

**EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS WHO
GRADUATED WITH POSTGRADUATE DEGREES FROM INSTITUTIONS OF
HIGHER EDUCATION**

A dissertation

by

JOSE LUIS ZELAYA

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Chair of Committee,
Co-Chair of Committee,
Committee Members,
Head of Department,

Zohreh E. Eslami
Monica V. Neshyba
Gwendolyn C. Webb-Hasan
Felipe Hinojosa
Michael A. De Miranda

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lives of eight self-identified dreamers who successfully graduated with a postgraduate degree. Grounded by the theoretical framework of Undocumented Critical Theory, this study provides a literature review reporting on a historical review of laws that have impacted the immigration and education rights of undocumented students as they pursue higher education. This study investigates three main guiding questions examining how dreamers with postgraduate degrees experienced financial, social, emotional and psychological barriers. Moreover, this study relied on the exploratory nature of qualitative research to conduct semi-structured interviews while utilizing the affordances of technology to communicate with the participants across California, Texas, Arizona, Missouri, Massachusetts, and Utah. Moreover, an interpretive analysis was applied as the personal story of the research seeks to add valuable insights regarding the body of knowledge linked to undocumented students in higher education.

The findings of this study add to the body of existing literature which confirms the many systemic fears undocumented students experience in higher education such as hyperawareness, fear of deportation, feelings of isolation, and an inexplicable sense of empowerment and hope that inspired them to complete their postgraduate education. Furthermore, this study echoes the importance of mentors, educators, professors, institutional agents, peers, mentors with similar backgrounds and friends in the postgraduate academic attainment of each participant. The implications and recommendations of this study seek to amplify the stories, experiences, and voices of the participants. This study is fully intentional about creating new knowledge regarding the experiences of undocumented students in higher education by exploring the lives of eight highly determined, perseverant, and academically successfully dreamers.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to undocumented students across the United States who aspire to pursue a higher education and to believe in their dreams despite the numerous systemic barriers. As more undocumented students continue to graduate from high school, it is key to remember that higher education is possible. This study serves as a testament of the strength, perseverance and commitment found among undocumented students who completed postgraduate degrees. Moreover, I dedicate this to the numerous educators, mentors, friends, systems of support, and my family who always believed in my dreams and supported me to successfully complete a Ph.D. program.

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Contributors

The author of this dissertation completed all the work presented in this dissertation under the guidance of Chair Dr. Zohreh Eslami and Co-chair Dr. Neshyba from the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Culture in the College of Education and Human Resource Development at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Research on undocumented students in higher education is an emergent field of study exploring the lives, experiences, and stories of students who have transitioned to institutions of higher education. According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2015), between the years 2015 and 2065 “immigrants are projected to account for 88% of the population growth in the United States” (Little and Mitchell Jr., 2018). As the demographics shift in the United States, it is imperative to continue documenting the lived experiences of undocumented students who successfully made the transition into higher education. Kim (2012) describes undocumented students as patriotic, hopeful in education, and evolving leaders. If the United States is to live up to its creed, the government and education system must provide opportunities for academic, economic, and social mobility of all the people that contribute to make this country a great country and land of promises and possibilities.

The inability of the United States Congress to legislate on federal policies such as the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (Kim, 2012) create a series of academic, financial, legal, cultural, social, and political barriers for undocumented students who aspire to pursue higher education (Cervantes, Minero, & Brito, 2015; Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015; W. Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2015). Despite institutional barriers, this scholarship highlights the stories of highly successful undocumented students who graduated from institutions of higher education in the United States. (Undocumented students are also known as Dreamers who consider higher education as hope for themselves, families, and communities (Gamez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017)). This term will be used throughout the chapters to refer to this population of individuals.

The literature documents that each year, over 65 thousand undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools (Gonzales, 2016; Bjorklund, 2018). Inherently, the majority of them cannot matriculate at institutions of higher education due to the lack of legal immigration status. Additionally, systemic financial barriers and feelings associated with navigating a liminal immigration status prevent Dreamers from accessing the forms of intellectual capital, professional networks, and cognitive development opportunities available at these institutions of higher education. As of 2019, a congressional policy determining the national, comprehensive, and equitable access to higher education for undocumented students currently does not exist (Bjorklund, 2018; Hsin and Ortega, 2018; Lara and Nava, 2018; Nienhusser, 2018). As a result, individual states have legislated on policies both in support and in opposition to undocumented students attending colleges and universities (Aboytes, 2009; Borjan, 2018; Contreras, 2009; Gonzales, 2016; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). Therefore, Dreamers' region of residency plays a significant role on how accessible higher education can be.

The absence of a consistent national solution creates a series of systemic barriers, which limits the educational attainment of undocumented students. Several studies explored the experiences of undocumented students in higher education reporting on emergent themes associated with financial, psychological, emotional, and social barriers these students experience due to their lack of legal immigration status (Buonavista, 2016; Cebulko, 2014; Chan, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Jauregui & Slate, 2009; Kim, 2012; O'Neal et al., 2016). These institutionalized barriers manifest their discriminatory behaviors in the form of financial, social, emotional, and legal implications. Financially, undocumented students battle with out-of-state tuition rates, lack access to federal funding, and lack access to a majority of scholarships (Abrego 2006; Barnhardt et al., 2013; Gonzales, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2016; Ibarra, 2013; P. A. Pérez & Rodríguez, 2012;

Potochnick 2014; C. Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi and Suárez-Orozco, M. 2011; Nienhusser et al., 2016). Also, undocumented students lack access to social capital, tend to undergo cultural isolation.

Emotionally, undocumented students have experienced the effects of liminality such as depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and uncertainty for the future. The term liminality refers to the continuous limitations and uncertainty that undocumented live in due to their status. Legally, undocumented students battle with understanding their legality, fear deportation, and lack of opportunities for socio-economic growth (Gonzales 2016; Menjivar, 2006; Potochnick 2014; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011, 2015). This creates a series of emotional difficulties that prevents them from living a normal life without fear and tranquility.

Financial barriers are limiting undocumented students to have access to institutions of higher education (Cervantes, Minero, & Brito, 2015; Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015; W. Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2015). The following section discusses financial barriers undocumented students experience in higher education due to their lack of legal immigration status and their inability to garner funding for it.

Background

Since the lack of passage of the Dream Act, individual U.S. States began to legislate policies such as the Texas House Bill 1403 (2001), which provided undocumented students with access to institutions of higher education. Presently, twenty U.S. States recently legislated similar policies creating statewide access for undocumented students to register at private and public institutions of higher education (Bjorklund, 2018). Additionally, the literature reports that undocumented students lack financial resources to matriculate and successfully graduate from

colleges and universities due to limited institutional, state, and federal financial assistance (Diaz-Strong and Meiners, 2007; Gonzales and Ruiz, 2014; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011, 2015). This lack of financial resources can discourage individuals from pursuing their dreams of a better life through improved educational attainment.

In 2012, Barack Obama, the 44th U.S. President, used his legislative power to implement the Deferred Action for Childhood Minors Act Program also known as the Deferred Action Program or DACA (Cervantes, Minero, & Brito, 2015; Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015; W. Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2015). This executive program provides undocumented students with a series of liminal social and legal benefits such as work authorization, driver's license, and discretionary protection from deportation (Abrego, 2006; Buenavista, 2016; Cebulko and Silver, 2016; Contreras, 2009; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Gonzales et al., 2015; Gonzales & Ruiz, 2014; Gonzales, 2016; Muñoz, 2013; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). In terms of education, the program is liminal given that it does not establish federal accessibility to institutions of higher education. Thus creating a series of systemic barriers for undocumented students who aspire to pursue a college degree. Local and state policies catalyze these numerous systemic barriers preventing undocumented students from making the transition from high school to colleges and universities (Aguilar, 2019, Cervantes, Minero, & Brito, 2015; Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2015). Therefore, access to a work permit in this case, does not translate into full access to the educational benefits often granted to members with permanent legal statuses.

Theoretical Frameworks

Undocumented Critical Theory

There has been a lack of comprehensive theoretical frameworks that provide the bases for examining the lives of the various undocumented immigrant communities in the United States. The literature offers a limited number of theories and methodologies that can be applied explicitly to undocumented students in this country. In 2018, a graduate student at Harvard University by the name of Carlos Aguilar developed the undocumented critical theory, thus setting the groundwork for further research to develop. It is a theory created by a Dreamer who holds valuable, personal, and unique knowledge regarding undocumented students in higher education.

For this dissertation study, Undocumented Critical Theory (Aguilar, 2019) is used as a framework to explore, analyze, and report on the lives of undocumented students who successfully graduated from institutions of higher education in the United States. The theory is a combination of Critical Race Theory, Latinx Critical Theory, and Tribal Theory. The first theory helps deconstruct and understand the relationship between law, power, and systemic discrimination in the lives of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Latinx critical theory explores the intersectionality of "...race, gender, class" and also immigration status, surname, phenotype and sexuality (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, pg. 472). Lastly, tribal theory is based on the indigenous perspective when explaining how colonization is endemic in society to explain how this affects their lives (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2015).

The Undocumented Critical Theory is comprised of four main tenants, used to explore and analyze the experiences of undocumented students in higher education and the overall undocumented immigrant community. This dissertation relies on the tenets and underlying

components of this theory. Besides, the author and creator infused valuable personal experiences into this framework, since he also identifies as a Dreamer in higher education. The tenets of undocumented critical theory are as follow:

1. Fear is endemic among immigrant communities.
2. Different experiences of liminality translate into various experiences of reality.
3. Parental sacrifice becomes a form of capital.
4. *Acompañamiento* is the embodiment of mentorship, academic redemption, moreover, community engagement.

These four tenets provide a valuable framework that allows for a more in-depth exploration of undocumented immigrants in the United States from the lens of Aguilar (2019). As stated earlier, he is a self-identified Dreamer that adds incredible insights to the expanding body of research. The voice of the researcher must be heard as he also identifies as a Dreamer who completed a postgraduate degree in the United States. Next, the literature reports on a series of theoretical frameworks utilized across previous studies exploring the lives of undocumented students in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

As prior research has captured the series of systemic barriers undocumented students in higher education experience, this study seeks to build upon the existing literature by creating new knowledge. As such, the purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore, document, and report on the lives, voices, and experiences of eight undocumented students who successfully graduated with postgraduate degrees from highly recognized universities in California, Texas, Arizona, Utah, Missouri, and Massachusetts. This dissertation explores the

systemic barriers Dreamers experienced before, during, and after completing a postgraduate degree from an institution of higher education in the United States.

More specifically, this study highlights the struggles, pieces of advice, life's hurdles, parental sacrifices, systems of support, hidden treasures, failures, successes, perseverance, determination, purpose, meaning, and seeks to document the key attributes, accredited by Dreamers, for their postgraduate academic attainment. It examines the complexity of local, state, and federal laws, as these currently legislate on educational and legal rights for undocumented students. Also, it provides a historical report of rules and policies to broaden our scope on the role of systemic oppression through the implementation of policies that prevent and ban Dreamers from accessing institutions of higher learning. Moreover, this paper applies the Undocumented Critical Theory as the grounding theoretical framework to document, analyze, and report the experiences of the eight postgraduate Dreamers in this study. All this creates the opportunity for Dreamers to share their individual stories with their own words, voices, and experiences.

Additionally, this research challenges a discriminatory narrative aiming to dehumanize, criminalize, and stigmatize undocumented immigrants as a threat to the United States. On the contrary, the stories of the participants of this study evidence that undocumented immigrants are making enormous contributions and advancements in all aspects of life. In summary, the purpose the focus of this paper is to research, explore, navigate, and answer three guiding research questions detailed below.

Research Questions

This dissertation explores the systemic barriers undocumented students experience before, during, and after postgraduate school as well as to whom or to what factors these

Dreamers accredit their academic achievements. The research seeks to advance the body of knowledge regarding undocumented students in higher education by exploring the unique experiences and perspectives of Dreamers who completed postgraduate degrees. As more undocumented students continue to graduate from U.S. high schools, community colleges, universities, and other institutions of higher education each year, it is imperative for the field of research to learn from the real voices, original stories, and lived experiences of Dreamers who completed postgraduate degrees. As such, the guiding research questions for this study are as follows:

- How do Dreamers describe the financial and social barriers they experience while pursuing postgraduate degrees?
- How do Dreamers describe the emotional and psychological barriers they experience while pursuing postgraduate degrees?
- To whom or to what factors do Dreamers attribute their postgraduate attainment?

The first question asks the participants to discuss the financial and social barriers experienced before, during, and after postgraduate school. The second question aims to develop a greater understanding regarding the psychological and emotional challenges Dreamers with postgraduate degrees consistently experience. The third question aspires to examine to whom or to what dreamers attribute the academic attainments.

These research questions stress the multidimensionality of the systemic barriers that often inhibit the potential of undocumented students. Moreover, the third research question investigates the various forms of capital, assets, and tools utilized by dreamers in order to complete their postgraduate degrees. The essence of these guiding research questions is to build upon the existing body of literature by expanding the evolving scholarship by examining the

lived experiences of eight highly courageous dreamers with postgraduate degrees who attended prestigious universities in California, Texas, Arizona, Utah, Missouri, and Massachusetts.

Through these experiences, I gained valuable insights that I seek to utilize in conducting, analyzing, and reporting of this dissertation study. As a researcher who personally understands and relates to the experiences of undocumented students in higher education, I hope to add valuable discernments and understandings of the experiences of undocumented students who successfully graduated with postgraduate degrees from institutions of higher education in the United States.

Significance of this Study

The significance of this research relies on the actual words, voices, experiences, stories, and anecdotal evidence that each participant shared. Moreover, the experiences of the participants fill in the research gaps by studying a rare and unknown population to the current body of research. This study provides a valuable perspective on the series of systemic barriers dreamers undergo before, during, and after postgraduate school. As more self-identified dreamers' transition from undergraduate programs to postgraduate degrees, this study provides the unique experiences of eight highly courageous dreamers who despite a series of financial, social, emotional, and psychological barriers, bravely managed to graduate from institutions of higher education with postgraduate degrees.

Although some research highlights the experiences of some graduate students as they create meaning through pursuing their postgraduate education, the literature review found minimal academic articles linked to the experiences of undocumented students with postgraduate professional degrees. In this study, I apply Undocumented Critical Theory, which is a social justice-minded theoretical framework that applies the philosophical ideologies and

conceptualizations of theories such as Critical Race Theory, Latinx Critical Theory, and Tribal Critical Theory. This study must provide a historical background of laws, policies, and public rulings relating to the education and immigration rights of undocumented students in the United States. This historical background provides a historical lens to understand better the intentional discriminatory construction of barriers limiting undocumented from educational, social, and economic upward mobility.

Definition of Terms

Dreamer: This term became synonymous with undocumented immigrant youth seeking a pathway to citizenship (Galindo, 2012) and derived from the federal legislation the Dream Act.

In-state Tuition States: U.S. States with policies supporting access for undocumented students to enroll at institutions of higher education paying in-state tuition rate.

Out of State Tuition States: U.S. states that deny, restrict, or ban undocumented students from accessing state-wide institutions of higher learning asking for out of state tuition rate.

Undocumented Immigration Status: Legal immigration status possessed by people who lack legal authorization to reside in the United States.

Liminality: “Transitional moment between spheres of belonging when social actors no longer belong to the group they are leaving behind and do not yet fully belong in their new social sphere” (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011, p. 444).

Undocumented Students: A student in the United States who lacks the legal immigration status to reside in the country and is not a beneficiary of the Deferred Action Program.

Acompañamiento: The embodiment of mentorship, academic redemption, and community engagement (Aguilar, 2019).

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program (2012): Known as DACA, is an executive action program activated by President Barack Obama. It provides a series of social and liminal benefits to a sector of the undocumented immigrant population currently residing in the United States.

Ganas: The extreme desire to succeed. It derives from the Spanish word "desire" or "willingness to win." Furthermore, the literature uses this term to define the strength and determination of dreamers in higher education.

The Dream Act: Federal legislation whose intentions were to provide a permanent solution; however, it failed to be ratified in the years 2001 and 2010.

Outline of the Dissertation

The content of the dissertation will follow a traditional dissertation format with five chapters. Chapter I includes an introduction to the study, research background, statement of the problem, the purpose of the dissertation, guiding research questions, the significance of the study, vox-autoethnographia and the definition of terms. In the second chapter of this dissertation, the existing literature related to the challenges undocumented students face is reported.

Furthermore, the literary analysis provides a theoretical foundation, activates prior knowledge, and sets the groundwork to further explore the experiences of the undocumented students in higher education by examining the lives, stories and actual voices of dreamers who completed postgraduate degrees in Texas, California, Arizona, Missouri, Massachusetts and Utah. Chapter three of this dissertation details the study design by describing the research methodology and providing context regarding the recruitment process, participants, researcher personal narrative, instrumentation, location, setting, data analysis, validity, member checking,

and trustworthiness. Chapter four explores the emergent themes in this study, as well as analysis of participants answers to research questions. Lastly, chapter 5 provides the summary of the research analysis and results, exploration of the main themes, author's recommendations, implications for future research and concluding remarks.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship Review Emphasis

Grounded by the three guiding research questions, this literature review aims to provide an analysis of studies and a report on the critical factors related to undocumented students covered in the literature as well as the theoretical framework utilized to investigate the experiences of undocumented students in higher education. The theoretical framework includes Critical Race Theory, Liminality Theory, and Latinx Critical Theory (Aguilar, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lara and Nava, 2018). Furthermore, I provide a historical review of legislation on the education and immigration rights of undocumented students (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales, Heredia, & Negrón-Gonzales, 2015). Moreover, the review of the literature explores each guiding research question and reports on prior studies as they relate with the purpose of this dissertation.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory emerged in the late 1970s during the development of Critical Legal Studies with the intent of exposing the discriminatory practices people of color experienced in the legal system (Ladson-Billings, 1999). There are six tenets (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), which will help us deconstruct and understand the relationship between law, power, and systemic discrimination. First, racism is an ordinary, permanent, and persistent component of American life, culture, and social order, “the common, everyday experience of most people of color” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Second, self-interest and privilege prevent the white elite from ending racism because they benefit from racism materially and working-class people

benefit from it physically. Third, the race is a socially constructed category based solely on the physical traits that people with a common origin share, ignoring higher-order traits such as intelligence, personality, and moral conduct. Fourth, differential racialization exists to racialize and stereotype different minority groups at different times to satisfy changing economic interests. The fifth is the notion of intersectionality and anti-essentialism, positing that no person has a unitary identity. On the contrary, “everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). Sixth is the unique voice of color or racial stories, a product of experience and imagination, which are an indispensable part of the identity of people of color. Communicating these stories is “a first step to understanding the complexities of racism and beginning a process of judicial redress” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p.16). These propositions of race as socially constructed, differential racialization, self-interest and privilege, intersectionality, and racial stories will guide the interpretation of this dissertation. I examine how a group of Latinx students in higher education have been able to successfully surpass political, social, economic, psychological and emotional barriers to obtain the post graduate degrees. I am able to analyze their stories to understand how the networks they build helped them in their respective states as minority individuals with limited privileges in the educational system.

In the field of education, Critical Race Theory has been utilized across studies to examine and report on the experiences of undocumented students in higher education (Aguila, 2019; Lara and Nava, 2018; Munoz and Maldonado, 2012). As such, it is of high relevance to define and describe the five tenets of critical race theory in education. These are as follow:

1. Intercentricity of race and racism
2. Challenge the dominant ideology

3. Commitment to social justice
4. The centrality of experiential knowledge
5. Interdisciplinary perspective (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Scholars such as Lara and Nava (2018) describe Critical Race Theory as a framework that exposes the racism embedded in the structures caused by navigating life as an undocumented student in higher education. This theory is deeply rooted in the inchoate scholarship within the legal system that analyzed the systems of law to eradicate discrimination by seeking social justice (Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). They also describe how “race and racism are embedded in the structures, practices, and discourses that guide the daily practices of universities” (p.274), thus affecting undocumented students who often lack traditional forms of documentation, such as Social Security Number, necessary to matriculate at institutions of higher education (Aguilar, 2019). These practices force students to find their own manners to survive the multiple micro aggression, and social isolation that comes from being in spaces where they are the minority.

Yosso (2006) reports that Critical Race Theory in the field of education provides a lens to defy a master narrative that stigmatizes entire communities. Moreover, Solorzano & Yosso (2001) mentions that Critical Race Theory implements narratives to share the stories and lived experiences of people of color. Critical Race Theory is an exceptional lens to analyze further systemic barriers and discriminatory practices affecting the lives of undocumented students in higher education. Furthermore, this evolving theoretical framework has expanded into other forms of critical theory such as Latinx Critical Race Theory, which take a closer look at the experiences intersecting immigration status, language, and identity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Huber and Malagon (2006) describe Latinx Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework that

exposes "the multiple levels of oppression undocumented students experience including race, class, gender, language, and immigration status" (p. 842). This theory explores the intersectionality of issues that affect Latinx students in higher education settings where this is often overlooked.

Latinx Critical Race Theory

Building on the evolving work of Critical Race Theory, Latinx Critical Race Theory has allowed scholars to expose the discrimination, systemic barriers, and injustices undocumented students from Latinx ethnic background experience in their higher education journeys. Such injustices are represented in the many limitations undocumented students experience as they transition from high school into institutions of higher education. Such injustices emerge from navigating life with liminal legality and financial barriers resulting from their inability to apply for federal financial assistantships such as scholarships, grants, or loans (Gonzales, 2010).

Solorzano & Yosso (2001) describes Latinx Critical Theory as a lens that sparks a conversation regarding the "intersection of race, gender, class" (p.472) and also immigration status, surname, phenotype and sexuality. Lara and Nava (2018) used Latinx Critical Theory in education as the grounding theoretical framework to conduct a two-year qualitative research study exploring "the multifaceted nature of the decision-making process of undocumented college students to pursue graduate degrees and how their commitment to matriculate in higher education programs is shaped by a myriad of social, familial, financial and institutional factors" (p.114). In their findings, they report that civic engagement and parental sacrifices were significant contributors to their postgraduate decision-making process of undocumented Latinx students pursuing postgraduate programs in the United States. Moreover, they found that "...financial, research and academic requirements..." (pg. 120) also contributed to their

decisions of pursuing a postgraduate education. On the other hand, Yosso (2005) goes a step further and applied Latinx Critical Theory to the traditional idea of cultural capital. She explored how family assets are another form of capital that empowers undocumented students to follow an education. All these studies on Latinx critical theory has contributed a theoretical structure, academic language, and an evolving conceptualization of such Latinx students' experiences. However, they are still limited on how they examine the variety of experiences of students who share the same degree of liminality.

Given that, it is highly relevant to acknowledge the diversity found within the cultures, experiences, and traditions within specific nationalities. Reporting on this broader context can provide a deeper understanding of the societal, historical, and contextual environment in which the participants were born. As best described by Aguilar (2018) "although LatCrit highlights issues such as immigration, language, identity, culture, and skin color, its conceptualization in general and its name in specific delineate an application-specific to Latinx experiences" (p.2). Therefore, this study applied Undocumented Critical Theory as a theoretical framework with the pursuit of exploring the experiences of the eight self-identified dreamers represented in this study.

Liminality Theory

The liminality theory explained by Menjivar (2006) gives context to the liminal immigration status concept, which is "characterized by its ambiguity, as it is neither an undocumented status nor a documented one but may have the characteristics of both" (p. 108). Menjivar's study reports on the experiences of Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants who were recipients of a federal program providing them with Temporary Protective Status, also known as TPS. Aguilar (2019) described experiences of liminality as "a legal status, or lack

thereof, no longer strictly shields nor predisposes one from experiencing a uniform state of illegality” (p.4). While Suarez-Orozco et al., (2011) describes liminality as the “transitional moment between spheres of belonging when social actors no longer belong to the group they are leaving behind and do not yet fully belong in their new social sphere” (p. 444). As undocumented students transition across the different layers of legality, as best reported by Aguilar (2019), “different experiences of liminality translate into different experiences of reality” (p.2). Meaning that undocumented students hold different perceptions of their own reality based on the degree of marginalization they have experienced that has banned them from living a normal life.

Due to the implementation of the DACA program in 2012, eligible undocumented students have had the opportunity to benefit from the program and as such transition into legality. However, the DACA program is not a permanent solution to the educational and legal systemic barriers undocumented students experience. As best described by Gamez, Lopez, and Overton (2017), “DACA’s limbo status carries the uncertainty of other similar immigration models” (p.9). Some DACA recipients have gained access to Legal Permanent Residency, and others have become United States Citizens. As described by the literature, the different transitions of legality also provide the application more social, economic, and professional benefits otherwise not present. Therefore, it is imperative to study this transition of liminality further as new immigration status expands the conversation regarding undocumented students in higher education.

Overview of Laws

Perez (2014) details how in 1965, the passing of the Federal Higher Education Act prohibited undocumented students’ access to federal financial resources such as loans and grants

by implementing Title IV, which requires applicants to either be U.S. legal residents or U.S. citizens. Furthermore, he reports showing how undocumented students were then excluded from “Pell Grants and the Federal Work-Study Program” (p.5). Therefore, undocumented students were ineligible to apply for federal financial aid at institutions of higher education. In 1975, entire communities protested against efforts in Texas to prohibit education access to K-12 for undocumented students. For example, the a lawsuit in Texas against the Tyler Independent School District, which made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court and became Plyler v Doe (1982) (Contreras, 2009; Hsin and Ortega, 2018). In the following, this literature review presents a historical report of such laws and policies from 1982 to 2018, which have determined the educational and immigration rights of undocumented students in the United States.

Historical Lens

The review begins with Plyer v Doe (1982) followed by the Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act of 1996, the Federal Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act 2001, a list of in-state tuition states and the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program. A historical lens provides this dissertation study with a chronological framework of laws determining the educational and legal rights of undocumented students in the United States.

Table 1: Overview of Educational Policies

Policy	Year
<i>Plyler v Doe</i>	1982
IIRIRA	1996
DREAM Act	2001, 2010
In-State Tuition	2001 to 2018
Deferred Action Program	2012-Present

A review of the laws above provides a broader scope for understanding how state, local, and national policies determine the accessibility to institutions of higher education for undocumented students. Furthermore, this study acknowledges systemic barriers as the result of unstable policies preventing undocumented students from accessing federal access to colleges and universities in the U.S.

Plyler v Doe (1982)

Policies demonstrating discriminatory practices against the educational rights of undocumented students are traced back to 1975. Gonzales (2016) recall Texas creating a law allowing local school officials to discriminate against undocumented students by not allowing them to matriculate in public schools. As a result, sixteen undocumented students submitted a class action litigation suit against their school district when it commenced implementing such a

discriminatory policy (Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales et al., 2015). Consequently, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled on the issue, and it became *Plyer v Doe* (1982). Because of the overwhelming evidence in favor of undocumented students, five judges voted “yes,” and four judges voted “no.” As a result, the decision created federal access for undocumented students to enroll in the primary and secondary public education system (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales, Heredia, & Negrón-Gonzales, 2015). Although the ruling was a great triumph for undocumented students across the nation, the decision did not allow access to institutions of higher education (Abrego and Gonzales, 2010; Amuedo-Dorantes and Sparber., 2014; Lopez, 2004). Instead, the verdict created mixed emotions among undocumented students who regardless of the future challenges, remained hopeful in their education, civic engagement, and political advocacy.

Overall, the decision was considered a victory since the first case desired to limit undocumented students from enrolling in primary and secondary schools. Little and Mitchell Jr. (2018) Report this federal ruling “guarantees all children residing in the United States, regardless of immigration status, the right to primary and secondary education (p.140). However, Harmon, Carne, Lizardy-Hajbi, and Wilkerson (2010) explain how this decision did not dismantle barriers to enrollment at the university level for undocumented students. The document, “while *Plyer v. Doe* addressed the issue of education for undocumented students at the elementary and secondary level, the approach to post-secondary education remained unchanged” (p.71). In other words, undocumented students still did not have guaranteed access to post-secondary education, only primary and secondary education.

The Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act of 1996

As undocumented students began to graduate from high school in the early '90s, access to higher education became the reasonable next step towards upward social mobility and economic stability. However, the passing of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IRRIRA) in 1996 prevented this from happening (Harmon, Carne, Lizardy-Hajbi, and Wilkerson, 2010). The passing of Section 505 in IRRIRA, “barred states from giving unlawful residents postsecondary education benefits that states do not offer to U.S. citizens beginning in July 1998.” (Amuedo-Dorantes and Sparber., 2014, p.11).

Section 505 of the IIRIRA states:

“Notwithstanding any other provision of law, an alien who is not lawfully present in the United States shall not be eligible on the basis of residence within a State (or a political subdivision) for any postsecondary education benefit unless a citizen or national of the United States is eligible for such a benefit (in no less an amount, duration, and scope) without regard to whether the citizen or national is such a resident” (Federal Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, 1996).

Harmon et., (2010) mentions that initial interpretations of this decree obstructed undocumented students from matriculating at colleges and universities. However, later interpretations allowed individual states to reinterpret the “unless a citizen or national of the United States is eligible for such a benefit” part of the legislation as the ability to provide both undocumented students and U.S. citizens with same benefits to institutions of higher education (Federal Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, 1996). Such interpretations have allowed individual states to create state-wide legislation providing

undocumented students with the ability to matriculate at institutions of higher education while paying in-state tuition rates. For example, in California and Texas, undocumented students have access to state financial aid, institutional scholarships, departmental funding, graduate assistantships, internships, and tuition waivers.

The Federal DREAM Act

Hesse (2017) reports that the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minor Act (2001), also known as the DREAM Act, was introduced to Congress to provide undocumented students a pathway towards legalization. As reported, “the act sought to provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented students who enrolled in college or enlisted in the military and maintained a clean criminal background” (Hesse, 2017, p.4). Senator Dick Durbin introduced the DREAM Act from Illinois and Orrin Hatch from Utah. They joined forces in bipartisan legislation that would provide undocumented students with congressional relief and a pathway to citizenship. Although the bill passed the House of Representatives in 2010, it failed to pass the Senate by five votes during a lame-duck session (the term refers to the resumes of congress meetings during even numbered years). The law would have provided a pathway to citizenship to an estimated 1.76 million undocumented students. Also, Kantamneni et al., (2016) report that this congressional action would have provided undocumented students with “permanent access to higher education and reduce financial barriers for undocumented students at a federal level” (p.487). Jimenez-Artista and Koro-Ljungberg (2017) further explain that the congressional act would have allowed undocumented youth the opportunity to minimize the systemic barriers linked to the immigration and educational obstacles they currently experience while aspiring to pursue higher education.

If the Dream Act would have passed, undocumented students who entered the country as children, graduated from a U.S. high school or equivalent, lived in the United States for at least five years prior to the enactment of the legislation, exhibited good moral character, attended an institution of higher education for at least two years, or completed two years of military services would have been eligible to obtain legal permanent status. (Contreras; 2009; Flores, 2014; Kim, 2012; Nienhuser, 2014; Olivas, 2009; Perez, Cortes, Ramos and Coronado, 2010). After five years of legal permanent residency, undocumented students could have applied for citizenship. This would have provided undocumented students with protection from deportation, higher education opportunities, and could have resulted in economic growth for the nation. As reported by Kantamneni et al. (2016) “in general, the DREAM Act would provide permanent access to postsecondary education and reduce financial barriers for undocumented students at a federal level” (p. 478). Unfortunately, years later and no permanent solution has been offered to the plight of undocumented youth, including their parents. Their lives are still at a limbo and their educational dreams largely stagnated.

In-state tuition States 2001-2018

After the Federal DREAM Act disastrously collapsed in Congress, individual states began to show interest in creating higher education access for undocumented students. This progress was a result of the consistent work of advocates from social justice movements, immigrant rights organizations, influential community leaders, state legislators, representatives, philanthropist, and other influential sectors of the community. In 2001, Texas became the first state in the Union to create access for undocumented students to enroll in colleges and universities with House Bill 1403. Since then, 20 U.S. States currently provide higher education opportunities for Dreamers (Bjorklund Jr., 2018). An illustration of it is California with the

passing of Bill 540, thus providing undocumented students with access to attend institutions of higher education at state tuition rates (Gonzales, 2010; Flores, 2010). Perez (2010) explains that in order for undocumented students to be eligible for AB 540, they must,

- a) graduate from a California high school or the equivalent
- b) attend a California high school for at least three years
- c) enrolled in or are currently attending an accredited post-secondary institution (p. 22).

Undocumented students' access to institutions of higher education is significant as it provides an idea of the educational support for undocumented students across the nation and the type of aid that is available. The example provided by those 20 states, is the starting point towards starting a comprehensive discussion of the benefits of such access for young individuals who want to better themselves and their families through education. Table 2 contains a breakdown of the states, legislation and year of enactment of those legislations that now allows students with their educational attainment.

In-state Tuition via Board of Regents

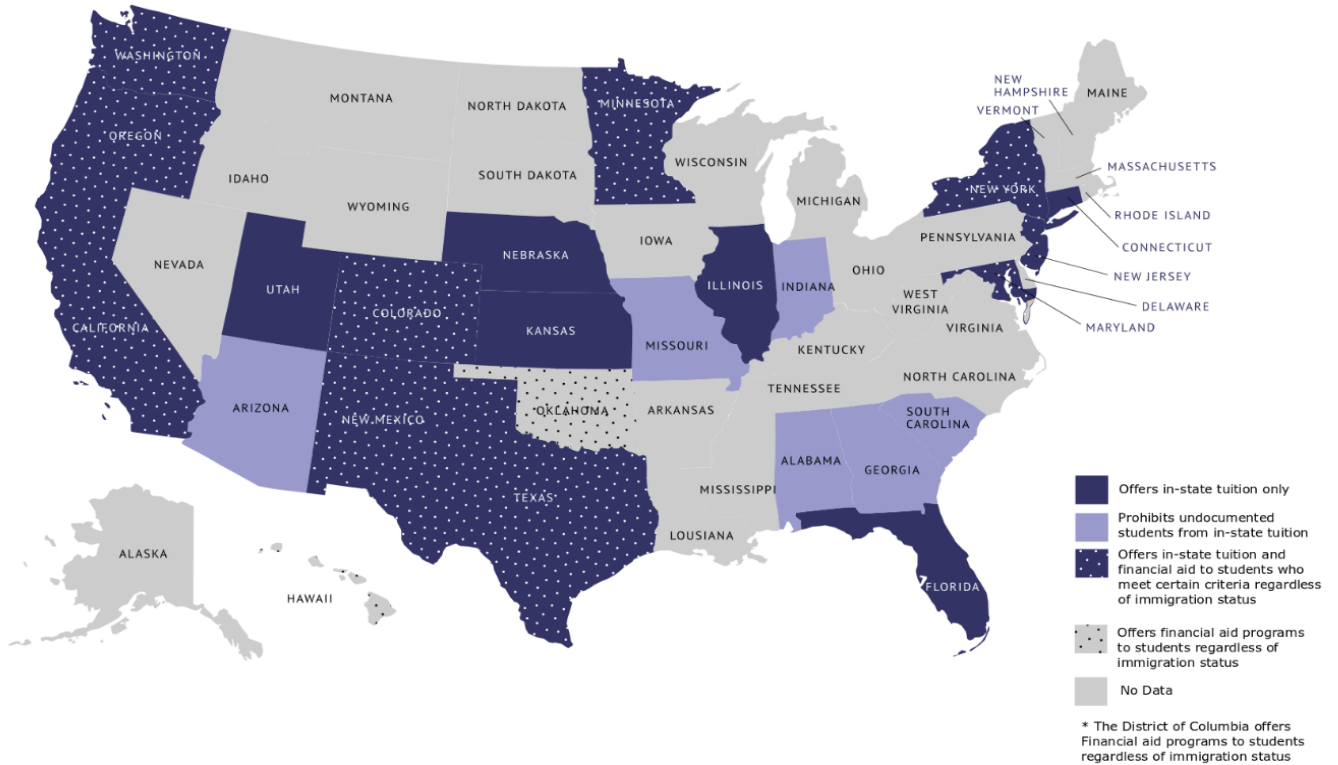
Rhode Island, Oklahoma, Hawaii, and Michigan have adopted similar educational policies through an internal systemic approach and the approval of their Board of Regents (Dickson and Pender, 2013; Bjorklund Jr., 2018). Additionally, Virginia was reported to provide DACA recipients with the unity to attend institutions of higher education and pay in-state tuition rates (Bjorklund Jr., 2018). On the other hand, regressive action has taken place in Arizona, Alabama, and Georgia, which have implemented policies restricting access to state-wide institutions. Figure 1 visually illustrates the type of aid available to undocumented students in the nation. Some offer in-state tuition or financial only, others offer both.

Table 2: States with In-state Tuition Laws

State	Legislation	Year Enacted
Texas	HB 1403 & SB 1528 *HB 1403 also provides financial aid	2001
California	AB 130 & 131	2001
	A131	2011
	S8	2017
	A343	2017
Utah	HB144	2002
	S253	2015
New York	SB7784	2003
Illinois	HB60	2003
	H1488	2018
Washington	HB1079	2003
	S6523 *S6523 also provides financial aid	2014
	H1817 *H1817 also provides financial aid	2014
Kansas	HB2145	2004
New Mexico	SB582 *SB582 also provides financial aid	2005
Nebraska	LB239	2006
Maryland	S167/H470	2011
	S532 *S532 also provides financial aid	2018
Connecticut	H6390	2011
	H6844	2015
	S4	2018
Colorado	SB33	2013
Minnesota	SF1236 *SF1236 also provides financial aid	2013
Oregon	HB2787	2013
	S1563 *S1563 also provides financial aid	2018
New Jersey	SB2479	2013
	S699 *S699 also provides financial aid	2018
Florida	HB851	2014

Figure 1. U.S. Map of States Determining Higher Education for Dreamers

U.S. Map of States Determining Higher Education for Dreamers, 2019



Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)

In June 2012, President Barack Obama used his administrative power to provide relief from deportation to an estimated 1.7 million undocumented students who met the required criteria. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA as the program is known sets a new

precedent for the Department of Homeland Security and removes undocumented students from deportation priorities for a period of two years. Though, as reported by many researchers, the President's actions do not provide permanent congressional relief from deportation, it is only temporary protection with limited benefits. It is well reported that DACA does not provide a pathway to legal citizenship. Undocumented students could be exposed to deportation if the policy was exterminated. Gamez et al., (2017) explains that "many states have failed to recognize DACA as sufficient proof of residency to provide in-state tuition rates" (p.147) for recipients of the federal program. The following are the requirements undocumented students must meet to be eligible and be considered applicable for DACA:

1. Were under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012
2. Came to the United States before reaching their 16th birthday
3. Have continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007, up to the present time
4. Were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012, and at the time of making your request for consideration of deferred action with USCIS
5. Had no lawful status on June 15, 2012
6. Are currently in school, have graduated or obtained a certificate of completion from high school, have obtained a general education development (GED) certificate, or are an honorably discharged veteran of the Coast Guard or Armed Forces of the United States
7. Have not been convicted of a felony, significant misdemeanor, or three or more other misdemeanors, and do not otherwise pose a threat to national security or public safety

Gamez et al., (2017) describe how this national program "further improved college access and helped many ameliorate the stress and anxiety inherently associated with college attendance" (p.146). However, the policy does not provide access to federal financial aid, nor does it provide

a permanent solution to the legal immigration barriers DACA students experience due to their legal liminality. The Migration Policy Institute (2015) reports that beneficiaries of DACA have been able to gain access to in-state tuition in individual U.S. states. However, the executive actions hold many congressional limitations, as upcoming administrations could repeal the program. Next, the literature reports on the programs' limitations, repeal, its reimplementations by the United States Supreme Court.

Programs' Limitations

In terms of education, DACA does not provide federal financial aid, and it does not determine access to in-state tuition rates for institutions of higher education, as this rate is determined by individual states (Contreras; 2009; Flores, 2014; Nienhusser, 2014; Olivas, 2009). On September 5, 2017, President Donald Trump rescinded DACA by stopping the program, thus creating high levels of uncertainty, intense fear, and traumatic confusion. According to the National Immigration Law Center, DACA was allowed to be reinstated by courts in District of Columbia, New York, and California. However, as of July 2019, only people who had previously applied for the permit can renew it, first time applicants cannot apply for it.

DACA itself contains a series of limitations faces as it “does not offer its beneficiaries any form of [permanent] legal status nor a pathway toward legality. It also does not reconcile the steepest barriers to postsecondary education; federal aid is off-limits to all undocumented immigrant students, including those with DACA” (Gonzales et al., 2014, p.1867). DACA students are not qualified as citizens or permanent residents for them to receive federal aid. As best reported by Schmid (2013) “unless the immigration system is reformed to recognize undocumented immigrants and a fair pathway to legalization stature there will be unequal and bifurcated citizenship in the U.S.” (p.703). This matter further alienates them from an affordable higher

education journey and from leaving a normal life pursuing their dream. Next, the literature review reports on the series of systemic financial barriers undocumented students in higher education experienced and thus described in this study.

Financial Barriers

The existing literature shows there are a series of systemic barriers that contributed to the low matriculation rates among undocumented students in higher education (Buenavista, 2016; Cebulko, 2014; Chan, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Jauregui & Slate, 2009; Kim, 2012; Flores, 2012; O'Neal et al., 2016). Chavez, Soriano, and Oliverez (2007) point to financial barriers as “the largest challenge that college-ready undocumented students confront” (p.261), further limiting their ability to attend and succeed at institutions of higher education. Overall, affording to go to an institution of higher education is highly expensive for the majority of college students regardless of immigration status (Enriquez 2011; Gonzales, 2011; Kim, 2012; Huber et al. 2006; Perez et al. 2009). Gonzales (2016) estimates that 70% of students attending college rely on some financial assistance to help them finance and complete their higher education. However, undocumented students currently are denied access to federal financial aid assistance, thus creating a series of financial obstacles they most encounter to complete their college aspirations.

Caicedo (2018) explores this issue in his study on the experiences of undocumented students in New York. He finds that a “lack of financial aid as a barrier in life, in terms of not permitting the relative ease and flexibility in paying for college in the NJCC [New Jersey Community College] interviews” (p.8). These financial aid barriers include the inability to apply for federal financial assistance and obtaining authorization to work in the United States legally (Abrego, 2011; Cebulko and Silver, 2016; A. Flores, 2016; Gonzales 2011; Gonzales, 2011, 2016; Muñoz and Maldonado, 2012; , Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2015; Terriquez, 2015).

This is something that Lara and Nava (2018) reiterate and explain that undocumented students experience a series of financial limitations “such as financing their studies, transportation issues such as driving to school and work, and remaining ineligible for most forms of financial assistance, including scholarships and fellowships” (p.120) while completing a postgraduate degree from an institution of higher education. The lack of eligibility for most federal grants, loans, and scholarships diminish the likelihood of affording the rising cost of a college education. This increases student worries and stress since they are now obligated to afford an exuberant college education cost with no financial assistant.

Chavez, Soriano, and Oliverez (2007) emphasize how undocumented students do not possess a social security number, which limits their ability to apply for financial aid and scholarships that require it. Gonzales et al., (2013) document how undocumented students “face barriers to accessing bank accounts and other financial services and are less likely than legal immigrants to have health benefits to work” (p.1176). These reported financial systemic barriers limit undocumented students as they “cannot apply for federal or state aid, most scholarships and even loans; consequently, they are systematically being discarded from the higher education system” (Diaz Strong et al., 2011, p.112). Also, Perez (2014) reports the struggles undocumented students consistently experience with affording a high-cost tuition rate, especially in states with restricting policies to in-state tuition. They are having to adopt different methods to raise money, which can include fundraising, working during summers to save-up money and take less credit hours to afford tuition (Diaz, Strong, Gomez, Luna-Duarte, and Meiners, 2011). This relegates students to having to work under the table, work extra shifts in below minimum wage jobs to afford to pay for their educational dreams. This is also emphasized by Lara and Nava (2018) in their study of 20 undocumented graduate students. They found that they experience “many forms

of racialization and were still subjected to low-status employment as waiters, bartenders, working at a dairy or as customer service agents at a furniture store” (p.120). The issue at hand is they cannot find better opportunities given their status. A social security number determines the level of economic advancement they can aim for since they cannot be employed legally. This leave exposes them to jobs that do not represent the extend of tehir skills and aspirations.

This issue also affects DACA recipients. For example, Gamez et al., (2017) documents how students who were beneficiaries of DACA, still experience a series of financial barriers despite their ability to work legally. The authors mention that, “the costs of attending college continue to be a barrier for DACAdmented students as they remain ineligible for receiving federal financial aid” (p.146). Furthermore, in her overview of tuition-equity laws facing DACA students in the nation, Perez (2014) points they “continue to face challenging paying their tuition, particularly without access to state and federal financial aid and loans” (p.7). In their study of 34 Latino undocumented and previously undocumented immigrants in the Midwest area, Diaz-Strong et al., (2011) describe how the lack of access to federal financial assistance for undocumented students pursuing higher education seeks to promote their systemic exclusion among these institutions of advanced learning. In all, denying access to financial assistance contributes to expanding the practices of unjust laws, discriminatory behaviors, and philosophies that exclude entire populations from reaching social, educational and economic upward mobility upward. This is precisely the intent of the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (1996), which prohibited undocumented students from accessing federal scholarships, Pell grants, and loans (Cebulko, 2013; Dozier; 2001; Gonzales, 2011, 2016; Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, and Suarez-Orozco, 2015), which states have interpreted as their own discretion. Erroneous interpretations of policies have led to statewide legislation further limiting

undocumented students from enrolling in colleges and universities by implementing out-of-state tuition laws, making it nearly impossible to attend.

Limited Financial Background

Financial barriers were profoundly echoed as the main impeding-factor for undocumented students who enroll at colleges and universities (Gonzales, 2016; Ibarra, 2013; Muñoz, 2015; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). This is due in part to the inability of undocumented students to work in the United States legally, thus, limiting their ability to create economic capital to afford the high cost of a college education (Kim, 2012; Neinhusser, Vega and Saavedra Carquin, 2016; Sahay, Thatcher, Nuñez and Lightfoot, 2016). Undocumented students also reported experiencing the results of living in a low socioeconomic status, which also limits their ability to pay for their education. Lauby (2017) reports that “undocumented youths tend to come from a family with few resources and low levels of social capital, so the public education system often provides the only resources for these children’s transition to higher education” (p. 26). Kantamnenir et al., (2016) explain how “a multitude of factors, such as threatening life circumstances, extreme poverty, lack of employment opportunities” (p. 484) create systemic barriers for undocumented people in the United States. The vast majority come from working class families, whose parents for some reason or another do not have the educational and social background necessary to help them afford and even navigate higher education.

Additionally, growing up with limited financial resources creates many constraints for undocumented students who aspire to pursue higher education. According to Baum and Flores (2011) “postsecondary attainment rates of young people who come from low-income households and, regardless of income or immigration status, whose parents have no college experience are low across the board” (p.171). Although inspired and empowered by their parents, often

undocumented students find it challenging to entirely rely on parents for the funds required to pay the high tuition costs. Moreover, Anguiano and Lopez (2012) describe how many undocumented parents are unable to provide the information required or financial support necessary to matriculate at institutions of higher education. They further report the college-going “process was particularly complicated for undocumented families because of colleges and universities not being able to offer the scholarship and financial aid as a result of their immigration status (Anguiano and Lopez, 2016, p. 331). Even with parental support, navigating the higher education system becomes complicated when parents are unable to meet the financial and knowledge needs necessary for their children to pursue their dreams.

Out of State Tuition Rate

Laws regarding the higher education rights for undocumented students vary from state to state since the ruling of Plyer v Doe (1982). For example, in Georgia, Arizona, and Indiana, state legislators approved S492, proposition 300, and H102 & S207 policies. All of them forbid undocumented students from paying in-state tuition rates at institutions of higher education. Classifying undocumented students as international or out-of-state forces higher education tuition to be as three times higher than the rates paid by their documented peers (Bozick and Miller, 2014; Bjorklund Jr., 2018; Contreras, 2009; Dickson and Pender, 2013; Drachman, 2006; Wilkerson, 2010). South Carolina and Alabama have passed H4400 and H56, which bans undocumented students from attending any institution of higher education (Bjorklund Jr., 2018; Cervantes, Minero, and Brito, 2015; Terriquez, 2015). These policies are purposefully designed to discriminate and are prejudiced against undocumented students by limiting their ability to experience the economic and social benefits of higher education. A contemporary example of out-of-state tuition rulings is in Arizona who recently repealed in-state tuition rates for undocumented

students enrolled at institutions of higher education. As a result of out of state tuition laws, undocumented students had to pay the nearly quadruple rate increase to complete a higher education or stop their college aspiration (Abrego, 2008; Kim, 2012; S. M. Flores, 2010a; S. M. Flores & Oseguera, 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

The social-political climate created by out-of-state tuition policies have created lower matriculation rates among undocumented students in these states when compared to states where dreamers have access to in-state tuition policies, such as in Texas and California (Barnhardt et al., 2013; Buenavista, 2016; Contreras, 2009; Gonzales, 2011, 2016; Ibarra, 2013; Kim, 2012; Muñoz, 2015; Villarraga-Orjuela and Kerr, 2017; Nienhusser, Vega and Saavedra Carquin, 2016). In addition to financial barriers, the literature reports a series of social barriers, which undocumented students in higher education experience due to their limited access to necessary forms of social capital, as they are concerned with sharing confidential information about their immigration status. Next, the literature review will report on the most emergent themes associated with the social barriers undocumented students in higher education experience due to their lack of legal immigration status (Abrego and Gonzales, 2014; Gonzales, 2016; Contreras, 2009; Jauregui & Slate, 2009; O’Neal et al., 2016; Munoz and Maldonado, 2012; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011; Terriquez, 2015).

Social Barriers

Although DACA recipients experience liminal benefits, undocumented students who are not included in the program continue to lack the ability to obtain legal documentation to be employed, obtain a social security card, and apply for a driver’s license (Gonzales, 2016; Contreras, 2009; Jauregui & Slate, 2009; Terriquez, 2015). As undocumented students transition into institutions of higher education, they face a series of systemic social barriers that limit their

ability to concentrate on their academics fully (Gonzales, 2016; Contreras, 2009; Jauregui & Slate, 2009; O'Neal et al., 2016; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). Moreover, conceptualizing the lack of legal immigration status takes a heavy toll on the lives of undocumented students who often rely on social isolation to avoid communication about their immigration status. As such, the literature reports on the social stigma undocumented students experience due to the lack of documentation and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Such social stigmas lead undocumented students into a dangerous isolation zone causing a series of mental health symptoms such as high levels of depression and anxiety.

Limited Forms of Social Capital

Different forms of social capital are crucial for undocumented students because of the unique series of systemic, social, financial, emotional, and legal barriers they experience. According to Bjorkland (2018), social capital is a "form of relations with peers, teachers, faculty, administrators, mentors, and parents that produce valuable resources to help students succeed in school and transition to higher education" (p. 649). However, undocumented students lack various forms of social capital such as mentors, mentoring programs, and role models due to their fear of disclosing their immigration status. Furthermore, four reasons were identified as primary reasons for the lack of social capital amongst undocumented students: 1) keeping their immigration status confidential, 2) having multiple jobs, 3) access to influential institutional staff, and 4) limited social mobility (Contreras, 2009; Gámez, Lopez, and Overton, 2017; Gonzales, 2010, 2016; Jacobo and Ochoa, 2011; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). As a result, they often receive inaccurate information regarding the college application process that does not allow them to advance economically and socially.

According to Lauby (2017) even “when these youths obtain proper services and information about college, schools can provide the context for positive bureaucratic incorporation, but that incorporation may be “strained” due to the anxiety associated with coming out as undocumented. (p. 31). Depression and anxiety lead to distrust since they battle with seeking professional mental health help due to their distrust in sharing about their immigration status due to the stigma associated with it (Cebulko and Silver; 2016; Contreras; 2009; Negrón-Gonzales, 2013; O’Neal et al., 2016; Terriquez, 2015). This distrust is not unusual as historic anti-immigrant rhetoric and increase in deportations can generate much fear of revealing the status to anyone. These students take precautions with whom they reveal this information due to the stigma associated with it.

Social Stigma

As undocumented students learn of their immigration status and its ramifications on their education, Abrego and Gonzales (2010) explain that “because of the circumstances of undocumented youth, these transitions are often traumatic” (p.154). In this transitioning process, these students experience a series of social barriers while internalizing the social implications of being undocumented. Although the literature review reports this phenomenon as the “transition to illegality,” I wholeheartedly disagree with the term “illegality” because it contributes to rhetoric that dehumanizes, stigmatizes and criminalizes undocumented students (Gonzales, 2016). Nonetheless, the concept seeks to describe the “psychological and social burdens that weigh heavily on undocumented students, especially those with aspirations to pursue higher education” (Bjorklund, 2018, p.644). The stigma and shame associated with anti-immigrant rhetoric have led undocumented students to keep their immigration status confidential from their peers, teachers, and school administrators (Contreras, 2009; Gonzales, 2016). According to

Lauby (2017) “due to the stigma associated with lack of documentation, many youths hesitated before talking to their teachers or counselors about their status, and as a result, they missed out on educational opportunities like advanced placement classes and scholarships” (p.30). For many, this is way to protect themselves and their loved ones for possible ramifications and backlash that could land them in removal proceedings.

Lack of Trust

Lack of trust in revealing their status is a predominant phenomenon in the undocumented community, especially around undocumented students. The fear of disclosing their immigration status serves as a limiting mechanism for undocumented students to openly seek counseling resources both in the community and educational institutions (Bjorklund, 2018; Gonzales, 2013; Gurrola, Ayon and Salas, 2013; Muñoz, 2015). Additionally, the lack of trust frequently resulted in becoming socially isolated, thus producing high levels of anxiety, depression, and hyperawareness (Abrego, 2011; Diaz-Strong and Meiners, 2007; Negron-Gonzales, 2013; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). In many cases, they do not address issues of depression and anxiety since they battle with seeking professional mental health due to their distrust in sharing about their immigration status with these individuals due to the stigma associated with it (Cebulko and Silver; 2016; Contreras; 2009; Negron-Gonzales, 2013; O’Neal et al., 2016; Terriquez, 2015). In other cases, they avoid interactions with government officials due to this distrust. For example, Abrego and Gonzales (2010) describe how undocumented students experience high levels of fear and anxiety when “health care officials, social service providers and community police perform immigration-related duties” (p.154) such as requesting one's immigration status or a government-issued identified from the United States. Thus, limiting their interactions with government services and other figures of authority. The social isolation that results from that is due to a lack

of trust in revealing their status to a government official. This distrust is not unusual as historic anti-immigrant rhetoric and increase in deportations can generate much fear of revealing the status to anyone.

Undocumented students take precautions with whom they reveal this information and this can lead to social isolation. Gonzales et al., (2013) further documents how “all the respondents reported intense feelings of isolation and hopelessness derived from the extreme concealment, self-censure, and hyperawareness about others discovering who they are” (p.1185). They are not able to tell anyone who they are because of fear or shame that being undocumented often congeals. The literature reports that undocumented students utilized “passing” as a strategy to hide their immigration status. “Passing” refers to the ability to blend in, to appear as a United States citizen through the adoption of customs, language, and culture. However, this also caused a series of mental health-related emotions associated with identity, belonging, and depression due to social isolation. They are having to keep quite an important part of who they are in the shadows. While constantly watching their surroundings to protect themselves from being apprehended.

The lack of trust also translates into lack of collaboration among undocumented student with their documented peers, which is predominant in higher education settings. Abrego (2011) points that “fear and stigma are both barriers to claims-making, but they make affect undocumented immigrants’ potential for collective mobilization in different ways” (p.337). While Yasuike (2019) exalts this and explains that high levels of anxiety and fear among undocumented students in higher education is associated with fearing legal consequences associated with their immigration status. This translates into them keeping quiet and forfeiting

collaborations between them and those who surrounds them. Next sections explain the malign outcomes of social isolation on the life of this young dreamers.

Social Isolation

As explained previously, many this students “pass” as documented, nobody knows of their status and nobody asks for it; it is assumed in many cases. However, Roth (2017) reports on how “passing” is a form of social isolation which in return “has implications for mental health, identity development, and a sense of social belonging” (p.533). Moreover, Lauby (2017) report that undocumented students can become isolated even though they are among their peers, as “undocumented students can become isolated in their schools and colleges simply because teachers and administrators may not be properly trained to deal with them” (p.36). The fear and shame that historically has been attached to being undocumented is a major contributor to this isolation.

Being undocumented in the United States has serious consequences, which includes mass incarceration and deportation (Gámez, Lopez, and Overton, 2017). Once undocumented students conceptualized the meaning of being undocumented, they were reported to experience high levels of anxiety and stress for keeping their immigration status confidential (Abrego, 2011; Diaz-Strong and Meiners, 2007; Negron-Gonzales, 2013; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). Sequentially, undocumented students became secluded from peers, families, educators and community members, causing higher levels of depression and uncertainty about their future as well as their academic aspirations (Buenavista, 2016; Cebulko, 2014). Social isolation is highly dangerous for undocumented students because it prevents them from developing effective and trustworthy relationships with academic staff that hold essential knowledge about the college application process and their aspirations (Abrego, 2011; Buenavista, 2016; Cebulko, 2014;

Cervantes et al., 2015; Chan, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Gonzales, 2010; Jauregui & Slate, 2009; O’Neal et al., 2016; O’Neal et al., 2016; Pérez Huber & Malagon, 2006; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). Undocumented students seclude themselves from close friends, mentors, and families due to social isolation produced by feelings associated with loneliness and often feeling as not belonging at institutions of higher education (Buena Vista, 2016; Cebulko, 2014; Chan, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Jauregui & Slate, 2009; O’Neal et al., 2016). This fear is amplified by the current anti-immigrant rhetoric that criminalizes their existence.

Social isolation also leads undocumented students to hide their immigration status, often creating feelings associated with the lack of belonging. Goonight (2017) reports how “academic disengagement is particularly detrimental, and thus, targeted support for ELL [English Language Learners] non-citizen students may safeguard their typically higher LRADC [against the threat of disengagement due to linguistic barriers and social isolation]” (p.953). Additionally, Bjorklund Jr (2018) reports that “newfound awareness of undocumented status brings feelings of hypervigilance regarding their status and whom they can trust” (p.645). The combination of the documented financial and social systemic barriers are explained to cause a series of mental health-related symptoms among undocumented students in higher education such as anxiety. Kantamneni et al., (2016) emphasize how systemic discrimination expands upon the “anxiety related to applying and transition to college” (p.489). The social stigma causes undocumented students to experience anxiety while furthering the desire to remain isolated to society. This can happen regardless of whether “they reached milestones, such as graduating from high school, community college, or the universities, also persisted in graduate school” (Lara and Nava, 2018, p.119). Undocumented students experience this type of anxiety due to the uncertainty linked to

feelings of uncertainty as the current anti-immigrant sentiment portrays undocumented immigrants as a threat rather than the solution.

Even undocumented students who made the transition to temporary protection via DACA experience higher levels of anxiety due to the instability of such program. The reason for it being that it affects their ability to study, work and legally obtain an identification. According to Alif, Nelson, Ahmed, and Okazaki (2019) “despite having the same legal protections, DACA students had higher anxiety and isolation and alienation, suggesting that they may experience greater psychological distress than international students or students with visas” (p. 8). Additionally, they further explain how social isolation could serve as a “may shield undocumented students from deportation by fostering adaptive behaviors, such as isolation, thus limiting exposure to risk” (Alif, Nelson, Ahmed and Okazaki, 2019, p. 9). Limiting the exposure to risk is not necessarily the best route to take, however, for them their future in this country dependent on it.

Psychological and Emotional Barriers

Gonzales et al., (2013) report on the life-history of Joaquin Luna Jr., who was an undocumented student and brought to the United States by his family when he was only six months old. He resided in Mission, Texas who had the dream to one day become the first one in his family to attend college, but “despairing that his undocumented status would block his ability to achieve his dreams to go to college, however, he took his life on November 25, 2011” (p.1175). Therefore, it is essential to explore, analyze and report the role of mental health among undocumented students in higher education for the implementation of services, laws, and practices that would provide them with the intentional access to counseling services. Colleges and universities across the United States lack systemic pipelines promoting counseling services specifically to undocumented students. Lara and Nava (2018) further point the need for

institutions of higher education to provide undocumented students with culturally responsive services to address their emotional and psychological needs. Internalizing the harsh reality of lacking legal status is a challenging process that hinders the academic achievement of undocumented students (Buenavista, 2016; Cebulko, 2014; Chan, 2010; Contreras, 2009; Jauregui & Slate, 2009; Kim, 2012; Flores, 2012; O’Neal et al., 2016). Therefore, it is the duty of institutions of higher education to provide the services necessary for these students to cope with their mental health issues.

Academic Stress

Completing a degree in higher education requires extreme focus, time-commitment, and intense concentration. However, undocumented students experience a series of unique psychological and emotional barriers, linked to the lack of legal status, that makes focusing on academics extremely challenging (Gonzales and Ruiz, 2014; Jacobo and Ochoa, 2011; Muñoz, 2015; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015; Terriquez, 2015). Undocumented students in higher education expressed academic stress due to the inability to fully concentrate on their academics as a result of the fears associated with lacking legal immigration status (Jacobo and Ochoa, 2011; Terriquez, 2015). Furthermore, Abrego (2006) studied undocumented students during their high school years and determined how the lack of legal immigration status caused academic stress in the lives of students seeking to transition to institutions of higher education such as colleges and universities.

Guilt

Undocumented students can feel a certain kind of guilt for pursuing their higher education aspirations instead of working full time to provide for their families. As reported by

Kuroki and Preciado (2018), undocumented students “often experience guilt and shame for attending college and work more hours per week than their peers while having less income” (p.39). Moreover, Gonzales et al., (2013) document that undocumented students experience many forms of social exclusions thus causing their lives to be “fraught with feelings of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and guilt” (p.1175). Additionally, Abrego (2018) states how beneficiaries of the DACA program “were happy to help their families financially and through their use of driver licenses, but there were many moments when they could not share their temporary individual benefits” (203). This was due to the shame and guilt associated with transitioning to legal status while their parents still face serious consequences such as deportation and inability to legally work in the United States.

Yasuike (2019) studied how undocumented students hid their immigration identities by creating new ones, thus resulting in constricting feelings such as “hopelessness, embarrassment and shame” (p. 198), further triggering the social isolation undocumented students undergo to keep their immigration status confidential and away from potential consequences. Suarez-Orozco et al., (2015) analyze how “sustained encounters with a negative climate may give rise to the mental health issues, including feelings of guilt and shame” (p.431) among undocumented students struggling with the sense of belonging at institutions of higher education. These feelings associated with fear are most common among undocumented adults. Abrego (2011) states how “for young people who grow up in the U.S. and are socialized in a school environment the primary experience is that of stigmatization and shame” (p.1177). Next, this literature reports on the many forms of fear undocumented students in higher education experience due to the lack of or liminal immigration status, as best explained by Aguilar (2019) describe fear as “endemic among immigrant communities” (p.2). Fear, guilt, and shame consequently carry a series of

psychological related emotions such as depression, social isolation, stress, and anxiety linked to lacking legal immigration status in the United States.

Aguilar (2019) describes fear as endemic and its destructive consequences as “transferable regardless of a receptor’s legal status and proximity” (p.4). Although DACA provides limited protection from deportation to a sector of undocumented immigrants, its beneficiaries continue to be vulnerable to the gruesome exposure of deportation (Gámez, Lopez, and Overton, 2017). The fear of deportation was predominantly articulated across studies as a major barrier that triggered the emersion of numerous mental health indicators that destructively disturb the wholesomeness and humanity of undocumented students in higher education (Abrego, 2011; Anguiano & Gutiérrez Nájera, 2015; Buenavista, 2016; Contreras, 2009; Jacobo & Ochoa, 2011; Negrón-Gonzales, 2013). For example, Chavez, Soriano and Oliverez (2007) document how “the fear of being stopped by law enforcement officers such as the border patrol or even the highway patrol while driving unlicensed, creates further stress and can lead to the students’ inability to focus on school, potentially impacting their academic performance” (p. 361). All this has been created by a system of policies, that have created a system where undocumented immigrants cannot integrate fully to society and live a tranquil life.

Challenges Undocumented Students Continue to Face

Fear of Deportation

Fear of deportation continue to be challenge for undocumented students in the nation, especially when they have experienced deportation in the family. This is said to be interlaced with the visible increase in their individual levels of depression, anxiety and stress (Abrego, 2008; Anguiano & Gutiérrez Nájera, 2015; Buenavista, 2016; Cervantes et al., 2015; Contreras,

2009; Contreras, 2009; Gámez, Lopez, and Overton, 2017; Jacobo & Ochoa, 2011; Negrón-Gonzales, 2013). This suffering of possible family separation makes it difficult for them to continue a healthy mental state. Alif, Nelson, Ahmed, and Okazaki (2019) found that “participants at-risk of deportation and temporary status students had significantly higher depression, anxiety, isolation and alienation, and self-esteem than those with stable immigration status” (page 6). The acute levels of fear among undocumented students enrolled in higher education is due to their consistent preoccupation about their families’ well-being and possible deportation. Gonzales (2016) explains that undocumented students experienced quotidian acute fear for the deportation of their family’s members as well as their own. Even when they have been themselves protected from deportation, as in the case of DACA recipients, they still worry about their family members well-being (Patler and Pirtle, 2017). For a vast majority of students their safety and their family members safety are of equal priority.

Uncertainty in the Future

Bjorklund (2018) explains that "a future of college and prosperous career opportunities become filled with uncertainty and fear" (p.646) due the many systemic barriers preventing undocumented students from reaching their full academic potential. For undocumented students in high school, they find it challenging to believe in a future of uncertainty after high school graduation was given the many systemic barriers (Diaz-Strong and Meiners, 2007; Jacobo and Ochoa, 2011; Gonzales and Ruiz, 2014; Muñoz, 2013, 2015; Perez Huber and Malagon, 2006). Furthermore, Gonzales et al., (2013) describe how hope alone is insufficient to provide clarity about the implementation of future policies relating to the legal and educational rights of undocumented students. They further explain how “for unauthorized youth coming of age without a clear sense of where and how they belong in society, maintaining a sense of

hopelessness is often severely compromised” (p. 1188). Across studies, undocumented students conveyed uncertainty about their future aspirations due to several psychological challenges (Abrego, 2011; Bjorklund, 2018; Cebulko, 2014; Cervantes, Minero and Brito, 2015; Contreras, 2009; Diaz-Strong and Meiners, 2007; Gonzales, 2011, 2016; Suarez-Orozoco et al., 2011, 2015; Terriquez, 2015). That lack of belonging creates uncertainty about future prospects further limiting the range of adventures and goals undocumented students can embark in.

Despite the numerous systemic barriers, the literature sheds light on the extraordinary stories and experiences of undocumented students who matriculated and successfully graduated from institutions of higher education in the United States. As this dissertation seeks to explore the experiences of dreamers with postgraduate degrees, we next turn our attention to the forms of capitals, tools, and strategies utilized by dreamers to successfully graduate with postgraduate degrees from institutions of higher education in the United States. Furthermore, Contreras (2009) describe how undocumented students are “determined, hardworking, engaged, and optimizing despite the additional layer of fear and anxiety they experience due to their legal status” (p.2). Next, the literature review reports on the most emergent themes associated with key attributes that helped undocumented student transition and graduate from institutions of higher education in the United States.

Factors Related to Undocumented Students Success

Ganas: The Desire to Succeed

The literature reports that undocumented students in higher education demonstrated great amounts of internal motivation which can be described by strong desire to succeed conceptualized in the Spanish word *Ganas*, which translates as an immense desire to triumph. For example, Contreras (2009), found that despite the odds, undocumented students in

Washington state relied on this concept as their stories “accounts represent sacrifice, selflessness, and the *ganas* (will) to persist despite the uncertainty of their ability to legally work once they complete their degrees (p.611). Moreover, undocumented students refused to drop out of school by relying on a deep intrinsic desire to succeed. As best described by Gámez, Lopez, and Overton (2017), “*Ganas* seems to move beyond mere resilience, an ability to rebound and keep moving forward, an internally and communally driven sense of determination to win out over the barriers” (p.116). Moreover, undocumented students in higher education portrayed *ganas* by navigating a complex system of higher education filled with a series of systemic barriers aimed to limit their full potential (Bjorklund, 2018; Cervantes et al., 2015; Ellis and Chen, 2013; Gámez, Lopez, and Overton, 2017; Morales et al., 2011; Tenarashi, et al., 2015). Despite the many obstacles, undocumented students remained committed to “develop their own strategies for transitioning to college” (Lauby, 2017, p.35).

Intrinsic Motivation

Undocumented students found *ganas* by reflecting on the sacrifices, teachings, and lessons taught by parents and not giving up on their higher education aspirations. Additionally, the students portrayed a strong internal sense of motivation that empowered them to achieve and exhibit *ganas*. Moreover, Anguiano and Lopez (2012) report that “Latino families stressed the importance of their collective, cultural, and family values, and they desired to pass the values onto their children” (p.331). This internal method of motivation empowered students to understand their purpose in life, professional careers, and civic engagement. Undocumented students show high levels of intrinsic motivation that equip them with perseverance, encouragement, and *ganas* (Cervantes et al., 2015; Contreras; 2009; Gámez, Lopez, and Overton, 2017; Negron-Gonzales, 2013). Moreover, *ganas* “seems to move beyond mere resilience, an

ability to rebound and keep moving forward, an internally and communally driven sense of determination to win out over the barriers” (p. 156).

Personal Perseverance

Little and Mitchell Jr. (2018) report that “perseverance is integral to the level of intentionality and persistence needed to align a student’s actions with their sense of purpose” (p.168). Matriculation at a college or university may be a standard process for many documented students. However, undocumented students enrolling at institutions of higher education in the United States is a testament to their perseverance and dedication to succeed in life. The literature reports that undocumented students found hope in the future, a sense of purpose, and belonging by attending institutions of higher education (Cervantes et al., 2015; Gámez, Lopez, and Overton, 2017; Gonzales, 2016). The yearning to succeed in higher education was reported to derive from desiring to serve their community and a strong desire to create a positive difference (Contreras; 2009; Gonzales, 2008; Gonzales and Ruiz, 2014). Undocumented students demonstrated high levels of perseverance by experiencing numerous systemic barriers yet not giving up and succeeding academically (Little and Mitchell Jr., 2018).

Parental Sacrifices

Aguilar (2019) describes the sacrifices of parents as a form of capital that empowers undocumented students to succeed academically (Aguilar, 2019). For undocumented students who often experienced limited forms of social capital, the capital derived from parental sacrifices was the mechanism of motivation (Abrego and Gonzales, 2010; Gámez, Lopez, and Overton, 2017; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011, 2015; O’ Neal et al., 2015). Best described by Aguilar (2019), “the cognitive capital that undocumented parents convey onto their children can be experienced

at the moment and remembered, valued, assessed or reflected upon retrospectively” (p.5). Moreover, Anguiano and Lopez (2012) describe how “these families knew that coming to el norte (the north) would be a dangerous journey, but their need to feed their children was greater than their fears” (p. 328). Furthermore, as undocumented students internalized the numerous sacrifices their parents made, they expressed a deep level of respect, empowerment, and admiration. Little, and Mitchell Jr. (2018) described dreamers as being motivated by the “constant reminders of the sacrifices their parents, friends, and counselors made to provide them with a brighter future” (p.160). Undocumented students in higher education expressed a deep level of appreciation and gratitude towards the sacrifices their parents made by migrating to the United States in pursuit of better opportunities.

Parental Financial Support

These parental sacrifices motivated undocumented students to value their unique opportunity of attending institutions of higher learning, and it also inspired them to succeed academically, personally, and professionally. Moreover, parents played an enormous role in helping undocumented students pay for their college expenses such as tuition, textbooks, room, and board. Moreover, in *Familial Capital*, Allen- Handy and Farinde-Wu (2018) identified sacrifices, motivation, and financial support as the manifestation of this concept among the lives of undocumented students in higher education. In addition to the family and parental support, undocumented students attribute institutional agents for their ability to matriculate and successfully graduate from colleges and universities. Furthermore, Gonzales (2012) describes the meaningful financial contributions parents made to support their children to succeed academically by further reporting on how “parents and families chipped-in in small but meaningful ways to the success of their children; in which parents made whatever sacrifices

necessary to pay tuition for their daughters” (p.131). Such financial contributions also empowered undocumented students to seek to one day return this financial investment by financially supporting their parents and families right after college graduation.

Family Aspirations

Allen-Handy and Farinde-Wu (2018) define familial capital as “the cultural knowledge nurtured among families that carry a sense of community, history, memory and cultural intuition” (p.1192). Regardless of the numerous systemic barriers and policies restricting equitable access institutions of higher education for undocumented students, the parents were reported to be “willing to live undocumented as long as their children had an opportunity to obtain their U.S. residence so that they could continue their higher education and have a better life” (Anguiano and Lopez, 2012, p. 333). Also, undocumented students expressed a deep level of respect and admiration for the numerous sacrifices their parents made to support their academic careers such as taking the arduous journey to the United States in pursuit of better opportunities. Despite the limitless barriers, families were reported to have played a pivotal role in the higher education achievement of undocumented students in higher education.

Gonzales (2012) reports that “the parents of the Latinas in this study cared deeply about their education, to the point that education was conceptualized as a family, not just an individual, goal or expectation.” For undocumented immigrant family’s access to higher education is highly valuable as this is often considered as hope, empowerment, and as a way out of poverty. Furthermore, Abrego (2006) reports on the key role of family members who served as significant motivating factors in the lives of undocumented students as they “partially construct their aspirations based on the level of educational attainment of their parents and older siblings” (219).

Families would sacrifice their limited financial income for the education of their children with the full intent of supporting their children's academic aspirations and trusting in a brighter future.

Educators

Ruth (2018) describe the important role educators play in the lives of undocumented students who successfully made their transition into colleges and universities while recommending teachers to “foster relationships between students and college career counselors by directly connecting them and inviting counselors to speak about opportunities in their classrooms, so information is widely shared” (p.29). Implementing such strategies could be life-changing for undocumented students who often lack access to accurate and truthful information regarding the college application process available financial aid opportunities. Furthermore, as undocumented students continue to develop deep roots in their communities and schools, they also develop close relationships with educators who often become mentoring figures and guides towards their higher education aspirations. Arango et al., (2016) report how “families, children and educators are affected by immigration policies and practices” (p.230) restricting undocumented students from having access to an equitable system of higher education. Educators have become mentors for many undocumented students who have decided to entrust them with their stories and experiences as undocumented students with the full intent of seeking help to transition into institutions of higher education such as colleges and universities.

Institutional Agents

Roth (2017) describe how institutional agents are essential for academic achievement; however, they “cannot address the overarching problem of students' legal status but the support available through these connections can provide undocumented students with some needed guidance” (p. 544). Nonetheless, their institutional mentorship, guidance, and assistance played

a key role in the higher education of undocumented students. Nienhusser (2018) exposes, “the central role that higher education institutional agents have in implementing policies that affect undocumented and DACAmented students” (p.446). Such institutional mentors were reported to have been key mentors for undocumented students in higher education as they held influential power to make certain decisions related to college admission, financial aid, and professional opportunities. In fact, Ruth (2018) reports how institutional agents help undocumented students regain trust by describing how “the students’ attempts to hide their undocumented status interferes with the type of help these youth can access and pushes them to rely on select institutional agents” (p.27) for support and guidance with their higher education journeys. Gonzales (2010) also found that undocumented students who “had formed school-based mentors reported that they were more likely to develop trust in adults and to disclose their unauthorized status to seek help” (p.483). These mentors help them in the educational journey as they boost their academic confidence and provide advice for struggles they are likely to face.

Mentoring has indeed played a key role for undocumented students in high school as these “strong mentoring relationships with high school teachers are pivotal for students who are afraid to discuss their legal status” (p.29). Terriquez (2015) documents how “undocumented students who do attend college appear to benefit from the extensive assistance of mentors, as well as broad networks of support” (p.1306). Furthermore, Lara and Nava (2018) report on how “Latinx college graduates relied on the guidance of peers and mentors for encouragement and support when information know-how about the peculiarities of graduate school for undocumented students was inaccessible or nonexistent at the institutional level” (p.119). For undocumented students who have successfully made the transition to higher education, the role of mentors also provided with access to accurate information regarding financial assistance and

admissions process for undocumented students to matriculate at institutions of higher education. Gamez, Lopez, and Overton (2017) highlight that DACA recipients who had enrolled or graduated from an institution of higher education highlighted the role of mentors in their lives. This made it easier for them to navigate the educational system with the guidance of people they trust and most of the time look up to.

Note that, undocumented students described mentors as “the importance of individuals who provide guidance and support in the process of enrolling and attending higher education institutions” (p.152). Access to adult mentors helped undocumented student mitigate many of the mental health symptoms associated with lack of legal immigration status. As best described by Gonzales et al., (2013) “those who were able to maintain strong friendships or had caring adults (teachers, counselors, or other adult mentors) with whom they could talk openly about their struggles described less emotional distress and were much more likely to remain at school” (p.1188). Thus, providing them the ability to seek solutions to the numerous systemic barriers they encountered due to the lack of legal immigration status. Moreover, the literature review identified many mentoring figures that played a role in the higher education attainment of undocumented students such as educators, peer mentoring, high school counselors, community college advisors, pastors, church leaders, influential community leaders, successful young professionals, institutional staff and most commonly expressed were family members (Abrego and Gonzales, 2010; Bjoklund 2018; Cervantes et al., 2015; Contreras, 2009; Gonzales and Ruiz, 2014; O’Neal et al., 2016; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). These mentoring characters are vital for increasing access to new forms for social capital.

Personal Intentionality

According to Bjoklund (2018), “social capital can take the form of relations with peers, teachers, faculty, administrators, mentors, and parents that produce valuable resources to help students succeed in school and transition to higher education” (p. 649). Lara and Nava (2018) studied the decision-making process undocumented students in higher education and reports on undocumented students expressing a deep sense of appreciation for the many mentors empowering, supporting, and providing key resources to attend postgraduate school. Nonetheless, Gámez, Lopez, and Overton (2017) documents that “there was rarely a systemic means of findings such mentors, and they had either benefited from serendipitous encounters or sought mentors out themselves” (p.152). Nonetheless, undocumented students utilized their intentionality in seeking out to key mentors who held strategic power and knowledge to help them succeed academically. Furthermore, undocumented students in higher education expressed a strong desire for activism, civic engagement, and giving back to their communities in various forms.

Civic Engagement

Undocumented students enrolled at colleges and universities demonstrated a sincere desire to give back to their communities and help other undocumented students transition into institutions of higher education. Moreover, they had access to numerous social networks that created systemic solutions across their communities. Munoz (2016) reports that being involved through activism played a pivotal role for undocumented students who stopped fearing “deportation for themselves because of the level of trust and knowledge they acquired through their activist work” (p.723). Furthermore, undocumented students in higher education reported a deep desire to give back to their communities by providing access to knowledge, resources, and

key forms of capital to advance their overall community. Little and Mitchell Jr. (2018) report how serving their community as a credible resource was essential for undocumented students. Despite the many systemic barriers, failures, and achievements undocumented students in higher education experiences, they “were able to translate their experiences into a source of support for others” (p.161).

Social Capital

Undocumented students in higher education demonstrated intentionality in reaching out to mentors and seeking information regarding financial aid opportunities. Ruth (2018), reports how “social capital available to these students emerged from the networks they created themselves while in public school” (p.26). This level of intentionality led them to seek mentors, professional networks, and create spaces that would result in systemic opportunities to continue their higher education aspirations. Moreover, Gonzales et al., (2013) described how undocumented students “having to conceal important details about their lives with peers and friends led to the serving of important networks of support” (p.1184). These forms of social capital supported undocumented students to develop a sense of trust among figures of authority and allowed them to express the many obstacles they experienced, thus empowering them to free themselves from the social stigma and social isolation often linked to being an undocumented student in higher education.

The Church

Jacobo and Ochoa (2011), document how “involvement in church activities or family gathering at a park are enjoyed but not without the fear of legal ramifications” (p.24). Undocumented students reported having found social systems of support among their church

networks, which helped them identified key strategies on how to succeed academically. Gamez et al., (2017) report how undocumented students attributed “coaches, church leaders, family members, and friends or other individuals with no affiliation to higher education who provided guidance and support” (p.154). Furthermore, Contreras reports how all of the participants in his study expressed to have an affiliation with either a “school, organization, nonprofit, church” (p.615). The church provided undocumented students with access to valuable forms of social capital such as learning how to fundraise, seek out for support, and mentorship on how to successfully graduate.

Hope for the Future

Despite the numerous systemic barriers, undocumented students follow the hope of their parents instilled in the value of pursuing higher education. Undocumented students reported having hope in attaining the social and economic benefits associated with such higher education. Gonzales et al., (2013) documents how undocumented students “inspire of these daunting obstacles, we have encountered youth that are remarkably resilient, maintaining hope in the face of hopelessness” (p.1188). Nonetheless, the majority of undocumented students are not enrolled in institutions of higher education, and it is imperative for more dreamers to pursue professional careers at colleges and universities to create a stronger future for their families, communities, and further, develop a strong sense of hope for the future.

Conclusion

The presented literature includes a historical background comprised of a series of laws, policies, and federal rulings from 1982 to the present. The review of such policies provides a lens that has determined the educational and immigration rights of undocumented students in the

United States. We described the most common themes that emerged throughout the analysis of this study's data. The literature also exposes the financial, social, psychological, legal, and emotional barriers that negatively impact the college matriculation rates and higher education experience of undocumented students in the United States. Moreover, the review reports on the unique experiences of highly successful undocumented students, who despite all barriers, expertly navigated the systems of higher education. In doing so, the literature facilitates the development of a conceptual understanding of the systems of supports and hubs of motivations these students developed for academic success, high motivational levels, and future professional opportunities.

Overall, this literature review serves as a research foundation for this dissertation, providing evidence of undocumented students who have graduated from colleges and universities. Furthermore, this review informs the current research study to do an in-depth analysis of the stories, voices, and lived experiences of seven highly successful undocumented students who graduated from institutions of higher education.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Insightful Perspective

As the author of this dissertation and a self-identified dreamer with a postgraduate degree, I provide an insightful perspective hoping to add value to the evolving conversation associated with undocumented students in higher education. I graduated with a Master of Education from Texas A&M University and my aspirations for success led me to face the systemic barriers while navigating higher education, and acknowledge the parental sacrifices that contributed to my postgraduate academic achievement. The shared experiences detailed in a subsequent section of this chapter, allowed me to develop a unique connection with each participant. These experiences seek to fill in the research gaps by studying dreamers who have completed postgraduate degrees from institutions of higher education in the United States. The current anti-Latino and anti-immigrant rhetoric aiming to dehumanize, criminalize, and stigmatize undocumented immigrants also further activate undocumented students' hyperawareness, lack of trust with institutional agents. As reported across the literature, the recruitment of undocumented students' participants is not an easy task, as the consequences of disclosing one's immigration status could lead to serious social, academic, and or professional consequences.

Narrative Approach

Sarbin (1986) explains a narrative as "a way of organizing episodes, actions, accounts of actions: it is an achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations; time and place are incorporated" (p.9). Lara and Nava (2018) used a narrative approach in their research

and show how “the student narratives were instrumental in illumination their reasons why graduate school was a logical next step” (p.119). Similarly, Munoz and Maldonado (2012) examined the narratives of undocumented students and state that the narratives “reproduce and/or reinscribe elements of oppressive discourse of race, class, and gender in the contemporary USA” (p.293). The use of narratives, testimonios, counterstories, storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos, chronicles, oral history, corridos, Facebook posts, chisme and comedy is also encouraged by Undocumented Critical Theory (Aguilar, 2019).

Guiding Research Questions

The aim of this study is to explore, investigate, and report on the experiences of each dreamer as it relates to the three guiding research questions.

- How do dreamers describe the financial and social barriers they experience while pursuing postgraduate degrees?
- How do dreamers describe the emotional and psychological barriers they experience while pursuing postgraduate degrees?
- To whom or to what do dreamers attribute their postgraduate attainment and success?

Purposeful Sampling

The selection of the eight participants who took part in this study was a purposeful sampling process. Maxwell (2005) describes this technique as “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately to provide important information that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 88) while Patton (1990) explains “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (p. 169). Therefore, this study describes the experiences of participants who self-identified as a dreamer

and whom despite the numerous systemic barriers, successfully graduated with postgraduate degrees in the United States.

Given a history of civic engagement, professional background, postgraduate attainment, and self-identification as a dreamer, the author of this dissertation holds access to a network of dreamers who have successfully graduated with postgraduate degrees from institutions of higher education in the United States. Furthermore, mutual admiration, social media following, and prior communication facilitated access to these participants' unique and valuable experiences. Accordingly, due to his networking and similar experiences, the researcher was afforded a great opportunity to utilize purposeful sampling to select eight participants from six socio-politically influential U.S. states as it relates to immigration and education rights for undocumented students.

Participant Pseudonyms

As reported across the literature, the consequences of disclosing one's immigration status could lead to serious social, academic, and or professional consequences. Therefore, the researcher assigned a pseudonym to account for confidentiality, except for Reyna, who desired to be identified by her real name. This symbolic and literal request is a form of empowerment, strong cultural identity, and the constant desire to humanize the experiences of undocumented immigrants in the United States. It is vital to acknowledge, the researcher had a prior activist, personal, and professional relationship with all of the participants, thus facilitating a transparent, honest, professional, insightful, academic, respectful, and flexible line of communication.

Context of the Study

The states represented in this study are California, Texas, Arizona, Missouri, Massachusetts, and Utah. These six U.S. states represented in this study play a pivotal role in the

national debate regarding undocumented students in higher education. Texas became the first state in 2001 to pass House Bill 1403, which created access for undocumented students in higher education. The law was drafted and became a bill in the 77th legislative session. In 2005, the House Bill was ratified and became known as Senate Bill 1528. As of 2019, the policy provides undocumented students the ability to apply for financial aid by applying for the Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA), instead of the Federal Application for Financial Aid (FASFA). This legislation has empowered undocumented students to enroll at institutions of higher education.

Furthermore, California passed Senate Bill 540 soon after Texas in 2001. The policy provides similar benefits to undocumented students as this provides access to in-state tuition rates as well as state financial aid for undocumented students. Undocumented students must sign an affidavit promising that they would fix their immigration status once able. Moreover, undocumented students in these states can apply for institutional funding such as short-term loans, state grants, and academic scholarships.

Massachusetts has not yet legislated a policy determining access for undocumented students to matriculate at colleges and universities. However, there is not an existing statewide prohibition of such access. Undocumented students do not have access to state financial aid; however, some undocumented students have reported receiving funding via internal avenues. According to the University of Massachusetts, undocumented students who aspire to apply for financial assistance are “eligible to compete within [their] out of state international applicants when determining financial aid awards.” Moreover, in Utah, undocumented students can attend institutions of higher education at in-state tuition rates under House Bill 1144, which became the law in 2002. The undocumented students in Utah do not have systemic access to statewide

financial aid. Instead, they can apply for non-federal sources of funding such as loans, grants, tuition waivers, fellowships, and graduate assistantships. Similar to other laws, House Bill 1144 was challenged in courts trying to bar undocumented students from in-state tuition rates. Nonetheless, in 2011 via House Bill 191, these discriminatory practices were defeated as dreamers currently have access to in-state tuition in Utah.

In Arizona, undocumented students must afford out of state tuition rates to matriculate at the university level. The exponential tuition increase is due to Proposition 300, which enacted in 2006 that undocumented students could not continue paying in-state tuition rates. As a result, undocumented students found their college aspirations diminished yet not vanished. Although efforts to reconstitute in-state tuition rates and eligibility to state financial assistance, undocumented students remain restricted by such discriminatory policies.

DACA Political Context

The Migration Policy Institute (2018) reported the number of DACA recipients specifically to each U.S. state. Texas reported 115,290 beneficiaries, California had 200,150, Utah 9150, Arizona 26,100, Missouri 3,220 and Massachusetts has 6,030 DACA recipients. According to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, in 2019 they granted 679,740 applicants with DACA thus providing the beneficiary with the ability to obtain legal work authorization, state identification as well as obtain a social security number. The Pew Research Center (2017) states that almost half of the entire DACA population live in California and Texas. In our study two of the eight participants attended schools in California and another two attended schools in Texas.

The Pew Research Center (2019) estimates that “10.7 million unauthorized immigrants, the lowest level in a decade, lived in the U.S. in 2016”. In 2017, the Migration Policy Institute

reported “1,193,000 eligible DACA population”. Of this population, 241,000 students matriculated in some form of higher education such as universities. Reports state that 134,000 DACA recipients had completed some college and 57 thousand achieved at least one higher education degree. Table 3 provides a representation of how many dreamers have received DACA in Arizona, California, Massachusetts, Missouri, Texas, and Utah. Moreover, the representation presents how many undocumented immigrants are estimated to reside in each state represented in this study.

Table 3: Undocumented Immigrants in Different States

U.S. State presented in this study	DACA recipients enrolled in higher education per U.S. State	How many undocumented immigrants reside in each U.S. State
Arizona	26,000	275,000
California	200,100	2,200,000
Missouri	3,200	60,000
Texas	115,290	1,600,000
Utah	9,150	95,000
U.S. Total	*241,000	10,700,000

*1,193,00 eligible DACA population. 241,000 enrolled in college, 134,000 have completed some college and 57,000 have completed at least one degree.

Participants

A total of eight self-identified dreamers participated in this study. Four were females, and four were males, and all eight participants had already completed their postgraduate degrees by the completion of this study. Two participants, one from Utah and one from California, were awaiting graduation from their Master's programs after having completed all the institutional requirements. Six participants completed postgraduate programs while pursuing master's degrees in education, Counseling, Business Administration, and Social Work. Also, two participants earned their postgraduate degrees by passing the U.S. Bar Association Exam and obtaining their Juris Doctor Degree of Law. Seven of the eight participants described Mexico as their country of ethnic background, and one participant identified as a native of South Korea. The ages of the participants ranged from 24 to 29 years. Detailed demographic information about each participant is presented in table 4 below.

Table 4: Participants

Pseudonym	Postgraduate Degree	U.S. State	Immigration status
Victoria	Masters in Social Work	Texas	Legal Permanent Resident
Kim	Masters in Business Administration	California	Recipient of Deferred Action
Jorge	Juris Doctor of Law	Arizona	Legal Permanent Resident
Diana	Juris Doctor of Law	Utah	Recipient of Deferred Action
Alejandra	Master in Media	Missouri	Recipient of Deferred Action
Joaquin	Master of Educational Leadership	Utah	Recipient of Deferred Action
Kevin	Master in Counseling	California	Recipient of Deferred Action
Reyna	Master of Education	Massachusetts	Recipient of Deferred Action

Six of eight participants were beneficiaries of the Deferred Action (DACA) program and transitioned from the lack legal immigration status to having access to certain social and legal benefits such as the ability to apply for a social security number, obtain a U.S. legal identification, acquire a driver's license as well as work-authorization for a limited period of two years (Little and Mitchell, 2018). Additionally, two participants transitioned from DACA recipients to legal permanent residents. It is imperative to acknowledge these transitions in legality as the new immigration status, such as a DACA, provide dreamers with access to a set of positive experiences and realities such as a temporary sense of relief from deportation, ability to pursue professional careers, and development of a sense of societal belonging (Aguilar, 2019; Gonzales, 2016).

The following sections detailed information about each of the participants of the study.

Victoria: Master of Social Work

Victoria graduated with a Master of Social Work at a major university in Texas. She currently possesses a legal permanent immigration status, thus providing the ability to travel outside the United States legally. She completed her undergraduate degree in bilingual education. She believes bilingual education individuals hold a deep sense of community, civic engagement, and a strong academic background in research. Victoria is from Mexico and lived in the United States for over 20 years. She attended school in Texas where Senate Bill 1528 provided access to in-state tuition rates. Her undergraduate education was also in Texas, where she has lived since arriving to the United States. She has experienced the transition of liminality by acquiring a new immigration status by becoming a legal permanent resident and soon seeks to apply for U.S. Citizenship. She is now married and seeks to serve her community by ensuring other

undocumented students also have access to similar resources that enabled her to succeed academically, personally, and professionally.

She has a strong passion for service learning, giving back to her community and serving as a model and mentor for motivating other undocumented students to pursue postgraduate school. She is a firm believer in optimism and seeks to provide solutions to members in her community who remind her of her own family. She seeks to resolve the same issues that once prevented her from reaching her entire potential. She seeks people to have access to accurate information regarding the college application, financial aid process, as well as careers in postgraduate school. Victoria portrayed a willingness to participate in this study after learning about the vision of the study. She is also a scholar, and within her field of study, she continues to advance the stories of undocumented immigrants. She defines happiness by the ability to be happy in all aspects of life.

Jorge: Juris Doctor of Law

Jorge is a highly determined attorney in Arizona. His strong belief in personal perseverance, ancestral knowledge, work ethic, and understanding legal issues empowered him to graduate with a Juris Doctor Degree of Law from a major university in Arizona. Jorge attended postgraduate school under a political system of Proposition 300, restricting undocumented students from paying in-state tuition rates and forcing them to afford higher out of state tuition rates. Jorge has lived in the United States for over 25 years and has transitioned from DACA to legal permanent residency. As a result, he experiences the benefit of renewal of his permanent legal residency every ten years in comparison to reapplying every two years for the DACA program. Jorge is highly passionate about creating new spaces for other undocumented

students to have access to the same resources he once lacked under discriminatory policies that limited, yet did not stop, his college experience.

He finds hope in a social justice movement that encourages him to keep believing in new generations as they continue to lead a movement in support of and undocumented people. Having permanent residency status, He can travel to his native Mexico and visit family after being separated from them for over two decades. Jorge is also the owner of his own business in which he continues to help, advice, and empower others as an attorney of the law. Jorge can be found across the nation traveling, giving speeches at community events on behalf of the undocumented community. He continues to make a difference by providing dreamers with motivation, knowledge, and resources to help them transition into institutions of higher education.

Kim: Master of Public Administration

Kim finds motivation in his humble, sincere, and kind desire to give back to his community. He graduated from a major university in California where he was allowed access to in-state tuition rates. Additionally, Kim completed his postsecondary education in California, earning a master's degree in business administration. He was born in South Korea and has lived in the United States for the past 23 years. His postgraduate funding was obtained by connecting with a financial aid adviser who understood the process as she also shared a dreamer background. It was his intentionality that helped him succeed academically, seeking help and researching for resources. His brave and courageous character empowers him to continue to create systemic change in his pursuit of helping other dreamers have access to similar opportunities that changed his life and that of his family.

He offers an insightful perspective on the need to continue studying undocumented students from across continents other than America. As the only participant with an Asian ethnic background, he describes the need to continue to highlight the stories of dreamers who frequently feel isolated and invisible even among the undocumented immigrant youth movement. His experiences further highlight the importance to diversify resources for students of all backgrounds and not only Latinx backgrounds. Furthermore, Kim expresses a deep admiration for his mother who traveled across the world to migrate to the United States to provide him with the opportunity of growing up in an environment where he could have access to an excellent education. Moreover, Kim explains the importance of mental health in academic attainment as the most important and a topic that is often not talked about in postgraduate school.

Diana: Juris Doctor of Law

Diana is empowered by the financial sacrifices and investments her family has made toward her postgraduate education. She is a free spirit, energetic and justice-minded person. She completed her Juris Doctor's Degree at a major university in Utah and was able to pay in-state tuition rates. Diana is a DACA recipient who has lived in the United States for over 20 years. She also obtained her undergraduate degree in Utah, where she lived for most of her life. Her personality is outgoing, happy, and willing to help. She accredits her parents for the many sacrifices they have made to support her education. She acknowledges that her parents have been investing in her education for over two decades. She recalls the role of educators as she transitioned from high school into college as a critical attribute to her higher education success. She described teachers who helped her stay on track by providing her with guidance, mentorship and from time to time words of love that would empower her to believe in herself and not give up simply because of the lack of her immigration status.

Now, Diana is a brave attorney who fights for justice and has a strong desire to help others challenged by systemic challenges as dreamers. Every day she wakes up with the desire to help people in her community. She is a mentor to other dreamers and guides them in finding systemic resources to successfully navigate the many barriers undocumented students experience. Diana has been inspired by the many financial contributions her family invested in her postgraduate careers. She seeks to return the investment by helping her family for generations to come as well as inspiring other family members to pursue higher education regardless of the numerous systemic barriers. Diana expresses her strong desire for justice and continues to defend the lives of undocumented immigrants by utilizing her academic degree to fight against the many injustices. Moreover, Diana is positive about future as she seeks to continue to share her story with the full intent of creating more opportunities for other undocumented students to pursue higher education careers with a focus on postgraduate degrees.

Joaquin: Master of Education

Joaquin recently graduated with his Master Degree in Educational Leadership. His joy, happiness, and aspirations for a better world are contagious. He is highly determined to give back to his community by sharing the knowledge, experiences, and strategies that helped him achieve his postgraduate education. He attended postgraduate school in Utah where only one out of eight public universities have created a Dream Center to provide a safe space for undocumented students on campus. Joaquin is a recipient of the Deferred Action (DACA) program who seeks to one day take advantage of advance parole and have the ability to travel internationally. Furthermore, Joaquin has lived in the United States for the past 22 years. Joaquin seeks to pursue a Ph.D. in Education as his strong desire is to conduct research that would highlight the experiences of undocumented students in higher education and works towards

solutions that would provide other dreamers like himself the opportunities, he often lacked due to his prior undocumented immigration status.

Joaquin showcased much optimism in believing in the future implementation of policies benefiting the undocumented immigrant community currently residing in the United States. He acknowledges the sacrifices of the family in a multidimensional manner and showcased his scholarly identity by describing his independent research. Joaquin desires to serve as a role model for the communities that have empowered him to succeed academically. Joaquin showcased deep respect to his cultural roots as he describes how his ancestry serves as a mechanism of empowering when he recalls the sacrifices his family made towards his postgraduate achievements. Furthermore, Joaquin provides valuable information regarding the misclassification of undocumented students as international students among institutions of higher education. His perspective adds significant value to the evolving body of research as his experiences unveil a series of systemic barriers he encountered through his higher education journey.

Kevin: Master of Counseling

Kevin is a heart-guided, strategy-based, and future-focused professional who through his professional career, provides professional counseling services to students in California where he completed his postgraduate education. He recently graduated with a Masters in Counseling as he seeks to pursue a Ph.D. Kevin is a recipient of the DACA program and has lived in the United States for the past 18 years. Kevin loves to mentor, counsel, and provide other dreamers with essential resources regarding mental health on campus. For Kevin, it is crucial to remain optimistic when helping other undocumented students because he wants them to think about solutions rather than the many barriers meant to limit their academic abilities. However, he seeks

to empower students to use their skills, strategies, and support networks to become more involved in the community and build meaningful relationships that would empower them to succeed academically.

Kevin highlights the numerous financial obstacles associated with undocumented students in higher education. However, he provides a solution-based lens hoping to empower other dreamers to seek help and apply for the numerous financial aid opportunities do eligible for. His accredits his curiosity in seeking answers to the numerous problems his community currently faces. Via his professional counseling work, he inspires other students to believe in their aspirations and equips them with life-changing resources such as access to financial assistance and mental health services. Kevin showcases a strong sense of belief in the capacity of undocumented students and seeks to support their journeys the same as he was once encouraged. Moreover, Kevin seeks to pursue a doctoral program in counseling and is highly interested in conducting research surrounding the role of mental health among the undocumented community in the United States. In Sum, Kevin expresses a strong desire to continue succeeding academically, while accepting the social responsibility of helping other undocumented students also achieve their academic aspirations.

Reyna: Master of Education

Reyna is a brave, courageous, and empowered scholar from Arizona. She completed her Master of Education from a major university in Arizona where she was affected by Proposition 300. Reyna requested to be identified by her real name. Reyna also completed an additional postgraduate program in Massachusetts. She is inspired by hope, optimism as she promotes awareness and courage across the undocumented and overall immigrant community in Arizona as well as around the Nation via her civic engagement and professional academic background.

Reyna has lived in the United States for the past 21 years. Reyna believes in community empowerment and continues to organize critical strategies to implement positive change in her community. She leads a national nonprofit organization empowering the undocumented community to believe in their capacity while taking great care of their mental health.

Reyna is empowering and highly knowledgeable of many aspects of life. Her knowledge contributes to a unique perspective because she desires to continue to challenge a status quo among research that continues to hide the human side and humanity of undocumented immigrants in the United States. Reyna is fearless and empowered by the strength developed from witnessing the sacrifices of her family and the entire community. She seeks to create systemic solutions for other undocumented students to have access to higher education opportunities as well as overall life success. Reyna is focused on her community and represents them by traveling the nation speaking about her personal experiences, academic research as well as civic engagement. Reyna is hopeful in her community and believes that power and the solutions are within the brains and minds of upcoming generations. In summary, Reyna highlights a deep desire to give back to her community while taking strategic steps that would create systemic opportunities for cities in Arizona and the entire nation.

The researcher and his narrative

Personal Stories

This study uses an auto-ethnographic approach to enrich the investigation, conversation, and experiences of undocumented students who have completed a postgraduate degree. Because of the auto-ethnographic quality of this study, I briefly included my own story to bring a richer contextual background to the dearth of this body of literature. More specifically, I am now a

Doctor in Urban Education and set to officially graduate soon from Texas A&M University. I am also a Dreamer who migrated to the United States as an unaccompanied minor in the year 2000 in hopes of reunifying with my family in Houston, Texas.

Given the current national debate about the educational rights for undocumented students, the actual stories of undocumented students must be shared from empowerment, strength, and courage perspective. Often, stories are shared from a deficient perspective that showcases undocumented students as vulnerable, or weak. An objective in sharing my personal story is to showcase the key factors that allowed me to successfully navigate the system of higher education.

Auto-Ethnographic Approach

According to Wall (2006), autoethnography is “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (p.146). Often times, this approach is conceptualized as the personal narrative where the researcher shares individual experiences and their unique voice and understanding of life. Furthermore, Maguire (2006) describes autoethnography as a method of increasing the “emergence of alternative forms of writing in the social sciences and humanities that focus on a dialogic notion of self, voice, and human consciousness (p.1).

Moreover, Tse (2014) states how this approach “brings the presence of the subject into focus—the self that writes is not being neglected, not pretending to be invisible, nor is it relegated to a brief snippet of the author’s positionality” (p. 179). To this end, I seek to humanize the actual lived experiences of several students who were able to beat the odds and achieve high levels of success in their post-secondary education, despite their liminality.

Jose: Doctor of Philosophy in Education

I hope that this auto-ethnography raises awareness of the social inequities that defenseless children experience in Honduras through the lens of my personal lived-experiences, as they directly relate to the experiences of the other dreamers interviewed in this study. According to the literature, this technique presents “highly personalized, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lives, experiences, relating the personal to the cultural” (Richardson, 2000, p.11). To this end, I will share in great detail how extreme poverty and rampant violence negatively shaped my life in Honduras. Also, I will narrate how I escaped Honduras in 2000 and took a journey alone to the United States. Even though I have faced multiple challenges, I will share how being perseverant helped me succeed in higher education. Through my story, I do not seek to chastise my native land, but instead, share a story which is echoed by thousands of street children in Honduras. The following component of auto-ethnographic study’s context takes the form of a narrative where I am the narrator. The following categories include:

1. Living as a street-child in the most dangerous city in the world
2. My Journey to the United States: 45 days as an unaccompanied minor
3. Life in the United States: Language, culture, and resilience
4. Navigating the higher education system and reaching postgraduate school
5. Barriers faced while completing post-graduate school

Life in Honduras

I was born March 28th, 1987, in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Sadly, the average Honduran is affected by rampant poverty, extreme violence, and high levels of illiteracy. According to Hansen-Nord et. al., (2016) Honduras’ violence has made it difficult to foster the country’s social and economic development, which has also caused a political crisis. The epidemic of

poverty is a strong factor for the disintegration of families. The basic food basket is unaffordable when families have to pay for electricity, clothing, water, rent, and other basic needs.

Unfortunately, since families are not able to afford this cost of living as reported, the family continues to disintegrate due to poverty.

Poverty also serves as a fuel that strengthens the most dangerous ‘Maras’ (gangs) in the world. San Pedro Sula (SPS) is considered the murder capital of the world, and gangs are primarily responsible for horrific violence and killings (Schmidt & Buechler, 2015). According to *La Prensa*, one of Honduras most influential newspapers, 20,515 murder cases have been reported in the last three years. To make matters worse, the legal justice system is inadequate and inefficient to deal with a large number of murders, and as a result, the number of killings continue to escalate. San Pedro Sula was my home for 13 years until I was able to escape to the United States. The high levels of poverty, an insecure education system, family disintegration, and violence forced me to become a street child in the most dangerous city in the world—here is my story.

Poverty and Death

In addition to extreme violence, I grew up in an impoverished family where the only shelter we could afford was a small room in an overcrowded cuarteria (shanty). There, we only had one bathroom and one restroom for 50-60 shanties. As a result, when I needed to shower, I had to wait for hours to do so. For these reasons people would go to the restroom in dirty creeks—it was an unsanitary place to live. Additionally, there were times where my family did not have any money for groceries, and we would go without eating for days. Though this may sound horrible, it is essential to acknowledge that this is the cruel reality that poor people live in

Honduras. My life is not an outlier but instead is an example of what thousands of people experience daily in Honduras.

Living in poverty came at a high cost for my family and me because when I was five years old, I witnessed how my two-year-old brother passed away in my mother's arms. My brother Noe Zelaya suffered from Asthmatic Bronchitis, and our poverty prevented us from buying my brother's medicine. Through conversations I have had with my mother and a blurred memory, I recall the day my brother died as followed. My brother had an asthma attack, and he could not breath to take the oxygen he needed. We could not afford to take him to the hospital. My mother screamed for help, she asked many people to take my brother to the hospital, but no one was able or willing to help us. My mother ran to different private clinics and begged them to save my brother's life, but since we couldn't afford to pay-- they rejected us.

Without much more to do, my mother went back to the shanty and started to pray for my brother, and then I heard my mother scream. My brother had passed away in her arms due to an asthma attack. At his funeral, I remember crying because my mother was in deep sorrow. However, I was too young to understand the meaning of death. I thought my brother was asleep and that soon he was going to wake up to play with me—like we always did but that time never came. Due to my brother's death, my mother fell into extreme depression, and as she cried, she would scream, “Porque te me fuistes Noecito” (why did you leave me Noecito). This is a harrowing part of my life which I am still healing from, and despite being five years old when my brother passed; I still have several memories of him which I am not yet ready to talk about.

Hurricane Mitch—A Natural Disaster

In 1998, I was 11 years old when Hurricane Mitch caused extreme devastation in Honduras. Hurricane Mitch is the fourth-strongest hurricane in the Atlantic Ocean and as

recorded by Smith (2013) the hurricane's aftermath "reported an official casualty count of 5,657; with 8,058 missing; and another 12,275 injured" (p. 55). Additionally, the destruction of Hurricane Mitch left a quarter of a million people homeless, and my family and I were part of them. Furthermore, Mitch caused an overall 3.8 billion dollars of material loss (Smith, 2013).

My family and I were still living in Barrio Cabanas, but this time in a different location; we were living next to a drainage creek. This creek was filled with trash, dead animals, and from time to time, dead bodies were left there in black bags. The horrible smell of this creek could be smelled from miles, yet the city careless about fixing the living conditions of its habitants. Since my family and I did not have access to the Internet or the news, we were only informed by the rumors that a hurricane was coming. However, people went on with their daily routines since I don't believe we truly understood the destruction it would cause. I remember there was rain for a few days but the first day was fun. People were in the streets showering, collecting water in buckets and living on with their regular lives. However, once the dirty creek started to rise, that is when chaos broke loose. People were now trying to get their few properties. As the rain continued, the river overflowed, and destructions started to happen. Streets had turned into strong rivers and as people were trying to cross; I witnessed from the top of a roof how their bodies were taken down by the river.

A few hours later, I remember people making a human chain and helping children get to the other side, but I was terrified because the river current was strong. Thankfully, my sister and I were helped, and we were able to get to the other side, and then my mother took us to El Estadio Morazan (the city's soccer stadium). There were thousands of other people there seeking refuge, and it was extremely sad when the police officers closed the gate of the stadium since the location was overcrowded. However, as my family and I were taken to the stadium, I witnessed

the desperation of people as they were asking for help, but there were not enough cars to bring people to the stadium. Once we made it to the stadium, a few people had radios and small TV's which showcased the horrible reality happening outside. As the rain was still pouring the news were reporting how people continued to die. Inside the stadium, there was extreme commotion as people were looking for their lost relatives, they were thirsty, hungry, afraid, and in complete desperation.

After the rain stopped, we were told to leave the stadium, but in reality, we had no place to go to. Life in the streets was perilous as people were fighting each other for water, food, and housing. As a consequence, my family and I became homeless, and we started to sleep in the streets for a few days. Due to the intense desperation, my mother grabbed my sister and me, and we tried escaping to the United States as multitudes of people were fleeing. Unfortunately, my father found out that we were escaping and he caught up with us as the bus to Guatemala was leaving, and he stopped the bus while abusing my mother in public. A few months later, my mother visited her uncle, who lived in a mountain, and she asked him for his guidance—this was the first time I met him. Her uncle gave my mother a plan which was to ask my father to allow her and my sister to go work in Guatemala for a few days and that she would come back with money.

This was the plan because my father would not allow my mother, my sister and I to be together for an extended time since he was afraid that we would try escaping again. However, my mother did not want to leave me behind with my father, but after she and I had multiple conversations, I convinced her to leave and that I was going to be okay. I asked her to save my sister's life because my father was starting to threaten her. Thankfully, my father agreed to let my mother and my sister to go to Guatemala to work, but his only stipulation was that I would be

left behind. This was a tough decision for my mother to make, but I supported her because I wanted her and my sister to be safe. I was tired of seeing my father abuse my mother—I wanted them to escape even if it meant for me to stay behind. I still remember the night when with heavy tears in my eyes, I waved good-bye to my mother and sister. I knew they weren't coming back. I knew that could have been the last time I kissed them, I cried, I cried, I cried, I am crying. Thankfully, it only took my mother and sister four days to reach American soil, but the worst nightmare was about to begin—becoming a victim of violence.

A Street Child in San Pedro Sula, Honduras

When my mother and younger sister left Honduras, I started to spend more time in the streets since my father would spend all his days inside of Cantinas. Since I would spend more time on the roads, I started socializing more and more with street children to the point that became one—except that I had a shanty. According to Murrieta (2010), many children leave their home because they want to become independent and run away from problems at home. “When a child or young adult decides to leave home, he so she is running away from the abuse and/or living conditions in which he lives of seeking independence” (p. 826). This clearly explained why I chose to spend more time in the streets because it was better than being home when my father came in drunk and beat me. I would rather be in the streets working, sleeping in plazas than to be back seeing how my father would bring in different prostitutes to the shanty—who he would force me to call my mother.

According to Murrieta (2010), there are two main reasons why children become street children, which are “family disruption and poverty” (p.824). Poverty punished me by taking away my brother. Also, my mother and sister were in a different country. After several days that

my father did not know anything about my mother; he started to question me by physically abusing me—he knew I was hiding the truth. He later found out that my mother and younger sister were in the United States. I ran away from the house and became a street child after he had beaten me with the iron cable and the cover of the machete—I became a full-time street child in the most dangerous city in the world.

According to Schmidt and Buechler (2015) Honduras “is one of many with a high percentage of child workers and children living on the street” (p. 1) and the second poorest country in Central America. As a street child, I was in constant danger of becoming a victim of oppressive police officers, corrupt politicians, gang members, thieves, older street children, drug dealers, murderers and the regular civilians who would from time to time hit me for smelling dirty.

Subsequently, I slept in plazas, parks, and underneath bridges. Rocks became my pillows, and newspapers became my blankets. However, during my first days as a street child, I felt safer in the streets than with my father. This was my harsh reality; I was homeless without a family and only eleven years old, and I was yet to experience worse.

As the majority of children in Honduras, I loved playing soccer. Every day after 5pm., people would come out of their homes and would play soccer. There were hundreds of people playing in the streets, at school, at parks and everywhere people could play. Almost two years after my mother had escaped to the United States, on a regular evening, I went to play soccer at a public park when all of the sudden we heard gunshots—it was a drive-by shooting between two rival gangs. We immediately started running, looking for a place to hide. As I was running, I felt both of my arms started feeling really warm, and as if something had hit me. I was 13 years old when I became another victim of violence since I was shot twice in both of my arms. Due to this

shooting, my desperation as a street child, the extreme poverty, the rampant violence and missing my mother and younger sister; I made the decision to escape Honduras and travel alone to the United States to reunite with my family.

Soon after the shooting, I talked to my grandmother and told her what had happened. She immediately called my mother and told her that I was on my way. My mother and my grandmother had been planning my escape since my mother arrived in the United States, but since I was a street child; I had lost communication with my family. Thankfully, my grandmother agreed to help me escape. That same day she took me to her home, fed me, and gave me a place to shower—I hadn't showered in weeks. My grandmother told me that we were going to leave the next morning at 2:00 a.m. When the time came, she woke me up, and we took a taxi to the bus terminal and later that morning we were in Guatemala. I was 13 years old when I migrated to the United States alone to find my mother and younger sister, but the journey alone is its own nightmare.

My Journey to the United States as an Unaccompanied Minor

My journey to the United States was horrible, but I was willing to go through hell to find my family. My grandmother helped me get to Guatemala, where she handed me over to a coyote (smuggler). He then took me to a hotel that smelled like urine and feces. This hotel also served as a place for prostitution and drug trafficking. I stayed in this hotel for two days and then we traveled to Guatemala City. We were told not to speak because the native people would recognize our Honduran accent, and we would be in danger. I remember walking for many days and many nights without water. My feet begin to crack and I lost all of my toenails due to the incessant walking.

I remember one time we were in the middle of nowhere, we had been walking for over three days—the heat was so intense that it made me hallucinate. Thankfully, that night, we were able to sleep until we heard several cars approach our location—it was the Mexican military. We were advised by the coyotes not to run because they were going to take care of it. The military started beating us with their sticks and even with the side of their guns. Once again, I was horrified, sleepy, hungry, and thirsty. Thankfully, that night, we were lucky because the coyotes were able to take care of it, but the worst things were to come. One night the coyote dropped other children and me at a home that I had never seen before. Inside this house, there were dozens of other people who were also trying to make it to the United States. As we walked in the desert, we only had a gallon of water per person, which should have lasted four days of waling. During this time, there was an elder couple who ran out of water and instead of helping; the coyote beat this couple and left them behind. There was not much I could have done other than to keep walking. I was only a child, and these people were also armed. As we kept walking, we saw a group of people who stopped us—it was a cartel. They robbed everything we had, and they also took a few people with them. During this time, I remember crying and asking for mercy but so was everyone else. Thankfully, the majority of people were allowed to go except for the few people that they literally kidnapped—these people had no mercy. After the four days of walking, we made it to the train tracks.

I remember when I first saw the train called “La Bestia” (The Beast) which is a train that travels 40 miles an hour with thousands of people on it. However, we had to wait until the train left later that night. I recall seeing hundreds, if not thousands of people, sleeping under the stopped train. Children were traveling alone, there were gang members robbing people, but there were also people helping. Some people gave us water, a meal, a place to shower, and medical

attention at a shelter. My feet were very swollen, dirty, and bloody, but the worst part of this hellish journey was yet to happen. Later that night, when everyone started screaming that the train was in fact leaving, we started boarding the train. I remember that I traveled next to the stairs of the train—next to the sections that connect two wagons. Soon after the train took off, I witnessed how a man fell off the train, and his body was caught underneath—I saw him die. Of course, I was terrified, thinking that I could be the next one who fell off the train. I took off my belt and shoelaces and tied them to my neck and to the stairs of the train for in case I fell asleep. At this point, I remember praying on the train, crying in silence. Amid all these, I was committed to finding my family regardless of any risks because I knew that if I saw them—my life would change for the better.

Finally, after a forty-five-day journey, I reached the Rio Grande, which borders Texas. I swam across the river and touched American soil, but it was not how I imagined it. I thought my mother would be there to find me. Instead, I was alone, afraid, and thirsty. I remember that I cried myself to sleep, and a few hours later, I was awakened by an immigration officer. I was then transferred to an immigration detention center in Harlingen, Texas, where I lived for about two months. Even though I was given shelter, food, and water, I felt empty because my mother was not with me. I was psychologically destroyed because I feared the possibility of being deported back to Honduras. Thankfully, after two months, a social worker found my mother who was living in an immigration shelter in Houston, Texas, and I was reunified with my mother—this was the first day I felt happiness. I remember crying out of joy, we were shaking because we were finally together. We then traveled to Houston to reunite with my younger sister. Once we arrived at my new home, my mother told me to knock on the door. A little girl opened it - my sister. She had grown so much; she spoke English and was so beautiful—it was a new beginning!

My New Life in the United States

Even though I was with my mother and sister, life was not all roses. My new home was a one-bedroom apartment, which was shared by ten other immigrants in addition to my mother and sister. Thankfully, life blessed my mother with her amazing husband—a man who has taught me to fight for my dreams and who has sacrificed his life so that my sister and I could pursue a quality education. One week after arriving in the U.S., my mother enrolled me in middle school, and I met Mrs. Wright. She was my English Language teacher and the person responsible for my decision of pursuing education as my life-mission. Mrs. Wright inspired me to believe that I was capable of reaching higher education. However, on a daily bases, I dealt with depression, anxiety, shame, and fear because I was an undocumented immigrant. Fortunately, throughout middle school and high school, I've met inspiring counselors and mentors who encouraged me to attend college, and because of their encouragement, I quickly learned English and embraced my new culture.

As a result, I became the first member of my family who graduated from high school and obtained an Associate's Degree from Lone Star Community College. I then transferred to Texas A&M University, where I graduated with an Interdisciplinary Degree to teach Middle Grades Math and Science. Regardless of my immigration status, by being resilient, I managed to graduate with a Masters of Education in Curriculum and Instruction specializing in English as a Second Language. Currently, I am posed to officially receive a Doctor in Urban Education since I have passed the dissertation defense.

Navigating the Higher Education System

Now, I am a Doctor in Urban Education. As a first-generation student, undocumented, and English Language Learner, I faced multiple challenges that made my academic career filled

with difficulties. Nonetheless, these same barriers allowed my character to develop values of courage, responsibility, and academic achievement.

Instrumentation

As described by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research promotes a diversity of options for gathering data through methods such as “observational field notes, interview write-ups, and documents as well as mapping, census taking, photographing and sound recording” (p.170). Furthermore, the close connection between the researcher, participants, and field of study seeks to provide a naturalistic approach to data collection. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommends data collection to take place in a natural environment while advocating for a human instrument who “builds upon his or her tacit knowledge as much as, if not more than, upon propositional knowledge and uses methods that are appropriate to humanely implemented inquiry: interviews, observations, document analysis, unobtrusive clues, and the like” (p.187).

As a self-identified dreamer with a postgraduate degree, I find empowerment in these identities and the ability to explore the lives of dreamers who successfully graduate with postgraduate degrees while meeting the demands and becoming the human instrument (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Additionally, my commitment to social justice, lead me to frame this dissertation from a model of optimism by exposing the experiences, stories, and voices of dreamers who successfully obtained postgraduate degrees in the United States. Furthermore, to provide a broader contextualization of my personal story, I also shared my auto-ethnography with the intent and purpose of describing my life history, positionality as well as my connection with undocumented students in higher education as a field of the research study.

Data Collection

The practices of qualitative research, as suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), “turn the world into a series of representation, including field notes, interviews, conversation, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self” (p.3). Merriam (1998) emphasizes interviews as an efficient manner of collecting the desired data. Furthermore, Munoz (2016) uses interviews to narrate the experiences of seven undocumented college students as she explores how to navigate disclosing their immigration status. Similarly, this study conducted two semi-structured interviews using the video and audio recording features from Skype. In summary, this study used the following forms of data collection: handwritten notes, conversations, as well as audio and video recording. The triangulation of data was used to explore the experiences of the participants as they relate to the three guiding research questions.

Online Research: The Use of Skype

Online research provides researchers with creative solutions to overcome some of the limitations created by limited financial resources, spatial distance, and proximity with participant. The use of avenues such as Skype provides a feasible communication channel to conduct interviews across geographical locations. Ryobe (2008) suggests research via skype as key in educational research. Furthermore, each participant in this study had time limitations due to the responsibilities of academia, research, business, and the overall professional world. Therefore, this study utilizes an online qualitative research approach via Skype to conduct, record, and document the experiences of the eight participants in this study, given the many research limitations.

Initial Interviews

The first online interview explores how dreamers defined a systemic barrier as well as how they described financial, social, emotional, and psychological barriers. Furthermore, it examines the experiences expressed when asked to describe to whom or to what do they attribute their postgraduate academic attainment. However, this was a conversation style conversation with semi-structured questions. I was very intentional about creating a naturalistic environment in which to secure quality and valuable insights. As such, I memorized each question before each interview and familiarized myself with each participant before conducting the interview. Given prior professional relationships, connectivity via the Dreamer movement network and self-identifying as a dreamer, I was able to develop a great connection and have in-depth conversations regarding the systemic barriers these eight dreamers experienced while pursuing their postgraduate degrees. The initial interview ranged from 28 minutes to 78 minutes.

Follow-Up Questions

The qualitative design of this study focuses on growing a deeper understanding of the central phenomenon comprised in its three research questions. Guided by existing literature, an insightful perspective and research curiosity, an interview protocol was created to facilitate two online interviews to explore the guiding questions further. Cresswell and Poth (2017) explain the importance of a robust protocol "guide your questions, complete the interview within the time specified, be respectful and courteous and offer few questions and advice" (p. 66). Furthermore, the interview protocol allowed for more associated questions to emerge, as further described by Cresswell and Poth (2017), "interview questions are often the sub-questions in the research study, phrased in a way that interviewees can understand" (p.164) such as the case of this study.

Follow-Up Interview

Given the willingness to continue the conversation, a follow-up interview was scheduled to explore their experiences further, confirm previously collected data, and account as a method for member checking. Before the interview, the participants were provided with the full-transcription from the initial interview to clarify, elaborate, and confirm any prior collected data. According to Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018), a follow-up interview provides an opportunity for the participants “to comment on the findings” (p. 200). Furthermore, in the book titled, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, written by Creswell and Poth (2018), they describe a follow-up interview as a data collection strategy that “asks participants to explain their improvisation and thus accessing their experience” (p.161). Therefore, this study applied a follow-up interview to gain a deeper understanding of the perspective of the participants.

This interview helped confirm and affirm emergent themes derived from the initial interview. Furthermore, the participants described their experiences in postgraduate degree by exploring the three guiding research questions from the conceptual framework of Undocumented Critical Theory (Aguilar, 2019). Participants conceptualized the financial, social, emotional, and psychological barriers experienced in postgraduate school through the lens of a social justice-minded theoretical framework.

Triangulation

Triangulation, in qualitative research design, adds value and credibility to a study. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) explain that applying “multiple methods to corroborate the evidence that you have obtained via different means” (p.77). Furthermore, Merriam (2009) describes triangulation as “using multiple sources of data and cross-checking of data collected

through observation at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives” (p.216). To assure triangulation, I used many forms of data, such as video and audiotaped interviews, handwritten notes, non-verbal cues, and poetic samples. The purpose of analyzing nonverbal cues was to expose hidden knowledge found in body language and nonlinguistic expressions.

Creswell (1998) encourages triangulation as this strategy add profound insights that confirm the data collection. Therefore, this study applied triangulation to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of dreamers who successfully graduated with postgraduate degrees and conduct a credible and validated research study. Additionally, each participant was asked to submit a short poetic sample about their overall experiences as dreamers with postgraduate degrees and their message to the future generations of undocumented students aspiring to pursue professional postgraduate degrees. These different methods of data collection provide this study with essential evidence to gain an in-depth understanding from the perspective of participants.

Research Design

This study applies qualitative research methods to design a credible research design. The intent is to develop an in-depth understanding of the unique and valuable forms of capital, strategies, tools, and skills that helped undocumented students successfully graduate with a postgraduate degree despite the numerous financial, social, emotional and psychological barriers they experienced. As the researcher with similar background, listening to the voices and stories of each participant was an empowering, emotional, and life-changing experience. Personally, studying the experiences of each inspirational story has contextualized many parts of my own evolving personal story. Additionally, this personal connection encouraged deep conversations

regarding the topic as the researcher shared similar experiences as a self-identified dreamer with a postgraduate degree in Education from Texas A&M University.

By conducting two online semi-structured interviews to each of eight participants, this research design shares the narratives, stories, and experiences of eight self-identified dreamers who successfully graduated with postgraduate degrees across six different states in the United States. The purpose of the study is to explore the nature of the participant's experiences, voices, and stories as these relate to the guiding research questions. First, this study explores how each participant experienced financial, social, emotional, and psychological barriers in their postgraduate careers. Second, the study examines to whom or to what the participants attribute their postgraduate academic attainment.

Data Analysis

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), "the process of data analysis begins with putting in place a plan to manage the large volume of data" (p.74) gathered in the process of interviewing and other methods of data collection. Furthermore, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) qualitative research allow for an interpretive approach stating, "qualitative research study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p.3). Analyzing lived-experiences "are fundamentally well suited for locating meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives... and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them" (Huberman, 1994, p.10). Therefore, the aim for our data analysis was to organize the data with the intent of answering the three guiding research questions.

The data analysis mechanism consisted of transcribing each interview using the Nvivo Software transcribing features and using its features to systematically code the data. The data

was also manually code, and used member checking to further re-assert its validity. The transcribing process consisted of uploading the audio files to the software and the program did the transcriptions. The full transcribing manuscripts were again confirmed, edited, and finalized by the researcher to eliminate room for mistakes in flow of conversation. All the interviews were conducted in English.

Interpretive Analysis

Niehusser (2018) implemented an interpretive design when exploring the role of institutional agents at 45 community colleges as they fulfill state and federal policies determining the immigration and education rights of undocumented students in four different U.S. states. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) describe as an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the collected data. Understanding the participant's ethos, thought-processes, as well as their unique experiences, sparked this data analysis process. While Sandelowski (1991) report that “narrative as an interactive and interpretive product is the focus even before it becomes subject to the researcher’s purposes” (p.162). As such, the narratives presented in this study allow for the researcher to implement interpretive analysis to further share the experiences of eight self-identified dreamers who successfully graduated with postgraduate degrees across six different states in the United States.

Handwritten Notes

As the interpretivist, my data analysis began each time I conducted an interview as I made handwritten notes of issues that captured my attention. I was intentional about understanding hidden cues, nonlinguistic messages as well as the emotions portrayed by the participants during specific topics of a semi-structured interview. Moreover, video recordings and an additional audio recording device allowed me to analyze when the participants, either

shared a unique experience or expressed important non-verbal cues. Video recording the interview via Skype video recording features provided me with full access to the collected data as well as the opportunity to accurately analyze body language and nonlinguistic expressions. Also, recording the interviews with an additional audio recorder granted me with the chance to listen to the participant's unique voices to further concentrate on tone, speech speed, as well as hidden messages between the words. Overall, these handwritten notes helped remember critical information presented during the lifetime of the interview process. As such, they helped me grow deeper understandings as to the experiences of the participants. Additionally, these handwritten notes were used throughout these analyzing process to recall critical information not available in another source of the collected data.

Manual Coding

The researcher first read each confirmed manuscript without making any comments. In this process, I focused on identifying contextual information that would provide insights into answering the guiding research questions. Specific information emerged from the data, and these were reported as themes. As these themes grew across interviews, they were recognized as essential themes while other leading ideas were categorized as subthemes. Furthermore, I used different color markers to manually code essential information regarding the financial, social, emotional, and psychological barriers the participants experienced in their postgraduate school. Moreover, key concepts were also color-coded to identify ideas associated with the critical attributes accredited by the participants for their postgraduate academic attainment.

NVivo Coding

After developing a contextual understanding of the major themes and subthemes from manual coding, the manuscripts were uploading to NVivo software, where I developed a

systemic understanding of the significant ideas represented in each interview. The NVivo software provided me with the opportunity to organize my transcripts as well as the ability to code them for later for analysis. Additionally, I ran several systemic tests to understand my data better. The systemic tests I ran were: 1. Word Frequencies 2. Reference Summaries 3. Word Trees. These three systematic methods of analyzing provided supplemental support in analyzing the data. Moreover, a series of nodes were created with the intent of storing vital information associated with the research questions studied in this research.

In sum, the following methods summarize the techniques utilized for data analysis:

- a. Handwritten notes during the interview
- b. Manual coding for major and subthemes
- c. NVivo Systematic test of Data

Member Checking

Lincoln and Guba (1985), explain that member checking is an effective strategy to achieve credibility in research because it reaffirms the truthiness of study. Furthermore, Patton (2002) describes this process as the ability to confirm the collected data by following up with the participant. As I account for the presence of member checking in this study, I reference the numerous times I reviewed the transcripts seeking to grow a deeper understanding of the research questions while manually coding for crucial information. As best described by Smith and McGannon (2018) who suggests the validity of member checking as “often done by first returning to data (e.g., interview transcripts) and results (e.g., themes and interpretations) to the research participant and then asking them to provide input on whether the data are accurate, and the results accurately reflect their experiences” (p.38). Additionally, I provided each participant with a full transcribed manuscript of the recorded confirmation to assure all data collected is

accurate, correct, and ready for further analysis. These techniques provide accounts of member checking in this study.

Validity and Credibility

It is imperative for the findings of this dissertation to be considered respectable, trustworthy and validated by the field of undocumented students in higher education. Therefore, this study seeks to build trustworthiness as an essential pillar for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) provide a series of techniques in which a study can gather to achieve credibility and validity. Some of these include 1. clarify upfront bias 2. Triangulation 3. Peer debriefing 4. Member check 5. Discuss various point of views (p.77). This study implements triangulation by applying multiple methods of data collection for the purpose of analysis. Moreover, it provides my ethnographic background as positionality to give the context of my personal relationship with the field of research. Additionally, this study implements member check to assure all data collected is proper, correct and accurate. Therefore, these qualitative research methods aim to provide this study with the validity and credibility required to conduct a trustworthy study.

Summary

In summary, this chapter set the methodological groundwork to proceed into the analysis of data to report on the experiences of the participants, per the three guiding research questions.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the voices, experiences, and stories of eight self-identified dreamers who successfully graduated with postgraduate degrees in the United States. This study relied on collected data from two online-interviews, audio recordings, handwritten notes, and nonlinguistic cues recorded during each interview. First, the findings are reported by answering each research question. Next, this study documents the experiences of each participant associated with the three guiding research questions. Furthermore, four emergent themes reveal a broader understanding, capturing the experiences of undocumented students who successfully graduated with postgraduate degrees from institutions of higher education.

Exploring Emergent Themes

This study explored the unique lives of dreamers who had successfully graduated with their postgraduate degrees. The findings of this study are revealed and presented in the following four emergent themes:

1. Returned Investment on Parental Financial Support
2. Individual Sacrifices as a Form of Capital
3. Professional Networks of Support
4. The Hope of a Generational Impact

Returned Investment on Parental Financial Support

Each of the eight dreamers expressed a sincere desire to take care of the parents financially and return the investment their parents provided for more than two decades by economically supporting their postgraduate education. As newly minted young professionals,

and business owners, hungry to succeed, they aspire to not only provide for their basic needs but create a generational legacy that can create economic and social safety for years to come.

Throughout their postgraduate career, their parents invested with their life-savings, medical health coverages, and wages from work to help them afford their basic needs as first-generation postgraduate students at major universities in the United States. Now, all these dreamers can work given the benefits of being recipients of DACA and legal permanent residency and are providing for their families as they seek to continue to take care of them financially to not only pay a long-coming debt but also continue to invest in higher education. This concept emerged from the series of examples each participant provided regarding the financial support their families provided them with throughout their postgraduate education. Additionally, they expressed a deep desire to take care of their families financially and support them, especially as they become of age.

Individual Sacrifices as a Form of Capital

All dreamers in this study made severe sacrifices to succeed academically. Due to the lack of navigating the higher education as a dreamer, the journey had a series of systemic barriers which took an emotional toll on their lives. Moreover, they spent many nights of studying alone in a library, away from family, while worrying about how to pay for tuition the following semester due to the repeal of the DACA. Furthermore, the participants also saw their education as an investment and sacrificed their savings and limited financial resources in their postgraduate education. All these forms of sacrifices also allowed them to realize that giving up was never an option since they would often reflect on the sacrifices their parents made by migrating to the United States to provide them with the ability to access formal higher education. The participants expressed a series of personal sacrifices they took to complete their

postgraduate education. Individual sacrifices inspired the participants, and they were empowered not to give up. They borrowed from the strength that emerged from reflecting on the sacrifices of their parents, communities, and prior generations such as an *abuelas y abuelos*- Grandparents.

Professional Support Networks

Each one of the participants in this study demonstrated a long track of student leadership, civic engagement, and social justice activism. As a result, they had access to a vast network of professionals who empowered them with valuable resources, life-changing opportunities as well as access to postgraduate programs in the form of guidance, financial resources, and finding loopholes in the system. The participants reported having utilized their professional networks when they encountered systemic barriers which they could no longer handle. Part of the reported members of professional networks in this study are lawyers, program directors, institutional agents, professors, deans, as well as financial aid advisers. These crucial figures play a significant role in providing systematic support for each participant to successfully enter, maintain, and complete their postgraduate education. Lawyers, long-time mentors, deans of universities, program directors, professors, and other influential professionals played a crucial role in providing direct assistance that resulted in the participants graduating with their postgraduate degrees. A professional network of support strengthens the participants' self-confidence, professional development, and employment opportunities.

The Hope of a Generational Impact

The participants expressed a deep desire to succeed professionally and become financially stable to create economic and social stability for their families, communities as well as across generations. Each dreamer expressed a strong desire to give back to their communities and pursue professional careers that would benefit immigrant people who reflect parallel

backgrounds of their families. Moreover, Alejandra expressed how her children empowered her to complete her postgraduate education and how they continue to inspire her to be the best human she can be. Furthermore, Daniel expressed a strong desire to help his grandmother and one day help his community in his native Mexico. Additionally, Joaquin expressed his desire to one day build a family and is grateful for the impact his postgraduate education will have on their social, individual, and academic upbringing. The participants expressed their strong desire to give back to their own families, communities, parents, children, families in native countries, and other undocumented students. The participants amplified this phenomenal sense of generational hope as they experienced economic, social, and professional benefits due to their postgraduate degrees in addition to transitioning into new spaces of liminality such as DACA and Legal Permanent Residence. Next, we will describe the experiences of each participant while continuing to explore the three guiding research questions.

Victoria From Texas

Victoria graduated with a postgraduate degree from a major university in Texas where she had access to in-state tuition policies and access to state financial aid, given her inability to qualify for federal aid. Although she recalls having “an extremely difficult time in high school” she never gave up in her aspirations of one day attending college. Her dedication, commitment, and dedication have empowered her to complete a postgraduate degree, which she defines as an asset “to find yourself in the community and give back to others.” Despite the many challenges, barriers, and obstacles she experienced, she attributes her postgraduate education to her parents as they are “the ones who took me to these mentors as they inspired me to attend college.” She is the first one in her family to obtain a postgraduate degree. During the interview, she was

confident, critical thinker, and had a positive mentality. She is a scholar, a professional, and an advocate for the human rights of undocumented immigrants in the United States.

Systemic Barriers

When asked to define systemic barriers, she described these structures as functions that work in multiple systems which affect the lives of people across many dimensions. As systemic barriers limit the ability undocumented students in higher education, Victoria explains the intentional discrimination embedded in systemic barriers as “many systems are created in ways that the person that's creating them is only thinking about their experiences and how to how they would be able to navigate through the system.” As we dove into each guiding research question, we developed a line of communication-based on honesty, trust, and professionalism. As continued discussing the role of systemic barriers she describes these as evolving challenges when relating to her postgraduate career.

“I see it as an evolving experience because of I the same barriers that I faced as an undergrad diminished as I develop skills. I learned coping strategies. I learned how to navigate the system because the same experiences that were as challenging in the beginning for when we are not as challenging when I went to postgrad because I learned to navigate certain things and I learned things about myself that I needed to learn in order to succeed.”

Navigating a New Culture of Academia

She mentioned that some barriers were not as challenging to navigate anymore in postgraduate school because she realized that many of the coping skills she learned in undergraduate school had indeed transferred to her postgraduate career. To further explain this transition of skills between her undergraduate experience and the postgraduate school she recalls

“As an undergraduate two things: Well it was I completely understanding the culture the culture of the college. It is a whole different way of understanding how people function as well as your role as a student. How to use certain resources and how to ask for help. So that's the whole culture of like I've never been in a culture. It was like a whole you know going into a new country and trying to figure out how do I speak their language. So that was basically the most challenging as an undergrad. But when I went to graduate school, I was like oh wait a lot of the things that I learned how to navigate like the language that I learned over here is also applicable we here. I may not be exactly the same. But I think most of the skills are transferable so that the whole culture change wasn't I guess as intense as it was in undergrad as it was here postgrad because I already knew, and you'd ask for help when I need help”

She further explains that to navigate this new culture she had to rely on academic mentors to help her navigate postgraduate school. Moreover, she accredits the advice and guidance of her parents in helping her navigate certain aspects of her postgraduate school.

Multiple Jobs

Victoria recalls working multiple jobs to afford her postgraduate education. Although, she received partial funding for her postgraduate education, she held many responsibilities all at once as she recalls,

“I was a full-time student, which was taking about 15 hours a week. I was also doing an internship, which was another 20 hours a week. I was also working, which was another 20 hours a week. So, all of that combined really took a toll on me. It was the most difficult two years of my life. I know if it wasn't for the support that I received in the counseling that I was offered at school I probably wouldn't have been able to make it out

of there. There was a lot of things that happened to me throughout postgrad that had to do with my immigration status.”

Defining Role in Community

Through ought postgraduate school, it was vital for Victoria to define her role in the United States to best understand how she could be most intentional about serving her community. During her undergraduate education, she lived under the hope of one day having the ability to work since the DACA had not yet occurred. However, during her postgraduate degree, she renewed her hopes in the implementation of DACA and the ability to use her master’s degree in social work towards creating a positive impact in her community. She recalls defining a professional identity in her community as one of the most challenging areas to navigate even after the protection secured via the DACA program. She recalls,

“when DACA happened, my whole perspective changed from when I didn't really see a path. Before, all I could see was just going to school and hopefully I'll get a job afterwards. That was the only goal I could see and once I graduated (with her undergraduate degree), I went to grad school. Then, it wasn't so much about the end goal of a job; the end goal rather trying to find myself and what my role in society and in my community”

As we discussed social barriers, she described limited professional opportunities and finding networks to help her navigate postgraduate school. Nonetheless, her many years of higher education experiences in combination with learning skills and strategies facilitated the many barriers she encountered. Veronica portrayed a strong desire to find herself in the community as she expressed,

“defining my role in this country in society. Because when you take into consideration that as an undergrad, my goal was I just want to graduate and be able to have a job because at the time we weren't even believing that, Ok once we graduate we can get a job. But you know when DACA happened my whole perspective of way you know I you know I guess my I didn't really see a path. All I could see was I'm just gonna go to school and hopefully I'll get a job afterwards. That was my only goal that I could see and once I graduated, I went to grad school. It wasn't so much about the end was a job, the end goal was trying to find myself and what my role is in society and in my community.”

Financial Aid Barriers

During the time Victoria applied for a postgraduate program, she obtained a postgraduate assistantship that would provide a tuition waiver as well as the opportunity to work for the university to afford her living expenses such as books, housing, transportation, and groceries. Due to the liminal benefits of her DACA program, Victoria encountered a financial barrier with her tuition stipend since this derived from federal funds and as such she was unable to receive.

“one of the things that I dealt with was the financial situation, which was you know I expected that to be a challenge but I didn't expect it to affect me as much because whenever I applied for the master's program they told me that they were gonna give me a full ride and I was so happy about it. And I went to interview where they told me that they offered three different kinds of stipend and that would pay for my whole tuition. So they offered me the stipend that paid the most they could have offered me any other stipend”

However, such funding derived from federal sources from which she could not receive such funding. Once aware of the legal stipulations her stipend contract, she contacted the

institutional agents at her university to notify them that she could not proceed with the paperwork due to her immigration status. However, she was provided a different contract without the U.S. citizenship requirement as she was told of her immediate eligibility and not to worry about her postgraduate funding. Nonetheless, months after school had started, she was notified of the immediate termination of her stipend since she did not meet the federal guidelines stipulated by the federal stipend. This drastic experience, caused a series of emotional feelings associated with pain, fear, sadness, and worry. Nonetheless, after the tears stopped, she immediately reached out to her professional support network and was immediately connected by a community mentor with an attorney at law who took her case pro bono. She describes,

“So thankfully I had a mentor who helped me. I talk to her about what was going on and she referred me to this attorney that, she said you know let me talk to her, maybe she can help you out for free. So that worked out well and I went back to the school”

With legal representation she set up a meeting with a representative of the university, who previously had taken her postgraduate funding away, she recalls,

“I told him that I had an attorney and I think they got really scared. So in the end he's like we'll deal with this and he ended up giving me the money that they were supposed to give me that year but it was thankfully because of the resources that I had and connections that I had”

Jorge From Arizona

While on his way to the airport to take a plane that would take him to California for one of his professional, civic engagements, I communicated with Jorge who was thrilled to have an honest and intentional conversation regarding his experiences as a dreamer within the postgraduate school. At the beginning of the conversation, I noticed the desert and a majestic,

beautiful natural background as his Uber drove through Arizona. Jorge is eager for positive change in the community, and he seeks to motivate other undocumented students to believe in their higher education aspirations by providing them with access to financial resources, legal representation as an attorney as well as volunteering his time to service-learning. Jorge's experience echoes the many experiences found in the literature review regarding undocumented students in higher education possession extraordinary forms of capital that helped him succeed academically. He attributes his academic success to his intentionality in practicing the knowledge he gained in social activism as well as his intense desire for other undocumented students to undergo similar experiences like the ones that have impacted his life.

He additionally describes a dedicated mother who believed in higher education and inspired her son to one day become an attorney at law. The village that empowered Jorge continues to inspire him to give back as he feels a strong responsibility to continue to create solutions for other undocumented students to also have access to careers in postgraduate school. Furthermore, Jorge expressed a great sense of individual perseverance by not giving up on his postgraduate aspirations. Jorge attended postgraduate school under a sociopolitical context the criminalized undocumented immigrants. The implementation of policies such as Senate Bill 1070 and Proposition 300 created a series of systemic hurdles for Jorge who despite not having access to in-state tuition rates, still managed to complete Law School at a major university in Arizona.

Proposition 300 and Out-of-State Tuition

To gain a deeper understanding about his experiences regarding the three research guiding questions, I first asked Jorge to define in his own experience what a systemic barrier is and entails. His critical and thoughtful answers can be summarized by the two major points he

made through the interview as he described “I think some systemic barriers or an example of a systemic barrier here would be the law, as it relates to in-state tuition, and also public benefits”. Additionally, he echoed that separating advocacy from professional career goals or “understanding the need of such was a great struggle when balancing new realities”. Jorge has grown up in the United States for the past 27 years.

Jorge graduated high school in the year 2001 and quickly enrolled at a major university in Arizona. However, in the year 2006, Proposition 300 became the new law of the State, and undocumented students were forced to pay out of state tuition rates which are triple and quadruple when compared to in-state tuition rates. Jorge also recalls his academic funding in the form of scholars suddenly taken away “just like that my scholarships were gone”. He further describes,

“In the proposition 300 was the in-state tuition law in Arizona. And that passed in 2006. And so, I started ASU in 2004. By the time I began my junior year that law was already in effect and therefore the scholarships that were there were essentially gone. So, the only reason that I was able to continue ASU was the private scholarships and one affected me Proposition 300”.

The Lack of an Adult Mentor

Jorge describes lacking the presence, guidance, and mentorship of adult mentors as he states, “I didn't find older people that I would consider role models to be looking out there and say oh look there's this guy that wants to be something, that was working hard, I want to be part of that by mentoring him”. Jorge recalls having a challenging experience with older community leaders who did not believe he had the experience, qualities, or knowledge to be a recognized leader across the immigrant community.

“I didn't find that intentional mentoring from sort of like older people right. And my experience was the opposite. I didn't find older people that I would consider role models to be looking out there and saying oh look there's this guy that wants to be something that was working hard. I want to be part of that by mentoring him. I didn't I don't believe because it may have happened, but I don't believe I had that from someone that was doing it intentional.”

The Church

Jorge attributes his postgraduate attainment, mainly in part due to the social support he received from his church networks. As he proceeded to explain how they were pivotal in supporting his fundraising efforts to pay for his postgraduate school, as he described “there was not a day in law school that I was not fundraising and the church had a huge role because the donations were don't through them”

“the church was also very important to me and it was towards late in my development with the church. So, having that network of support at the church was very helpful. Interestingly enough, that church is a White predominant church and I found more support there in terms of like social capital- sort of speak- than other churches that we have been through. We grew up Catholic, and then she tried the Jehovah witnesses, then she went Mormon for a few years and check it out. I mean it was like a thing right, so, I it was interesting in terms of the social capital that I found within this church network”

Jorge relied on the social capital of his church for methods to continue with his higher education aspirations. Jorge described how his church networks empowered him to seek the financial help necessary to fund his studies. He described the church as influential in his postgraduate academic achievements as he further states,

“the network of support that I had already built in church was very closely connected to my fundraising plans to law school. There was not a week in law school that I was not fundraising. There was a church group that was very intentional in helping me do that. All the donations that the money raised, both went through the church. So, I without that, I wouldn't really have been able to do it.

Undocumented-Peer Mentoring

Jorge previously mentioned his lack of adult mentors in his life, as such he unintentionally relied on other undocumented peers for guidance in navigating the higher education system by communicating with other dreamers in postgraduate school across Arizona and the United States. He describes how he “found a lot of social capital in that unintentional peer to peer mentoring of people within my age range, that were doing similar things or the exact same thing, but with different life experiences.”

Furthermore, the opportunity to gain knowledge from other dreamers in higher education provided him with access to the resources, professional networks, and new opportunities otherwise not present. He expresses,

“peer to peer unintentional mentoring. I always wanted the mentoring the mentoring, the mentorship and that's something that I sought more intentional when I was young, but I couldn't find even within the circles that you would believe are going to be sort of like a more natural circle of support. I found more mentorship from within my peer groups and in different sort of like model mentorship than the traditional you're going to be mentored by someone older than you and they're going to tell you what you're supposed to do.”

Understanding Purpose and Reason

In this interview, Jorge maintained a positive, hopeful, and encouraging message when describing the importance of understanding the role of mental health and postgraduate attainment. He overcame the many systemic barriers and social pressures by developing a greater sense of purpose and reason for attending law school.

“It means it means having to worry about school. Well I was worried about the law. It means having to decide for yourself whether the purpose that you're there is connected to whatever larger purpose you feel like you can have like does your academic really need to tie to you your identity or whatever sort of status you may have had”

Although he recognizes the endemic fears among undocumented students, he understands how hope in education can play a significant part in completing a postgraduate degree. He quickly understood that his education was “not a means to an end but the end itself” thus empowering him to succeed academically despite the many challenges he experienced. Additionally, he found hope as well as social capital in sharing his personal story with the means of providing accurate information regarding the college process for other undocumented students in Arizona. Jorge was determined to complete his postgraduate degree because he understood the bigger purpose and long-term benefits associated with such postgraduate education. He recalls,

“finishing school is so much part of your identity that we form through this bigger movement, that's a lot of pressure. I think mental health part of it is saying, why are you even going to school? Why are you even there? Take away the politics, take away the policy. Why were you even there in the first place? Why was that your dream there in the first place? I think that once you dissect that, you take away some of some of the pressures and the expectations around you.”

Personal Dedication

Jorge was cognizant of his community, church system of support, a heroic mother, family members as well as many forms of social capital who empowered him to succeed in various aspects of life. Moreover, when asked to whom he attributes his academic attainment, he replied,

“me just me. I've been very intentional in my own development. I am angered to solutions and so I've always felt like I had a plan, I've always also been very intentional in how I use my social capital to leverage situations like in my goals”

However, his statement was not from an egoistic perspective but rather from a powerful model of intrinsic motivation. He continued, “at the end of the day, if I didn't make those choices, it would not have matter.” He does not question how his journey has resulted in his postgraduate achievement; instead, he claims his academic success to “the plan and strategy” he executed to successfully graduate with his Juris Doctor of Law Degree. He seeks to empower masses of undocumented students to “realize, understand and grasp your place in history” as they aspire to pursue and complete law school degrees in the United States. He further expresses, “I had a plan, I wanted to be here. So that's why I attributed to me. But I also do want to be like selfish because social capital was a determining factor”

Joaquin From Utah

Joaquin was enthusiastic, focused, and very professional throughout his interview. Indeed, a few hours before the interview, Joaquin had a job interview. He individually scheduled the date and time of the interview to concur after his job interview because of his desire to portray academic professionalism. Joaquin graduated with a master's in educational leadership and was very insightful as he provided valuable insights in the form of personal experiences, academic research and community advocacy. He experienced many social barriers associated

with the inability to travel outside the United States, limited financial aid opportunities, as well as been miscategorized as an international student by his university. He further states, “I think one of the biggest systemic barriers within my own experience; is as a first-generation underrepresented graduate student would be probably the lack of sort of support. In terms of trying to find opportunities that would allow me to excel as a person who is, identifies as a dreamer”. The lack of prior knowledge of how to navigate his postgraduate degree led much confusion and misinformation.

Unable to Participate in an International Internship

Joaquin expressed the lack of support in finding opportunities that would allow him to excel academically and professionally. For example, he highlights the lack of international internships, which limited him from professional development opportunities as well as networks of support that his documented peers experienced since they could legally travel internationally. Joaquin recalls an experience in undergraduate career when he was forced to say no to an internship outside of the United States because “quote about his biometrics and if he went, making him unable to reapply.” Furthermore, he experienced similar frustrations with the lack of international social mobility because the new guidelines of DACA have canceled the ability to apply for advance parole. Consequently, banning students like Joaquin from legally traveling abroad under advance parole has eliminated access to professional international opportunities. As he describes in one specific experience,

“a specific example of that is so for example part of the requirements of my program is to complete a seventy five hour internship for the kind of like a service learning component for one of my classes which is called, which is called the Higher Education internship and so I realized that one of the barriers that I had to deal with was the fact that many of my

colleagues, who were U.S. citizens or permanent residents, had applied for internship opportunities outside of the state to complete that learning experience and so unfortunately, at that time, I was in the process of renewing my DACA, so because of that I was not really able to take advantage of an outside internship experience.”

This happened during the last year, during the summer of 2018. At that time, he was in the process of renewing his DACA, so because of that, he was not able to take advantage of an outside internship experience. Because he knew that from the moment that he left he would be unable to either return to the country or reapply for the program.

Miscategorized as an International Student

Joaquin expressed one of the significant barriers he experienced in postgraduate as followed, “even though I am paying in-state tuition, I am categorized as an international student.” He continues his real frustrations with a system which continues to push him out by stating “its problematic because I feel pushed out of the system... making me wonder how much attention the institution is paying”. Furthermore, he worries about future implications this miscategorization would have in his future professional endeavors if this were shown his graduation diploma “stigmatize...”. He also e worries how this miscategorization, by the university’s admissions, could have negative implications when have it explain it to future employers.

“I think one of the biggest challenges is and I guess this would be this would kind of go back to where I just talked about. But the fact that as a student here even though I'm paying in-state tuition. I unfortunately I'm categorized as an international student according to the office of the Registrar. And there's been many times where for instance I've been given a scholarship opportunity to continue my studies. Yet my financial aid in

a way is kind of withheld from me until I kind of talked to someone from the office of the Registrar to kind of explain them what my situation is. Because even though we do have laws that allow students who have graduated from... So those who graduate from a Utah high school here in the state are able to apply for in-state tuition for any of the of the aid in Utah schools in Utah public schools here. And so, one of my biggest, I guess one of the biggest barriers is the fact that I keep constantly being mislabeled as an international student. When in reality that's not the case.

He further explains, "It's problematic because even though I do not pay in-state tuition. Because of that international status, I feel very much pushed out of the system. It very much feels like that mislabeling kind of allows me to reflect on how much the institution is really paying attention to us as dreamers. And our sense of belonging and our ability to sort of thrive on the campus". He has to consistently remind the office of the register regarding his status with the university to be classified as a resident of Utah and for his academic funding to not be at risk due to a misclassification of immigration status.

Explaining DACA to Future Employers

Joaquin expressed his overall frustrations with consistently having to explain facts regarding his immigration status to future employers as DACA limits his ability to work for only two years. He finds himself explaining how his work program is renewable; however, he lives with the constant stress and worries that "an employer would rather prefer a resident over a dreamer." Joaquin has lived in Utah for over 19 years and seeks to continue developing relationships across sectors to create more opportunities for other undocumented students to have access to similar opportunities that allowed him to complete his postgraduate education.

“I don't want that to sort of get stigmatized by whoever, whomever the employer wants to hire me as a person. I mean let alone DACA I have to constantly explain myself that I am eligible to work. And that this is a two-year permit, but I can renew it right. I mean in addition to facing sort of employment barriers when it comes to you know discrimination. Some people might have preferred to hire somebody who was a permanent resident who can actually work until you know. There is no expiration really the other than the fact that permanent residents have to you know renew their green card every 10 years. But for us it's sort of renewing in two years but make making sure that the employer is aware and like keeping them posted about the you know the card and when it comes through the mail. So, I mean that's frustrating you know. It's more frustrating to have to explain to them the international status component in the transcripts. Or even as a person who is not considered an international student because I've lived in Utah for almost 17 years”

Empowerment Through Pain

Many of the systemic barriers Joaquin experienced happened in the year 2017 when the DACA program was rescinded. He recalls “it made me more hyper-aware that I would not finish my program” thus resulting in him losing hope regarding his future professional aspirations. He recalls,

“I remember back when 2017, I remember the day. I think it was the beginning of September 2017 when the announcement was formally made that my current president was going to essentially dismantle the DACA program. And when that happened, I was really fearful given the fact that I live in a Republican conservative state. I was even more fearful and careful because I knew that anytime my opportunity to finish this graduate program would be in jeopardy.

He described this stressful period of time as “I was fearful because I felt like my program was going to expire.” Additionally, it increased his anxiety and stress levels which he describes as “I never felt such an intense fear until that day” referring to the day the administration repealed the DACA program. Joaquin was preoccupied because the DACA program gave him access to a graduate assistantship, tuition waiver as well as employment. Joaquin is the type of person who “loves to finish what he started.” However, the repeal of DACA provoked feelings associated with depression; however, his warrior spirit encouraged him to find motivation during challenging times as he describes motivating others even though he was “feeling depressed while empowering others to pursue their academic dreams.”

“Never been through that and I don't aspire to obviously because I tried to be an exemplary citizen. But you know given the fact that this program would be removed I almost felt criminalized in a way you know. I felt like why me or why everybody who's trying to become successful and try to aspire to greatness, to try to move the needle forward, to try and you know go above and beyond to make a great impact in this country. Like why would anybody rescind that opportunity, right? It just doesn't make, there's no logic behind that. And despite the fact that I had to deal with my own kind of mental not breakdowns necessarily but just being more hyper aware like you mentioned. That there was and there could be the consequence would be that I would not finish the program which would which would have made me really upset which would have blew up which would have made me lose hope.”

Systems of Professional Support

Amid much confusion and worry, Joaquin expressed gratitude towards a specific advisor who encouraged him to not give up by stating, “I was empowered by an advisor who empowered

me by letting me know what anything I needed, she was there for me. Specifically, in the year 2017 when DACA was rescinded, Joaquin found support in his professors who encouraged him during this difficult time “quote necessary.” Additionally, Joaquin expressed tremendous gratitude towards a DREAM Center located at his university where “the staff running the center are empathetic towards the cause, letting me know about scholarships...”

“I had very many mentors to support me in the process. My adviser who worked over with me through my capstone project which is like the master’s thesis really helped solidify my decision to even attend graduate school. In spite of having to push through those barriers because she empowered me by letting me know that there was anything I needed in terms of support, she would always be there for me. I had professors who have also, kind of approached me to give me support in terms of like when the DACA was rescinded back in 2017 in the fall of 2017.”

Cultural Capital

Joaquin’s experiences provide a depth of knowledge regarding the many forms of capital utilized as he completed his postgraduate degree. He describes strategically seeking resources, building professional networks of support and relying on research-based philosophies such as Yosso’s (2005) theory of Cultural Wealth Capital to empower himself as he advocates for his community. He describes,

“I think the one that helped me the most in graduate school, was definitely cultural capital. You know as a first-generation student. I am the first in my family to even aspire to get a graduate degree or postgraduate degree. And to me that is very powerful, knowing that where I come from. My family obviously my parents are both, they don't have bachelor’s degrees even though they're working blue collar jobs and sort of

janitorial working settings. But knowing that I can aspire to greatness and that the country has given me opportunities to thrive and to really use my skills to the maximum. I've been very fortunate to have been awarded several different scholarships over the past as well as a graduate assistantship which has covered my tuition thanks to my DACA status, which is positive because had it not been for DACA I would definitely not have been able to take advantage of that opportunity.

Inspired by Civil Rights Activists

He utilized his philosophy to dissect his own experiences, the higher education system and how he could be an agent of change to create access and more opportunities to other undocumented students to also pursue postgraduate degrees. Joaquin realized that sharing his knowledge regarding social capital with his peers and community can create positive change across Utah. He is empowered by civil rights activists and historical leaders when he describes, "I have great examples such as Martin Luther King Jr. Gandhi" as these leaders set a model for him to also "empower others in the process."

"I think that empowers me even more to make change and to really use my social capital in a way that allows me to help not only my family but also my community members and to help other individuals who are in the same boat and to really tell them you know si se puede, even in spite of all these barriers and systemic issues. You know, there you can, the person who really wants to thrive and make a difference will do so regardless of whatever circumstances are available, right. And I look at great examples such as Martin Luther King, Muhammad Gandhi, individuals who have inspired to greatness"

Honoring the Sacrifices of Parents

He honors the sacrifices of his family whom as he describes “my attribution for that degree would probably be for my parents who supported me in the process” Joaquin expressed tremendous gratitude towards cultural wealth as this allowed him to conceptualize the phenomenological impact his parents had in his postgraduate academic attainment. He is proud of having opened a blocked-pathway for members in his family by becoming the first one to graduate with a postgraduate degree in the United States.

“My parents were also a huge support system in the process. Both my mom and dad who have lived here in the States for about 20 years or so really brought me to the US for that reason to empower me to get an education. You know as a first-generation student. I am the first in my family to even aspire to get a graduate degree or postgraduate degree. And to me that is very powerful, knowing that where I come from. My family obviously my parents are both. They don't have bachelor's degrees even though they're working blue collar jobs and sort of janitorial working settings. But knowing that I can aspire to greatness “

A Sense of Community on Campus

For Joaquin, it was critical to feeling that he belonged on campus. Although he faced barriers such as isolation and not belonging during undergraduate school, in his postgraduate program he understood the need for him to build a sense of community among other undocumented students, campus leaders, institutional agents, academic advisers, counselors, staff members at the Dream Center as well as justice-minded student organizations. He realizes the rarity of his academic achievements by saying the following “its difficult because I had to be intentional” when developing relationships among the campus community. Moreover, he

explains “statistically, I am one of those marginalized groups...”. However, building a sense of community on campus allowed him to find valuable financial resources such as eligible scholarships promoted at the Dream Center. Additionally, his mentors guided him to academic resources that would improve his academic writing, as he described “this language is a whole different level”. Therefore, to communicate efficiently in many forms, he attended writing workshops which were advised by his mentors. Furthermore, his academic mentors inspired him to remain focus on academic as he details “it's more than going to class, it is developing a close connection on campus”.

“I feel very empowered by my mentors who have supported me knowing that even though I don't really know what the next day will bring. taking things one day at a time you know for me study groups taking advantage of graduate school resources. Taking advantage of the Dream Center whenever there I'm offering opportunities or even getting involved with meeting with the director of the Dream Center.

Attributes to Academic Attainment

When asked to describe who or what he accredits for his academic success. Joaquin recognizes the role of mentors, advisors, community members, teachers, his high school Alma Mater, college-bound programs such as GEAR UP, cultural wealth capital, his family. As well as a developing transnational identity to continue his exploration to one day have access to the ability to travel abroad either through the reimplementation of the advance parole guidelines or future legislation providing comprehensive solutions to this dilemma. Joaquin provides an in-depth understanding of the numerous factors that played a role in his postgraduate academic attainment. He describes as follows,

“My attribution for that degree would probably be for my parents who supported me in

the process. But also, to my alma mater, so that the people who supported me at my former high school: my counselors, my instructors, and avid which is the college access program, and also to gear up for example Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for undergraduates. Yeah, you know so taking advantage of every opportunity that I had to explore colleges. and so, I would attribute my associate degree to those individuals. For my bachelor's degree it was kind of as it was sort of an extension of my... it's... because my bachelors after two years of study. And I would contribute that to both my parents, my mentors who pushed me to continue on to the University of Utah and get a bachelor's degree in communications. I knew I wanted to attend graduate school which was like my biggest goal in life. To pursue a degree that was what it was...getting it. I would I would I would say that actually my biggest attribute for that particular degree would be...to reach out to me and ask questions about being in panels you know talking about my own example as a student. so, I would say that my community members, my community affiliates, my parents, those mentors who have supported me on campus, including my own faculty who you know that I was still able to sit at the table to complete this master's thesis.”

Kim From California

Kim was born in South Korea, and one of the most essential terms for him is “inclusivity”. The interview took place in the middle of a busy city in California. In the background, could hear traffic, people conversing, yet Kim was extremely concentrated, focus, and shared challenging yet empowering experiences within his postgraduate career. Kim describes being the first in his family to attend an institution of higher education by stating,

“first of all I'm a first-generation and the first one in my family to even go to college and so I have to navigate everything all by myself. And that itself was challenging and both undergrad and grad school. I had limited access of resources and in respect to specifically help being undocumented immigrant youth and so I had to take a lot of initiative and rely on people who have gone through that process in the past”

As such, he was empowered to take the initiative in seeking out the resources, guide and help required to succeed in a postgraduate degree. Furthermore, Kim describes the many challenges he faced by being part of the undocumented Asian community and the many hidden systemic barriers associated with invisibility of this population among undocumented immigrants in the United States. As he further describes, “I didn't have anyone to look up to and so there is no systematic channel of network or access of resources or information were available in the institution.”

Systemic Barriers

Kim describes the role of mental health in postgraduate school as “key not just for academia but personally overall.” During his masters’ studies, he was unaware of the broader concept of mental health as this was a topic often dismissed or not talked about enough. Kim recalls “I did not think about it” however, he is hopefully in future research surrounding this topic and describes it as “its promising and we need more of that” to further understand, support and empower more undocumented students to successfully graduate with postgraduate degrees. Additionally, he expressed the lack of role models within institutionalized agencies such as universities that would provide access to resources specifically for dreamers “I didn't have many role models within the institution”. Kim recalls “a specific dreamer counselor helped me apply

for scholarship, review my application and with their support, I received financial support “which helped him graduate with his master’s degree in public administration. He states,

“I think that finance is a really big piece of getting my master's degree and there's a specific undocumented student counselor. And she was able to help me, how to apply for certain scholarships or certain aid they might be eligible for me while I'm attending the school. And she kind of gave me like step by step process and review my applications and help me successfully to receive the financial aid. And would with her support I was able to graduate from college without so much worrying about finance-related.”

Feeling Invisible and Using Its Power

Kim describes a lonely journey throughout the postgraduate school as he lacked access to significant resources provided to undocumented students with Latinx ethnic backgrounds, as he states,

“in terms of as an Asian undocumented immigrant. I think that was even more invisible within the immigrant community where there are some certain student groups or certain institutions interest institutionalized programs that are available for specific towards Latino/Latina undocumented immigrant students to have access and scholarships or counseling opportunities. I didn't have that in the Asian community. So for me the more difficult to even navigate and tap into those type of resources.”

He further describes how navigating hidden education as an undocumented immigrant from an Asian background led to both a negative and positive impact in his life. Negatively, he describes “a lot of stress is involved” because he lacked role models in positions of power who had similar identities as him. He recalls,

“I didn't have any role models or any mentors that would help me guide after I Graduated from the program or during the program help me navigate either the buying or resources that would help me securing finance and help me success in academia and that has been definitely a challenging task.”

Kim also described the vast amount of mental pressure and stress comprised in navigating a postgraduate degree with even more limited resources given his ethnic background. Although these experiences limited from “absorbing the entire experience,” he felt empowered and determined to achieve his postgraduate degree while also create systematic solutions for undocumented students who come from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Kim further states,

“I think in positive terms; it gave me even more determination to finish college and I want to be a role model to set the groundwork. And so, I took initiative and I identify core issues and problems and I try to solve those problems and you know put in place systematically. Put in place so that the next one in line would not go through those types of struggles that I have gone through. For example, scholarship opportunities. I think that I wanted to make sure that scholarship opportunities are inclusive to all undocumented immigrants.

Redefining Undocumented

For Kim, the social construct of what it means to be undocumented in the United States often ignores the strength, power, and perseverance found in their stories. Kim describes being undocumented as “being resilient, not giving up and find creative ways to achieve whatever dream they desire.” His definition drives away from a consistent deficit model defining undocumented only from a concept of legality. Furthermore, he provides an empowering model

which redefines an undocumented person with key positive attributes essential towards academic, professional, and personal success.

Kim expressed the need for more undocumented students to develop a strong sense of purpose and as meaning as these concepts were essential in redefining his identity as an undocumented student. Moreover, Kim suggests dreamers to “think about the long-term goal” as he describes the backward planning strategy as following “plan out, start with the end”. He found much hope in redefining an identity that often stigmatized, misinterpreted and under-defined his personal story of academic success.

“that's a million-dollar question. And I don't know if I can answer it in a very concise way. I think my definition undocumented always evolves. I think for me right now what it means to be undocumented is being resilient and someone who did not give up. And finding creative ways to achieve whatever dreams that they desire. I now define undocumented means as more of empowerment rather than what specifically as an undocking person going through in this struggle which is the factual truths and that's what folks are going through. But I think I try to pivot in a more positive and positive ways and try to relate in that connotation.”

Social Capital

Kim learned to navigate the higher education system from a multidimensional perspective. He expressed a strong sense of gratitude to the multitudes of people, resources, and empowering factors that helped him succeed in postgraduate school. He defined social capital as a way of empowering others to utilize all sources possible to succeed academically. Kim was empowered to give back to his community and help other undocumented students have access to

stronger forms of capital, which also helped him succeed academically. He described social capital as

“offering your skill set and experiences to others to help advance in academia, or in a career trajectory. I think that, I have tried to utilize my social capital knowledge skills or experiences that I've gained and shared those resources to other undocumented students at conferences by doing workshops, giving presentations. sharing my personal testimony how to navigate the systemic barriers that I've gone through in the past. So, that other folks would at least have the best effective strategies to navigate while they're in that institution.”

Trial and Error

Kim utilized his gained knowledge, experiences to help other undocumented students by providing and attending “conferences, workshop and sharing his personal story” to bring light to the systemic barriers undocumented students experience due to feeling invisible within the undocumented community. When asked where his social capital derived from, he answered:

“I just acquired from just personal experience I think it does a lot of trials and errors and you make mistakes and you make adjustments and find the right path. You also along the way you meet other undocumented folks or your mentors or counselors or supporters and allies and they would pivot in the right direction for you. I think it's simply just kind of going through that path and just along the way you just learn. You just learn from different aspects, whether it's through books or through the media or through mentors. Whatever it might be, I think those accumulated and allowed me to gain that social capital and with that knowledge I wanted to give back. I think that I've been trying to do for the past 10 years.”

Alejandra From Missouri

Alejandra was very insightful in her responses as her approach to higher education involve the life of her two beautiful children. She is brave, highly intelligent, and with the character of a warrior. This interview was filled with emotions and a positive perspective. Alejandra graduated high school in Kansas, and although she had access to in-state tuition laws, she lacked role models in her community who would provide access to information regarding her options at major universities. She started her career at a local community college and then transferred to a private women's college in Missouri where she completed both her undergraduate and postgraduate education.

She finished her undergraduate course requirements by the beginning of her senior year and started her master's programs instead of graduating a year early; she states "I am glad I did but the great part is that I was not just extending college. But I started my master's program".

Low-income Jobs

She recalls experiencing a series of systemic barriers that limited her social mobility, employment opportunities and access to public resources as a young mother with an undocumented immigration status as she recalls, "I did baby-sitting jobs, I was a resident assistant, to help cover my room and board." However, she quickly realized that her postgraduate program required more concentration time to complete the required academic work. Therefore, she focused on looking for financial resources in the forms of private scholarships, institutional assistance as well as graduate assistantships as such her primary financial support came from "keeping up with scholarships and grants."

During the middle of the interview, Alejandra received a call she had to answer as she confirmed an appointment she said: "yes, 4 p.m. sounds great". She follows, "sorry, that was my

therapist, when you are sick you go to the doctor”. She relies on counselors, therapist, and mentors for professional, personal and academic guidance.

“I actually started my master's degree in my senior year in college. I had to get approved. I had to apply I had to be accepted to the master's degree. It was a relatively new master's program that my school was starting and so they were really doing an incentive to try to get their students to go straight into from college to their master's degree”

Social Isolation Due to Social Immobility

One of the significant social barriers Alejandra experienced entailed her limited ability to freely move and navigate to different places since during postgraduate school since she could not have a driver’s license. She recalls a time when she was on her way to school, driving with her child in her car and she feared being separated from her children as she described,

“I drove but I couldn't drive, right. So, even driving to school, I made a risk every day. I didn't have a driver’s license. I was actually I was I was pregnant or with the baby at a time and that was it. I mean it was a very depressing time. I stayed at home with my kiddo.”

The lack of social mobility led Alejandra into social isolation which caused her great deals of worry, depression, and stress every time she had to drive. She continued, “I was terrified to drive and get pulled over and that meant having consequences.” Although she has grown up in the United States she feared for her safety and that of her children as she further describes “consequences that could result in losing my child to the hands of DHS” as she referred to the Department of Homeland Security.

“I was juggling a baby, while I had my master's degree and at the time, I was terrified to drive with him because I was scared, I was going to get pulled over. If I got pulled over

what that could mean ready. I never wanted it to be a situation where I got pulled over and what if they like you know I got arrested. I didn't know the consequences of that and then my child would be in the hands of DHS”

Alejandra recalls the intense levels of fear and anxiety, which driving without a driver's license caused in her mental well-being. The idea of losing her child led her to drive only for a significant occasion, which further resulted in her isolation and that of her family. Additionally, these emotions happened while expected to perform academically, which for her safety and that of her child also led her to keep her immigration status hidden. She further describes,

“I couldn't drive, right. So, even driving to school I made a risk every day. I didn't have a driver's license. I was actually I was I was pregnant or with the baby at a time and that was it. I mean I remember that.. I mean it was a very depressing time. It was very you know I stayed at home with my kiddo I did my master's degree. I maybe only had like three weeks break from when I had my baby too, I didn't really have a break right. And I was just kind of very isolated”

Breaking Through Breakdowns

Alejandra expressed experiencing many emotional barriers as she completed her postgraduate degree due to the lack of legal immigration status before the implementation of DACA. She further describes,

“I remember my big struggle was just like dealing with depression during that time and still being able to do my schoolwork you know. But I think I did since high school and I did that since college. There were times when emotionally it was difficult for me to even want to do my work and I felt depressed”

She continues to describe how staying up all night to study in the middle of these

Breakdowns also triggered time where she cried; however, it was during these tough and challenging times that she recalls how she would “then build me up and then continue to do work”. Furthermore, Alejandra expressed various sentiments of stress and worry during successful times as she recalls, “it was mainly during successful times that I had breakdowns, around the time of a test, or an achievement, during a time you definitely don’t want to have a breakdown” and as such she was astray from having a full postgraduate academic experience due to the many systemic barriers she experiences due to her immigration status. Additionally, she recalls the day of her graduation from postgraduate school because “the day of graduation, I felt sad because I was unable to work”

“Whenever I graduated with my masters, I was graduating, and I was sad that day like it didn't feel like it accomplished. But you know they you know you have RESEARCHERS I get up and say things and they said that only 9 percent of the world that has a master's degree and even with those statistics like that just didn't feel like an accomplishment to me that day. I knew that I wasn't going to be able to work after”

A Personal Obligation: My Duty to My Parents

Alejandra showed power and emotions expressed through body language, facial expressions, and tears of joy during our interview. Alejandra honors and celebrates the many sacrifices her parents have made to help her achieve her postgraduate and feels a great sense of personal responsibility to return the savings her family invested in her education. She recalls,

“I think a lot of what kept me going was this duty to my parents right. Yes, the duty to my dreams. But mostly a duty to my parents. They believed in me even though we all knew that I possibly was not even going to be able to work, be able to drive people to

anything. Yet they still invested in me. They still paid for that college even though it took all of their money to pay for my college”

Alejandra described how her parents supported her financially throughout the years because they wanted the best for her. Now, she feels an active duty and responsibility to support her parents. She states,

“I feel like in the long run, my obligation is almost more to take care of my parents, and make sure that they're OK. They don't have Social Security waiting for them. They don't have disability. They don't have Medicaid, Medicare right. So, they have done all of this for me, whether it was going to be me or not. And I want to take care of them especially as they age.”

This personal sense of duty and obligation continues to motivate Alejandra to represent her family among professional networks to assure that other undocumented immigrant families also have access to the resources which ones empowered her to complete a postgraduate degree. She further states, “I'm thankful for the support and I think also I felt an obligation to continue to succeed to continue”.

An Educator Impacted My Life

Alejandra recalls an educator who made a huge difference in her upbringing. She recalls that “It was an elementary teacher who would pick us up in her car during the snow because we didn't have a car to go to school” as she further described how grateful she was that this teacher went far and beyond the typical responsibilities of an educator. This great impact has led Alejandra to continue to remain connected with this educator as she describes “we are still connected, I send her pictures of my children, I tell her how I am doing.” My Message To other Dreamers Seeking Postgraduate Degrees, “If there is something you want to do, do it.” As she

further explains, “sometimes it is better to ask for forgiveness than for permission” As she further inspires, “I am going to do this because I am not allowed to do this” as she reminisces about her postgraduate academic experience and the numerous systemic barriers that limited yet did not stop her. “I am going to create opportunities for myself.”

“I did have an elementary school teacher that would pick us up when it snowed because we didn't have a car. She would go above and beyond. She'd bring us like Christmas presents. I mean she knew that there was a need. And she went above and beyond what a teacher would do you know and I still stay connected with her”

This elementary teacher-supported Alejandra by helping her further develop her academic language, and she invited Alejandra to attend summer school to work on their spelling, grammar, and other English language structures. She further describes continuing to be connected with her elementary teacher as she now considers her teacher as a mentor and life-long friend. It was the empowerment of people such as her teacher who cared about her well-being during times of extreme cold. As well as her academic language development that played a significant role in higher education achievements as Alejandra as her appreciation and gratitude towards educators remained because of this one educator who cares about her life beyond the classroom walls.

Diana

When asked about her experiences with systemic barriers in law school, Diana provided Various examples of how financial barriers played a challenging role in her postgraduate careers due to the limitations associated with the lack of immigration status. She describes systemic barriers as institutional and intentionally created to limit the ability of undocumented students who aspire to pursue higher education. In this interview, she provides valuable insights regarding

the numerous financial barriers she experienced due to the lack of legal immigration status to apply for financial aid resources or have the ability to work legally. Furthermore, she describes as follow,

“at least by definition, I would think that a system a systemic barrier is something that has always been in place and because the system wasn't built obviously for DREAMers or people who are undocumented or who don't have the same resources as other students who traditionally go into these pipes. I would think a systemic barrier something that they may have not put in place on purpose, but which prevents you from going forward and you know in school and in your career for the basic fact that these systems were not built for you”

Realism

Diana explains the importance of being realistic and understanding one's limitations. However, she further described realism as an obstruction that often limited her to reach her full potential. She further states,

“Ok so you Utah and people are actually often surprised how good they are, not even just our resources, but how good people are helping, especially dreamers. There's a lot of realism here you know. Like, how are you going to pay for stuff and so you have people who want to help you. Counselors, people you might meet at the Law School, who want to help you. They were the same people I was talking to before I even applied who were like, you need to understand that you will not be able to practice. You are going to have a really hard time paying for this and you need to think about that. It was a little harsh and I thought oh like this could definitely be a barrier for students who whose personality is

kind of like oh well maybe this isn't the best idea and maybe you start having doubts. As opposed to being like, oh well look I don't really care what you have to say. Another thing is a very white community obviously. Well, we have communities of color here. It's majority white and LDS.

Diana describes how other undocumented students who might come from outside the state of Utah could experience severe challenges due to the social and cultural climate of the state. She details,

“So, I think for dreamers who are not usually Mormon, it's a little bit harder to network sometimes, especially in higher ed where the majority of students are white, or they come from affluent families. Here you don't have as much of that in that sense. You don't have as much of that sense of community like “Oh I know a ton of people who are trying you know who are Latin”. Not even undocumented, just like Latin, who are trying to go to law school or trying to go to grad school”

Academic Language and Social Capital

Diana explained how strong academic language proficiency empowered her to succeed in higher education. She describes the importance of learning this style of language to further communicate with professors, advisers, and other figures of authority who can play an influential role. She further describes academic language as a form of social capital by stating as follow,

“I think social capital language was probably the biggest thing. So, being able to talk like other people, being able to not just in an educational setting, but a social setting, was huge. Getting into certain social circles in law school is just as important as getting good grades. My parents are immigrants and they've always had a really hard job. So, to me

having a hardworking family, who has given so much helped pushed me a lot during law school. So, part of the only reason that I was able to get through my first year of law school because DACA hadn't even come through when I started law school.”

Parental Financial Support

Diana describes the serious financial contributions her family made towards her education by investing their life savings. She further details the sacrifices made by her parents as follow,

“My mom had saved a ton of money and gave me all of her life savings to pay for my first year. I think without having that resource and like someone who literally believes in you so much that's willing to just like give you everything they made. I have no idea how I would have paid for my first year of law school at all. Mentors, I think was social capital, having people who just invest time in you and who care about what you're doing. Who check on you and who you can talk to when things are going really hard. [Mentors] who not only have advice like “oh you can do it and it's OK” but who have actual like “this is who you need to talk to” and here's someone here's some resources I found you”.

Paying Attention to the Mind

When describing the role of mental health in academic attainment, Diana seeks to educate other undocumented students to not ignore such an important aspect of life. She describes how she struggled to understand the importance of taking care of her due to her desire to complete her postgraduate degree. She further details that,

“So, if you would have asked me when I was law school, I would have said it's very important, I guess. But now I'm like wow it is so important. Mainly because I'm one of

those people who's really good at not even hiding their emotions, but like pushing them off to the side until you absolutely have to deal with them. All of a sudden, I'm like wow I have a lot of mental health stuff to deal with that I didn't even realize. I was kind of masking, so I think it's insanely important for people who have to have others to talk to about it. I would have laughed if someone is like you need to talk to your therapist. You talk to someone about these like I would've been like “yeah right, I'm not talking anyone”. I always think like why I didn't want to talk about it. I think part of it's also a cultural thing. You know I feel like it's kind of a taboo to talk about mental health in Latin community. Even growing up you know someone starts acting a little weird or getting depressed. Everyone's like esta deprimido. Like the they brush it off like there's something wrong with them or like they obviously can't handle what they're doing”

Systems of Support

Diana attributed her postgraduate academic success to the numerous mentors, teachers, peers, and advisers who helped her successfully graduate from law school in the state of Utah. She further details the key role her parents had in her education as they provided encouragement, financial support as well as high academic expectations. She details,

“that would probably be multiple things, it would be my parents and the way they raised us. My dad would [talk] to me specifically like well “you're going to college”. It was never a question of if I'm going to college. It was always like when you go to college. Do you know which college are you going to go to? Even back when my family had zero resources to ever get us into college like I just continuously hearing like “you're gonna do good” and “you're gonna go to school” just made me feel like it was a given. It was gonna happen and we were going to find a way to do it anyway. My dad would always

buy me books and encourage me to you know to read more, into to study more. I think that made the biggest difference having somebody almost condition me to think that education was the most important thing that was gonna happen to me. Besides that, mentors, I don't know how I found these incredible people who just at the hardest times would we just like help me figure out what I was going to do. People who made me feel like all the things that seem so hard were actually not that hard, those people I think made a huge difference in my life”

Empowering Dreamers to Succeed

Diana feels a strong sense of responsibility to empower other undocumented students to succeed academically. Despite the limitations and systemic barriers, Diana is inspired to help other students to graduate with postgraduate degrees. She provides a message of hope and optimism for dreamers who aspire to become attorneys in the United States. She further describes,

“I would probably tell them the same thing I was telling my friend who was like I want to go to law school, but it's too much and I just don't know if I do it. I just said don't look if you really want something, don't think twice about it. Even though you're undocumented you know you have additional barriers and other people. If you can't find a way, other people will help you find a way. Like there's nothing that you can't overcome. You know financial stuff like there's money somewhere whether it's private donors or scholarships, there's a way. You know there's always a solution, take less classes so that you have the money. Time is going to pass regardless of whether you're doing this thing or not. For every barrier, there's a loophole or there's a solution and you'll find a way. Decide on what you want, then make a plan and pivot.”

Kevin

Kevin describes his experiences from an optimistic framework hoping to inspire other undocumented students to pursue higher education despite the numerous systemic barriers. Although he acknowledges the many challenges and obstacles, he remains optimistic in providing solutions to the systemic barriers explored in this study.

Access to Financial Resources

When asked to describe the systemic barriers experienced in postgraduate school, Kevin echoed financial limitations as a significant hurdle. However, he also expressed a strong sense of positivism. He expressed a strong sense of optimism as he further describes,

“I feel like I didn’t have a lot of barrier because in the way my situation is different because I worked for a Cal State University. I was given the opportunity to get financial support through my work. So pretty much I was getting financial help from my institution. I worked at CSU and I attended CSU for my masters. So pretty much they paid almost all of my tuition. So, in terms of a systemic or financial barrier that wasn't a barrier for me because I was actually paid part of my tuition. With the other part of my school expenses in terms of my tuition. I paid using the California Dream Act. The California Dream Act is pretty much state financial aid for undocumented students here in California. It gave me like a thousand five hundred to pay for the rest of my tuition”

Familiarity with Postgraduate Culture

Kevin explains the importance of utilizing the knowledge learned and developed in undergraduate to navigate postgraduate school. He further describes the need to become involved on campus by seeking employment opportunities that could further access to resources, networks, and various forms of social capital. He further states,

“So, for me, I would say it could be beneficial for undocumented students, for dreamer to have connections with the school that you are attending. I mean for me it was really it was not that difficult because I know I wasn't a member of the university and I pretty much knew the policies and stuff like that. So, for me it was not it was a struggle to earn a master's degree. Because everything that I learned from my undergrad and being a staff member at the university. I knew where things were, so for me it was not difficult.”

Friends and Peers

Kevin explain the need to surround oneself with a strong network of friends and peers to rely on to succeed personally, academically, and professionally. He further describes as follow,

“I had a friend that she also applied [to the program] and she's a citizen and we were classmates. We actually worked together at the university that we worked. We always took classes together, we carpooled together, we studied together. So, I had this support system, having that friend, especially when writing a thesis, while being there for each other. That's why I feel like I didn't really have like a lot of barriers in grad school because there was always someone somewhere, someone listening to me”

Breaking the Stigma

For Kevin, the concept of mental health is one he takes very seriously. His master's degrees are in the field of counseling. He aspires to help undocumented students surpass the many emotional and psychological challenges by remaining positive and developing creative solutions to succeed in higher education. He further describes the role of mental health in academic attainment as follow,

“There's a lack of mental health within academia and undocumented students or Dreamers or DACA recipients. That is one of the things that I really want to do, I want to

explore. I want to document some of the stories of dreamers that go through school. Whether it's bachelors, masters or something like that that deals with mental health. I feel that coming from where we come from you know. The Latino community feels like we are locos, that we are crazy, and we have that stigma, that label. That if you go see a counselor that means that you are loco, that you are crazy, but it's not. That is something that we have to address within our community.”

Aspiring a Better Life

Kevin describes his compassion and understanding towards the undocumented community by detailing how undocumented students are people who aspire better lives and for such reason, migrated to the United States. He further states,

“There are different undocumented statuses. Someone could be an undocumented person coming from another country with a visa and overstaying the visa then that person becomes undocumented. Another one is someone who came to this country running from their country because there is violence, natural disasters, war and then there is other people coming because they want a better life.”

Attributes of Academic Attainment

Kevin expressed a sincere and robust sense of appreciation towards his religious beliefs thus accrediting them for his academic success. He describes as follow,

“So, first my faith, I'm very religious so Dios, la Virgencita. Second, my parents and the sacrifices that they made. I would say my success is because of them and because of the sacrifices that that they did.

Additionally, Kevin expressed admiration and respect towards the sacrifices his parents made to help him succeed academically. He further details,

“I remember when I came home you know I remember seeing my mom, my dad waking up really early, like 5 or 6 in the morning and going to work. Then getting home like at 7 or 6 p.m. Then just having little time, trying to enjoy each other and spend some time with us. So, seeing those sacrifices that they made and that community that surrounded me and my siblings”

Furthermore, he accredits the numerous mentors who played a significant role in his Higher education journey, as he additionally states, “my mentors played a big role in all my success. Always learning from different people that everything is possible.”

Creating Postgraduate Pathways

For Kevin, it is imperative to give back and help other undocumented students succeed academically. He shares his gained knowledge with friends, peers, students, and with the community with the full intent of increasing the higher education matriculation rates among undocumented students in the state of California. His advocacy is represented in the following expression as he describes,

“I already placed another dreamer into the master’s program that I just finished, that I will be finishing up a few days. I let him know that other opportunities to finance your education. There are scholarships, private scholarships, fundraisers, finding a job that actually pays for your school. My experience with him, from a dreamer to another dreamer, there is going to be like a lot of doubts that if is going to be worth it. I tell him “hey you know, your education, no one will take away your education. Just go for it. Always go see a counselor. Always do the best that you can.”

Summary

The lives of the participants in this study serve as a living testament that undocumented students are capable of graduating with postgraduate degrees despite the numerous systemic barriers limiting such courageous population. Furthermore, the findings of this study reveal the strength, perseverance, and dedication undocumented students have towards achieving postgraduate degrees. As the field of undocumented students in higher education continues to evolve, these experiences provide the real voices of dreamers who despite the challenges successfully navigated the system of higher education as they continue to give back to their communities by inspiring other dreamers to succeed academically.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The narratives of our participants provide a unique perspective into the lives of eight dreamers who despite the numerous financial, social, emotional and psychological barriers they experienced throughout their academic careers, they managed to successfully graduate with their postgraduate degrees. Within the deferred action program, six of the eight participants were able to benefit from being able to obtain a driver's license, work for a period of two years as well as expressing some relief from the fear of deportation. Moreover, two of the eight participants were granted legal permanent residency and had the opportunity to travel internationally as well as not having to renew their documentation every two years as continues to be the case for DACA recipients. Despite their individual minimal benefits, the current national rhetoric surrounding undocumented immigrants reflects one of dehumanization and criminalization as represented by actions such as the repeal of DACA in 2017 and Arizona's Proposition 300 in 2007.

The findings of our study documents the experiences of eight self-identified dreamers who despite a series of financial, social, emotional, and psychological barriers managed to successfully graduate with postgraduate degrees in Arizona, California, Massachusetts, Missouri, Texas and Utah. All of the eight-dreamer expressed their experiences of having faced a series of systemic barriers due to policies such as proposition 300 in Arizona and the repealing of DACA in 2017, which limited their ability to access in-state tuition rates, renew their driver's license, and reapply for a two-year work authorization. Amazingly, their stories reveal a deep sea of motivation, support and personal perseverance by refusing to give up and instead, pursue their

dream of completing their postgraduate studies. Furthermore, these narratives uncover how the participants' family investment towards their education played a significant role in their postgraduate achievement. A deeper appreciation of their family's long-term sacrifices furthers their desire to return the investment on the years of financial capital they received towards their postgraduate academic attainment. Additionally, they amplify the importance of mentors while highlighting the key role professional support networks such as lawyers, church networks, academic advisers as well as therapist had throughout their personal, academic and professional lives.

As best described by Huberman (1994), "qualitative data, with their emphasis on people's lived experience", are fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meaning to the social world around them" (p.10). By reporting the unique experiences of these eight dreamers, this study provides valuable insights to the field of research regarding undocumented students in higher education. More studies are needed to further explore the experiences as well as the key attributes dreamers with different demographics and individual differences accredit for the postgraduate academic success.

Summary

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore, analyze and document the experiences of undocumented students who successfully completed postgraduate degrees from institutions of higher education in the United States. A brief description of the findings linked to each individual research question is presented below.

Guiding Research Question 1

- How do dreamers describe the financial and social barriers they experience while pursuing postgraduate degrees?

All eight participants expressed having experienced a series of financial barriers in postgraduate school due to the lack of full citizenship status and the benefits associated with such legality. In summary, the participants shared experiences regarding their options to work as many of them held low paying jobs such as babysitting and working in residence halls and restaurants while holding college degrees. A subtheme presented in the findings is the issue of Denied-Approved Access. Dreamers by law were granted certain legal and education rights such as access to in-state tuition, a driver's license, work-authorization, scholarships, graduate assistantships, stipends as well as other types of financial aid; however, denied-approved access, indicates the many financial barriers the participants experienced due to the repeal of the deferred action program as well as state policies such as Proposition 300 in the Arizona. Students expressed great amounts of stress from knowing that their parents were utilizing their life savings to help them afford their postgraduate education. Even though, they expressed to have had extremely hardworking parents who came from humble background and did not produce sufficient money; their parents still invested in their education as described by Alejandra.

Victoria describes an experience where inaccurate information and lack of responsibility from institutional agents caused a traumatic experience where she was almost prevented from receiving funding and attending postgraduate school. The participants in this study also expressed frustrations with lacking the ability to qualify for federal aid even though they had lived in the United States for most of their lives. Moreover, meeting federal guidelines associated with citizenship status blocked them from accessing valuable resources that would allow them

the time to focus on their postgraduate education. Furthermore, they described lacking access to paid professional internships outside the country that would allow them to grow professionally, personally, culturally and socially.

Socially

All participants expressed to have experienced many social barriers throughout their postgraduate education due to either the lack of legal status before DACA or their liminal benefits associated with either being a legal permanent resident and a recipient of an administrative program such as deferred action. A major theme found in their experiences is captured in the metaphor of “Navigating Isolated Terrains”. This metaphor reflects how first-generation postgraduate students experienced social isolation as well as lack of support from key networks. Their hyperawareness associated with sharing their immigration status to figures of authority such as institutional agents or members from professional networks was an impeding factor to their success as well.

Alejandra reported experiencing fears associated with driving without a driver’s license and the possibility of been separated from her children. The lack of access to a driver’s license limited her social mobility and lead to social isolation. Moreover, Daniel explained the lack of adult mentors in his life to guide him in how to complete his postgraduate career; in fact, he expressed to have felt negative attitudes from older community leaders as they saw him achieve recognition from his community and across the nation for his civic engagement. Joaquin expressed uncertainty about future implementations of policies and whether or not he would have the ability to freely work since he constantly has to explain his immigration status, social benefits and highly complicated immigration policies to future employers.

Kim described that as an undocumented student from an Asian background he often felt socially invisible even among undocumented-led organizations thus affecting his ability to find valuable resources to help him navigate his higher education. Diana wished she would have known that many of her peers from high school were also dreamers now that they have opened up about their status due to being recipients of DACA. Not knowing the peers in similar position as oneself, can further explain the disconnect among peer to peer social networks of dreamers. Uncertainties associated with “Denied-Approve Access” added to the social and psychological barriers for these dreamers. For example, Daniel was forced to pay out-of-state tuition after having been approved-access to in-state tuition rates in Arizona in year 2007. Additionally, with the repealing of DACA, all the participants expressed stress, worry, and frustration due to their needs to housing, food, transportation, tuition and basic living expenses without the ability to obtain a work-authorization or driver’s license.

Guiding Research Question 2

- How do dreamers describe the emotional and psychological barriers they experience while pursuing postgraduate degrees?

All eight participants expressed a great deal of concern associated with emotional and psychological barriers experienced in postgraduate school. The expressed feelings were associated with depression, fear of deportation, loneliness, hyperawareness, social isolation, stigma, identity-conflicts, and feelings associated with failures. For example, Alejandra lacked the ability to utilize her master’s in business administration degree since DACA was not yet implemented. She expressed great frustration, stress and worry over the constant risk she experiences due to driving without a driver’s license and the consequences of being separated from her family by the Department of Homeland Security. Furthermore, Joaquin remembers

feeling intense fears when he heard DACA had been rescinded since he saw his future shatter. He knew he could not afford postgraduate school without being able to use his master's in educational leadership to find jobs to afford the postgraduate education.

Diana and Victoria both expressed trying to always set aside their worries, stress and anxieties to prevent these worries impede them from succeeding academically. Moreover, they both expressed the difficulty of dealing with many of these emotions during postgraduate school. Kim further explained that he did not reach out for emotional support as these types of resources and conversations surrounding mental health are not usually talked about among the undocumented community. Diana further explained the stigma associated with being an undocumented student as a major contributor for not seeking out counseling or other types of emotional support. Joaquin, for example, recalled feeling depressed due to the repeal of DACA since he would lose his tuition waiver jeopardizing his dream of postgraduate education.

Despite the many financial, social, emotional and psychological barriers the participants in this study experienced, they managed to successfully graduate with postgraduate degrees from institutions of higher education. They demonstrated a great sense of appreciation for assets, gratitude towards their support system, and were empowered by the numerous kinds of support their parents provided them throughout their higher education careers.

Guiding Research Question 3

- To whom or to what do dreamers attribute their postgraduate attainment?

All eight participants expressed the high value they placed on higher education. Moreover, they described the realization of the long-term investment their parents have made in their higher education. Additionally, they expressed having a professional network of support as

imperative. The ability to intentionally seek out mentorship, resources, and building long lasting relationships with peers and educators was considered instrumental in achieving their goals.

The concept of Generational Capital can describe the many forms of capital found across many generations that inspired, empowered and supported these dreamers to successfully graduate with their postgraduate degrees. The concept describes the many financial contribution their parents made towards their education. As the participants gained access to professional careers as attorneys, business owners and higher education administrators, they started returning the investments parents and others had shared for their success.

Consistent with the reported literature, all eight participants expressed a sincere, deep, and intense gratitude towards educators, counselors and high school staff who made their high school experience one where attending college was indeed possible. Moreover, they described how peer-to-peer mentoring helped them process some of the most difficult times. Furthermore, they all agreed that friends played a key role in supporting them throughout some of their most difficult times.

Exploring the Four Main Themes

First, Returned Investment on Parental Financial Support emerged from the series of examples each participant provided regarding the financial and emotional support their families provided them with throughout their postgraduate education. Additionally, they expressed a deep desire to take care of their families financially and support them as they become older and need help. Second, Individual Sacrifices as a Form of Capital exposes the numerous sacrifices each dreamer made throughout their higher education. Moreover, Individual sacrifices inspired the participants as a form of capital that empowered them to not give up by digging strength and guidance in reflecting on the sacrifices of their parents, communities, as well as prior generations

such as a *abuelas y abuelos*- Grandparents. Third, Professional Networks of Support were highly echoed to have been influential in providing key resources, mentorship and opportunities that changed their lives. Finally, The Hope of Creating a Generational Impact was amplified as the participants expressed their strong desire to serve, lead and give back to their own families, communities, parents, children, families in native countries, as well as other undocumented students. The participants expressed how their individual success could lead to economic and social opportunities for the loved ones as well as future generations and other undocumented students.

Recommendations

The recommendations presented in this dissertation derived from the actual voices, experiences and stories reported in the findings of this study. Furthermore, this study acknowledges that postgraduate school might seem impossible to achieve due the numerous systemic barriers, current anti-immigrant sentiment and policies restricting undocumented students from accessing higher education. However, the following recommendations seek to provide a road map of research-based ideas that can transform what may seem impossible into a new reality. Based on our participants stories and voices, we provide a list of recommendations below:

1. Undocumented students who aspire to pursue postgraduate degrees should consider creating a strong professional network of support to create meaningful relationships and have access to resources that can result in matriculating and consequently graduating from their postgraduate programs.

2. Undocumented students who aspire to pursue postgraduate degree should consider the financial support their families have invested in their higher education as a form of inspiration and empowerment to continue with their higher education aspirations.
3. Undocumented students who aspire to pursue postgraduate degrees should consider the sacrifices their parents have made by migrating to the United States as a facilitator for them to reach their ambitions.
4. Undocumented students who aspire to pursue postgraduate degrees should consider recognizing their individual sacrifices as a form of capital similar to how their parents' sacrifices had a positive impact in their upbringing, their sacrifices also play a significant role in postgraduate academic attainment.
5. As more dreamers continue to graduate from postgraduate degrees, it is imperative for more research to further explore how their experiences continue to evolve as they continue to experience the benefits of new legal immigration status.
6. More dreamers with postgraduate degrees should consider documenting the stories of undocumented immigrants in the United States to advance the field of research in this area and provide advocacy for the unprivileged groups in our society in the current hostile climate.
7. Institutions of higher education should consider collaborating with Dreamers to provide professional development to university staff on how to advance their efforts in supporting their postgraduate careers and trajectories.
8. Policymakers should consider legislating on a federal legislation that would provide a permanent solution to the numerous systemic barriers undocumented immigrants continue to experience on a daily basis due to the lack of legal immigration status.

9. More U.S. States should create laws providing access to institutions of higher education for undocumented students and concentrate financial resources, human capital and event programming in supporting the higher aspirations of dreamers.
10. Parents should continue to invest in the postgraduate aspirations of their children as the many economic and social benefits associated with graduating with a postgraduate degree seek to guarantee life-long profit for all.
11. Undocumented students should know that despite the numerous systemic barriers ahead, graduating with a postgraduate degree is possible as reported in the experiences of the dreamers in this study.
12. Undocumented students should continue to believe in their higher educational dreams while pursuing careers that would lead them to postgraduate degrees.

Limitations of the Study

Several factors served as limiting variables to this study. First, the sample size for this dissertation does not provide a broader contextualization for the more extensive experiences that undocumented students experience in postgraduate school. Moreover, the lack of research explicitly studying the lives of undocumented students pursuing postgraduate school prevented this study to build upon a strong literature background. Additionally, although the use of technology such as the internet and skype interviews allow for flexibility, this also served as a limiting factor as the researcher believes that personal interviews would have provided deeper meaning when analyzing non-linguistic cues as well as verbal expressions. Moreover, this study was limited by the number of interviews conducted.

Implications for Future Research

Every year more and more undocumented students continue to graduate from high schools without the legal ability to matriculate at institutions of higher education such as colleges and universities due to their lack of immigration status. Grounded on the findings of this study, the following suggestions seek to advance the field of research by providing professional, intellectual and research-based implications for future study exploring the lives of dreamers with postgraduate degrees in the United States.

- It is imperative for researchers to study across the experiences of undocumented students in higher education across nationalities by intentionally exploring the lives of students across the world beyond the countries found in the continent of America.
- Conduct studies with larger samples of dreamers to achieve a deeper understanding of their unique stories, experiences and real voices.
- Acknowledge the diversity among participants of Latinx backgrounds as different nationalities account for diverse experiences.
- Create interview protocols filled with sensitivity when exploring the emotional and psychological barriers undocumented students in higher education experience.
- Use longitudinal studies to explore how dreamers during different stages in their education navigate multidimensional systemic barriers.
- Further investigate how professional networks of support provide systemic avenues for dreamers to matriculate in postgraduate programs specifically in states where in-state tuition policies restrict undocumented students to attend institutions of higher education such as Arizona and Missouri

- Explore the experiences of undocumented students in higher education by applying different theoretical frameworks and with both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Aguilar 2019).
- Conduct more research exploring how a national pipeline of DREAM Centers at colleges and universities can further increase access to resources that can minimize the many systemic barriers undocumented students in higher education experience as they navigate the system.
- Provide further research that studies how dreamers experience emotional and psychological perspective from a lens that promotes healing, progress and empowerment.
- Create research that would increase dialogue between institutional agents at colleges and universities and the voices of undocumented students by exposing ways in which higher education systems can collaborate with social justice organizations on behalf of dreamers.
- Further explore a historical, political and social background of the participants ethnic background as well as a deeper lens which contextualizes the environment in which the participants grew up in their native countries.
- Explore how dreamers' perception of giving back to their families in their native countries connects to a larger field of research surrounding Internationalism.
- Develop research that further advance a conversation regarding the need for professional development specifically associated to better understanding, serving and supporting undocumented students in postgraduate programs.
- Further explore how dreamers with postgraduate schools continue to create a difference in their communities via professional opportunities such as employment, owning their own business and having the ability to travel internationally.

- Conduct more studies on dreamers with postgraduate degrees who are also parents and explore how their higher education could have made an impact in their own families.

Conclusions

The participants in this study all demonstrated to have experienced a series of systemic barriers that limited their ability to fully concentrate on their postgraduate careers. However, and despite the numerous social challenges and political hurdles, the participants in this study managed to successfully graduate with postgraduate degrees thus creating a pathway for other undocumented students to continue to aspire to further their academic careers by pursuing careers in postgraduate school. Furthermore, this study highlighted the importance of parents, mentors, teachers, educators, friends, undocumented-peers, social justice organizations and individual perseverance on the success of undocumented students.

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ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Abrego	I can't go to college because I don't have papers": Incorporation patterns of Latino undocumented youth	2006
Abrego	Legal Consciousness of Undocumented Latinos: Fear and Stigma as Barriers to Claims-Making for First- and 1.5-Generation Immigrants	2011
Abrego	Legitimacy, Social Identity, and the Mobilization of Law: The Effects of Assembly Bill 540 on Undocumented Students in California	2008
Abrego	Renewed optimism and spatial mobility: Legal consciousness of Latino deferred action for childhood arrivals recipients and their families in Los Angeles	2018
Abrego and Gonzales	Blocked Paths, Uncertain Futures: The Postsecondary Education and Labor Market Prospects of Undocumented Latino Youth	2010
Aguilar	Undocumented Critical Theory	2019
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Yosso	Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth	2005

APPENDIX A

RECRUITING EMAIL

Howdy,

My name is Jose Luis Zelaya, and I am currently a Ph.D. Candidate at Texas A&M University. I am contacting you because I am interested in conducting a study with you as a potential participant. My study title is: "Exploring the Lives of Undocumented Students who Successfully Graduated with Postgraduate Degrees from Institutions of Higher Education in the United States." You are identified as a potential candidate to participate in this national dissertation study. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and anonymous. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

If you choose to participate, you would be participating in a two-week research study comprised of three online interviews.

If you have any questions, concerns or would like to know more information, please feel free to contact me at joseluis1987@tamu.edu and 713-837-6970.

Respectfully,

Jose Luis Zelaya
Ph.D. Candidate
Texas A&M University

APPENDIX B

INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Research Study: Exploring the Lives of Undocumented Students who Successfully Graduated with Postgraduate Degrees from Institutions of Higher Education in the United States.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Eslami

Contact Information for P.I.: zrasekh@tamu.edu

Investigator: Jose Luis Zelaya, Ph.D. Candidate

Supported By: This research is supported by Texas A&M University

Why are you being invited to take part in a research study?

You are being asked to participate because you meet the purposeful sampling criteria associated with the specific population this dissertation study seeks to study.

What should you know about a research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask any questions related to the research and your participation before making a decision to participate. **Who can I talk to?**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at joseluis1987@tamu.edu and or 713-837-6970

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Texas A&M Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may talk to them at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636, or by email at irb@tamu.edu, if

- You cannot reach the research team.
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to study the lives of undocumented students who successfully graduate with postgraduate degrees from institutions of higher education in the United States. The vision is to explore and report on their experiences, stories and real voices.

As more undocumented students continue to graduate from high school across the United States, it is imperative for more research to continue to document the experiences of undocumented students in higher education.

How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in this research study for two weeks. During these two weeks, three online interviews will be conducted each lasting between 45-75 minutes.

How many people will be studied?

We expect to enroll about 8 people in this national research study.

What happens if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research”?

- Participate in three online interviews
- Share personal experiences regarding postgraduate school in the United States
- The interviews will be conducted in a two weeks duration.
- The first two interviews will take place on the first week of research
- The third interview will take place on the second week of the research

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

What happens if I say “Yes”, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research studies and other records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete privacy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the TAMU HRPP/IRB and other representatives of this institution.

Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym to protect their legal identity.

Poetry Sample: Each participant will be asked to provide a poetic sample in which they describe their higher educational journey in postgraduate schools in the United States.

Additional Elements:

The following research activities are essential for the further collection of data, meaning that agreement to the following is key for continuation. Please indicate your willingness to participate in these activities by placing your initials next to each activity.

I agree I disagree

_____ _____ The researcher may audio or video record me to aid with data analysis. The researcher will not share these recordings with anyone outside of the immediate study team or TAMU Compliance.

_____ _____ The researcher may audio or video record me for use in scholarly presentations or publications. My identity may be shared as part of this activity, although the researcher will attempt to limit such identification. I understand the risks associated with such identification.

APPENDIX C

INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

Vision: The purpose of the interviews is to collect data about the experiences of eight highly successful postgraduate alumni. The questions are based on four specific themes: Postgraduate Education Attainment, Social Capital Lack, Lack of Legal Immigration Status and Systems of Support. This interview protocol uses a semi-structured approach with open-ended questions to provide understanding of the issues undocumented students face.

Systemic Barriers

- How do you define a systemic barrier?
- Which systemic barrier has been the most challenging to endure?
- Which systemic obstacles do you identify as the most emotionally demanding?
- How did these systemic barriers affect your college aspirations?

Social Barriers

- How do you define social capital?
- What types of social capital have you utilize throughout your postgraduate career?
- What forms of social capital do you consider most imperative?
- Do you believe you own social capital?
- How do you define success?
- Do you believe you are successful?

Psychological and Emotional

- What is the role of mental health in academic attainment?

- Do you experience the fear of deportation?
- Can you define what it means to be undocumented?
- What are your hopes for the future implementation of policies?
- How does your current immigration status affect your professional aspirations?
- Have you reached out to counseling and or therapy during difficult times?
- How are you dealing with challenges currently?

Key Attributes to Academic Attainment

- When does one reach academic success?
- To who or what do you attribute your academic achievements?
- What does your family mean to you?
- Who is the most important person in your life?
- Why did you pursue higher education despite the barriers?
- Can you describe the role of mentors in your postgraduate educational journeys?

APPENDIX D
FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW GUIDE
PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

From the theoretical framework Undocumented Critical Theory, the following interview seeks to explore the tenets found in this theory. This theory was created by Carlos Aguilar, who is a graduate student at Harvard University.

1. Fear is endemic among immigrant communities.
2. Different experiences of liminality translate into different experiences of reality.
3. Parental *sacrificios* become a form of capital.
4. *Acompañamiento* is the embodiment of mentorship, academic redemption, and community engagement.

Fear

How have you experienced fear in your postgraduate journeys?

What were the consequences of facing these fears?

How did you overcome or process these fears?

Experiences of Liminality

Has your new immigration status provided you with new opportunities?

What is the difference between being undocumented and having legal documentation?

Has life changed with access to a new immigration status?

Parental *Sacrificios*

How do you define your parents?

How do you define your family's sacrifices?

What does family mean to you?

Acompañamiento

During times of isolation, whom did you reach out to for guidance?

How did you manage to build relationships with figures of authority?

What does community mean to you?