Gonzales observed high school seniors reaching the end of the protection provided by their K-12 education. Upon reaching high school graduation, the students were forced to come to terms with their illegality and the limitations of their status; Gonzales developed the concept of "transition to illegality" from these experiences. Since the time his research was conducted more education access policies have been signed into law: the

California Dream Act and DACA. These policies help undocumented students get to college, but what happens once these same students reach college graduation?

Through this chapter, I argue that college provides students without DACA a delay in their transition to illegality while those with DACA are able to continue with the post-college graduation transition. In chapter 1, the students without DACA understood they could not get a traditional job to pay for college out of pocket and chose to start at community college. These students overcome financial barriers by choosing to stay close to home and commute to their four year institutions. These students demonstrated their resilience and resourcefulness to pursue college regardless of the limits of their status. However, as they reach college graduation undocumented students start to confront the restrictions of their status, and question the limited options available to them as the next path denies them the benefits of higher education. I start this chapter by sharing how undocumented students without DACA feel about their prospects. Then, how students with DACA decide to pursue graduate school and the impact their immigration status has on their careers prospects. In the end, I share the range of options and challenges for each group with their respective immigration status and the resources they wish they had access to for this overwhelming transition.

UNCERTAINTY UPON REACHING COLLEGE GRADUATION

For undocumented students without DACA the transition post-graduation comes with overwhelming uncertainty and high levels of stress and anxiety. These students are nearing the end of their undergraduate career, ready to celebrate their hard work and effort from the last four years, but unlike their US citizen peers, they are unable to figure out what the next path in their

life will be. For Emily, post-graduation planning got complicated because she was unable to resolve her immigration case before reaching graduation:

My senior year was packed with a lot of stress...I was dreading the idea of graduating and not being able to get a job. My immigration case got really complicated and it turned out that I wasn't able to gain any kind of status after I graduated. I had a depressive episode because I thought about what on earth I was going to do after I graduated. I decided to take that year off because I really just didn't know what to do. A lot of it felt like it was for nothing. Like all of the hard work over the past four years, it didn't really amount to anything.

Emily was overwhelmed by the restriction of her immigration status, it impacted her mental health and even caused her to ponder whether or not getting her degree was worth it. The depression and uncertainty she faced as she neared graduation was the same for the students interviewed by Gonzales. The difference in this situation is that Emily's confrontation with her illegality came upon reaching college graduation. Pursuing higher education provided a gateway that postponed her "transition to illegality" from high school graduation to college graduation. The policies granting access to higher education create a safe space for undocumented students to continue their education and not face the urgency of figuring out what happens next.

As undocumented students without DACA receive more access to education, their transition to illegality is now delayed and must be acknowledged upon reaching college graduation. Despite the laws in place to welcome undocumented students at higher institutions, Emily's uncertainty shows that even when pursuing a college education, undocumented students are still limited by their immigration status. As Emily continued to think about what her life would be like, she decided it was best for her to take a year off and rethink if pursuing graduate school was the right option for her:

There were so many complications with my status that I felt that it just wasn't the right time. I needed to at least pursue alternatives to education that will kind of stabilize my family a little bit more. Any kind of independent contracting that was relevant to my degree like tutoring, maybe something in tech that I can be an independent contract for or

starting a business. I felt that if I took the year off, I could explore those options and see where it leads me before potentially going back to grad school.

I made the decision to go to grad school only a couple of weeks ago, because I was still unsure about whether it's the right path for me or where it will lead me if I still have this [undocumented] status. Public university is a safe space for me. Not being in school is a terrifying world with uncertainty of what I can do. But I know that if I at least go to school, I can work on skills that will make me kind of have a better job, maybe in the future if I get status. So it's kind of like the same thing that I went through in undergrad where there's this path, but I'm not sure what it will end up after I finish it.

During her time off Emily tried to pursue alternative options to education to prioritize the stability of her family. She was able to pursue independent contracting and tutoring, but did not get the benefit of pursuing a career her education prepared her for. In addition, Emily explicitly acknowledged the safe space education provides undocumented students supporting my argument that college delays the transition to illegality for these students. The more higher education these students pursue the more they are able to delay their transition to illegality. Undocumented students are not confronted by the severity of the restrictions from their status until they complete their educational journeys and realize they are unable to enter the labor market their education prepared them for. Similarly, Joe, an undocumented senior without DACA, did not have a clear idea of what his life would look like, but he tried to maintain a positive attitude towards graduation:

My prospects after college definitely are up in the air because of my status. I don't have DACA, so when I eventually graduate, very shortly, it'll be an interesting experience. I'd like to be positive, but it'd be an interesting experience because I have this degree. At the same time, I don't have traditional work authorization. It will be pretty stressful. I'm not going to lie, trying to look for job opportunities in my peculiar situation is already tough. The prospects after college are very up in the air, but right now in the present, this last semester was great and I'm going to finish off academically very strong.

His perspective may have been more optimistic than Emily's because at the time of the interview he had just finished fall semester and still had spring semester to go. It could be possible that he didn't think much in-depth about what life after graduation would be like for him because he

needed to prioritize his academic performance for the spring semester. Nonetheless, both Emily and Joe understood that there is no traditional path for them after graduation. Unlike their documented US peers they could not pursue traditional work opportunities and their circumstances added to the stressors they already have to balance as they complete their coursework. Undocumented students without DACA are unable to access the benefits of the education they pursued despite the barriers they had to overcome. For these students, the burden of figuring out what's next gets delayed when pursuing higher education, but when the end of their college career nears, these same students are now facing a wall upon graduation that stops them from completing the post-college graduation transition.

POST-GRADUATION WITH DACA

In this section, I share the post-college graduation experience of DACA students. For these students, I argue that they are able to complete the transition post-college graduation. While students with DACA are also undocumented, they have the advantage of having work authorization and having a relatively easier time figuring out a path for them compared to their non-DACA peers. Students like Angel are able to complete the transition post-college graduation and begin to have the same concerns their citizen peers do such as adulting and figuring out how credit works:

My worries were my classes, and knowing that I was going to get to the world and have to go and look for a job. I came from a small rural town. I knew I had to look around different cities for work. My experience was rooted in legal work. I was applying to firms, but it wasn't enough. Housing. Oh, my goodness. That was the thing I was most worried about because I had no credit. I didn't even know how to navigate that. I barely got my social [number] through DACA in 2017 so I didn't know how to navigate that type of world itself.

I got hired and I was looking for an apartment, but I got denied because of no credit and I didn't make enough money for it regardless of how much they were going to give me. My gap year was just navigating adulthood with credit, taxes, and everything. It was just a lot

of confusion with things like income and money and credit and all of these things that play in adulthood.

Angel's post graduation experience shows how she is able to experience a more typical post-college graduation transition in the sense that rather than having concerns about what's next for her, her main concerns are figuring out how credit works and how to approach adulthood. DACA gave Angel the opportunity to complete the post-college transition as she is able to work and begin to navigate adulthood. On the other hand, Jenny continued to make post-college graduation plans while acknowledging that she is still restricted by her immigration status:

I started to see how my status would impact everything. I'm currently looking for a job with more limited opportunities. When I would look at the qualifications, the first thing that I would see is if it's DACA friendly, and when I see the qualification of a fellowship if it didn't have that, that's excluding the majority of undocumented people. That feeling is very horrible because it kind of takes you back to square one where you're doing all this hard work and then you say "Oh, I can't do this because of my status" which isn't fair.

While students with DACA have the opportunity to pursue opportunities those without DACA are unable to, they still face restrictions if those opportunities are not welcoming of their DACA status. Jenny's experience highlights the need to further understand the post-college graduation of DACA students. Even though DACA provides them work authorization, it's not perfect. It does not grant them citizenship or permanent residency status which excludes them from opportunities only available for those with citizenship or permanent residency.

ALTERNATIVE PLANS

This section will explore the considerations DACA students have to keep in mind in the event that DACA gets taken away. Although DACA students are able to approach college graduation in a somewhat normal and traditional way as their citizen peers, students like Jenny experience the restriction of their immigration status as they keep in mind that DACA could be

taken away at any moment. For example, Laura's priority upon college graduation was financial stability, a priority she's able to address with the work authorization granted by DACA. When the attacks on DACA began, it made Laura realize that everything she had could go away at any moment and she began to explore how she could support herself if DACA were to go away:

I needed to find something that could make me financially stable. I did find jobs that were paying pretty well. Then I started to notice that there was news about DACA being in danger. So I began to think about the possibilities of it ending and what I could do to be prepared. I always followed these Instagram accounts and saw that there were opportunities and ways to get help. I noticed that [an organization] was giving out grants for people who wanted to start businesses. I applied and I got a grant. This whole time, I've been trying to start my own business. I also work part time and I am keeping grad school on hold only because I want to make sure I can afford it and not have to go through the same difficult situations that I had in undergrad.

Laura's resilience is shown through her understanding of having a backup plan through a small business. Although she's working towards alternative plans, it's important to note that she's able to build financial stability before pursuing graduate school through DACA, an advantage that non-DACA students lack.

MEDICAL SCHOOL

Regardless of having DACA and no DACA, the immigration status of undocumented students impacts their experience pursuing graduate school. Students who decide to pursue graduate school are limited to places that are welcoming of undocumented students. DACA students are able to pursue options out of state, but if that institution is not DACA friendly, then it limits the places students can apply to. Mary is an undocumented student with DACA who shared her experience applying to medical school. As she underwent the year-long process, Mary also had to balance the stress and fear from the attacks on DACA and how a verdict against DACA could impact her future prospects: "I was lost in this constant state of fear of being

deported and separated from my family, and also in a state of uncertainty. ‘Can I still go to medical school? If I do go, could I even work as a doctor once I graduate?’ For a while I questioned my career path, whether or not it was worth it for me to pursue that.”

Aside from navigating the complex application process for medical school, Mary experienced anxiety from the possibility of DACA ending. As Mary created her medical school list, she had to decide whether or not she would consider out-of-state institutions. Mary called an institution she was considering to ask what type of support they offer students with DACA and found out that institution had nothing in place to support students like her. After this phone call, she decided that staying in California would be the best option for her because California provides more opportunities to undocumented students with DACA. While she restricted her list to stay in a supportive state, Mary explained that it minimized her chances of getting into medical school as she would be applying to a smaller list of medical schools:

I chose to apply to school in California because not only is this a state where there's so much diversity and acceptance of our communities, but this is a state that will financially support us. That was one of the biggest reasons why I chose to stay in California. I remember when I was applying to [an institution] in North Carolina, I called them asking, do you guys provide financial support for DACA students? And they said, oh, we actually don't have any programs related to that here. That was when I realized that not every state is like California and I came to realize how lucky I am to be there.

But not every undocumented immigrant in this country experiences the same sort of privileges and opportunities as we do in California. When I did start applying to medical school, I came into it with the same sense that I could apply to whatever school I want. Then I realized that half of the medical schools in the United States do not accept undocumented students. That's going to make it so much harder for me and other students to step foot into this medical field. It's kind of a rude awakening, really, in the sense that we have to work harder to prove ourselves because we don't have the options. We don't have as many options available as other people because of our immigration status.

Despite being able to travel out of state and having the option to pursue medical school outside of California, Mary learned that not all institutions provide support to students with her background. Mary's experience shows that financial and institutional support are two critical

factors undocumented students with DACA take into account when deciding to pursue an advanced academic degree. The fact that even a student with DACA was restricted in the places she could consider for medical school highlights the limitation that DACA has in providing more resources and opportunities to undocumented students. Additionally, it points to the fact that students without DACA may experience even more limitations when choosing to pursue an advanced academic degree. Institutions that do not develop resources to support undocumented students are keeping them from having the same ability to pursue advanced degrees as their citizen peers.

ALTERNATIVES TO EDUCATION

Furthermore, DACA's limitations continue to be seen through the experience of Oscar, who moved away from multiple career options due to his immigration status. At a young age, Oscar aspired to go into criminal justice or work for the government. He described having to limit his aspirations and interest because of the lack of citizenship: "had I been a U.S. citizen, my career options would have definitely been a lot higher. For example, I couldn't go into criminal justice if I wanted to be an officer of the law because a requirement is U.S. citizenship. I can't work for the government because you can't do that with DACA. A lot of these careers that I was really interested in were kind of closed off to me. What am I left with?"

Oscar graduated in 2020 and aside from having to navigate a pandemic, Oscar also needed to balance the stress and anxiety caused by recurring attempts from Republican-led court cases to bring DACA to an end. The political climate around DACA caused him to give up on his dreams of getting a PhD:

2020 was a rough year because of a lot of things. One of them being DACA under threat, and COVID. A realization I came to with a PhD was 'What happens if I get my PhD and

then I lose my status? Where am I going to work?' I had always envisioned, I'll get my PhD, and work for some institution in the US because that makes sense, right? I can't imagine getting my PhD here and doing all my research in the US and then I have to move back to Mexico. Then where's my job? Right?

Tech in general is one of those things where you have the flexibility of working anywhere in the world and it's still relevant. UX isn't a US specific thing. It's something I could do in any country in the world and I can work remotely. There's a lot more flexibility in the career. So it was another big deciding factor in what I should do next.

In order to figure out the next step for him, Oscar had to take into consideration the possibility of losing DACA and his life in the United States. Oscar gave up on pursuing a PhD because it was not a realistic path for him. The continuous threat that things could change any day made him change from anthropology to a career in technology. He prioritized a career that had the flexibility of working from anywhere. This came to be after planning for the worst-case scenario, losing DACA and being deported back to Mexico. Oscar's experience shows that it's not as simple for undocumented students to pursue careers even with DACA because there's no promise of their status and work authorization being permanent.

POST GRADUATION NEEDS

The undocumented students I interviewed shared a sense of loss and loneliness as they figured out what to do next. Leslie is one of the students without DACA that reflected back at her undergraduate time, to compare how the access to resources differs post-graduation and the support she wished her institution provided her:

Now that I've graduated, looking back at one of the resources that I wish was emphasized more is 'What does it look like? Graduating? What does it look like after graduation?' When I was in undergrad, I felt very welcomed. I felt very supported. I joined organizations. I was applying to scholarships or going to the food pantry, connecting with mental health services, legal services, career services. We had a lot of support as an undergrad, and I wish it was emphasized more what it would look like after graduation because it's very difficult to navigate post-grad. Before I used to be like, 'I know this will happen', but it didn't hit me until I graduated, and I'm living through it.

While pursuing her degree, Leslie knew that at some point she would have to come to terms with her status, but it didn't hit her until she graduated and began to live through it. Leslie wished she had been prepared by her institution on what life would look like after graduation as an undocumented student. Leslie's perspective on her situation continues to support my argument that students without DACA are provided a safe space in higher education and can delay their "transition to illegality." Her story also demonstrates the importance of role models and connecting undocumented students with those that have transitioned to their career or explored alternative careers in order to give these students a sense of direction and support.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT NETWORKS

"I felt comfortable being undocumented, accessing opportunities, and everything because I was an undergrad. I felt I was in a safety net. But now that I am in post-graduation. It feels like I'm starting all over again." - Leslie

Upon graduating, college undocumented students no longer have access to the same resources they did in their undergraduate time. The lack of access to resources may close off undocumented students from support needed as they manage the overwhelming transition to illegality. Leslie mentions a feeling of starting over as she figures out her life after college and the importance of support in her life:

I think one of my biggest supporters right now navigating post-graduation is having mental health support, because there's family, friends, other undocumented folks that you can talk to, but it's not someone you can really be very vulnerable to say, I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know where I'm going. I feel like that is the support that I wish other people could have. Having mental health support, especially after graduation because after you graduate, you lose a lot of access to resources.

The resources and opportunities she had during her undergraduate career provided a stability that is no longer accessible upon college graduation. Having access to mental health resources during

her undergraduate journey was an important aspect to Leslie and despite having support from her family and other undocumented peers, it's not the same as having the mental health resources she used to have in college. Undocumented students are undergoing a stressful and overwhelming transition and not having anyone to talk to about their loss of direction may complicate matters and negatively impact their well-being. Leslie's experience of starting over highlights the need for institutions to provide mental support to undocumented graduates or developing a program to help them develop coping skills and advice on building their support networks post graduation. It is critical for institutions to start reflecting on how they are supporting undocumented students through their transition post-college graduation particularly the students without DACA who are left in a state of limbo and uncertainty after college graduation.

In this final chapter, my participants painted a picture of the reality undocumented students face after graduating from college. As they near the finish mark and complete this great achievement even despite the barriers they encountered on the way, undocumented students must confront the restrictions of their undocumented status. For students without DACA this overwhelming reality may cause them to fall into a depressive episode and question their education as they face even more restrictions compared to their peers with DACA. On the other hand, DACA students are able to consider pursuing graduate school and work opportunities with the work authorization they receive through DACA. However, students like Oscar and Mary have to keep in mind the possibility of DACA being taken away and all they worked for coming to an abrupt end. Higher education institutions need to reflect on how they can best support and prepare undocumented students as they leave the safety of education and enter the reality and restrictions from their immigration status.



CONCLUSION: UNWAVERING RESILIENCE

To achieve their dream of higher education, undocumented students must overcome barriers at every step of the way. The list of barriers these students face is anything but short. These students must first overcome a lack of support from their high schools. Students who are unaware of the education access policies must exhibit high levels of self-advocacy before even stepping into a college campus. Undocumented students without adequate support networks are forced to navigate the journey to college by themselves and are required to develop high levels of resilience and self-advocacy to complete the transition from high school to college.

Upon completing the first transition and entering an undergraduate institution, undocumented students must then learn to navigate the exclusion their immigration status brings. These students are unable to partake in the full experience of a college education. Students without DACA must compromise and face the limited access to opportunities for professional development. DACA grants access to work authorization and provides students the opportunity to access a closer experience of a college education that is similar to their US citizen peers. Yet for some aspects such as study abroad, only the students willing to take the risk to travel outside of the country may participate. For students without DACA, it's even more crucial to develop high levels of resilience as they encounter more barriers than students with DACA. The students in my study demonstrated success by developing high levels of resilience and self-advocacy. The majority of the students created their own support networks by seeking help from dream centers and peer organizations. These resources helped them get to the last milestone: college graduation.

In the final milestone, undocumented students with DACA are able to access the benefits provided by their higher education. These students are able to apply for jobs thereby completing

the post-college graduation transition. Students without DACA however face a locked door upon reaching graduation. Their immigration status and lack of work authorization prohibits these students from entering the labor market and accessing the benefits of their higher education. Upon reaching college graduation, undocumented students without DACA leave the safety net of their education. Higher education provides these students with a space in which they don't need to confront the realities of their immigration status, at least not until they reach college graduation. The experiences of these students as they navigate the complexity and uncertainty of the final transition in their educational journey point to the pressing need for higher education institutions to reflect on the support they provide undocumented students. Higher education institutions must develop resources to help undocumented students build the skills and support needed to manage the post-college graduation transition.

Despite overcoming the barriers to pursue higher education, undocumented students are unable to complete the American Dream. The college graduation of these students marks the achievement of their resilience and hardwork, but fails short as they can only complete half of the American Dream. Higher education opens the door for economic and social mobility, but for students who are restricted by their immigration status, they can only watch as their citizen peers access the benefits of higher education. The frustration and restriction undocumented students experience point to the need for immigration policies to open the pathway to economic and social mobility for these students. Future generations of undocumented students will pursue higher education and only to face the same wall as the students before them. The dreams of these students will remain half way until immigration policies grant them the last piece of the puzzle: work authorization.

Future Direction

Future studies are needed to understand the experience of students outside of California. My study was limited to the educational experiences of students in California, but the education access policies vary across states. Students from states that prohibit them from pursuing higher education like South Carolina reached out with interest to share the barriers they faced. The immigration status of undocumented students extends beyond having DACA. Further research is needed in this group of students to answer the following questions: How does the experience of California students differ from students in states that prohibit them from enrolling in public higher education institutions? How does the experience of students with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) differ from those with DACA? What about students under asylum? This study only begins to scratch the surface of the undocumented experience in higher education.

Unwavering Resilience

I want to conclude my thesis by acknowledging the tremendous resilience demonstrated by undocumented students. The students in my sample have dreams and hopes. They aspire to provide financial stability to their parents and support future generations of undocumented students. These students dream of becoming doctors, psychologists, teachers and more. Their unwavering resilience despite the uncertainty of their future demonstrates the need for immigration policy to help these students accomplish their dreams. Even after the hardships they encounter students find a way around these barriers. Undocumented students build their own support networks. They create organizations in their institutions to make a safe space for not only themselves, but for future generations of undocumented students. To succeed these students understand the importance of community. Despite the barriers they face, undocumented students

continue to thrive and succeed in higher education. As I end my thesis, I leave you with Angel's message to future undocumented students:

You're so much more than what an institution tries to tell you. You're worthy because you're human and you exist. You don't need to prove yourself to anybody but you. You have lived your life and no one else could take that away. Stand your truth

APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT FLIER

Recruiting Now!

The Next Step: A Study of the Experiences of DACA and Undocumented Students on the Transition Post-College Graduation

- Opportunity to share your story and experiences in higher education
- Private 1- 1.5 hour interview
- IRB approved study
- Virtual format
- \$40 gift card for participation

Interested?

Contact Ximena Sanchez

xime@stanford.edu

**Participant's rights questions, contact
1-866-680-2906**

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Before starting the interview, remind participants to avoid sharing any identifiable information such as names or locations. Also inform the participants that any identifiable information that is accidentally shared will be redacted from the transcript as soon as possible. Ask if they have any questions before you start the recording.

Identity

1. Tell me the most important things someone should know about you.
2. What kinds of information do you tell people at your university about you?
 - a. In what situations do you share your immigration status?
 - b. Can you provide an example?
3. If you met someone who didn't know what undocumented/DACAmented meant, how would you describe it to them?

Applying to college

1. Tell me about your journey to higher education/college.
 - a. How did you learn about higher education?
2. What were your aspirations for college after you learned about it?
3. Tell me about obstacles you believed existed.
4. Tell me about opportunities you believed existed
 - a. PROBE: Laws, Scholarships/funding
5. What did you expect would happen with college?
 - a. What actually happened?
6. Tell me about how you viewed your immigration status in relation to your higher education opportunities

Navigating College

1. Can you tell me about your experience when you started college?
 - a. Did anything surprise you?
2. What would your experience have been like if you were a US citizen? What about if you had DACA?
 - a. PROBE: Extracurriculars Classes Friendship groups travel work
3. If you need help with something, who do you rely on?
 - a. What about any organizations on your campus?
 - b. What would things have been like without that help?
4. Are there any resources you used or wished you would've had access to?

College Graduation/Post College Graduation

Seniors

1. Tell me about your senior year?
 - a. How is it going?
 - b. What are you excited about?
 - c. What worries you?
2. How are you navigating your senior year with your status?
 - a. What concerns do you have?
3. What support systems are you using?
 - a. What support systems do you wish were available?
4. What are your plans after college graduation?
 - a. What do you want to do?
 - b. What do you think you will realistically do?
5. What advice would you give to a freshman version of yourself?
6. For people who may be unaware of what it's like to be a undocumented/DACAmented student, what would you share with them?

For recent graduates

1. Tell me about your senior year?
 - a. How did it go?
 - b. What was your favorite memory?
2. How did you navigate your senior year with your status?
 - a. What concerns did you have?
3. What support systems did you use or wish were available at that time?
4. What are you doing now?
5. For people who may be unaware of the challenges of undocumented/DACAmented students, what would you share with them?

For DACA students

What would your higher education experience be like without DACA?

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