

University of Nevada, Reno

**Experiences of Latinx DACA Students while Navigating a Four-Year College in a  
Politicized National Climate**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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## **Abstract**

College students with deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA) status continue to attend higher education institutions (HEIs) despite their uncertain future in the United States. These students, particularly from Latinx backgrounds, overcome many challenges to access higher education and graduate. This qualitative study explored the experiences of Latinx DACA students as they navigated a four-year HEI in a highly politicized climate surrounding immigration. A total of 12 students were interviewed on their experiences at a four-year college campus with a focus on their academic and social challenges, and the systems of support from their family, community, and college. The findings indicated that the focal students utilized multiple sources of support, such as a DACA student club, to overcome challenges of fear and uncertainty and create a sense of belonging on their college campus. In addition, the political climate with the negative portrayal of this population served as a source of motivation and determination to succeed. The findings call for training to higher education faculty educators about this population and for increased academic resources and financial support to all students, regardless of immigration status. For instance, the creation of social networks, such as student clubs with a focus on the undocumented and DACA student populations can enhance their integration on campuses. Further research focusing on strengths these students possess is needed to create inclusive spaces on campuses that recognize their assets.

### **Dedication**

Dedico esto y todo lo que he hecho a mi abuelo. Un hombre que no le importo que fuera un reto o un problema en su vida, él siempre los venció con una sonrisa hasta el final.

Siempre será una inspiración para mí a través de que avance en mi vida.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

The number of students from underrepresented backgrounds attending higher education institutions (HEIs) has increased considerably since the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Ode, 2014). This act, which was meant to reduce barriers and promote equity, resulted in the creation of college student support programs and federal financial assistance for students in need (Ode, 2014). In 2016, 41% of the total college student population was comprised of students from underrepresented backgrounds, a percentage that reflects an increase of 5% since 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Correspondingly, the enrollment of Latinx students, which accounted for 17% of the total student population in 2016, was characterized by a 4% increase since 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Researchers anticipate these percentages will continue to grow in the years to come (Garcia, 2015).

Citizenship status in the United States (U.S.) varies among Latinxs, with many having the legally-required paperwork and others having undocumented status. Undocumented immigrants are individuals who reside in the U.S. without proper legal documentation (Muñoz, 2013). An estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants resided in the U.S. at the time of this study, with roughly 74% originating from Mexico or other Latin American countries (Ramirez, 2017). According to Abrego and Gonzales (2010), an estimated 80,000 undocumented college students are eligible to graduate from U.S. high schools every year, but only 65,000 achieve this goal, and an even smaller number (5-10%) matriculate into higher education (Montiel, 2017). As a result, an estimated 3,250 to 6,500 undocumented immigrants enroll in and attend HEIs every year (Herrera, Garibay, Garcia, & Johnston, 2013).

As the Latinx college student population increases, it is predicted that the undocumented college student population will increase as well, especially among the students who are undocumented or have Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) protections (Duarte, 2016; Juarez, 2017; Ramirez, 2017; Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). DACA was an executive order signed by former U.S. President Barack Obama in 2012 granting two-year renewable protection to eligible undocumented immigrants from deportation and granted them a social security number, the right to work, and access to resources (Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017; Muñoz, 2013; Shelton, 2014). DACA provides educational benefits to undocumented college students, such as in-state tuition rates, institutional financial aid and scholarships, and the right to work on HEI campuses in some states (Gonzales, Terriquez, & Ruszczyk, 2014; Murillo, 2017). In September of 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump announced the DACA program would be rescinded by March of 2018 (Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). This announcement brought uncertainty and jeopardized the futures of approximately 800,000 undocumented immigrants in the U.S. protected by DACA (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017).

During the time that this study was conducted in the fall of 2018, DACA was in a state of limbo with three federal judges ruling in favor of DACA, allowing the renewal of DACA applications (Escalante, 2018). As of July 2019, the numerous court battles between DACA supporters and the Trump Administration led the U.S. Supreme Court to intervene, which was set to determine a decision on the DACA program's future by the summer of 2020 (Slatton, 2019). Unquestionably, the uncertainty about their status in the country provides a significant challenge to undocumented college students. Despite this

and other challenges, DACA students still attend four-year institutions of higher education (Brown, 2017).

This study focused on the experiences of Latinx DACA college students at four-year HEIs. The growth of the undocumented Latinx student population warrants increasing attention to this group by HEIs (Ramirez, 2017). Researchers have identified several challenges these students face in higher education. These include: lack of financial assistance, limited academic and social support, inaccessible resources, and restricted opportunities (Greenman & Hall, 2013; Yoshikawa, Kholoptseva, & Suárez-Orozco, 2013). Other researchers have examined the traits and qualities that enhance DACA students' success in their pursuit of higher education at four-year institutions, such as their resiliency and motivation to succeed (Barragan, 2009; Shelton, 2014).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study utilized the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework to examine the experiences of Latinx DACA students at four-year HEIs in a highly politicized climate. A distinctive characteristic of this student population is that they regularly face challenges in their pursuit of higher education due to their DACA status (Patrón & Garcia, 2016; Sahay, Thatcher, Núñez, & Lightfoot, 2016). However, research has also highlighted the resilience these students portray despite, or perhaps because of, their unique immigration status (Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, Castro & Vela, 2010; Brown 2017). For instance, Cavazos et al. (2010) and Brown (2017) presented that despite the challenges these students have in their current lives and those they are expected to face in their future, they are motivated to pursue an education. However, the

positive traits or qualities common to this population have not been fully explored in the literature.

Yosso's (2005), CCW framework provides a theoretical lens that moves beyond deficit views of communities of color, by bringing attention to the cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities they have and the networks they utilize (Yosso, 2005). This lens was used in this study in order to move beyond deficit thinking of Latinx DACA college students and recognize the accumulated knowledge and skills these students use to succeed in higher education (Yosso, 2005). Highlighting the knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks Latinx DACA college students acquired from their communities and home (Yosso, 2005) could assist four-year HEIs and their faculty to challenge restrictive institutional policies and expand resources to support these students.

### **Statement of Problem**

Latinx DACA college students' journeys and experiences in higher education are unique due to factors, such as, the surrounding political climate, their sense of invisibility, and the insufficient academic and social support they receive (Martinez, 2014; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). A lack of resources and understanding of these particular students is characteristic of many four-year HEIs (Murillo, 2017; Nienhuser & Espino, 2017). While research on Latinx DACA college students has brought to light the deficits and challenges they face to obtain their higher education degrees, little attention has been devoted to their strengths and sources of motivation (Juarez, 2017; Shelton, 2014).

Individuals with DACA have more opportunities than their undocumented counterparts, but with the political climate at the time of this study and the uncertainty of the DACA program's status, their future remained unknown (Escalante, 2018;



Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). While some HEIs have provided support to undocumented and DACA college students in the form of financial assistance, support programs, and access resources (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; Barnhardt, Phillips, Young, & Sheets, 2017), students with DACA are still met with numerous challenges in their academic journey because they typically come from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds and are first-generation college students (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; L. Martin, 2014). Nevertheless, many of them do persist and find success in higher education, even if their journeys remain unknown. Given that only a few researchers have attended to the sources of success for students with DACA (Shelton, 2014), there is a need to further explore their experiences at four-year HEIs from an assets-based framework.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Latinx DACA college students on how they navigate higher education at a four-year institution in a highly politicized climate around undocumented immigration in the U.S. This study examined the Latinx DACA college students' perspectives utilizing an asset-based framework. The CCW framework for this study provided a lens focusing on the various resources cultivated and transmitted within communities (Yosso, 2005). The study used semi-structured interviews and a participatory mapping exercise to examine the experiences of 12 Latinx DACA college students at a four-year HEI. The focus was to collect information on the experiences that influenced their decision to pursue higher education and on the elements that continued to assist them in their success.

### **Research Questions**

This study investigated the following questions:

1. What are Latinx DACA students' perspectives on their experiences navigating their educational pursuit at four-year higher education institutions? Sub-questions included:
  - a. What are the academic and social challenges these students face?
  - b. What are sources of support they identify in the family, the community, and the college?

### **Significance of Study**

Currently, literature that focuses on how Latinx DACA college students experience higher education at four-year campuses in a political climate that makes the future of DACA unknown is limited. The limited literature that exists focuses mainly on their challenges, their transitional experiences to higher education from their K-12 education, and their persistence once enrolled at an HEI (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; Brown, 2017; Contreras, 2009; Gámez et al., 2017; Nienhusser, Vega, & Saavedra Carquin, 2016). This study aimed to bring to light the experiences of Latinx DACA students at a four-year HEI from an asset-based perspective. The knowledge acquired could inform policies and practices at HEIs such as providing funding that could be available to all students regardless of their background and creating welcoming environments for underrepresented groups of students, specifically Latinx DACA students.

### **Definition of Terms**

Various terms are used throughout this study. These are defined below.

**Community Cultural Wealth (CCW):** A theoretical framework developed in 2005 by Tara J. Yosso. This framework brings attention to the, often unacknowledged or

unrecognized, cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts that underrepresented groups possess (Yosso, 2005).

**Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA):** An executive order enacted in 2012 by former U.S. President Barack Obama granting eligible undocumented immigrants temporary work authorization, a social security number, and deportation protections for a two-year renewable period (Gámez et al., 2017; Muñoz, 2013; Shelton, 2014). A term that has been used to describe individuals with DACA is DACAdmented, but was not used in this paper (Nguyen & Kebede, 2017).

**Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act):** An act proposed several times in Congress that would provide eligible undocumented immigrants protection from deportation and a pathway to U.S. citizenship (Muñoz, 2013). DREAMers is a term used to describe youth that were brought to the U.S. at a young age without legal documentation, but were educated by the U.S. school system (Laurin, 2013).

**Hispanic:** Individuals of Latin American descent living in the U.S. (Merriam-Webster, 2018). While some research studies presented in this paper used the term Hispanic, Latinx is used instead of the Hispanic term in this paper. The Latinx term is used to be inclusive of the various individuals and their identities.

**Latinx:** Individuals who identify as having a Latin American origin living in the U.S. (Merriam-Webster, 2018). For this study, the term Latinx is used to identify those from a Latino or Hispanic background. Latinx is an inclusive and gender-neutral term used to describe any person from a Latin American origin or descent that may not conform with the gender binary (Chang, Torrez, Ferguson, & Sagar, 2017).

**Underrepresented students:** These are students of color and/or low socioeconomic status (SES), and/or first in their family to attend college (first-generation college students) (Pyne & Means, 2013).

**Undocumented immigrants:** “Individuals who entered the U.S. without proper immigration documentation or as nonimmigrants but overstayed the terms of their status without authorization” and therefore reside in the country without legal documentation (Muñoz, 2013, p. 234). Some other terms used to describe these individuals are unauthorized immigrants, illegal immigrants, and illegal aliens. These terms are not used in this paper due to their derogatory nature (Burton, 2012; Duarte, 2016).

**Undocumented students:** These are students that have undocumented status and are enrolled in K-12 or higher education systems (Heckenberg, 2016). This study centered on undocumented immigrant students in higher education and, therefore, the term undocumented college students is used throughout this paper to describe students in higher education without legal status in the U.S.

### **Summary**

Deficit views are regularly held about Latinx DACA college students, and academic literature often examines the challenges they face in their pursuit of higher education. The deficit lens seems to be intensified in a highly politicized climate around undocumented immigration in the U.S. Not much is known about the sources of success that DACA students utilize and access to navigate and succeed in their pursuit of higher education. The purpose of this study was to shed light to the latter, using the CCW theoretical framework, aiming to inform policies and practices to four-year HEIs.

This chapter provided an overview of the completed study. Chapter II discusses the theoretical framework and provides an overview of the literature that focuses on Latinx DACA students. Chapter II also provides an overview of the political climate around DACA at the time of this study, the challenges that DACA students face in higher education, and the systems of support that students of undocumented backgrounds utilize. Chapter III presents the methodology used in this study. The chapter elaborates on the study's research design, setting, recruitment, participants, data collection, data analysis, and limitations, as well as an overview of the researcher's background. Chapter IV presents the key findings from interviews conducted with Latinx DACA students attending a four-year college campus. Finally, Chapter V concludes with both theoretical and practical implications for the study and suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter II: Review of Literature**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of Latinx Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students on the ways they navigated higher education at a four-year Higher Education Institution (HEI), in an era of a highly politicized climate around undocumented immigrants in the United States (U.S.) This chapter provides an overview of the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) theoretical framework employed in this study, which encourages researchers to move beyond deficit views of those from marginalized backgrounds. Following is an overview of the literature on Latinx DACA college students in regard to the political climate, higher education challenges, and support systems. The higher education challenges include financial, social, and academic challenges faced by DACA students. The support systems reviewed are the home, community, and educational institutions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework guiding this study is Yosso's CCW developed in 2005 (Yosso, 2005). CCW is rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT), but shifts the focus of analysis from the deficit views of what people lack toward unacknowledged or unrecognized knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired by marginalized groups from their communities and homes (Yosso, 2005). An overview of CRT is provided as a way to better understand the CCW framework.

### **Critical Race Theory**

The goal of CRT is "to challenge and disrupt normative structures that fuel racism and racial oppression" (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016, p. 39). Five tenants are foundational in CRT: 1) ordinariness of racism, 2) interest convergence, 3) social

construction and differential racialization, 4) intersectionality and anti-essentialism, and 5) counter storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Jones & Abes, 2013; Von Robertson, Bravo, & Chaney, 2016).

The first tenant, the ordinariness of racism, emphasizes that racism is still an everyday occurrence in the U.S., but not widely or blatantly seen by people (Burton, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Examples of this reality are microaggressions, which are common everyday comments made that may be unintentional or intentional towards individuals of a marginalized group (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). One microaggression example can be the use of the word “guys” to address a group comprised of men and women. The term “guys” can denote that women are inferior to men.

The second tenant, interest convergence, argues that traditional claims of race neutrality and objectivity are not addressed in society because of the self-interest, power, and privilege held by those in positions of power (Burton, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Groups who have power may oppose change because the change may no longer benefit them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For example, individuals with DACA are not allowed access to federal aid to assist in college costs because they are not legal citizens in the U.S. (Contreras, 2009). Additionally, some policies were created to exclude DACA students from attending higher education in some states (Trivette & English, 2017). Policies and resources such as these were not given to DACA students because those in power who created the policies and resources felt DACA students did not have the right to access the same opportunities as U.S. citizens (Chang et al., 2017; Garibay, Herrera, Johnston-Guerrero, & Garcia, 2016).

The third tenet, social construction and differential racialization, examines the change in racism as it is convenient for those in the majority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For example, the category of race is a social construct used by groups in power to remain dominant over others without power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). As mentioned, the negative views against undocumented college students are reinforced when a tense political climate surrounding illegal immigration is present (Hartlep, 2009). Some advocate that these negative views aided President Trump in winning the 2016 presidential election because he promised to deport undocumented immigrants and reinforce border security (Ramirez, 2017).

The fourth tenet, intersectionality and anti-essentialism, refers to CRT theorists' acknowledgment that race is not the only structural force that should be examined, but other aspects of people's identities, such as race, class, and gender, should be taken into consideration (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Jones & Abes, 2013). This tenet challenges the idea that those from underrepresented groups all share or have the same experiences solely because they may belong to the same race or ethnic background. The fifth tenet, counter storytelling, analyzes and brings attention to inequities (Burton, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Additionally, it expands on the previous tenet by making others aware of the intersectionality of groups and individuals, giving them a voice to be heard (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

CRT's original foundation focused on race and the injustices of the African American population. More recently, CRT has branched into other marginalized groups (Cruz, 2013). For example, Latino Critical Theory, or Lat Crit, was created to emphasize the lived experiences of Latinxs and factors relevant to their population such as race,



ethnicity, language, culture, phenotype, and immigration status (Soltero López, 2014). Other branches are Asian Crit (Asian American), Tribe Crit (Native American descent), Fem Crit (women), and Queer Crit (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+)) to name a few (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Duarte, 2016; Jones & Abes, 2013; Nadal et al., 2015). CRT's attention to macro-level societal functions provides the backdrop to understanding CCW.

### **Community Cultural Wealth**

While CCW has the above mentioned traits in common with CRT, it expands the discussion by shifting away from negative views and focusing on how communities of color “nurture cultural wealth through at least six forms of capital” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). These forms of capital intersect and build on one another to serve as sources of aid that underrepresented groups utilize to succeed in their endeavors. The six forms of capital identified in Yosso's CCW are: 1) aspirational capital, 2) linguistic capital, 3) familial capital, 4) social capital, 5) navigational capital, and 6) resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). An overview of each form is provided below.

**Forms of capital.** *Aspirational capital* refers to the ability to maintain future hopes and dreams, even when met with challenges (Yosso, 2005). It proposes that despite the challenges students from marginalized backgrounds experience, they strive to succeed and graduate (Heckenberg, 2016; Pérez II, 2017). *Linguistic capital* attends to the intellectual and social skills acquired from communication experiences in more than one language. Being bilingual or multilingual is seen as beneficial because it can expand one's social network, which can then lead to access to more resources or opportunities (Heckenberg, 2016; Yosso, 2005).

*Familial capital* refers to the cultural knowledge individuals learn from their family and peers (Yosso, 2005). This capital references the cultural knowledge obtained from family history and cultural traditions (Heckenberg, 2016; Yosso, 2005). For instance, a family that cultivates the importance of education into their student can strengthen their desire to succeed (Heckenberg, 2016). *Social capital* refers to the networks of people and the community resources that can be used to provide support (Yosso, 2005). This capital can benefit students by creating more connections with individuals and groups, such as study groups and support programs, facilitating thus a sense of belonging in a given context (Heckenberg, 2016).

*Navigational capital* refers to the skills one has when navigating social institutions (Yosso, 2005). Higher education can be difficult for first-generation college students because they do not have the same support as those coming from non-first-generation backgrounds in areas such as applying for scholarships or advising (Kouyoumdjian, Guzmán, Garcia, & Talavera-Bustillos, 2017; Yosso, 2005). For example, submitting a college or financial aid application can be difficult for those who came from a first-generation background because they do not have someone in their family who could assist in correctly submitting these documents.

*Resistant capital* refers to the knowledge and skills obtained by fighting against the oppression faced by marginalized groups (Yosso, 2005). An example of resistant capital are families who educate their students to counter stereotypes, which empowers them to challenge and, hopefully, overcome these views (Oropeza, Varghese, & Kanno, 2010). For example, students may know inequities exist in society and therefore obtain their education as a way to obtain equal access to other opportunities (Heckenberg,

2016). Thus, obtaining an education provides a way for students who come from underprivileged families (or homes) to receive more opportunities, such as a career.

CCW has provided a framework for researchers to examine the experiences of Latinx students in the U.S.; however, CCW is primarily used in the K-12 education system. The assumption is Latinx students utilize and acquire many of the capitals mentioned above from their communities, specifically their homes and schools (Luna & Martinez, 2013; Oropeza et al., 2010). Employing the CCW framework in higher education brings to light the unacknowledged strengths Latinx DACA college students obtain from their communities and utilize to navigate these institutions. Yosso (2005) mentioned that navigational capital is used to navigate social institutions, such as HEIs. One aspect of this study explored how Latinx DACA students navigated HEIs to obtain their higher education degrees (Pérez, 2017). Furthermore, undocumented college students are referred to as a resilient group that overcomes many challenges to succeed (Cavazos et al., 2010; Shelton, 2014). Their aspirations and resiliency provide potential lenses that could be utilized in a higher education context (Yosso, 2005). The shift from the deficit views that CCW provides to a more asset-based approach provides the context to recognize the complexity of DACA students' experiences in higher education.

### **DACA Students**

Immigration has been an ongoing debate in the U.S. where some politicians and citizens have proposed stronger immigration laws and border security to prevent undocumented immigration from occurring (Dougherty et al., 2010; Hudson, 2017). In 2018, approximately 12 million undocumented immigrants were estimated to be residing in the country (Muñoz, 2016). The term *undocumented immigrants* refers to individuals

who entered the U.S. without proper documentation or who overstayed the terms of their visa status without authorization (Muñoz, 2013). Past terms used to identify undocumented immigrants were *illegal immigrants* and *illegal aliens*; however, due to the derogatory nature of these terms, undocumented immigrants was the term proposed in the academic literature at the time of this study (Shelton, 2014). A large number of undocumented immigrants come to the U.S. with their parents or caregivers at a young age without documentation.

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) was an act that aimed to provide protection and a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants in the U.S. but failed to garner enough support from government officials to come to fruition (Gámez et al., 2017; Muñoz, 2013). The DREAM Act gave rise to the term *DREAMers*, which identified youth brought to the U.S. at a young age who were educated by the U.S. school system (Laurin, 2013). Due to the failed attempts to pass the DREAM Act, former President Barack Obama signed DACA into effect with an executive order in 2012 (Guarneros, 2017). DACA provided various benefits for eligible undocumented immigrants. These included authorization to legally work in the U.S. and protection from deportation that needed to be renewed every two years (Muñoz, 2013; Shelton, 2014). To qualify for DACA, undocumented immigrants needed to meet the following criteria:

1. Were under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012;
2. Entered the U.S. before their 16th birthday;
3. Resided in the U.S. since June 15, 2007, until the present time of applying;
4. Were in the U.S. before June 15, 2012, and before requesting DACA;

5. Had no lawful status before June 15, 2012;
6. Were enrolled in school, graduated, or obtained a certificate of completion from high school, obtained a general education development (GED) certificate, or honorably discharged veteran of the Coast Guard or Armed Forces of the U.S.; and
7. Had not been convicted of a felony, significant misdemeanor, or three or more other misdemeanors, and did not otherwise pose a threat to national security or public safety (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2017).

DACA gave protection from deportation, as well as, the right to work in the U.S. legally to approximately 800,000 undocumented immigrants (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017). Many DACA recipients resided in large U.S. cities, such as Los Angeles, Las Vegas, New York, and Houston (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017). The majority of those with DACA were women under the age of 25, with 53% of DACA recipients who were women and more than two-thirds who were under the age of 25 (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017). DACA provided a sense of renewed hope to individuals eligible by granting them temporary legal status in the U.S. This allowed students with DACA to obtain higher education degrees because of the protection from deportation and the career opportunities with which it provided them (Brown, 2017). However, the continuation of the DACA program was uncertain in 2017 due to then-U.S. President Trump's Administration announcement that the program would be rescinded by March 2018 (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017). This announcement left many DACA recipients fearful for their futures (Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). During the time immediately after the 2017 announcement, advocates for the DACA program and those in opposition engaged in

legal battles in the U.S. courts. These legal battles resulted in DACA recipients being allowed to renew their statuses until a determination was made for the program to continue or end (Yee, 2018).

The DACA debate gave considerable attention not only to immigration, but to undocumented immigrant students in the U.S. Education, arguably one of the most critical factors leading to one's success in life, is challenging to obtain for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Hudson, 2012). Undocumented and DACA immigrants are one of the very groups with challenges to their pursuit of an education. Although these particular groups of students did not have legal status in the U.S., the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* case that all students have the right to free public education (Nguyen & Kebede, 2017). The Supreme Court ruling made it illegal for public schools, both at primary and secondary levels (K-12), to deny a student of an education based on a student's citizenship status (Nguyen & Kebede, 2017). Furthermore, the ruling made it illegal for K-12 public schools to request citizenship status and/or a social security number when a student registers for school.

Schools were also prohibited from sharing a student's immigration status with immigration authorities (Lad & Braganza, 2013). However, the ruling did not address access to post-secondary education, leaving this decision to the states (Barnhardt, Ramos, Reyes, Gonzales, & Russell, 2013). The states in the U.S. differ in their stance on undocumented college students access to their HEIs with some that allow access to their institutions and others that ban them altogether (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015). Thus, there was no uniform policy across the country at the time of this study. Moreover, undocumented college students who attended HEIs across the U.S. faced many

challenges due to their lack of citizenship status, including limited financial aid resources and academic support (Flores, 2016; Forenza, Rogers, & Lardier, 2017; Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015).

These particular students remained in the shadows of educational and societal institutions due to fears of deportation for themselves and their families (Contreras, 2009; Muñoz, 2016). Undocumented immigrant students were limited in the resources they could access due to their lack of citizenship or residency in the U.S, which affected their career choices (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016). However, with the implementation of DACA, many were able to access resources that allowed them to succeed (Gámez et al., 2017; Gonzales et al., 2014). DACA permitted undocumented immigrants to access higher education and enter their desired career fields. As previously mentioned, an estimated 80,000 undocumented college students were eligible to graduate from U.S. high schools, but only 65,000 graduated on an annual basis (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). In 2003, between 5% to 10% of the undocumented high school graduates went on to higher education, which resulted in an estimated 3,250 to 6,500 enrolled in HEIs every year (Herrera et al., 2013; Montiel, 2017).

One of the largest recipients of DACA, and arguably largest populations of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. were those who identified as Latinx or Hispanic (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017; Shelton, 2014). The term *Latinx* defined by Merriam-Webster's dictionary (2018) refers to individuals who identify as having a Latin American origin living in the U.S. Immigrants considered to be Latino are from countries such as Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America, and other Spanish speaking countries (Duarte, 2016). According to the Pew Research Center, nine

in ten DACA recipients identified as having a Latinx background, with approximately 80% of DACA recipients coming from Mexico (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017). Their access to education continued to be influenced by their undocumented status regardless if they had DACA because of the uncertainty of the DACA program due to the politicized climate around illegal immigration at the time of this study.

### **Political Climate**

Immigration has been a topic of debate since the beginning of U.S. history (Herrera et al., 2013; Mangual Figueroa, 2017). The debate often centers on undocumented immigration and sparks protests in highly polarized settings (Ishiwata & Muñoz, 2018). Some propose undocumented immigrants be deported back to their native countries, while others advocate for them to obtain citizenship (Gámez et al., 2017; Hudson, 2017).

Immigration has been the center of public debate since 1875, when the U.S. Supreme Court declared immigration be regulated by the federal government, giving Congress the authority to regulate and create policies (Center for Immigration Studies). The Office of the Superintendent of Immigration was created in 1891 to regulate the rise of immigration, which eventually changed to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (Center for Immigration Studies). Various policies and programs followed the creation of the Office of Superintendent of Immigration, such as, the national origins quota system in 1921, which was revised in 1924 limiting immigration by assigning each nation a specific number of individuals who could immigrate to the U.S. annually (Center for Immigration Studies).



As the U.S. economy boosted at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, job shortages in mining, railroading, and agriculture arose (Mitchell, 2002). The decreasing numbers of immigration further impacted these shortages after the national quota system was established. A response to this crisis was the recruitment and encouragement of immigrants from Mexico to enter the U.S. legally through temporary work visa programs, such as the Bracero Program and H-2 (Soltero López, 2014; Roberts, 2014; Rodríguez, Mosqueda, Nava, & Conchas, 2013). These immigrants became accustomed to the new lifestyle in the U.S. and either postponed or reconsidered returning to their home country. Thus, programs, such as the Bracero Program, exposed immigrants to life in the U.S. and motivated them to remain in the U.S. because of better working conditions and wages (Mitchell, 2002). As a result, many immigrants who participated in the Bracero Program, overstayed their temporary legal status and became undocumented immigrants in the U.S. (Barragan, 2009; Mitchell, 2002). Consequently, the number of undocumented immigrant populations rose because many sought better lives for themselves and their families (Mitchell, 2002; Roberts, 2014).

In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was passed, which allowed undocumented immigrants to apply for permanent residency if they resided in the U.S. since January of 1982 or had completed 90 days of agricultural work between 1985 and 1986 (Center for Immigration Studies). In 2003, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was created to enforce the illegal hiring and harboring of undocumented immigrants to prevent future undocumented immigration (Center for Immigration Studies). However, agricultural employers still employed these individuals because they offered cheaper labor (Center for Immigration Studies). While more acts

were passed to regulate undocumented immigration, such as the 1996 Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), they were ineffective due to a lack of resources and funds to enforce such acts (Center for Immigration Studies). The lack of regulation allowed undocumented immigrants to continue to enter the U.S. as years passed (Mitchell, 2002; Chishti, Hipsman, & Ball, 2015).

However, the discussion on immigration did not become mainstream again until the attacks on September 11, 2001 (Center for Immigration Studies). At that time, the spotlight was on undocumented immigration because some of the terrorists in these attacks were undocumented immigrants (Center for Immigration Studies). As a result, many politicians and citizens wanted increased enforcement and policies to regulate immigration, especially undocumented immigration (Center for Immigration Studies). These discussions capitalized on the generalized sense of uncertainty and fear that followed the attacks and led to negative stereotypes and associations (Center for Immigration Studies). For example, undocumented immigrants were often associated with criminals who needed to be deported because they posed a risk to national security (Soltero López, 2014).

However, such perceptions were not universal. In the early 2000s, the DREAM Act was introduced that would grant eligible undocumented immigrants the opportunity to obtain citizenship (Herrera et al., 2013; Muñoz, 2013). The DREAM Act lacked backing and votes, and as a result, never materialized into law (Gámez et al., 2017; Muñoz, 2013). The failed attempts to pass the DREAM Act created a pathway for DACA's implementation in 2012 (Gámez et al., 2017) and provided those eligible legal work authorization, a social security number, and protection from deportation for a

renewable two-year period (Muñoz, 2013; Shelton, 2014). When DACA was enacted, it was met with opposition. Even though DACA recipients were legally protected, in September of 2017, President Trump's Administration announced DACA would be eliminated (Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). As such, the protections became uncertain. The program was to end in March of 2018, at which time new applications or renewals for DACA would no longer be accepted (Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). However, an opportunity for a permanent solution to be created was provided by the Trump Administration, which allowed for Congress to agree on a new solution for DACA (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). The deadline passed with no solution by congress, but the legal battles continued, leaving DACA with an uncertain future. In early 2018, DACA renewals were accepted after the federal judges' ruled against Trump's Administration (Yee, 2018). Nevertheless, this political debate continued to influence undocumented immigrant students' pursuit of education, specifically higher education (Trivette & English, 2017). Access to higher education was impacted by policies that restricted access to resources, such as financial aid for undocumented immigrants at the states of Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Arizona, and Indiana (Juarez, 2017). The challenges that undocumented or DACA students faced are further explored in the next section.

### **Higher Education Challenges**

Higher education for undocumented college students has been a constant challenge due to their lack of citizenship and, more often than not, their status as members of various underrepresented groups based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Barragan, 2009; Brown, 2017; Soltero López, 2014; S. M. Muñoz, 2016). Due to

the Plyler v. Doe (1982) ruling in favor of undocumented K-12 students having the right to a free public education in the U.S., by 2007 there were an estimated two million undocumented students enrolled in the K-12 education system in the U.S. (Dougherty et al., 2010; Nienhusser et al., 2016). The Plyler v. Doe ruling, however, did not apply to higher education and therefore, undocumented college students were met with several challenges depending on their location and if they had DACA status (Barnhardt et al., 2013; Dougherty et al., 2010; Roberts, 2014). In 2013, the undocumented student population accounted for 2% of the total U.S. college student population, but had the potential to be higher (Shelton, 2014). The low enrollment of this particular student population had been attributed to many factors in the literature, which were categorized into financial, academic, and social challenges (Brown, 2017).

### **Financial Challenges**

For many students from underrepresented backgrounds, higher education is a financial challenge as tuition continues to rise. This is especially true for the estimated 39% of undocumented families who live below the federal poverty line (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015). Parents of undocumented college students can have multiple jobs with low wages (Mayorga, 2014). Consequently, higher education is difficult for undocumented college students to afford with limited access to funding (O'Neal, Espino, Goldthrite, Morin, Weston, Hernandez & Fuhrmann, 2016). In 1965, former President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Higher Education Act (HEA), which gave federal financial assistance to those in need (Forenza et al., 2017; Odle, 2014). The Pell Grant, which is based on need, was created in part from the HEA to fund higher education for individuals from low-income families (Odle, 2014). However, only those with legal status could obtain

federal financial aid, making undocumented college students ineligible to receive this assistance (Forenza et al., 2017). Undocumented college students are typically able to obtain other means of financial aid as long as citizenship is not required, such as private scholarships and state financial aid (Lauby, 2017; Muñoz & Alleman, 2016). However, state financial aid is only available in some states and not others (Herrera et al., 2013; Lauby, 2017; Muñoz, 2013). Also, some states charge in-state tuition rates to undocumented college students, while others charge them out-of-state tuition rates, making the cost significantly higher and much more difficult to afford (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016).

The state of California, which has been a state supporting the undocumented population, passed Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540) in 2001 (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; Hudson, 2012). Also, in 2011, Assembly Bills 130 (AB 130) and 131 (AB 131), known as the California Dream Act, were passed (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; Hudson, 2012). Together these bills allowed those without lawful immigration status in the U.S. to attend California HEIs and pay in-state tuition rates, while providing them with access to state financial aid (Hudson, 2012; Person, Gutierrez Keeton, Medina, Gonzalez, & Minero, 2017). The state of California is one example of a state in support of undocumented college students attending their HEIs. However, other states are less welcoming of this population; Georgia, Arizona, and Indiana provided no financial support, such as in-state tuition, while South Carolina and Alabama prohibited undocumented college students from attending their HEIs at the time of this study (Juarez, 2017; Trivette & English, 2017). As a result, many undocumented college students did not pursue a degree because they had no way to fund themselves (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015). When the state policy

is supportive, some undocumented college students pursue higher education despite the financial challenges. Some of them work multiple jobs or seek funding through the means of loans to pay for their education (Greenman & Hall, 2013). The jobs these students obtain typically pay minimum wage without benefits because they are not legally permitted to be employed in the U.S. (Roberts, 2014). Undocumented college students with DACA, however, obtain some additional financial support since they have the legal right to work in the U.S. (Muñoz, 2013). DACA college students, therefore, are able to obtain better-paying jobs and broader access to financial assistance when it is available (Gómez et al., 2017; Roberts, 2014). The financial burden of obtaining a higher education degree for undocumented college students further relates to other challenges, such as academics.

### **Academic Challenges**

Academic challenges for undocumented college students in higher education have been attributed to many factors, but research shows that challenges in their K-12 education carry over to higher education (Murillo, 2017; Nienhuser et al., 2016). Many undocumented college students in their K-12 education are labeled as English Language Learners (ELLs). The Latinx population is overrepresented in many ELL programs across the country (Hansen-Thomas & Sourdout, 2015; Noyola, 2012; Oropeza et al., 2010). ELL students are typically segregated from the general student population. The expectations that teachers have of them tend to be low; as such, they are typically not mentored to pursue higher education (Astorga, 2015; Cruz, 2013; Flores, 2016). In addition, for some undocumented college students, the English language serves as a

barrier in their academics as they may not fully comprehend the material being presented to them (Mayorga, 2014).

Furthermore, undocumented college students are typically the first in their family to attend college; as such, they are not able to rely on much academic support from their families (Cruz, 2013; Laurin, 2013; Mayorga, 2014; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). In addition, most undocumented college students come from low socioeconomic status (SES) families. They are more likely to have experienced a lower K-12 quality education and more impoverished living conditions, adding to their lack of preparedness in higher education (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). These intersectional factors impact their academic preparation.

A lack of preparedness starting in undocumented college students' K-12 education carries over into their higher education pursuit with a lack of encouragement and guidance from teachers to be college-ready as they approach their high school graduation (Nienhuser et al., 2016). Many first-generation students are unfamiliar with the navigation of higher education, such as the application process and the resources available to them. Research suggests that this issue is further conflated by the lack of knowledge possessed by educators who want to assist undocumented college students (Barnhardt et al., 2013; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Greenman & Hall, 2013; Shelton, 2014). For instance, financial aid advisors often provide general financial information such as general scholarships and grants because they want to help the students. However, these advisors are not always well equipped to do so because they may lack knowledge about the undocumented populations' limit to certain financial aid opportunities because of their immigration status.

The estimated 5% to 10% of undocumented college students who do pursue higher education each year struggle with their academics because they are not able to prioritize their education (Sinacore, Park, Mikhail, & Wada, 2011; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). As mentioned earlier, many of them work many hours to pay for their education while also attending to family obligations, such as being caretakers to members of their family, which impacts the time they can spend on academics (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Muñoz, 2013; Sinacore et al., 2011; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). HEIs also fail to adequately recruit and retain undocumented college students (Muñoz, 2013; Nienhusser et al., 2016). Access to campus events, resources, and programs are limited for undocumented college students because some of these require students to have legal status or citizenship in the U.S. (Sinacore et al., 2011). Such is the case with federally-funded student support programs (Nienhusser et al., 2016; Sinacore et al., 2011), which are programs meant to support underrepresented students in pursuit of a higher education degree (Ramirez, 2017; Zell, 2010). These same academic challenges and limitations apply to college students with DACA (Mangual Figueroa, 2017; Nienhusser & Espino, 2017). In sum, while navigating higher education is not an easy feat for any student, Latinx DACA students face additional academic barriers, such as lack of communication skills due to language and incorrect academic advisement by educators (Greenman & Hall, 2013).

### **Social Challenges**

An additional challenge undocumented college students face in higher education is a lack of a sense of belonging (Mangual Figueroa, 2017). A sense of belonging for undocumented college students varies by the HEI they attend. Researchers have found that some HEIs are more supportive of their undocumented college student population,



such as those in California; others, such as those in Georgia, are not (Nienhusser & Espino, 2017; Trivette & English, 2017). Undocumented college students' sense of belonging and integration is impacted by many holding multiple jobs that prevent them from participating in school activities and events (Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010; Mangual Figueroa, 2017). Additionally, undocumented college students avoid social interactions at HEIs due to fear of their undocumented status becoming public and the accompanying fear of deportation. This feeling is also prevalent among those protected by DACA because of the temporary nature of its protection (Murillo, 2017; Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017).

Undocumented college students' fear of others discovering their status limits their social interactions at their HEI and increasingly impacts the lack of social support they receive in higher education (Greenman & Hall, 2013; Nienhusser & Espino, 2017). Adding to undocumented college students' lack of social support were additional characteristics of the HEIs themselves (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Some states advocate for the undocumented student population to have access to higher education, while other states had do not and did do not provide access to resources, such as support systems (Greenman & Hall, 2013; Simon, 2016; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). These students face unique and challenging barriers ranging from their financial abilities to afford higher education, being academically prepared, and feeling welcomed on a college campus.

### **Support Systems**

Despite the challenges undocumented college students face, research suggests that they do find support in their family, community, and school (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; Heckenberg, 2016; Mayorga, 2014). Support systems are necessary for these students as

they continue to pursue their education during the uncertainty of the future of DACA (Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). Undocumented college students come from various backgrounds that influence their identities and therefore have various support systems based on their identities such as race, ethnicity, income status, gender, sexual orientation and so on (Pérez & Taylor, 2016). These sources of support are discussed in the following sections and are broken into three subsections: family and home, community, and educational institutions.

### **Family and Home**

The family unit can be an integral part of anyone's life with a positive home environment influencing a person's success (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016). Undocumented Latinx college students' families are known to be close and supportive (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; Von Robertson et al., 2016). The family provides emotional, financial, and motivational support for the success of their students (Araujo, 2011; Pérez & Taylor, 2016). Coinciding with Yosso's (2005) familial capital, families provide emotional support when students are faced with challenges. Since financial challenges exist for undocumented college students, some families provide support by paying for their tuition and books, if financial circumstances allow (Flores, 2016). Although many undocumented Latinx college students are first-generation college students, some families only support them emotionally by encouraging them to continue to work hard for their education, as they do not know how to support them in any other way (Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pyne & Means, 2013). Furthermore, undocumented college students' families increase their aspirations and motivations to succeed by instilling a desire to

want to give back and provide for those that sacrificed everything for them to have a bright future, such as their parents (Cavazos et al., 2010; Yosso, 2005).

### **Community**

The community has been viewed as another source of support for undocumented college students who are pursuing higher education. The community includes all groups that undocumented immigrants may identify with and are based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, and so forth (Heckenberg, 2016). An example of a community that some undocumented immigrants are a part of is the LGBTQIA+ community (Duarte, 2016; Ortega, 2013). Undocumented immigrants that identify with the LGBTQIA+ community use the term “UndocuQueer” to refer to themselves and others in this group (Duarte, 2016). The LGBTQIA+ community has been identified as a source of support (Duarte, 2016). The forms of support given by this community include access to more resources and opportunities by networking with various additional LGBTQIA+ organizations and members in the community (Duarte, 2016). Thus, these networks potentially increase these individuals’ familial, social, and resistant capitals (Duarte, 2016; Yosso, 2005). For example, those who identify as UndocuQueer are part of the National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA) and advocate not only for the immigrant community, but also the LGBTQIA+ community on social justice issues (Duarte, 2016).

Furthermore, some communities of support for undocumented college students and immigrants are those who use their privilege of being a citizen or legal resident to advocate for those who are not (Astorga, 2015). These advocates, whether individuals or groups, are a support system for undocumented immigrants by continually advocating for

greater opportunities and rights, such as pathways to citizenship or legal residency in the U.S. (Laurin, 2013). These same groups advocated for the DREAM Act because they sought better lives for the undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. (Forenza et al., 2017). Supportive communities continue to advocate for more protection as the DACA program was in a state of limbo at the time of this study (Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017).

Since the announcement in 2017 by the Trump Administration that DACA would be rescinded, supportive communities had advocated to keep and implement a new DACA program into law for better protection of those that identified as DREAMers (Ishiwata & Muñoz, 2018; Kuczewski & Brubaker, 2014; Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). These supportive communities, made up of individuals who were not undocumented, positively impacted undocumented college students' pursuit of higher education. For example, the state of Georgia implemented policies that prohibited undocumented college students from attending several of their HEIs and, as a result, Freedom University was created in 2011 (Trivette & English, 2017). At the time of this study, Freedom University was a tuition-free non-profit education organization that provided its undocumented college students "leadership development, public engagement opportunities, and skills related to building social movements as a way to empower" (Trivette & English, 2017, p. 867). The non-profit was founded by four professors at the University of Georgia, who saw an injustice and sought to support the undocumented student population (Trivette & English, 2017). Freedom University continued to thrive and serve the undocumented immigrant population through the support of volunteers, surrounding community members, and organizations (Trivette & English, 2017). Some

of the undocumented college students who attended Freedom University were pursuing degrees at other HEIs across the U.S. This was likely influenced by the assistance they received at Freedom University in navigating the application process, acquiring scholarships, and building support networks (Trivette & English, 2017). Freedom University was just one example of a community that had proven to be a support system available to undocumented college students. Resources and support systems, such as Freedom University, were needed to assist students from undocumented backgrounds as the population was anticipated to grow (Juarez, 2017; Ramirez, 2017)

The Latinx population was one of the fastest-growing populations in the U.S. (Lu, 2015). As a result, more students from Latinx backgrounds were attending college, and it was anticipated that the undocumented college student population would follow (Duarte, 2016; Juarez, 2017; Ramirez, 2017). At the time of this study, well over two-thirds of the undocumented population were estimated to be from a Latinx background, making this community a potential system of support (Montiel, 2017; Muñoz, 2016). The Latinx community provided social support for undocumented college students due to a majority of them identifying as Latinx (Juarez, 2017; Muñoz, 2016). Moreover, the Latinx community assisted in the creation of a sense of belonging by increasing the social and familial capital of undocumented college students: the building of connections with others similar to them (Trivette & English, 2017; Yosso, 2005).

### **Educational Institutions**

Another system of support mentioned in the research on undocumented college students was school; this is in reference to both the K-12 and higher education system (Brown, 2017; Nienhusser et al., 2016). The Plyler v. Doe, Supreme Court case ruling

granted access of a free K-12 public education to all youth no matter their citizenship status (Dougherty et al., 2010; Lad & Braganza, 2013). However, the ruling did not give stipulation to the support of undocumented college students, nor did it require for schools to be knowledgeable about opportunities undocumented college students may (or may not) have in the U.S. (Lad & Braganza, 2013; Nienhuser et al., 2016). Some K-12 schools in the U.S. encouraged undocumented college students to pursue higher education in various ways, such as utilizing college track curricula, offering opportunities to obtain college credit while in high school, assisting them with seeking scholarships and additional funding for college, and informing and mentoring them on higher education (Nienhuser et al., 2016; Noyola, 2012). In many cases, K-12 schools positively increased the aspirational and navigational capitals of their students because parents or caregivers may not have known how to be supportive of their student's education (Mayorga, 2014; Noyola, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Schools offered a place for undocumented college students to obtain mentors while increasing their network with peers (Murillo, 2017). These factors increased their social capital, which referred to the networks of people and resources available for the benefit of themselves (Hudson, 2017). Pérez and Taylor (2016) suggested that social, navigational, and aspirational capitals positively influence academic success by having peer networks and faculty interactions that assist in navigating higher education. Conversely, the challenges undocumented college students faced in their lives, in some cases, provided a source of aspirations for success and resilience (Murillo, 2017).

Typically, undocumented college students are not fully aware of their undocumented status until the later years of their K-12 education (Brown, 2017; Franchi-

Alfaro, 2017). This is the time when students discover that they cannot apply for jobs or college because they lack legal status in the U.S. (Brown, 2017; Nienhusser et al., 2016). Students are then faced with the dilemma as to whether they should disclose their lack of citizenship status to others, such as peers, educators, mentors, and other officials (Mangual Figueroa, 2017; Muñoz, 2016) or hide it from them. As mentioned, the decision to disclose their status is met with hesitation because of the fear of deportation for themselves and their loved ones (Mangual Figueroa, 2017; Muñoz, 2016). However, if they have a positive school support system in place, undocumented college students are more likely to disclose to those they trust (Muñoz, 2016). This information is very useful to educators as it can guide them to identify resources that are available to them (Nienhusser et al., 2016).

As mentioned earlier, the Plyler v. Doe Supreme Court ruling did not rule on college access and left the states to decide (Dougherty et al., 2010; Lad & Braganza, 2013). Nevertheless, higher education support systems for undocumented college students do exist, but vary across HEIs in the U.S. (Cruz, 2013; Dougherty et al., 2010). Despite this reality, DACA students are resilient and can become high achievers despite difficult situations (Burton, 2012). As stated before, various acts and policies, such as, the HEA of 1965 only allowed for access to financial aid, in-state tuition rates, and student support programs to citizens or legal residents of the U.S. (Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015). Some states had implemented policies and programs that provided support to students who did not have legal residency in the U.S. (Darolia & Potochnick, 2015; Gildersleeve & Vigil, 2015). States can counteract some of the challenges undocumented college students face by allowing them the opportunity to apply for state funds and pay

in-state tuition at their HEI, while providing them with access to student support programs that focus on their unique needs (Darolia & Potochnick, 2015). These support programs, such as multicultural centers, offer assistance to students in the forms of mentoring, advising, counseling, tutoring, networking, and providing a safe place for them (Clark, Ponjuan, Orrock, Wilson, & Flores, 2013; Gámez et al., 2017; Kuczewski & Brubaker, 2014). These supportive HEI policies and resources made available to undocumented college students assist in the creation of welcoming environments and a sense of belonging by integrating both social and academic support (Astorga, 2015; Burton, 2012; Zell, 2010), increasing the likelihood undocumented college students succeed in obtaining their degree at their HEI (Martinez Hoy, 2014; Zell, 2010). The state of California is an example of a support system to undocumented college students in higher education with the creation of the California Dream Act that granted access to state financial aid and in-state tuition rates at their HEIs to undocumented college students (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; Hudson, 2012). Also, many of California's HEIs have student centers specifically open to undocumented college students that provide additional resources and a space for them to interact with fellow peers and faculty when needed (Kuczewski & Brubaker, 2014). Greater access to resources and support programs is given to undocumented college students in some U.S. states due to the greater attention to this student population (Barnhardt, Phillips, Young, & Sheets, 2017; Ishiwata & Muñoz, 2018).

### **Summary**

In summary, this chapter discussed DACA and various aspects of immigration. The focus was on undocumented and DACA college students from Latinx backgrounds.



The chapter provided an overview of the U.S. political climate during this study through a brief overview of the history of undocumented immigration to the limbo status of DACA. The next sections of this chapter focused on the higher education challenges undocumented college students face on HEI campuses regarding financial, social, and academic aspects of college life. Undocumented college students are not afforded the same opportunities as their documented peers, making it much more difficult to succeed in higher education (Brown, 2017). Social and academic challenges are a result of a lack of resources and access (Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez & Taylor, 2016). However, despite these challenges, support systems for undocumented college students were identified and discussed in this chapter stemming from the home, community, and educational institutions. These types of support systems provide these students with opportunity to succeed; the support systems assist undocumented students in the navigation of the higher education system and provide these students with the social support needed to complete/earn their higher education degree (Noyola, 2012; Pérez & Ceja, 2010).

### Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Latinx Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students' navigating their educational pursuit at a four-year HEI. The study specifically focused on answering the following question and sub-questions:

1. What are Latinx DACA students' perspectives on their experiences navigating their educational pursuit at four-year higher education institutions? Sub-questions included:
  - a. What are the academic and social challenges these students face?
  - b. What are sources of support they identify in the family, the community, and the college?

A qualitative research design was considered the best method for this study since the focus was on exploring Latinx DACA college students' experiences navigating their educational pursuit at a four year college (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The research design allowed the researcher to approach the study using an exploratory approach in research with unknown outcomes (Rallis & Rossman, 2017).

This study involved the researcher conducting semi-structured interviews with Latinx DACA college students attending a four-year HEI. The goal of this research was to provide recommendations for higher education institutions and educators to better support the Latinx DACA student population by developing a better understanding of these students' experiences (Rallis & Rossman, 2017). This chapter starts with information about the researcher's background and proceeds with the study's setting, recruitment, participants, data collection, data analysis, and limitations.

## **Researcher Background**

The researcher of this study identifies as a Latino college student born in the United States (U.S.) attending a four-year HEI. He found himself interested in the topic of higher education access for those from underrepresented backgrounds through his professional experiences in higher education as they related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. He was a student that faced challenges due to the nature of coming from an underrepresented background and wanted to advocate for students that face challenges in higher education because of their backgrounds. As a Latino first-generation college student from a low SES background, he has had his own experiences navigating higher education with financial, social, and academic challenges, but overcame them with support. The topic of undocumented and DACA status immigrants in the U.S. became of interest to him as he noticed the hardships and injustices these individuals faced daily. While he did not face these experiences first hand, he had peers, colleagues, and family members that faced hardships due to their immigration status in the U.S.

He is aware that being a Latino college student could influence data collection and analysis because of his personal views and biases. Therefore, the researcher practiced reflexivity as an attempt to not impose his biases during the data collection and analysis of this study. Qualitative researchers have used this method to be aware of their biases during their data collection and analysis from imposing their views on the findings (Soltero López, 2014). The reflexivity method used in this study involved journaling as a way to bring into awareness the researcher's potential biases and influences in the data collection and analysis phases. This practice involved the researcher writing down notes

after each individual interview on any assumptions and thoughts the researcher may have had.

### **Setting**

The HEI selected for this study was a public four-year college located in the western U.S. referred to as Desert College (pseudonym) in this study. Desert College had approximately 5,000 undergraduate students. The race and ethnic makeup of Desert College consists of primarily White and Latinx students, with the Latinx accounting for over 30% of the total student population. The remaining student population was made up of Asian, Black, American Indian, Pacific Islander, multiethnic, and unknown. The gender ratio of the undergraduate students at this institution was over 70% female. Over 55% of the total student population self-identified as first-generation college students, and under 40% were considered low SES because they received the Pell Grant. The institution was both a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and a Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) as identified by the U.S. Department of Education.

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment for this study began after approval from both the researcher's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Desert College's IRB as required when research involves human subjects. Following approval from both institutions' IRBs, the researcher contacted a faculty member at Desert College with access to Latinx DACA college students as this person served as a faculty advisor to the institution's DACA student club. A script and flyer were created and shared with the club faculty advisor to disperse to potential student participants. 12 Latinx DACA students who attended Desert

College participated in this study. In order to participate in this study, a participant had to meet the following criteria:

1. Identified as Latinx or Hispanic
2. Was a DACA recipient
3. Had a sophomore or above academic standing
4. Enrolled and attended Desert College

The first criterion was used because Latinx were the largest group of the undocumented student population at the time of this study and not much was known about their experiences attending college during the DACA period of uncertainty. Also, the theoretical framework for this study, Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) called for the identification of a particular ethnic group, so the focus on community was somewhat confined. The second criterion was included because those with DACA were perceived to be more likely to speak about their experiences because of the protections granted to them from deportation. The participants had to be enrolled and attending Desert College to ensure all participants had relatively similar experiences on a higher education campus. First-year students were excluded from this study since they were considered to have limited experience in higher education.

The researcher and club faculty advisor remained in contact with one another until 12 Latinx DACA students who met the set criteria agreed to participate in the study. The faculty advisor then scheduled the first set of interviews with the participants in January of 2019 and again for the second set of interviews in March 2019. The interviews took place on Desert College's campus in their student services building. The interviews were one-on-one with the researcher. At the first interview, the participants were given an

information sheet about the study and were invited to ask any questions. They were told that at any time they were free to discontinue their participation in the study. Participants received a monetary incentive in the form of a \$25 Amazon gift card per interview for their participation in this study.

### **Participants**

The following section provides a brief overview of the 12 Latinx DACA college student participants in this study. The names of the participants were pseudonyms chosen by the DACA students in this study. All participants identified their native country to be Mexico. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the 12 participants.

**Rose** was a communication major, with minors in media and social justice. She was a sophomore at Desert College and employed on-campus part-time as a student worker. Rose came to the U.S. at about four years of age and had her DACA status for six years. She aspired to complete her undergraduate degree and continue her education in graduate school studying higher education. Rose was also a recipient of a full-ride scholarship and an active member of the DACA student club at Desert College.

**Ontario** was a secondary education major with a concentration in physical science. He hoped to one day become a high school teacher and inspire others to pursue their goals, just as he did in his younger years. Ontario was a junior at Desert College and enjoyed gardening in the community. He immigrated to the U.S. at the age of two and had DACA protections for six years.

**Ana** was a pre-nursing major in her sophomore year at Desert College. She immigrated to the U.S. when she was eight years old and had DACA for almost three years. Ana was a recipient of a full-ride scholarship and an active member of the DACA

student club. She also volunteered her time in the community by mentoring youth and assisting at events.

**Mable** was a sophomore in biology. She hoped to one day attend dental school and become a dentist. Mable was a participant of the DACA student club and recipient of a full-ride scholarship. She came to the U.S. with her family when she was three years old and had DACA for two years. Mable enjoyed expressing her artistic side and drew in her spare time.

**Alejandro** was a mathematics major and hoped to become a mechanical engineer in the future. He was a member of the DACA student club and received a full-ride scholarship. Alejandro was a sophomore that was one day hoping to transfer to an HEI with a mechanical engineering major. He enjoyed learning how things work and fixing mechanical objects. Alejandro immigrated to the U.S. when he was seven years old and had DACA for four years.

**Alexandra** was a pre-nursing student in her sophomore year. She came to the U.S. at the age of three and had her DACA status for two years. Alexandra was an activist and worked for a non-profit organization off-campus while being a member of the DACA student club. Her passion revolved around advocating for others and seeking justice. She was also a recipient of a full-ride scholarship.

**Lucy** majored in business administration and was a sophomore. She was interested in starting her own business, in particular, a family restaurant with her mother. Lucy worked off-campus in the fast-food industry. She was an active member of the DACA student club and a recipient of a full-ride scholarship. Lucy came to the U.S. before she was a year old and had her DACA status for six-years.

**Elle** was a speech pathology major with a deaf studies minor. She was in her sophomore year and an active member of the DACA student club. Elle paid for her undergraduate education with the assistance of a full-ride scholarship. She came to the U.S. with her family for better opportunities at the age of six and cared very deeply for her family members. Elle had DACA for three years but lost her DACA status when it was rescinded in 2017 temporarily when renewals were no longer accepted.

**Maria Jose** was an elementary education major that hoped to one day be a teacher. She wanted to pursue an art degree but thought she would not be able to obtain a financially stable career with that degree. Maria Jose was very thankful to have received a full-ride scholarship because college was not an option without it. She was in her sophomore year at Desert College and an active member of the DACA student club. Maria Jose immigrated to the U.S. with her family when she was five and had DACA for five years.

**Rosa** was a sophomore studying pre-nursing at Desert College. She came to the U.S. when she was a year old and had DACA for six years. Rosa was a recipient of a full-ride scholarship and an active member in the DACA student club at Desert College. She one day hoped to be a pediatric nurse as she enjoyed working with little kids.

**Tina** was a pre-nursing student in her sophomore year. She wanted to become a nurse practitioner by pursuing her master's degree. Tina received a full-ride scholarship to attend Desert College and was an active member of the DACA student club. She immigrated to the U.S. when she was two years old and had DACA for three years.

**Lucero** was a nursing student in her junior year with a minor in deaf studies. She came to the U.S. when she was two years old and had DACA for four years. Lucero was



a hard worker who at one point in time had three part-time jobs while studying. She was a member of the DACA student club and knew American Sign Language.

Table 1: Participant demographic information

<u>Name</u>	<u>Major</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Years w/DACA</u>
Alejandro	Mathematics and Science	Male	Sophomore	4
Alexandra	Pre-Nursing	Female	Sophomore	2
Ana	Pre-Nursing	Female	Sophomore	2.5
Elle	Speech Pathology	Female	Sophomore	3
Lucero	Nursing	Female	Junior	4
Lucy	Business Administration	Female	Sophomore	6
Mable	Biology	Female	Sophomore	2
Maria Jose	Elementary Education	Female	Sophomore	5
Ontario	Secondary Education	Male	Junior	6
Rosa	Pre-Nursing	Female	Sophomore	6
Rose	Communications	Female	Sophomore	6
Tina	Pre-Nursing	Female	Sophomore	3

### **Confidentiality**

The confidentiality of the participants was a top priority due to the political climate around immigration at the time of this study. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained to avoid any potential repercussions to the participants' safety because of their immigration status. Participants' information was kept confidential, and pseudonyms were used throughout the entire study. Participants' names were not used; instead, a pseudonym was used to keep their identity confidential. The audio recordings

and transcribed data were kept in a locked drawer in the researcher's office and a secure web-based storage system. The master list that identified the participant's real names and pseudonyms was kept in a locked drawer of the principal investigator and academic advisor's office. The digital audio recordings, participant master list and transcribed data will be destroyed a year after a successful dissertation defense. In addition, the participants were not required to sign any form of consent to add another layer of confidentiality and, instead, gave their verbal consent to the researcher to acknowledge their participation in the study.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection began in the spring of 2019 with two semi-structured individual interviews and a participatory mapping exercise at the start of the second interview. Semi-structured interviews were used to examine the experiences of 12 Latinx DACA college students. This interviewing method allowed the researcher to ask the same questions to all participants, but gave the flexibility to ask additional and clarifying questions based on participants' responses (Rallis & Rossman, 2017).

The first set of interviews with the participants began with an introduction from the researcher on his background such as him being a doctoral candidate from an underrepresented background at another institution with an interest in immigration, along with the purpose of the study. The participants were given an information sheet in both English and Spanish with information about the study for them to read and keep, the researcher's contact information was included (See Appendix A for a copy of the information sheet in both languages). The form discussed the type of information collected and how it would be used. An estimated timeline was provided and what the

participants would be expected to contribute to the study was explained. Participants were then allowed to ask the researcher any questions or concerns they had. Once this process was completed, the participants were asked to give verbal consent that they wished to continue to participate. The first set of interviews aimed to explore the experiences of the participants at a four-year HEI, focusing on the challenges and sources of support they utilized in their pursuit of higher education. The first set of interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 40 minutes and was guided by 14 questions and sub-questions (See Appendix B for a copy of the first interview questions).

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher and analyzed to formulate questions for the second set of interviews. The second set of interviews served as a follow-up to the first interviews aiming to clarify certain elements and gather additional information. Once the data from the first set of interviews were analyzed, questions were then developed for the second set of interviews. The second set of interviews took place approximately two months after the first interviews and focused on examining the participants' strengths. Five questions and sub-questions guided the second set of interviews (See Appendix C for a copy of the second interview questions). In addition to the common questions, additional questions tailored to each participant based on information provided in the first interview were asked. For example, one of the participants mentioned being a part of a mixed-status family. Therefore, a question pertaining to the potential challenges and forms of support was asked of the student to grasp a better understanding of this unique home environment.

Moreover, a participatory mapping exercise was completed before the second set of interview questions were asked. This exercise was used as another method of data

collection for this study, creating the collection of three data sources with two sets of interviews and the participatory mapping exercise to triangulate the data in this study (Rallis & Rossman, 2017). Triangulation is a method used that combines more than one data set in the forms of interviews, observations, documents, and others to further provide an understanding of the topic being studied (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Participatory mapping is a technique used to collect data regarding strengths, attributes, and resources of individuals by mapping their experiences and social interactions (Parker & Ashencaen Crabtree, 2016; Webber, 2015). It “builds on the premise that every community and its members has a supply of ‘assets’ that can be used to solve community problems and that these can be identified through the mapping process” (Parker & Ashencaen Crabtree, 2016, p. 369). Participants were asked to draw or write personal strengths they had as a student in higher education and identify who or what assisted with the development of that strength. Materials such as different colored markers and cardstock paper were given to the participants to complete this exercise. The participants in most cases created what looked similar to maps or lists. They were given as much time as was needed with many taking from 10 minutes to 30 minutes to complete. They were also asked to elaborate on their maps by stating their strengths, identifying how they obtained their strengths, and how they had used their strengths in higher education. The purpose of this data collection method was to provide insight into how participants believed they obtained their strengths, whether that was with support from an individual, program, or their personal characteristics. Once the participatory mapping exercise was completed, the second interview began. The interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 40 minutes.

Both sets of interview questions and the participatory mapping exercise were piloted with four participants (at the researcher's institution) meeting the criteria of this study who were not included as the 12 participants in this study. The piloting was done to ensure the questions and exercise instructions were clear and understood before introducing them to the 12 participants. For example, directions were added to explain how the strengths identified by the students assisted them with being college students. As initially the strengths were not clearly explained that they needed to be related to their education. In addition, all interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis began once the first set of interviews were completed. The researcher listened to the audio recordings and transcribed them verbatim. Any identifiable information mentioned in the interviews, such as individuals' names or locations were replaced with pseudonyms. Once the interviews were transcribed, the researcher read the interview transcriptions multiple times before coding began. Coding is a standard qualitative data analysis process that involves digging beneath the surface of what was said by a participant to discover meaning within the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The codes created are based on the responses of the participants and similar codes are collapsed into more significant themes based on commonality (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The coding involved line-by-line substantive coding with writing codes in the margins of the interview transcriptions based on the statements of the participants (Coyne & Cowley, 2006). The purpose of this form of coding was to gain an understanding of the data and what was meant by the participant's responses to the questions asked of

them. This data was then used to develop questions for the second interviews such as when participants were asked about being active in any clubs or organizations on campus, many responded with being a part of an undocumented student club. This was then coded as source of social support as many of the participants discussed how it provided a space for them to interact with others like them. Thus, more attention was given to the club's impact in the second interview that in turn created a question about the club's impact. As was later discovered the club provided more than just social support to these students. The codes and corresponding data from all 12 participants were compared continuously and recategorized until overarching themes emerged and then identified (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Coyne & Cowley, 2006).

The transcriptions and coding process were repeated for the second set of interviews. Then codes from both interviews were combined to compare and recategorize to develop overarching themes (Coyne & Cowley, 2006). For example, one of the main themes, political climate, was discovered after analysis of both interviews was completed. The nature of the climate at the time of this study led to many of the participants stating they were fearful and uncertain about their futures, which became codes that all stemmed heavily from the political climate surrounding undocumented immigration. In addition, the data collected from participatory mapping informed the findings from the two sets of interviews. The participants in the interviews discussed how they continued to work hard to be successful and this aspect was further reinforced by the participatory mapping exercise with students describing strengths they had such as being hardworking and dedicated. The themes were then developed into the findings of this study.

## Summary

The study used a qualitative design to explore the experiences of 12 Latinx DACA college students at a four-year HEI. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Latinx DACA college students and how they navigated their educational pursuit at a four-year HEI in a highly politicized climate. The study was conducted at Desert College, a small four-year HEI in the Western U.S. The researcher received assistance for recruitment from a faculty member at Desert College that served as an advisor to the participants. The data collected for this study was in the form of two semi-structured interviews and participatory mapping exercise completed with each participant at Desert College. The questions for the first interview were created to gather information to answer the research question of this study: What are Latinx DACA students' perspectives on their experiences navigating their educational pursuit at four-year higher education institutions? All data collected from the interviews and the participatory mapping exercise were then analyzed. The analysis led to the development of the findings and answered the research question of this study.

## Chapter IV: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of Latinx Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students on the ways in which they navigated higher education at a four-year higher education institution (HEI) in an era of a highly politicized climate around undocumented immigrants in the United States (U.S.). Using Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), an asset-based framework, this study explored Latinx DACA students' experiences navigating their educational pursuit at Desert College, a four-year HEI. The CCW framework, developed by Yosso (2005), focuses on the strengths individuals from marginalized groups obtain from their families and communities. These strengths are discussed in the form of six capitals: aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic (Yosso, 2005). While the study brought to light academic and social challenges the participants faced, its main focus was on the sources of support they utilized. Data sources included two interviews and a participatory mapping exercise. The students discussed their experiences prior to higher education and while in college and identified strengths they possessed that assisted them in successfully navigating higher education. When discussing the academic and social challenges faced due to their DACA status, the students also revealed the many sources of support they utilized from their families, K-12 education and their HEI to achieve their goals of success. They also provided recommendations for HEIs to support DACA students.

This chapter discusses the findings of this study. The first section addresses the impact of the political climate and media on the student participants. The second section discusses the challenges they faced academically and socially as they pursued higher



education and the various sources of support they utilized from their family, community, K-12 schooling, and Desert College to overcome these challenges. This section also attends to the recommendations these students had for HEI communities that aim to support students like them succeed on their educational paths. The third section discusses the students' self-identified strengths and motivations that continued to assist them in reaching their goals of success in the U.S.

### **Community Reactions to DACA**

While DACA students in this study saw themselves as any other college student, due to their DACA status, they were oftentimes treated differently at their college. Students who had DACA were granted a few more privileges in the U.S. than those who were undocumented, such as work permits and protection from deportation (Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). However, they were impacted by the political climate and the media views about them during the time of this study. The students in this study were faced with negative misconceptions and views of themselves due to their immigration status. The following sections expand on the political climate and the impact it had on these students in their pursuit of higher education. Next, the media's influence on the DACA students is explored.

### **Political Climate**

The political climate at the time of this study was characterized by instability as DACA was in a state of limbo because of the Trump Administration's efforts to end the DACA program implemented by the Obama Administration in 2012 (Ishiwata & Muñoz, 2018; Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). As a result, DACA students in this study had difficulty finding a place in their community despite their desires to do better for

themselves and others. Alexandra, who wanted to study nursing discussed her opinion about the overall political climate.

I think, for the most part, Americans are on [the DACA recipients] side...Then with all the things that happened with DACA recently, the Trump Administration, it was just a real rollercoaster...Is this judge going to take [DACA] away, is this judge gonna take [DACA] away...We were used as bargaining chips and even now [President] Trump is using [DACA individuals] not us specifically, but as bargaining chips for his [border] wall...It's not our fault that we're [in the U.S.] because our parents brought us over here when we were young. We didn't choose this life, but, like, why are they finding someone to blame for bringing us here when it's just, like we're looking for a better opportunity, better life.

As mentioned earlier, the Trump Administration attempted to rescind the DACA program in 2017, but was challenged by various legal proceeding that allowed those with DACA prior to the recession to renew their DACA status (Ishiwata & Muñoz, 2018). These legal proceedings, along with various political advocates of DACA, were struggling to find a permanent solution to protect those with DACA. The DACA program had an unknown future because there was no agreement between the various government entities to either end or continue its existence. Thus, the future of DACA and the future of those protected by the program was unknown. Elle, a speech pathology major, mentioned both the negative and positive implications of this climate. She said, "I feel like because of that visibility and because of the current president in office, it has put a lot of [DACA and undocumented] students in danger. A lot of them have taken more part in social activism." As Elle mentioned, students during this time had been fearful of disclosing

their status because of the danger of deportation to their native country. However, she also pointed out the fact that many people, with or without DACA, were advocating for a positive solution. The greater visibility Elle mentioned came from the debate of the DACA program's future on various media platforms, such as news and social media outlets.

### **Perceptions of DACA in the Media**

Media is a powerful outlet for multiple uses. Media includes news reports on television, printed newspapers, and social media posts. Media influenced individuals and groups' perspectives on topics and initiated attention to new topics. During the time of this study, the media had a negative and positive influence on immigration and especially the DACA program. The participants discussed the opposite influences.

**Harmful media.** Many of the students in this study discussed the media's influence on the views of DACA and undocumented individuals with many stating they avoided the media to get away from the negative perceptions and misconceptions others perceived about them due to their status. The responses made by the DACA students avoiding media meant they did not view social media accounts or watch the news and often only obtained new information about DACA by word of mouth. For example, Mable a DACA student wanting to be a dentist said,

To be honest, I kind of don't like [to] follow what's going on with what's related to like my [DACA] status and stuff, like what the president's doing or whatever because I really don't like listening to it, and I know I should pay attention because it concerns me... What I'm going through, but I just I don't like listening to it because it just brings me down. So, if I need to know and it's like if [the

media] were to say the president just took it away then obviously, I would have to know, and people would tell me because its gonna change my status and stuff. Similarly, Tina another DACA student shared that she focused on other parts of her life rather than the negative perceptions of the media. She stated, "I try to focus my mind on education and my goals with that, but with the current president and other representatives of the [U.S.] I feel like there is a very negative stigma placed on [undocumented and DACA] people." These students chose to ignore the negative perceptions about them. The negative stigma mentioned by Tina was attributed to the misconceptions and misinformation that media portrayed. Stereotypes (re)produced by the media included portraying DACA and undocumented individuals as criminals who did not belong in the U.S. Another DACA student, Maria Jose, elaborated on this point by mentioning her frustration with the portrayal of undocumented and DACA individuals being exclusively from Mexico because not all were from Mexico. She said:

I feel like there's a lot of [media] misconceptions regarding undocumented immigrants because a lot of times [they're] referred to as Mexicans and there are a lot of other people who are undocumented and are recipients of DACA that are not Mexican. There's a lot of ignorance surrounding that especially like in politics and they paint undocumented immigrants as bad people. I don't think we're bad people, I think we're just looking for better opportunities--So a lot of people are just jumping to conclusions, so I feel like you just need to be educated and know that the person sitting next to you probably has DACA and they're not necessarily Latino or Latina and it's just all about educating yourself and finding your own facts and researching your own thing. So that you can make an

educated conclusion to what you want to believe, not what's trending so I feel like that's my biggest thing with people.

Maria Jose discussed a common misconception: It was true that while many individuals who were undocumented or had DACA came from Mexico, not all did. Undocumented individuals from Mexico only represented 52% of the total population, while the remaining came from central American countries, Asia and Caribbean regions (Ramirez, 2017). This was only one misconception portrayed of the undocumented population.

The students described their frustration with media and additional misconceptions about DACA. Often, the students noted that people were misinformed and believed that DACA had resulted in a multitude of resources for recipients, but that was not the case. The fallacious privileges these students described that were not given to them with DACA included traveling, having employment opportunities, accessing resources and education, building relationships, and being secure from deportation. Travel in this case was referring to international travel, which was something that at one point those with DACA could do. However, at the time of this study it was advised that those with DACA not travel outside of the U.S. due to the possibility they would not be allowed to return into the country. Some of the students mentioned the consequences of not being able to travel, such as their inability to study abroad and to visit family members they had in other parts of the world. Alexandra mentioned a tragic outcome of not being able to travel, "I had my grandpa pass away in the beginning of the year and he's in Mexico. We [family] weren't able to say goodbye and that really hit home for everyone." Alexandra was not the only student in this study that referenced loved ones passing that could not be

seen due to the travel restrictions DACA students had. This was something that had negatively impacted these students.

Career opportunities were also limited for DACA students because, even though they had work permits, some careers required citizenship status prohibiting DACA students from pursuing them. Maria Jose, a DACA student who wanted to be a teacher, said:

I feel like another pressure is finding a job that is going to let you work because there are some jobs that require you to be a citizen and maybe you can't follow your dreams because in the future you're not going to be able to get that job because you're not a citizen...This field is what I want to do, but I can't do that because I'm not a citizen.

Having to come to terms with their status and the realization that their DACA status may prevent them from entering a career that they had dreamed of was a reality for these students because of policies and requirements set by certain employers.

The limited opportunities in their career aspects did not end there for those with DACA as they were also limited in other aspects, including financial aid and a general lack of information impacting their education. DACA students were not able to access federal financial aid and had to seek financial assistance through other scholarships and grants. Finding these types of resources was difficult as students often did not know where to begin looking for such opportunities in the absence of knowledgeable advisors. The students in this study mentioned various points in time that, not only in higher education but also in their K-12 education, they became frustrated due to their inability to receive help because an advisor or counselor was not able to advise them appropriately.

Elle mentioned her frustration with advisors at Desert College not being able to help her effectively, while her peers that were citizens did not have this type of problem in their education.

If I go to an advisor with this specific question about, what career field I can go into with this degree as a DACA student...A lot of the times I'll go into the advising office, and they don't even know what DACA is...They don't know who the DACA students are, they don't know what career fields they can go into, and it's been like a recurring issue. I know it's not just me because I have undocumented friends and they go through the same thing, and I know that it's not the same for other [general student population] students...I know scholarships is like a big thing, financial aid is a big one, advising it's just things we have to jump through, hoops and other students just kind of take it for granted.

This inadequate of advising made it difficult for these students to continue to pursue their education as they were left trying to figure things out on their own rather than getting assistance from professionals.

Furthermore, the students hinted that they did not have the active social life they wished for because of their immigration status. This was because one of the eligibility requirements of DACA was that an individual could not have a criminal record. Maria Jose mentioned the fear of deportation even while just commuting to Desert College.

It's [deportation] constantly in the back of my head. Maybe coming to school or they [individual's with DACA] can't go out to party too much or too late because they don't want to have a running with the police.

While DACA students were not planning to commit crimes, they were afraid that they might be in the presence of law officials. The interaction was seen as a possibility in which exposure and potential loss of their DACA status. As a result, students chose to stay home and only left their homes when they needed to go to Desert College or work. Elle, a sophomore at Desert College shared her experience, when she temporarily lost her DACA status:

My first semester of college DACA was rescinded, and I remember at the time I wasn't working, and I hadn't renewed my DACA in time for it to come before my previous one had expired. So, then there was a period of time when...I no longer had DACA protection so I was just completely undocumented you know just no type of protection whatsoever and I was so scared...What would happen if I were to be like detained or whatever little thing could go wrong, everything just came like rushing to me and so I think maybe for like two months or so I was really scared, and I like wouldn't leave my house. I would only come to school and back home, I would not leave the house.

Additionally, the students that had DACA were still fearful they would be pulled over by the police on their commute to Desert College and detained for any reason.

The political climate during the time of this study made it difficult for these DACA students to build relationships with others as they were not sure who they could trust.

Tina, a pre-nursing student, emphasized this fear of letting others know about her DACA status. She said, "they [DACA students] may feel not ashamed of their identity, but they may feel scared to put it out there and so that constant fear of making sure that they filter



what they share and what they don't." Another pre-nursing student Rosa mentioned her difficulty with having to open to others about her status once she got to college.

Having to kind of open up to so many people about how you're undocumented because before college I wasn't used to just saying, "Oh I'm undocumented" to people. As you get older certain things come up that you're just like "dang I have to tell them, I'm undocumented" and kind of hiding that your whole entire life it's kind of hard to adjust to being more open about that subject.

As previously mentioned, the media had painted a different picture of who DACA and undocumented immigrants were with some in society not being supportive of these immigrants. The fear of disclosing their status was amplified due to the political climate during this study and many of these students felt DACA did not provide the protection it once had when the previous presidential administration was in office.

Since DACA could be terminated at any point and no longer provide the temporary protection to these students, the fear left many of the DACA students wondering how they should plan for their future. Alejandro, a student with a dream to one day be a mechanical engineer, wondered whether if all his work to achieve his dream was worth the effort.

Worrying about if all your efforts are worth it, I think a lot of DACA students feel that or have that experience. I'm working towards being a doctor, but am I actually going to get to be a doctor [generalized career not Alejandro's career] after all these years because the presidential administration doesn't really care about me or is putting me in limbo.

The media had its fair share of impact on these DACA students. The garnered attention to this population in the media created negative views that influenced individuals in the country. The negative influences of media attributed to the continued segregation of political parties that had made it difficult for these students to be successful or maintain motivation in certain parts of their lives, such as their education. However, even though media had brought negative attention and influence on those with DACA, there had been some positives media had brought to the population.

**Positive influences of media.** Some students had used the rise in attention in the media to the DACA and undocumented populations in various ways ranging from openly advocating for themselves, to sharing resources with one another, motivating themselves to pursue their goals and creating a sense of hope for a positive future. Many of the DACA students in this study mentioned how they had been more outspoken about their status due to many other students like them speaking about their status openly. Tina, a sophomore at Desert College, mentioned that the increase in comfort level the media had given her and others allowed them to be more open. This was because of others with DACA posting on social media platforms to defend the DACA population from negative comments or openly disclosing their immigration status.

I think it kind of helps students come out, more out of the shadows, I guess you could say and have them speak more from their experiences and what they think should change or shouldn't change—since the media covers [DACA] so much. If there's something, for example, negative or incorrect [that is] said then DACA student is more likely to open up about their experience [to correct what is said].

As Tina mentioned, the increase of attention to DACA in the media had encouraged individuals to advocate for themselves. Lucy, a business administration student, discussed the increased attention in media of the DACA population. She stated:

The media helps a lot and helps people get to know about dreamers, DACA and be more educated on [DACA] and so I feel it helps college students because it's giving them power and more dreamers are going to college.

DACA students sharing their experiences through the media and correcting these misconceptions about the population helped to motivate their fellow peers, who might have had DACA or were undocumented, to pursue higher education.

Another positive aspect of media, in this case social media, was the sharing of resources and opportunities to other DACA students. An example mentioned by the students was sharing scholarship opportunities and programs that students who were undocumented or had DACA could access. Lucy mentioned using media to share the full-ride scholarship she had with others. The sharing on social media was also seen as positive for these students in the form of motivation in particular stories of success that other DACA and undocumented college students had in the U.S. Seeing these types of stories inspired the DACA students to push forward to reach their goals and disprove the negative misconceptions. Rose mentioned her seeing a post on a social media platform that showed other students like her succeeding because they fought and worked hard, which further motivated her to do well. At the same time, Alejandro used the negative portrayal of DACA and undocumented immigrants to motivate him to prove those views incorrect.

I think [media attention] is creating a lot of motivation for [DACA students] to continue to prove people wrong because when the president came out screaming that Mexicans are all these things [criminals, rapists, etc.]. I'm working my butt off to get to school to contribute to the American society of the country that I love, and I want to prove [these people] wrong because one day...after completing my engineering degree...be in politics and share my story.

DACA portrayed in the media was used by the DACA students to continue to do their best to succeed given the challenges faced due to their status in the U.S. either by using the positive to reinforce their potential or using the negative to resist those views.

The continued conversation about DACA and undocumented immigrants in the media had further sparked the creation of resources and support during this time. One of the students, Elle, shared her view on the opportunities the visibility of those like her were given. Media as mentioned brought its negatives and positives, but one of the largest positives for these DACA students was the hope for a future in the U.S. Elle summarized her thoughts on the media's impact.

Although [DACA students] still have to look really hard to find resources and find scholarships it is improving and that wouldn't be possible without starting a conversation about DACA and who these DACA students are... [DACA students] are just normal students who have to work a lot harder, but we are just really good students. I think that [media] had a positive impact, and I feel like not even just for the students, but I feel like it's given hope to a lot of parents.

The increased attention to immigration in the U.S. media furthered the conversation, mainly about DACA and continued hope for these DACA students to succeed. Media

created a form of support in various ways to either connect with others such as allies and peers that advocated for the DACA population, gave resources to assist them either financially or academically, and continued to correct the negative views that existed about them. As Maria Jose stated, “[Media] created this big support system, so I think the more people talk about [DACA] the more people know and then the more accepting they might be of it.”

The political climate shifted with the presidential administration in office at the time of this study and along with the media. The status of the DACA program was debated constantly from individuals wanting the program terminated to others wanting a pathway to citizenship created. These students continued to overcome challenges in the hope that things in the U.S. would change for the better. The DACA students expressed and faced various challenges the political climate and media presented them, but also managed to find silver linings from various forms of support.

### **DACA Challenges and Supports in Higher Education**

As indicated in the previous section, the participants in this study faced many challenges because of their immigration status in the U.S. These challenges were intensified because of the participants’ additional underrepresented identities, such as being Latinx, women, low socioeconomic status (SES), sexual orientation, and first-generation college students. The challenges discussed by the DACA students existed in their families, K-12 education, and higher education. However, they did find sources of support within these same environments. This section discusses the challenges and sources of support the DACA students in this study identified that they experienced in

their pursuit of higher education within their families, K-12 education, and higher education.

### **Family Advantages and Disadvantages**

Many students from underrepresented backgrounds such as Latinx, first-generation college students, and low SES, such as these students in this study, experienced varying dynamics from their families. It should be noted the term family is not restricted to the nuclear family structures as participants referenced various family structures ranging from single parent households to having more than two generations or additional families living with them. These family structures resulted in considering family to be more than just siblings and parents and included other caregivers, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and, in some situations, even friends. These experiences and dynamics resulted in additional challenges, but at the same time created support.

**Family's downsides.** Challenges brought on by the family mentioned by these DACA students involved communication, support, cultural beliefs, and mixed status. These various challenges discussed by the DACA students resulted in a negative impact to their educational and personal life experiences.

The communication challenges within the DACA students' families were in large part due to family members either not knowing the English language at all or knowing very little. Some of the DACA students mentioned they had to translate for parent-teacher conferences, doctors' appointments, and other conversations for family members causing the DACA students to pull away from tasks they needed to complete. Elle, who was the oldest of her siblings, mentioned she translated for her family members constantly. She said, "[M]y parents speak very broken English, so growing up I had to

translate everything for my parents whether that was at the grocery store or at the doctor's office or at the dentist's office.” Even though she was more than happy to do that, at times, she found it difficult to prioritize her school work with these types of family obligations.

Another challenge associated with communication was the constant explaining of higher education to their families because many were first-generation college students. The family members often wondered what the students were doing on the Desert College campus at odd hours and why they were constantly spending time on school work. Elle discussed her challenge with communicating to her parents the financial cost of higher education.

[My parents] don't really know what being in college is like. I remember, when I was applying to college, you had to pay application fees and stuff. They didn't understand that. They were like, “why can't you just go enroll like we did in high school?” They didn't understand how much, like, college costs...I remember talking to them about going to other schools, and I was, like, it's so expensive and they were like how much is that [college]? I would say, I don't know like 6,000, 12,000 a year and they were just completely shocked because they didn't understand how expensive college really was.

Mable said it was a constant battle to communicate with her parents about why she needed to do the things she did as a college student.

I have friends, who have that issue with their parents, who don't understand [being a college student]. Why they're going to school? Why they need Wi-Fi? Why they need certain things for school? Why they have to stay or drive? My parents

were always like that especially my mom, my dad, I feel like he's the same way, but he doesn't really speak much of it, but he has the same thoughts.

The constant communication battle about higher education to their family members made it difficult for these students to go to their families for support because of the lack of awareness and college knowledge. Consequently, the students were left to navigate higher education on their own, while overcoming the other challenges they faced in higher education.

Some DACA students discussed the lack of support that their families had for their education from an academic, emotional, financial, and social support. These students mentioned instances where their academic abilities were called into question by family members. Rose mentioned an instance when she knew she wanted to attend college and thought attending a high school with a college pipeline would be best for her.

When I was applying to high schools that were magnet schools, I was telling my aunt, and she was kind of, like, "oh well good luck with that because you need good grades and it's going to be hard for you, you're going to be struggling a lot."

The DACA students in this study all came from low SES families and, due to the lack of ability to apply for financial aid, found it difficult to obtain financial support for college. Their families in most cases were not able to offer financial assistance to pay for their tuition. Rose shared the following experience when she went to her high school counselor for assistance to find alternatives to college because she was not going to be able to afford college.

I had actually gone to my counselor and asked her, what other things can I do besides college because I don't know if that's like a financial option for me



because my family, my parents don't make enough money. We're struggling to pay the bills every month and I don't think college would help with that.

Fortunately for Rose, in this instance, she was able to find funding to pursue higher education in the form of scholarships. Like many other students in this study, had she not found the monetary support, she said she likely never would have furthered her education.

The inability to gain support from their families continued to be difficult for these students because they felt alone and unprepared for what they would experience throughout their pursuit of higher education. Lucy talked of her frustration with the lack of support from her family. She shared, "...not having anybody like family-wise support me. They don't know what I need, they never come to my events, they never come to school." Many of the students in the study felt that their family's lack of availability was a challenge because they wanted to share their experiences and achievements with their family members.

Furthermore, a family's cultural beliefs brought negative implications and, in this situation, the students' Latinx backgrounds played a role in their challenges. For example, in the Latinx culture, women are often expected to be married housewives and should not pursue an education (Astorga, 2015). Elle discussed this scenario with her grandfather who lived in Mexico with very traditional cultural beliefs of machismo. She explained:

There was a couple times, I would bring up college and there was a time when I wanted to go into political science because I wanted to work. I eventually wanted to go to law school. I wanted to be an immigration lawyer and my grandfather

would say something like, “Why are you even going to go to college?” College isn’t for women, you should be focused on helping out your family at home, and you should be focused on getting married and being a good decent woman...Just the thought of me going to college, he was like, “Why do you need to do that? You’re going to be a housewife...” I would never talk back because it’s disrespectful...“Okay grandpa that’s ok that you think that, but time is changing and that’s my goal”...That’s one thing that I want for myself. Not only that my parents want me to go to college, but I want to go to college that is my life goal to make a career for myself...Hearing him say those things [at] a very young age, when I was like 10 or 12 was really hurtful. Obviously, it’s somebody that I like care about and look up to so that was hurtful.

These machismo beliefs were typical in the Latinx culture and centered on the idea of masculinity. That is, the idea in which the male is the financial provider and main person of a household, whereas the female is the caregiver and stays at home fulfilling the housewife role (Astorga, 2015).

The Latinx culture also impacted the males, especially when it came to taboo beliefs of sexual orientation. For instance, homosexuality was not fully accepted in the Latinx culture. Ontario, a DACA student who wanted to be a teacher, described his experience coming out as a pansexual to his parents and how that changed their perspective on his career path.

When I came out to my parents as pansexual, [my mom] was like “Oh no, you’re not going to be a teacher anymore.”...She thought that it would be impossible for me to get married with someone... She’s like this poor child is going to live alone

and he has to find a good job so he could support himself because if he's a teacher he's not going to be able to do it or he's going to struggle. Then my mom was, like, "You shouldn't be a teacher and be an engineer."

Ontario's experience left him shaken and, although he did not change his career path, he was disheartened by how his parents initially reacted to him coming out. The DACA students faced various challenges typical of other underrepresented background students like communication and support, but their DACA status brought yet another unique family dynamic called mixed status families.

Mixed status families are unique to those that have some members in the family that have DACA and/or are undocumented. Alexandra, a DACA student in a mixed status family, defined them as "when there's some people in your family who are documented [legally allowed to live in the U.S.] and some people who aren't." In most cases with the students in the study, the participants' younger siblings were those that were documented. Some challenges that came from these types of families were situations of bullying and lack of security. In situations of bullying, the younger documented siblings would make fun of the DACA students' inability to partake in activities, such as traveling. Also, with mixed status families in some cases, one documented family member could provide legal status and had everything tied to them, such as loans, resources, living situations, and so on. These situations resulted in a shift to the family's power dynamics. One additional challenge shared by Alexandra, a DACA student who was part of a mixed status family, was her inability to comfort her younger sibling about the safety of the family. She confided:

My little sister telling me [when] she does watch the news or sees something on social media about what's happening...people are getting deported because it does happen like your mom can go to work and then she can't, she won't come back because sometimes they raid like places. [My sibling] just coming to me and telling me what if this happened, you know like that's what hurts me the most. Alexandra's sibling who was documented often confided in her, but at the same time Alexandra was hurt to hear these thoughts. The situation of mixed status families brings unique challenges to students like these in this study and could be emotionally draining for some.

The family brought challenges to these students in their pursuit to higher education and negatively impacted the DACA students in a variety of ways from making them feel alone, helpless, frustrated, insecure, unsafe, fearful, and exhausted. Nevertheless, even though families brought challenges to DACA students, they also provided a source of support for them.

**Family brings support.** The family was discussed as challenging at times to these DACA students, but they mentioned sources of support the family brought them. The family provided support to these DACA students in the form of financial support, emotional support, academic support, and motivation to succeed.

Some of the DACA students in the study mentioned their families provided financial assistance not towards their tuition, but by providing them with place to live, cooked meals, and so on. Alejandro mentioned this about his mother, "I can pay for my own food, [but] there's times where I just can't make my own food and my mom is there to make me a nice warm meal and that really helps a lot." The DACA students

appreciated these seemingly small contributions from their family and considered them vital to their success.

Another form of support the DACA students found to be a great importance came in the form of emotional support. Some participants in the study described their feelings of being loved by their families and how their families were so proud of their accomplishments. Lucero, a junior nursing student, mentioned hearing how her various family members said that they were proud of her and the impact it has had on her. She stated, “When [family members] say, ‘I’m so proud of you’...I think it’s just like having people who actually support you. That’s been a big thing for me.” Again, even though the family may not fully understand the struggles that these students go through, the emotional support provided acts as a motivator to continue their education.

Beyond the financial and emotional support, some students indicated they received academic support. The academic support came from siblings who were in college or a parent who was willing to provide a tutor. Ontario discussed getting help from his sister attending Desert College. He shared, “She’s also a student [at Desert College]...we study...help each other on some things. If I need ideas for [a] paper, I could always talk to her.” Lucy mentioned another type of academic assistance that came from her mother, “The other day, I told her I was struggling with accounting, for the first time [my mom] was like if you need a tutor, I’ll pay for it.” This surprised Lucy as her mother had never really shown an interest in her school but was willing to pay for a tutor to help her in a course she was not comprehending.

The motivation to succeed was one of the largest forms of support the family provided these DACA students. This form of support came with family members

interested in education as a conduit to success, serving as a role model for other members, and motivation from their parent's sacrifice to give them opportunities for a future. Many of the DACA students in this study mentioned the influence their parents gave them about the importance of education in their early upbringing. The importance of education was relayed to the DACA students and passed on to their sibling(s) and other family members with the DACA students wanting to succeed to serve as role models for others in their family. Maria Jose simply attested to the idea of being a role model for her siblings and hoped that they would continue their education. When asked about the type of influence her family had on her being in college, she replied, "I also wanted to be a role model for my little sister and my brothers, so I wanted them to follow in my footsteps." Serving as a role model for others continued to be a recurrent motivation for these DACA students whether it was for their siblings or other family members. Parents of the DACA students saw education as a way for their children to become successful and pushed them to do well in their academics. Alejandro's mother was one of those parents. He shared, "My mother, who's a single parent, influenced me to attend college because she's always said a simple phrase 'to go to school so you can have a better job than I have right now.'" Many of the parents of these DACA students initially came to the U.S. not only to provide more opportunities for themselves, such as employment, but also to allow their children to be successful and have a better life. Some of the DACA students in this study referenced their parents' dreams of success and their desire to make those a reality for their parents. Lucy stated she was motivated to complete her business degree to open a business for her mother. She said her goal was "to open up a restaurant at some point, maybe a family restaurant [because] my mom

[has] always wanted to own a restaurant.” These selfless acts the students discussed reflected how grateful they were for the opportunities they had been given in the U.S. They recognized their parents’ sacrificing everything by leaving their native country and starting a new life in an unknown environment. Tina summarized her most considerable influence from her family to pursue higher education when she stated, “Well, the biggest influence was knowing that the reason I'm [in the U.S.] in the first place is because my parents wanted a better opportunity to get education for their children...motivation to take advantage of what they granted us.”

Family served as a source of support for these DACA students in various capacities. The sources of support varied from student to student depending on their family situation. The support that the family attributed to these students was crucial, not only in their pursuit of higher education but also during their K-12 education. However, these students discussed additional challenges and sources of support that came from their K-12 education.

### **K-12 Educational Experiences**

The students in this study all discussed the K-12 educational challenges they had overcome, such as educators not knowing how to help them because of their status, being unprepared for higher education, and lacking career exposure. However, there were some forms of support they received from various K-12 educators serving as mentors and participating in college preparation programs. Much of the focus discussed the DACA students’ K-12 experience in this study was centered in their high school due to that being the most impactful time to them.

**Difficult times in high school.** The most significant barrier discussed in the DACA students' K-12 experience was not being able to find assistance from counselors and teachers. In most cases, the participants described they were not able to obtain help because of their status. That was especially the case when it was time to find information about how to pursue higher education. The varying degrees of preparation that they had in their transition to higher education were attributed to the mentors and types of high schools they attended. Some students felt that they were better prepared, while others stated the reverse and felt they were not prepared about what to expect in higher education. One student, Elle said she felt better prepared than others and attributed her preparation on the mentors she had in high school.

I have other friends who are also undocumented. Who don't really know where to find the resources that they need or they don't know who to go to if they need help...I did have mentors who prepared me with those resources and who always made sure to check in with me and stuff.

The mentors discussed by the students ranged from counselors at their schools to teachers and, in some cases, staff of non-profit organizations in which these students participated. However, because the students did not always feel comfortable disclosing their undocumented or DACA status, they found it difficult to receive or even ask for assistance. This fear stemmed from the unknown reaction that would occur if the student disclosed their status to others and, at times, they refused to seek help to avoid the potentially hazardous situation. As mentioned earlier, these students could not rely on their families for assistance since they were first-generation college students forced to



rely on themselves to succeed, making it especially difficult to receive assistance if it was not given by K-12 educators.

For some of these students, high school was the first time when they noticed the manifestation of the challenges that came with being an undocumented person. Prior to high school, it was not clear to them how they were different from their documented peers. Lucero, one of the students in the study, recalled the moment when she learned about what her undocumented status meant.

My mom never told me like, ‘Hey, you’re undocumented’, but I feel I just kind of knew, but it was in high school like tenth grade, when I tried to join a [college preparation program]...I realized what it could mean to me and things I couldn’t apply for, things that I couldn’t qualify for because of [my status]. That’s when it really hit me...it’s going to get tough...I wasn’t able to actually join [college preparation program] because I didn’t have citizenship...I started noticing that there were a lot of opportunities that I couldn’t actually pursue just because I didn’t have [citizenship].

This left Lucero with the realization that she was different from other students. She was not able to enter the college preparation program and felt she was not as prepared for higher education. She declared, “I feel like if I had been able to be a part of the [college preparation program] would have helped me a lot more significantly [in college].”

The opportunities these students were not able to participate in during their K-12 education left them unprepared in most cases because they were not advised on how to apply for college and seek funding opportunities. Besides not being allowed to participate in college preparation programs, the students continued to discuss the lack of

advisement from educators related to their status since they were limited in the opportunities that they could engage in like career exposure and internships. Elle mentioned that her lack of career exposure in her earlier educational years impacted her college years. Particularly when it came time for her to choose a major, she remembered, “I didn't know how to go about picking a major because in high school I didn't really get any exposure to, like, types of careers.” Not knowing what to major in was a pattern with other students as well, because they had not been exposed to career options before attending higher education. The lack of preparation and inadequate advising in their K-12 education for some students in this study continued to negatively impact their college experience. However, they managed to overcome these challenges despite their doubts about whether going to college was the right choice for them. Some of the DACA students did what they could based on what they knew by applying to college but were never sure if more could have been done to ease their transition to higher education from high school. One student who was unsure she had applied correctly was Rosa who shared her experience, “I had no idea what to do, I would have probably just applied [to college] and then not knowing what to do from there.” She specifically mentioned the paperwork coming with the college applications and correctly submitting them. Based on the information provided by the DACA students, they found difficulties as many other students did, such as applying for college and being prepared for college life but were challenged by additional barriers because of their immigration status. Though the K-12 educational experience of these students did have its challenges, the DACA students mentioned sources of support they had, too.

**Some schools and teachers cared.** Some of the DACA students in this study mentioned instances of support in their K-12 education in the form of schools with a college-going culture, supportive mentors and teachers, and access to opportunities. The sources of support identified by the DACA students in the study varied just as much as their challenges depending on the schools they attended. Some of the students received more support than others due to the schools they attended and the environment they were in, such as magnet schools.

Magnet schools were schools that provided a college going environment encouraging their students to succeed and preparing them for higher education. Other students mentioned being able to participate in college preparation programs that did not require one to be a citizen. Ontario attended magnet schools starting in his middle school years and felt that the teachers helped him prepare for college.

I learned a lot during [middle and high school] years... [Students] knew what we were going to do, we all did our work so there was no goofing off really. I consider myself lucky just because I got accepted to those [magnet] schools not everyone does, but it kind of just set the path straight for me to go to college to prepare me...as much as it could with all the teachers I had and the environment I was in.

The environment that the magnet school setup for Ontario guided him to pursue higher education and helped prepare him for the college experience. One aspect mentioned by Ontario that contributed to the positive environments at his schools was the teachers.

The DACA students mentioned having either one or a few teachers that impacted them and pushed them to succeed in their education. Elle, who attended a magnet high school, talked about the support she received from individuals at her school.

I had very supportive advisors and mentors in high school who really pushed me even being an undocumented student. They would help me find resources... They would help me apply to colleges and scholarships... That really was a big part in my decision to attend college.

Similar to Ontario, Elle's quote exemplifies the positive influence that a school environment can have. This point was echoed by Alexandra who mentioned the college going environment of her school prepared her for the course work in college.

It was one of those high schools where it's like hard, it's a lot of homework... The teachers say we're preparing you for college like this is college work... Now I mean I'm grateful for it because I'm kind of used to the load of [class] work.

The structure of these schools allowed the students to explore their options for the future by encouraging exposure to careers early on in their education. Ana, another DACA student who attended a magnet school, stated her school gave her the opportunity to explore her interests. She mentioned, "I used to be in a magnet school, where students are able to choose what field they want to do once they go to college and mine was [certified nursing assistant]... Then once I applied for college, I chose nursing." The teachers and environment at these magnet schools provided great support for some of these DACA students by pushing them to succeed academically, influencing their career paths, and finding resources. The environment at these schools exposed them to college life early on in their academic career.

However, not all the DACA students in this study attended magnet schools. For some, forms of support were provided from various individuals and programs at their traditional high schools. Even though some students in this study mentioned not having support from their teachers and counselors, there were situations in which teachers and counselors who showed interest in these students' academic abilities were able to be a form of support. In some cases, the invested interest of these educators had a lasting impact. Maria Jose mentioned that it influenced her career path.

A person that really made an impact in my life was my second-grade teacher. She's the one that taught me English, and I just looked up to her because she helped everybody. So ever since then I knew I wanted to bring that help to those students who needed it as well.

Specific educators lead many of these DACA students further regardless of magnet school attendance. When those supportive educators were not available, students took it upon themselves to find help by participating in organizations outside of their schools for support. Non-profit organizations that worked with schools in the community these students lived in served as a support system for some. Ana joined a non-profit to help her during high school.

I joined a non-profit organization. What they do is, your first two years [you] just volunteer and you explore. You volunteer whether it's a hospital or at different places, where you can find your field interests. Junior year and senior year, they start preparing you for [college entrance exams]. They are looking for colleges and college options. Then senior year you start applying for college...If it

wouldn't have been for them, I wouldn't [have] even start[ed] thinking of a college or applying.

Ana was able to gain mentors out of this non-profit organization that assisted her in her education. Organizations like the one Ana participated in helped some of the other students in this study to apply for college and created relationships with mentors that these students could trust to guide them.

These various forms of support from individuals, schools, and organizations in their K-12 education assisted them in continuing their education by encouraging college as an option for these students. The DACA students were able to gain mentors in various capacities during their K-12 education from teachers, counselors, and community members. Some of the students at the time of this study were still in contact with these mentors and utilized them to continue to succeed. Elle shared that she still had teachers with whom she was in contact. She stated, "Teachers from high school that I still keep in touch with till this day you know they'll text me and check in with me at the end of the semester." Along with the individuals discussed by the students who supported them in their K-12 education, the other contributing factor to their success were the magnet schools and organizations that created a college going culture. Given these DACA students' circumstances, they managed to discover sources of support without which they would have faced additional challenges or never have attended college. The DACA students in this study discussed their K-12 education experiences that led them on the path to higher education. Their experiences in higher education were varied.

## **Higher Education Experiences**

The DACA students in this study identified various challenges and forms of support that had assisted them in the navigation of their higher education journeys. The challenges discussed ranged from a lack of engagement with their college, lack of various forms of support and resources, awareness of the DACA population, building relationships and lack of opportunities. The DACA students also discussed forms of support they received at Desert College. The forms of support ranged from a dedicated club for these students, a full-ride scholarship paying their tuition, network of supportive Desert College faculty, and forms of academic support. This section discusses the financial, academic, and social challenges faced by these DACA students in higher education. Also, the sources of support found by these DACA students is addressed with recommendations to HEIs to better support students like them.

**Paying for college.** One of the largest barriers for DACA and undocumented college students in their pursuit to higher education discussed by these students is the financial cost. Many of these students came from low-income family backgrounds and could not depend on others to financially assist them on this path. Additionally, DACA and undocumented college students did not qualify for federal aid given through FASFA because they were not citizens of the U.S. However, scholarships were available to these students. Also, institutional funds in the forms of grants and scholarships were available for these students to apply for, depending on the institution.

***College was not free.*** The financial toll was the reason why some of the DACA students mentioned they did not believe college was an option for them. Rose revealed this to be her truth, “I didn't really see myself going because of the financial aid aspect.”

Another student, Maria Jose, believed she was not going to go to college because she did not have the money and her parents would only provide financial help to one of their two children, which was her brother in this case. She said, “It was either I was going to go, or my brother was going to go.” A standard route discussed by the students, besides obtaining scholarships and grants to pay for their education, was to work.

As a result, some of the students had multiple jobs to meet the needs of tuition and living costs while attending college. The need to work created more challenges for some of the students because they were not able to participate in programs that assisted them with their transition into higher education. Other challenges associated with the financial burden of higher education was time taken away from their academic work or not taking as many courses as they would have liked because the financial cost was too high. Some students shared that the long hours of working impacted their academics negatively by falling behind on course work and, in turn, lowering their grades. Lucy discussed her priority was supporting herself. She shared, “My grades were great, [but] aren’t the best for now. I haven't really focused. I'm focused right now on my life. I'm more focused on my job to support myself rather than school.” Other priorities in her life were transportation and other living expenses, such as paying for rent and car insurance. Some of the DACA students in this study mentioned not only having to pay for their own expenses but also contributing time to family members. This was the case for Elle who mentioned:

My dad works two jobs and my mom works one job, but when she’s at work...I have younger siblings [and] I have to take care of them. When I’m not at school, I’m home taking care of my siblings, if I’m not [home] I’m at my work.



One DACA student, Lucero, knew at an early age that she would have to support herself to go to college due to her limited financial options to pursue her dream. She shared this revelation and what she did to prepare for college:

I told myself I need to start working now [in high school] to be able to pay for the things I want in the future...I've always had two jobs since I was 16 years old...at some points I had three jobs and I killed myself doing that. That's not something I would want to go back to, and I really don't think I would if I needed to because it really drained me.

These financial costs and obligations made it difficult for some of these students to manage their time and graduate in a timely manner. Many of the students in this study expressed that if they did not have to worry about the cost of tuition that school would be much easier for them. Financial aid was limited for both DACA and undocumented college students in the U.S. at the time of this study but existed.

***Financial help existed.*** A large majority of the DACA students in this study received a scholarship that paid the entirety of their undergraduate education costs if they continued to meet the requirements. The scholarship requirements involved maintaining a set grade point average and required course load each semester. The scholarship discussed was a partnership between Desert College and a non-profit organization. This scholarship, which will be called the Dreamer's Scholarship from this point on, changed many of the lives of these students as it gave them one less challenge to their undergraduate degree. Maria Jose, one of the recipients of the scholarship, had mentioned she most likely would not have attended college because her parents were only able to support her brother financially. A couple of the DACA students in this study

were not as fortunate and had to seek financial assistance elsewhere in the form of scholarships and grants from Desert College or private donors.

Another added advantage these DACA students shared is that they were attending college in a state that is more supportive than some other states. The DACA students said this because some states in the U.S. had made it difficult for undocumented and DACA students to attend their HEIs by imposing out-of-state tuition even if they resided in the state or denied admissions. The difference between in-state tuition and out-of-state tuition can be a difference of thousands of dollars throughout a student's undergraduate career. Also, Desert College offered smaller amount of scholarships and grants to their students regardless of their citizenship status, along with in-state tuition. The DACA students with Dreamer's Scholarship were very thankful for receiving the scholarship as it gave them hope and changed their trajectory to success.

When the DACA students in this study were asked for recommendations on how HEIs could better support students like them, they suggested more financial aid. The students recommended having more scholarships available that did not require citizenship as that was a limiting factor for many of the scholarships. Maria Jose recommended:

There needs to be more scholarships for students with DACA because when I was first applying for scholarships there was a lot of good [ones]...I like art, so, there was a lot of art scholarships, and I would go in and try to do everything and then the requirements would be like you have to be a legal citizen of the United States. Financial assistance is a challenge that many students faced in this study but managed to find support through a supportive climate and allies to combat this challenge. However,

the financial aspect, both negative and positive, continued to impact these DACA students' academics.

**Reality of academics.** The DACA students in this study, as revealed through other themes, were faced with challenges to their academics, such as limited opportunities and lack of academic advisement and resources; as such, these students struggled to be high achieving students. Still, these students managed to find sources of support in their academics while in higher education like various support groups, centers, programs, and faculty.

*Academic struggle is real.* One of the largest frustrations discussed by the students came in the form of academic advisement and support from faculty at Desert College. The issue stemmed from the lack of knowledge some faculty had at Desert College about the DACA and undocumented student population. This population of students were often advised by faculty and supported in the same means of the general student population, which these students stated was wrong due to their status as they were not able to access the same resources and opportunities as their documented peers. Elle, probably one of the most vocal students about this issue, shared her frustration with advising at Desert College.

There was really only one advisor [at Desert College] who was more familiar with undocumented college students and DACA students...I don't feel like that's fair because you know any other student can walk into the advising office and ask whatever questions they have and [advisors] have answers. If [DACA students] go to an advisor and they don't know, then we have to explain the situation and then [advisors] end up giving up or not knowing any of this. They'll send us to

somebody else and then again explaining the whole [DACA] situation to that other advisor and see if they can find answers and it gets really frustrating...I talked to my other friends who aren't undocumented and they're just as dumbfounded as I am...It's a struggle to find people who know what our situation is.

Elle felt as though it is a never-ending cycle. However, it should be noted that at Desert College these types of situations were improving by trainings for faculty; however, it was still a problem that occurred. Elle mentioned that she was grateful to be attending Desert College because she knew DACA students at other schools have a harder time in situations like these.

Part of the lack of advisement was due to policies that limited these students' opportunities unlike their documented peers. For example, Lucero shared how choosing her undergraduate major was a challenge because her DACA status prohibited her from entering a career she wanted.

When I originally started [at Desert college] I had in mind to do nursing...I had a friend who was actually a DACA student too and she was going for nursing...She kind of told me, 'Hey you might want to rethink [nursing]' because something I didn't know you had to take your NCLEX [nursing exam] for your nursing license in your state. You have to have [a] Social Security...and weren't accepting [DACA students] Social Security...I felt like my dreams had just been shattered just because of a number and I felt like I couldn't do nursing anymore.

The situation Lucero mentioned happened to other students in this study with some students who changed majors because they did not know if they would be able to get a

career in the particular field once they graduated due to their DACA status. Even the Dreamer's Scholarship had an impact with a couple of the DACA students changing their major. The recipients of the Dreamer's Scholarship had to attend an institution that was partnered with the non-profit organization. Desert College was the only institution in the state that had this partnership and many of the DACA students stated they could not afford to move to another location with another partnering institution. However, Alejandro, one of the Dreamer's Scholarship recipients, chose a major that was the closest to what he wanted to pursue. He said, "I was offered [the Dreamer's Scholarship] which only had partner school at [Desert College] and it was my only option to come here...I want to major in mechanical engineering, mathematics was the closest thing for me to major." DACA students continued to be limited in their opportunities to seek a degree in a field they wanted and to attend specific HEIs due to their immigration status.

Their transition into higher education was also negatively impacted. The DACA students who mentioned they felt unprepared found it challenging to adjust to college life. Time management was a common challenge discussed because of the lives many of these DACA students lived. Most were working multiple jobs with long hours, had family obligations, and experienced life situations that made it difficult to prioritize academics. The impact of not being prepared for college life and how to manage their time resulted in a struggle to maintain appropriate grades. Many DACA students stated they were not prepared for the course work or the intensity of the courses, found it difficult to understand the content taught, struggled to devote the necessary hours to study the content, faced challenges with transportation to and from college, and struggled to utilize

campus resources such as tutoring. Elle, one of the students who attended a magnet high school, mentioned she still struggled to balance college with the rest of her life.

I hadn't really realized how much more time I would have on my hands per se because in high school I had a set schedule...I would go to school from seven to two and then after that I was working ... college, like your schedule varies so much more.

These academic challenges were attributed by many of these DACA students to being first-generation college students and being unprepared for college. This meant they could not seek assistance from their family who were unfamiliar with college life. Those who did not attend a magnet high school or who did not participate in a college preparation program found their lack of preparedness for college to be the most difficult aspect of attending college. Despite the challenges associated with academics these DACA students managed to overcome them.

*Graduation in sight.* The sources of support that these students utilized in their academics ranged from accessing campus resources to discovering supportive faculty. Desert College offered resources such as tutoring that some of the DACA students utilized for help with writing and mathematics. In most cases, the faculty from whom the students sought assistance were advisors and professors. These faculty members were ones the DACA students had a comfortable relationship with and did not mind asking for help. The type of help these individuals provided were guidance towards classes they should be enrolled in and referrals to other sources of support like tutors, research opportunities, and assistance in understanding course content. To the question of who her people for support were, Rose replied, "I go to academic advisors or professors that I

have more of a connection with. I might go to them, as well, and get their advice.”

Desert College offered these students free resources of academic support to utilize that some students did use, but what seemed to be the most utilized resource were the faculty with whom they were comfortable. Fortunately, the DACA students felt that many of the faculty at Desert College were approachable and supportive.

The recommendations made by the DACA students to other HEIs to support the academics of students like them were primarily focused on being aware of the population. The students stated numerous times the importance for faculty to understand the different immigration statuses such as undocumented or DACA and the impact the faculty had on each student’s education. For example, providing the correct resources and advice relating to these students showed undocumented and DACA students were important to the faculty and campus.

**Social network impact.** The social components involved with being an individual with DACA were a challenge and complicated. The DACA students expressed varying challenges with lack of engagement at Desert College, but not all of the challenges were related to the institution’s environment. Another challenge the students discussed was the lack of support that came from some faculty and peers at Desert College due to the lack of understanding of their DACA status. Still, sources of social support were discovered for these DACA students that came from peers and faculty. In the case of Desert College, a student club with a designated faculty advisor was discussed as the most significant form of support by the students at this institution. These challenges along with the sources of support are further discussed in the following section.

*Nothing to engage in here.* The DACA students in this study discussed social challenges in their higher education journey. A common challenge was their lack of engagement with Desert College because they had other obligations preventing them from participating in the full college experience, such as work or family, as was previously discussed. Some of the students mentioned not participating in activities on campus and building connections with others like peers and faculty. Lucero, a student who worked multiple jobs since she was 16, shared her disappointment with her level of engagement at Desert College when she stated, “I have two part time jobs, and I think that took a lot of my time from being involved in school, but that's one of the things I do really miss being involved at school.” Other DACA students shared the same experience as Lucero and wished they were more involved; however, other obligations took priority to being on campus unless it was related to their academics. One factor contributing to the lack of engagement mentioned by Alexandra was due to the fact that Desert College was not a large university. Desert College did not have all the same college experiences typical to larger HEIs, such as Greek life and athletics.

[We] don't have, like, sports or anything. We don't have, like, sororities and all that stuff...People come here, take their classes, maybe eat something if they have a gap [between classes] and then go home. I mean we do have clubs...As far as college student life goes Desert College isn't really there for that.

The lack of engagement with Desert College's campus was not just because the campus itself did not offer much, but because the students in the study were busy with other parts of their lives.



One social dynamic that was a unique challenge to these DACA students was building relationships either with faculty or peers. The challenge was because of their DACA status and not wanting everyone to know of their immigration status. The discovery of their DACA status instilled fear not only for themselves but for their family as well. Some students shared experiences in their classrooms where peers discriminated against those that looked like they may be immigrants. Maria Jose shared an instance in which this occurred in her communications class.

There was a person who came at another girl just because she looked Hispanic. She said, "Oh you're Mexican how's it being an immigrant for you?" She was like, "First of all, I'm not Mexican, I'm Salvadorian, and I'm not an immigrant."

There was also an experience mentioned by Elle in which a faculty member protested against the undocumented population when she participated in a town hall discussion panel about DACA.

I also did get to see some staff who work at [at Desert College] who weren't as supportive, and I remember I actually got into like an argument with one of the people who was like really against DACA and so that kind of like shocked me. Situations like these made it difficult for the students in this study to bond with faculty and their peers at Desert College in some instances, but these occurrences were minimal. These negative instances that occurred to the participants in this study were only a small fraction of their experiences that they shared with many sharing positive situations at their institution.

***Place found.*** The DACA students in this study described Desert College as a welcoming environment where they felt safe regarding their immigration status. Some of

the students mentioned a college transition program that helped them feel welcomed at the institution. The program prepared the student participants about college and introduced them to several faculty early on before the start of their freshmen year. The college transition program took place during the summer. Lucero shared the benefits after she had participated in the program, “I made connections with professors here at [Desert College]...When I came back in the fall I wasn’t uncomfortable talking to them.” Many of the students discussed the environment and the feeling of belonging because the faculty, administrators, and peers at Desert College were supportive and welcomed them as a member of the educational community. Several of the DACA students mentioned during the 2017 announcement of DACA being rescinded that many at Desert College came together to support DACA and undocumented college students by providing legal informational sessions about DACA. Ana shared her own experience in seeing Desert College campus come together in a time of crisis. She said the instance occurred when the announcement of DACA being rescinded was made.

[A faculty member] got together with her colleagues and they made a meeting where all DACA students are welcome to join and then they told us our rights...We’ll support you...Those [were] things [that made] us feel that we’re okay, we’re safe, when we know people are always there to help us.

The campus faculty rallied together to show their support in their students regardless of their background with town hall meetings focused on dispelling the negative views of DACA and undocumented immigrants. However, the most talked about resource these students had was a student club dedicated to students with DACA, undocumented and allies.

A majority of the DACA students in this study in some way interacted with one particular student club from knowing of it to holding a position on its executive board. This student club will be referred to as the Undocu Club for the remainder of this section. The Undocu Club served in various capacities of support for these DACA students, but the social aspect was by far the most significant impact. The club officially started in 2017 by the initial 13 members that received the Dreamer's Scholarship. Since the club's inception, the membership of the club had grown to over double its initial membership. Many of the DACA students in this study were members of the Undocu Club and spoke highly of the club's benefits. The Undocu Club was discussed helping these DACA students with navigating higher education, creating a safe place and a sense of belonging for them. The club's members served as a support system for one another and allowed them to interact with the campus more. Rose, one of the members of the Undocu Club, mentioned "If I wasn't with [the Undocu Club], I would just be going to school and back straight back home." Other students such as Rose stated the club allowed them to be engaged with the campus without the fears that were stemming from their DACA status. Another student, Alejandro, who identified as Hispanic, said that the Undocu Club allowed him to be comfortable with himself.

I feel comfortable with the population here [at Desert College] with a diverse population, mostly Hispanics. They all come from different backgrounds obviously, but with the [Undocu Club]...allows me to step in my comfort zone. Sometimes it's good to step out of your comfort zone. It's good to step back in so you can build relationships and so the [DACA club] has kind of instilled that ...I can talk to the [Undocu Club] members really quite easily.

It should be noted, as Alejandro mentioned, Desert College had a large population of self-identified Hispanic students. Being surrounded by others like them was important for the participants in this study as they were able to seek support from others who were going through similar situations as them. Elle, an Undocu Club member, elaborated on this point,

I think if I didn't have the [Undocu Club], I'd be so much more difficult...My other friends that I do meet here, they're not undocumented, they're not DACA. So, they don't understand like the struggles and stuff. They can listen to me complain about what I'm going through, but it's not the same as somebody who is actually in the same situation and has similar experiences.

Finding others like them and being able to relate to others going through the same situations as these students was very important. The words “safe space” were echoed by many of these students about the Undocu Club even though the club did not have a physical space. Ontario, who was not an active club member, discussed the importance the Undocu Club brings to Desert College’s already welcoming environment.

The fact the [Undocu Club] exists on this campus makes me feel better than if it didn't exist, but even then, the [Undocu Club] is such a small part about the whole environment here. The whole culture of Desert College that even if it didn't exist it wouldn't be a bad thing because overall on its own the culture is already very accepting.

The idea that the club provided a safe space was more than enough for these DACA students because many of the members knew their safety would not be jeopardized.

However, as Ontario mentioned, it was also due to the sense of belonging created by Desert College that attributed to the creation of a safe place for these students.

Another central aspect of the Undocu Club was a dedicated faculty member serving as an advisor to the club and its members. The Undocu Club advisor was discussed numerous times by the DACA students as a very positive individual in their life that helped them with anything they needed. Rosa mentioned how the Undocu Club advisor was a very supportive individual that guided her success. Students mentioned that they went to the Undocu Club advisor when they struggled in their classes or when they sought advice on what to do in certain situations. The result in most cases was the advisor connecting the students with resources available to them or individuals that could assist them. As mentioned earlier, DACA was a sensitive topic at the time of this study revolving around immigration. Still, the DACA students found comfort in having someone like the Undocu Club advisor with whom to confide and ask for advice. Lucero shared an experience with Undocu Club advisor when she learned DACA was rescinded in 2017.

The time when DACA was taken down, the first person I came to was [the] advisor who runs the [Undocu] club...I didn't know who to go to because I just felt like no one would comprehend where I was coming from, how I was feeling...I just told her 'Hey I know you don't know me, but like I just need someone to talk to.'

The club advisor was an important person to many of the students in this study and was a crucial piece to their continued success. However, this person was not the only source of support. There were other faculty that the students could go to as well. The social

environment of Desert College was labeled as welcoming by many of these DACA students given their immigration status. The DACA students never mentioned they felt fear or as if they were unwanted at the campus. As mentioned, the Undocu Club was an essential piece to their success because the students were able to have a greater sense of belonging within this pocket of peers and allies.

Not surprising, when asked for suggestions, the participants recommended that other clubs such as the Undocu Club should be created at other institutions to support students like them. Another recommendation given was for others to be educated on the topic of DACA and undocumented populations. Examples given were to provide trainings and panel discussions that exposed members of the campus communities to these populations of students. The DACA students in this study, given their circumstance, dealt with multiple contextual challenges. They had experienced rough times in their navigation of higher education starting early on in their education. However, they also had support systems and were able to build strengths within them.

### **Characteristics of DACA Students**

These DACA students faced unique circumstances and arguably challenging emotional impacts because of their immigration status in a highly politicized climate at a time of this study. The DACA students shared the emotional impacts and the toll brought on to them. Even with these unique circumstances the DACA students managed to overcome these situations they faced. By using the multiple strengths they acquired they overcame the shared challenges.

## Stressors and Effects

One negative aspect the DACA students discussed was stress and the resulting impact on them. The stress was compounded by the challenges that came with their other identities that were discussed earlier, such as being Latinx, first-generation college students, and a student from a low-income background. These students experienced stress for reasons such as the unknown future of the DACA program, fears of deportation and an unknown future for them, managing life, and experiencing pressure to succeed.

The unknown status of DACA at the time of this study due to pending court battles to maintain or rescind the DACA program left many of the students fearful, causing them increased stress. Ontario described how he felt when Trump was elected president, “I’m so stressed out, I’m almost depressed...I have high anxiety.” The heightened stress came with the worry of what was going to happen to the DACA program as during Trump’s election campaign he stated numerous times that he would cancel the program. In 2017, Trump attempted to make good on his promise to end the DACA program and rescinded the program (Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). Some of the DACA students shared their experiences after the program was rescinded in 2017 and the subsequent state of limbo that followed as it was being contested in court. Tina, one of the DACA students in this study, described her experience and related it to how other students did not need to worry about situations regarding immigration.

[DACA students] have to keep their eyes more on the news in reference to their [DACA] status [in the U.S.]. It's just another factor that you have to just think about, stress about. Regular people that are citizens or residents they don't typically have to think about, oh I have to renew my [DACA] to stay here another

two years or they're decreasing now or they're taking [DACA] away and it's just an added stress.

The stress of not knowing if the DACA program would continue was a constant stressor described by these DACA students. The result of DACA's future gave potentially negative implications to these students from no longer being protected from deportation and being legally able to work. This only encouraged the idea of a doubtful future for DACA students.

The stress for students in this study was amplified by the responsibilities they had at school, home, and work. Lucy mentioned, "I think I wasn't prepared for just the stress. The amount of work that you have to do, the focus, the hours, the transportation and everything like that it gets harder it's too much stress." Ana shared how the compounding responsibilities she had took a toll on her and gave her a sense of doubt in her academics when she stated,

I was taking two biology classes, and I was working on top of that, then I have my house responsibilities and things like that. I felt maybe I'm not smart to know what this is, and [college] is not the place for me because I can't handle all these things...I felt really overwhelmed, and I had to drop one of my classes because I was thinking it wasn't for me.

In most instances, these DACA students had other various roles in their lives with responsibilities and obligations in addition to the college work that they needed to manage.

Another stressor these DACA students described was the pressure to succeed. This pressure to succeed came from one overall mentioned factor and that was not to let



others down. Many of the DACA students in this study mentioned that their desire to not let their parents down was a source of enormous pressure. As mentioned earlier, many felt that their parents had sacrificed so much to come to the U.S. to give them a better future that they had to succeed. Alexandra shared this sentiment adding that the push for college in her K-12 schools added to this pressure. She shared, “[My parents] gave up their whole life for a better opportunity here and obviously it's like you're growing up the whole time and [teachers] tell you at school college is like a path.”

The students in this study faced these unique stressors due to their immigration status and environment. The stressors created by the unknown future of the DACA program along with their future and the pressure to not fail others. However, these students continued to persevere regardless of these stressors and events in their lives to succeed.

### **Sources of Success**

Despite the challenges the students faced, they overcame them to get to where they were in their lives. They were asked to self-identify strengths they possessed and how these strengths had assisted them in their higher education journey during the participatory mapping exercise. Many of the students used a variety of words to identify strengths, but the meaning behind the words resulted in similarities among the 12 students in the study. One similarity between them was how they believed they acquired their strengths through their life experiences and the people that surrounded them. As they indicated, they acquired the strengths from parents, family members, and their education. The types of strengths identified by these students were categorized as

personal and interpersonal. The words used by the DACA students in this study were put into a word cloud displayed in figure 1.



Figure 1: Strengths word cloud

**Personal.** The students identified numerous personal strengths, which, with some overlap, were one's ability in being focused, creative, innovative, hardworking, independent, resourceful, and one's skill in organization, planning, and being detail oriented. Other personal strengths were writing, speaking, technology, enthusiastic, drawing, budgeting, and educated. The common personal strengths identified by these students were ones learned early in life from a combination of individuals, such as family members, teachers, and community members.

Hardworking was a strength that was identified by these students across the board. Given the many challenges that they had to overcome to get to where they were at the time of this study, they needed to work hard and persist. The DACA students

identified their parents as the source of their hardworking ethic because their parents had worked hard to give them the life they had and made sacrifices to give better opportunities to them. Maria Jose was motivated by her parents to be a hard worker and explained how it had translated into her life.

My parents always told me that they brought me [and] my brother here because they wanted [us] to have a better future and a better education. So all through elementary school, middle school, high school, I was always, I had to work hard to get my grades because if I didn't work hard then it was like they brought us here for nothing...Also, I got a job so I have to work hard and [if] not get fired...It's helped me right now in my education because I don't want to give up. I want to keep working hard to not disappoint my parents and get the future that they always wanted for me.

Seeing their parents work hard encouraged students to do the same in their lives. Many of them used this hardworking strength to succeed in their education and not give up as Maria Jose stated. Along with the ability to be hardworking was one's skill to be resourceful, a solver, and independent because these students needed to navigate higher education when they were not able to get help. Many mentioned gaining this skill by having to rely on themselves to get things done.

The strengths of organization, planning, and being detail oriented were all tied together with the DACA students stating they learned these strengths from their parents and educators. Rose mentioned learning to be organized at a young age from her father through home tasks.

My dad has taught me how to be organized as a child. He used to tell me, “Ok this is how you put your clothes away. This is how you make sure your binder stays organized.” ...When I started working my job...I really had to see what the best ways to organize certain things are and if you're organized it'll help you get assignments done quicker.

Other strengths these students identified were more on the skill level and could be applied to their academics. For example, writing, drawing, and technology were all skills identified by at least one student in which they learned by the environment in which they were exposed at work and home. Writing was useful in their academics as well as drawing and technology because these were used in the classroom. Another strength mentioned was speaking and being used to advocating for themselves and others like them. Many of these strengths were self-taught as they grew up and developed further in their education.

**Interpersonal.** The students’ interpersonal strengths were being understanding, flexible, nurturing, respectful, supportive, trustworthy, able to build rapport, honest, communicative, compassionate, patient, and persistent. Other personal strengths were doer, helper, leadership, flexible, and babysitting. For these students in this study, these strengths were important because they were taught to treat others as they wanted to be treated. Ana mentioned her mom and school taught her to be respectful for this exact reason. She said, “My mom always taught me to respect my elders or respect everyone the way you want to be treated. In school, I think they teach you [to] just respect everyone.” The DACA students were portrayed negatively in society due to their immigration status and were mindful to be understanding of others. As one DACA

student Tina stated, “I like listening to other people and their opinions and their perspectives. Even if I don't agree with them, I still sit there and listen.” These DACA students referenced many words that reflected the importance of being respectful.

Additionally, another important strength identified by these students was being trustworthy and honest. The students learned these strengths during the early years of their education. Some of the DACA students stated that in school they learned the importance of being honest when doing homework and not cheating on their tests. Mable, one of the DACA students, shared a lesson she remembered about honesty, “[Y]ou shouldn't [be] lying about things and lying is not going to get you anywhere. To go further in life and have something well-earned.” Parents were also attributed to this strength as many of the students discussed not wanting to get into trouble for lying during their younger years. The interactions and experiences these students experienced led to this strength's importance. Alejandro shared the importance of being trustworthy and honest.

I could fix this I don't need a mechanic and that combined with justice to it because the mechanics were stealing from me. They wanted my money and I'm not going to deal with your bs and I'm [going to] do it myself. I could probably do better than you guys because you seem to not care.

Alejandro shared a powerful statement as he experienced and saw acts of unfairness. The example shared is centered on mechanics not always being truthful about car repairs and only charging to make money. He saw people, such as his mother, who were taken advantage of in employment situations and therefore decided that he did not want to be an individual who does this.

Rapport and communication were also important strengths the students identified as they were able to use these strengths to overcome challenges. Building relationships was important for these students and communication was stated as being important to maintaining those relationships. Lucero shared the importance of communication and also how communication related to understanding others.

I feel like communication is a really big thing and just every...Whether it's work, school because if you have a group and everyone's thinking differently, but no one is communicating their thoughts across or what needs to get done...I hear other people's voices on how they want things to get done and they come to an agreement that way you're not bumping heads all the time...I see [communication] being a big thing in the nursing field, as well, with patients.

You need to go ahead and verbalize all your performances that are happening and your patient status. If you're not communicating that across your team that patient isn't going to get the care they need.

Lucero shared how these strengths were utilized in different parts of her life from school to work and how they impacted others. Other students in this study stated similar experiences with the Undocu Club. The communication within the club was crucial to its success to keep the members involved. Another notable aspect related to communication was bilingualism. Students who were bilingual added that it assisted in them in building relationships with others. Elle stated her belief on the benefits of being bilingual:

I think [Spanish] overall anywhere you go just helps you connect with more people whether at school or at work or even just at the grocery store. [Spanish]

just helps to connect with more people because you have something in common and you can communicate.

In addition, the DACA students in this study mentioned another benefit to being bilingual was that it increased employment opportunities as many employers seek to hire those who speak Spanish due to the rise in Spanish speakers in the U.S.

Additional strengths identified by the students were doer, helper, leader, and babysitter. Some of the students mentioned how they learned to serve as a leader through volunteer and employment opportunities. Lucy described how she took on the leader role, “[A] lot of times I find myself being the one to step up.” She mentioned this skill was relevant in her college life when she participated in group projects; she wanted to make sure their assignments were completed correctly. The DACA students in this study stated that they developed leadership as a strength through various experiences and opportunities, such as participating in student government and supervisory roles in their jobs. Also, they mentioned leadership was useful in their home life as they applied the attributes of a leader to guide their family members to succeed. Helping others was another common strength because they did so at a young age by helping their family members, such as siblings and parents. This was also used as motivation for them to persist in their goals and wanted to pay it forward by helping others in return.

The strengths these DACA students identified were all used in their navigation of higher education with some skills that were still developing through the course of their education. The environments and experiences they were exposed to early in their lives, as well as their undergraduate years, built their strengths. Individuals also contributed to their strengths from parents and educators being the most influential, but also mentors

aiding in some of the strengths identified. A culmination of these strengths continued to serve them in their education and life outside of academia. Still, one of the greatest strengths identified by these students was motivation and dedication. These strengths were not used to reflect on themselves, but they used them to describe the DACA population. Rose reflected on her DACA status and how she saw it as a motivating factor to achieve her goals.

In my perspective, being DACA just makes you want to push harder to achieve your goals and stuff because you don't have the same opportunities that other people...Being DACA just makes you more aware of [the lack of opportunities] and take things more seriously.

The DACA students all mentioned being grateful for the opportunities offered and would continue to persist to achieve their goals regardless of their immigration status.

### **Drive and Motivation**

DACA students in this study had clear motivations not only in their pursuit of higher education, but because they desired a better life for themselves. Many wanted to succeed to ensure that they or their families did not continue to struggle financially and that they and their families could have happy lives. However, their motivation and dedication were often tested due to the nature of challenges associated with their DACA status. These challenges were overcome because these DACA students chose to advocate and serve as a voice for themselves and others despite their unknown future.

**Following an unknown path.** The motivation and dedication these students had were sources of their activism. Some students participated or hosted events to share their experiences and stories with others to dispel negative misconceptions of DACA and



undocumented individuals in the U.S. Additionally, others advocated for better immigration policies that would not only better their lives but others like them, such as peers and family members. The students continued to advocate and push forward even when they knew their lives may change forever if the DACA program ended or a pathway to citizenship was created. The students in this study were asked to envision their future lives under two scenarios: 1) the DACA program is rescinded, and 2) the DACA program provided a pathway to citizenship.

*DACA gone and no hope for change.* Because of their DACA status, the students were in a constant limbo. The DACA program which protected these students from deportation and legal right to work in the U.S. was in danger of termination. At the time of this study, the DACA program continued to accept renewal applications for those that currently had DACA for another two years, but no new applications were being accepted. The DACA program gave a sense of hope and optimism for these students, but due to the political climate and presidential administration at the time of this study, they were forced to live in the unknown and fear.

The scenario that once was a brief reality for these DACA students was posed to the participants, how would DACA students be impacted if DACA was rescinded? The students responded with words like fear, anger, devastation, defeat, and doubt. These powerful words described the many emotions that these students felt if DACA was terminated. Maria Jose expressed the chaos that would occur for many DACA recipients if the program was terminated.

I feel like it will be devastating because so many people are coming to school, they want a career, but if there's no more DACA then they are not legally allowed

to work. So, there's going to be thousands and thousands of students and DACA recipients who are just not going to be able to work at all...I don't know how to describe the extent of the damage that would do because so many people have DACA now and are dependent on them for work to take care of their families...My brother would not be able to go to college. I wouldn't be able to work anymore, and I wouldn't be able to be a teacher. So, it's just all the hard work for nothing.

Maria Jose shared that it would prevent her from completing her goal to be a teacher one day and many of the DACA students in this study stated they would no longer be able to enter the career fields they wanted. Opportunities would no longer be available and initial goals set would need to be changed. The impact would go beyond the individual level to a grander scale impacting families and communities, as Maria Jose stated. If DACA was terminated, some of the students mentioned they did not really have a plan, while a couple mentioned they would be forced to return to their native country. Elle shared her and her family's plan in the event DACA is terminated, "My parents would have moved us back to Mexico because the whole reason is for me to continue to go to school and if I can't do anything after school there's nothing for me here." However, some that mentioned the plan to move back to their native country would put them into an unfamiliar environment because many of these students had lived most of their lives in the U.S. What should be noted is these DACA students only mentioned voluntarily leaving if the DACA program were to be terminated and not once mentioned the idea of them being detained or deported. Those without a plan responded that it is something that they did not like to think about and were hoping that did not happen. Still, the

majority of the DACA students responded by saying they would continue to do what they were doing and keep advocating. Alejandro believed even though he would move to another country that would be accepting of him such as his native country Mexico or Canada, he believed many DACA recipients would stay in the U.S. and hope for change. He said, "Most DACA will probably just want to stay here [U.S.] with the families and continue to fight." The hope was that a solution would present itself for them to reach their goals, including a pathway to citizenship.

*Activism brings a hopeful future.* The students continued their education and lived their lives as normal as they could. They were asked another scenario because of this, how would DACA students be impacted if DACA granted citizenship? The students answered using words such as joy, miracle, awesome, relief, and security. They continued to say all their hard work and everything that they had done would mean something and not be wasted. Tina one of the DACA students shared this sentiment,

That would basically promise you're permanent to be here and to actively participate in activities that citizens do...A lot of cool benefits I guess you could say but that would also show that the hard work and effort of those pushing toward citizenship was worth it.

The DACA students stated they would have a future to look forward to with a career, more opportunities, ability to travel, security, and a sense belonging. Many stated they would be able to reach their goals of graduating with their undergraduate degree and start their career or pursue a graduate degree, with the ending achievement for them to have reached their goals and be able to give back to others, such as family or the community. Lucero, a DACA student, shared her reason for wanting to be a nurse.

My biggest [motivations] is in the community, there's not a lot of [clinics] that specialize [in] undocumented or Hispanics or low income. There's a lot of people that don't go to the clinics or hospitals because they can't afford that treatment and eventually something, I want to do later on is be able to give back and help in some way too. I want to help people who can't go to the doctor [or] afford medications because of the status that they're in.

Lucero's goal was to eventually give back to her communities and help those that had struggled like her. Another student, Lucy, wanted to help her mother reach her dream of opening a restaurant and used that as motivation to pursue her degree. These were common ideas that the DACA students shared about their motivations to continue to succeed, especially if DACA were to grant citizenship.

Citizenship was something that many of these students strived for and wanted to have one day. Several DACA students explained the limitless possibilities citizenship could bring them. The explanations started with happiness; now life would be easier because there would not be a fear of deportation or unknown future for them. They also said they could enter career fields they wanted, travel abroad and see family members without fear of not being able to return to the U.S, and access federal resources if needed, like financial aid. They also mentioned they would no longer worry about being deported or arrested due to their immigration status. Alejandro shared his emotional response if he were granted citizenship.

I would continue to work harder so that I can work for my mom and build a house for her. If I were able to go back [to Mexico] and see my grandparents because citizenship allows you to travel...I'm worried about them, they're getting older

like my grandparents might die. One day I won't be able to see them, but citizenship would create that connection. I even get emotional talking about it. It would be a dream come true.

Overall, these DACA students wanted nothing more than to one day be able to live a life like everyone else in the U.S. and be afforded the same opportunities to reach their goals. While citizenship wonderful/ideal for these DACA students, the fight would not be over for them. Alexandra pointed out,

There's always something to work on even if [citizenship] passed, hooray for us. The people who fought for us, our parents and the people before us. It sucks that they haven't been able to get anything yet. I'm just continuing to do the work for them so they can get their citizenship...There's always something to work on, but of course I'd be that's a big win for us because we've been fighting for the DREAM Act or whatever you want to call it for a very long time.

Alexandra's sentiments were echoed by other DACA students who said the advocating would not be over as there would still be others, such as their parents, who are undocumented and deserve the same opportunities as them.

### **Summary**

This study examined the perspectives of Latinx DACA students on the ways they navigate higher education at a four-year HEI despite a highly politicized climate around undocumented immigrants in the U.S. The DACA students discussed academic and social challenges along with the sources of support utilized. These academic and social challenges stemmed from their immigration status beginning in their early years of education. However, sources of support were provided from various individuals and

groups, such as parents, other family members, peers, educators, community members, and educational support programs. Additionally, strengths were developed through their interactions with individuals and their environment. Their identified sources of support and the strengths they possessed helped them to navigate higher education. The findings suggested that, despite the challenges faced by these students in higher education and negative experiences they had, they continued to move forward with the hope that they would reach their goals and help others like them.

## Chapter V: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of Latinx Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students on the ways in which they navigated higher education at a four-year higher education institution (HEI) in an era of a highly politicized climate around undocumented immigrants in the United States (U.S.). The research question guiding this study was, what are Latinx DACA students' perspectives on their experiences navigating their educational pursuit at four-year higher education institutions? Sub-questions were: 1) what are the academic and social challenges these students face? and 2) what are sources of support they identify in the family, the community, and the college? The Latinx DACA college students' experiences in higher education were unique because of the climate around immigration at the time of this study that led to a sense of invisibility and lack of support (Martinez, 2014; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Because they lacked a legal immigration status in the U.S., there were fewer opportunities and resources for them to access in higher education (Nienhusser & Espino, 2017). This study expanded on the research of Latinx DACA college students and highlighted these students' strengths and sources of motivation (Juarez, 2017; Shelton, 2014).

While some HEIs in the U.S. made changes to better support the Latinx DACA student population, others made it more difficult for these students to access higher education (Barnhardt et al., 2017). These realities combined with challenges stemming from their low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds and being first-generation college students made it difficult for these students to succeed in higher education (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; L. Martin, 2014). However, Latinx DACA students continued to

enroll and graduate from many HEIs across the U.S and because of this it was essential to explore these students' unique experiences. This chapter provides theoretical implications of this study and proceeds with practical recommendations and recommendations for future research.

### **Overview of Major Findings and Literature Connection**

This study focused on the ways Latinx DACA students navigated their higher education experience at a four-year HEI. The students experienced challenges from various outlets, but they found sources of support to continue their educational pursuit. The findings in the study brought attention to points not previously addressed in the literature but also reinforced the research thus far conducted about this population. The contributions of this study are discussed in relation to the influence of the political climate about immigration, the challenges Latinx DACA students faced, and the forms of support that aided in the development of their strengths while navigating higher education

### **Climate Around Immigration and DACA**

The political climate during this study was characterized by fear and a sense of unknown for many individuals protected by the DACA program. This environment shifted drastically when the presidential administration announced the rescinding of the DACA program in 2017 (Venkataramani & Tsai, 2017). However, the decision was contested in the courts by several organizations and advocates who demanded the continuation of the program (Ishiwata & Muñoz, 2018). This led to the DACA program being caught in a state of limbo, leaving those protected by DACA not knowing what future lay ahead for them. The students in this study discussed their fears of the possibility that DACA may no longer be available to them and the impact that such



reality would have on their future. Some of the DACA students discussed that they would plan to continue their education, while others stated they would return to their native country. Returning to their native country of Mexico was the last resort as many relocated at young ages ranging from less than a year old to eight years old and, as such, had limited to no recollections of living there. The constant turmoil surrounding DACA left many of these students feeling that their safety, along with that of their loved ones, was in jeopardy as they could be deported at any time. The negative climate in the U.S. was characterized by the media portrayal of the DACA population. Specifically, DACA recipients were portrayed as criminals that needed to go back to their native countries (Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; Ramirez, 2017). The negative portrayal and climate of the undocumented population created further challenges for the students in this study. The participants were in a state of disequilibrium since the initial “comfort” that DACA provided them with was soon transformed into uncertainty and fear.

### **Disadvantages and Challenges of DACA**

The DACA students in this study described many barriers to their educational pursuit of higher education that ranged from financial to academic and social. They described the tuition costs as a challenge because their immigration status forbade them access to federal aid. As previously discussed in the literature, because these DACA students were not citizens, they were not eligible to apply for FASFA to obtain federal aid (Contreras, 2009). As a result, the students had to fund their education through employment opportunities and the limited scholarships available that did not require citizenship (Martin, 2015; Muñoz, 2013). In this study, many of the students who did not have scholarships paid their tuition with the money that they made while working

multiple jobs. Most of them could not depend on their families for financial support as they were from low-income backgrounds (Cavazos et al., 2010). The financial challenges resulted in academic challenges for the DACA students in this study as some had to work multiple jobs or long hours which pulled them away from their engagement at campus and their academics.

As previously discussed in the literature, the students obligations to work impacted their academics because they had less time to dedicate to their course work, to participate in support programs, or to utilize campus resources (Heckenberg, 2016). As a result, their grades were impacted negatively since they had less time dedicated to their academics due to outside obligations, such as work and family. Also, social challenges were discussed by the DACA students. Because of their socioeconomic status and their obligations off campus, they did not have time to engage with others on their campus. This made it difficult for many of the students to build trusting relationships and they also feared disclosing their status because the risk of deportation was real (Murillo, 2017; O'Neal et al., 2016; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015). This fear at times stopped them from seeking opportunities or guidance in their education. These challenges described by the DACA students and acknowledged in the literature were only a few barriers they faced daily in their educational pursuit. The most significant impact described by the DACA students in this study came from a culmination of the climate and the challenges which resulted in stress and fear.

### **Impact of Climate and DACA**

The DACA students in this study mentioned the stress they endured due to their DACA status. They developed stress because their immigration status put them in

jeopardy of being deported. These students questioned if obtaining an education was worth it since they may not be able to work in the future. The pressure to be successful provided an additional source of stress for them because they did not want to disappoint or fail their parents who had sacrificed immigrating to the U.S. for the opportunity for a better life. As discussed, these stressors are unique to DACA students because of their immigration status and the fact that protection was not guaranteed (O'Neal et al., 2016).

The DACA students in this study shared their hardships with trying to find money to pay tuition and other living expenses such as, transportation, rent, and food because of their low-income background. In regards to transportation, travel was an additional stressor because of the fear of being deported when being pulled over by law enforcement for any reason (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Burton, 2012). In addition, international travel was restricted. While those with DACA may travel outside the U.S. with prior approval by the government, due to the adverse political climate at the time of this study travel outside of the U.S. was not advised because of the potential that they might not be allowed back in the country (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Ishiwata & Muñoz, 2018; Nienhusser et al., 2016). These were all situations that impacted their psychological well-being.

Much of the stress and uncertainty described by the DACA students in this study stemmed from the lack of protection DACA provided due to the limbo status of the DACA program and its future. These feelings were evident by the responses these students gave when asked about what they would do if the DACA program did end. The responses were characterized by powerful words such as devastation, discouragement, anger, unsafety, and fear. These feelings reflected sentiments identified in the literature

(Aguayo-Bryant, 2016; O'Neal et al., 2016). In this scenario, many of the students stated they either had no plans for their future or that they would return to their native country in most cases after completing their undergraduate degree. Despite the negative experiences these students had in their educational pursuit, they managed to continue to be optimistic due to the support they received and strengths they developed.

### **DACA Support Systems**

The DACA students discussed various support systems they utilized that assisted them in their educational pursuits. These support systems came from their families, the K-12 education, the college campus, and, in some cases, community organizations. The forms of support were the same as their challenges: financial, academic, and social. The financial support received by most of the students in this study was a full-ride scholarship that covered their undergraduate tuition and books. This form of support came from a non-profit organization that partnered with their institution to be able to provide this opportunity. Through this opportunity many of the students were allowed to pursue higher education without the added stress of worrying about paying for their tuition (Flores, 2016; O'Neal et al., 2016). Because the scholarship was awarded to a cohort of students, Desert College created a student club and faculty advisor. The faculty advisor to the club was a valuable individual who provided support in a variety of forms, the most beneficial of which was academics. The advisor provided and informed the DACA students of resources or other individuals that could help them when they struggled with their academics. For example, some of the students shared that the advisor suggested they enter a student support program that would provide services such as tutoring if

needed. The research suggests support programs such as those used by DACA students in this study to be beneficial to their academics (Astorga, 2015).

Additional support provided by the student club was social in nature. The student club was a club focused on undocumented and DACA students but also included allies of these populations. The DACA students in this study mentioned that the club allowed them to build relationships with others like them and connect with others that could support them. The club assisted in the creation of a sense of belonging and the students felt welcomed at Desert College due to the support by the administration and faculty members. This echoed research findings that proposed that a sense of belonging can be achieved when students see they are a priority and accepted on their campus (O'Neal et al., 2016; Tang, Kim, & Haviland, 2013). However, the sense of belonging was also described to be attributed by Desert College's environment because of the faculty and administrations interest in supporting all students regardless of their backgrounds. When administration and faculty are supportive of their students it reinforces a sense of belonging because the students feel they are safe and cared for by the institution (Lad & Braganza, 2013; Montiel, 2017). The DACA students in this study shared instances of Desert College faculty being supportive of them and made remarks such as if they needed anything to let them know. Additionally, some faculty members understood the students' immigration situation, to the point that some of these students were comfortable enough to approach their professors or advisors for assistance in more than just academics.

As discussed earlier, the negative portrayal by the media was discussed by the DACA students in this study as they would often see negative portrayals in the news and social media. Some mentioned that they avoided the media because of it. However, the

media also proved to be a source of positive motivation for the DACA students in this study. The forms of motivation that came from media were seeing those that were supportive of them and those that identified as DACA or undocumented succeeding in the U.S. DACA students in this study mentioned seeing posts of individuals with DACA graduating and succeeding, which led to them to believe they could do the same for themselves. The positive influences of the media at a time of increased visibility could be seen as a unique contribution of this study. These students found support in various areas in their higher education pursuit and this could be attributed to the strengths they possessed that allowed them to navigate higher education.

### **DACA Strengths and Motivation**

The literature discusses DACA students' resilience and motivation to be some of their most notable strengths (Montiel, 2017; Shelton, 2014). However, this study found that DACA students had more strengths they used to overcome the various challenges they faced. The students in this study self-identified strengths they developed that aided them in their education with the most common being hardworking, understanding, persistent, trustworthy, compassionate, honest, and patient. These were used in various capacities that aided them in building relationships with others who could serve as sources of support for them, while at the same time being resourceful.

Many of the strengths the DACA students in this study identified were developed in their environments and learned by others, such as parents and mentors. Hard work and persistence were learned by observing their parents; the DACA students witnessed their parents' struggle as they worked multiple jobs while still caring for their families. Being understanding, patient, compassionate, honest, and trustworthy were all strengths

developed through some negative experiences they had in their lives. These DACA students did not want to repeat negative behaviors to others and therefore utilized these strengths in their education to collaborate with others and build relationships. These strengths proved useful when it came to seeking assistance from faculty members at their higher education institution and building peer support systems in their education. Optimism was not a strength identified explicitly by these students in the study, but many used this thought to continue to pursue their education in the hope that one day they would be able to use their degree to enter the career of their dreams. The goal for many of these DACA students was to assist their families out of financial struggles and one day be citizens of the U.S.

The idea that one day they could become a U.S. citizen was a dream many of the students had because of the benefits citizenship would provide such as safety from deportation and the chance of a successful future. The students in this study were asked how it would impact them if DACA granted citizenship. They used the following words to describe such a scenario: joy, miracle, security, safety, relief, and a sense of belonging. This scenario was described by the students as “the dream” as it would give them what they had always wanted, a future without the fear of deportation. It would also allow them to experience a different life where they would have the opportunity to work, travel, and advocate for others. The DACA students mentioned if this scenario were to happen that the advocating and fight would not be over as they would continue to fight to give the same rights to their loved ones who were not protected by DACA.

### **Theoretical Implications**

A contribution of this study was the use of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) to examine the experiences of Latinx DACA students at a four-year college in an uncertain political climate. The CCW framework has not been utilized in this population of college students at a time of considerable uncertainty due to the possible end of the DACA program. Through the interviews with the DACA students in this study the various capitals discussed in CCW were identified within their responses.

The aspirational capital discussed was the students' desires to succeed despite the challenges they knew they had to overcome. Many of the students in this study continued their pursuit to graduate with their undergraduate degree because they had hoped that one day they could use the degree to better their futures. This capital was driven by their hope that in the future they could give back and contribute to their loved ones to have better lives. Aspirational capital by these students arose at a time in which optimism and hope could be easily lost due to the political climate at the time. Though the DACA students could find no hope because their DACA status was in a state a limbo they remained optimistic that they would succeed.

Their familial capital influenced their work ethic and educational pursuit. The majority of these DACA students' families encouraged education as a way to succeed at a young age that influenced the students to continue and succeed. Education was seen as an essential tool that could be used to propel one's status in society and could not be taken away. In most cases, the parents of these DACA students worked hard in multiple jobs to provide for their families. This was seen by the DACA students and influenced them to work hard as well in their education and any environment, such as work.



However, this drive to succeed was also influenced by the DACA students' resistant capital. The resistant capital of these students was evident by the drive to overcome the negative views that the political climate and media at the time of the study portrayed on undocumented immigrants. The students in this study used the negative portrayal of their population to resist these negative views and to view themselves as educated people who completed their degree and contributed to society.

Additionally, opportunities became available because of the other capital they possessed and developed. These capitals were social, navigational, and linguistic. These capitals were developed early on by the DACA students but were further cultivated in higher education. The students in this study mentioned a student club at Desert College that focused on the undocumented and DACA population. This was a great source of social capital for many of them. The club served as a place for them to network and build relationships that in turn assisted them in navigating higher education as they were able to seek help from others like them. The club increased their social capital but at the same time aided in their navigational capital to find resources and help when the students could not do something by themselves. The members of the club would assist each other in various ways from relating important information about immigration, connecting with others for assistance such as faculty members, submitting correct information such as applications, and creating study environments when needed. Another added support connected to the club was the maintenance of their linguistic capital by allowing them to speak their native language. The students in this study mentioned that being able to speak Spanish was important because it allowed them to connect with others and increased employment opportunities.

These capitals were not unique to the DACA student population as other underrepresented and underserved populations possess the same capitals to overcome their challenges. What is not addressed by CCW is capital related to immigration status of underserved populations and how that can build depending on a person's immigration status. Those with DACA are able to obtain more capital than those that are undocumented due to the additional privileges they are given in the U.S. Still, individuals with legal documentation to live in the U.S. such as citizens possess more privileges than those with DACA. The fear of deportation was prevalent with these students is not addressed through the CCW framework. Specifically, possessing DACA increased these students' capital to pursue a higher education degree in instances where some of these students may not have if not given the opportunities that DACA provided them. However, these capitals discussed in the CCW framework assisted the DACA students in this study to navigate their higher education experience to a degree of success. The DACA students utilized the capitals together or individually to move forward and seek opportunities for them to succeed. The family, peers, community, and their institution aided them to increase their CCW.

### **Practical Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, it is critical for institutions of higher learning that wish to support DACA and undocumented students at their campuses to have a better understanding of the experiences of these students. This can be achieved by providing training to campus faculty members, discussing limitations and challenges this population has in their education, and providing resources that can be passed on to these students. Also, the challenges the students face should be addressed at the institutional level. For

example, institutions can provide financial assistance that does not require a student to be a citizen. Also, DACA students should be allowed to pay in-state tuition versus out of state to lower the financial burden. Institutions could also create support programs and encourage students to create groups such as clubs to provide as a resource for academic and social support. For example, HEI's should consider supporting student clubs such as the one described by the students in this study at Desert College. This club served as a critical resource for many of the students in this study as it allowed them to have a sense of belonging, a place to network with others like them, a place to seek assistance from others that have similar backgrounds, and a place to create study groups. Furthermore, the students wanted nothing more than to give to the society they lived in and these added resources and opportunities allowed them to be contributing members of the society.

### **Considerations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was conducted in a short period and future research could expand on this study by following students throughout their undergraduate degree experience as well as their transition into graduate school. A longitudinal study could allow for time to build rapport with participants. Future research could also explore further the experiences of the students by observing DACA students in their campus environments, such as the classrooms or school activities. Also, a longitudinal study could include other data sources such as grades and interviews with administrators and faculty who work with this specific student population. Expanding the study to other four-year college campuses with the same population could be done to gain a better understanding of the experiences these students face in the pursuit of their education. Desert College's resources to these students in the form of a full-ride scholarship and the Undocu Club

also provided different experiences to those that may be attending college without these types of resources. The time period in which this study took place served as a limitation because the political climate that was discussed throughout this paper may have influenced the DACA students' responses.

### **Conclusion**

This study was one of few that used the Community Cultural Wealth framework to bring to light experiences of Latinx DACA students as they navigate a four-year college campus in a highly politicized climate. CCW was able to extract the strengths and forms of support these students used to navigate their higher education journey. A total of 12 Latinx DACA students attending a four-year college were interviewed who described their experiences at their campus. This study explored how the students cultivated the strengths they possessed and utilized the sources of support they had in a challenging political climate due to their immigration status.

The literature discusses DACA students' challenges in their pursuit of higher education from financial, academic, and social aspects. However, this research does not often highlight the strengths that got them there in the first place. This study was able to highlight these strengths by examining CCW's forms of capital and how they were developed and utilized to assist these students in navigating their college experience. These students used their strengths to work hard and succeed in their determination to overcome challenges. They used the various capitals described by Yosso (2005) such as aspirational and resistant to push against the adverse climate that existed toward their population to succeed. Familial capital provided a foundation to move these students forward with the encouragement gained by their family to pursue education and work

hard at an early age. Social capital allowed them to expand their networks to create sources of support such as the student club at Desert College.

This study was conducted to provide further insight into these students' experiences at four-year college campuses in a highly politicized climate. What was discovered is those with DACA have a sense of privilege in comparison to those that are undocumented due to their ability to legally work in the U.S., protection from deportation, and, at one point, ability to travel outside the country. However, the climate in which this study was situated further exposed those with DACA because they were at-risk with the U.S. government having their contact information which could be used against them if the DACA program was terminated. The limbo status of the DACA program was often used as a bargaining chip to further pursue a political agenda against immigration in the U.S. by the Trump Administration. This research further explored the strengths of these students and how they utilized their strengths to succeed instead of focusing on the deficit views focused on by the literature. The hope was that the information obtained in this study be used by higher education faculty and institutions as a way to better support this student population in a time of great need.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Information Sheets

I am conducting a research study to examine the experiences of Latinx DACA students at a four-year higher education institution with a focus on identifying strengths that these students possess.

If you volunteer to participate in this study will be invited to engage in two in-person interviews, each lasting approximately an hour to an hour and a half, for a total of two to three hours of their time. In addition to the questions that you will be asked, you will be invited to participate in an activity called participatory mapping.

This study is considered to be minimal risk of harm. This means the risks to those that participate in the research will be similar in type or intensity to what they encounter during their daily activities.

Benefits of doing research are not definite, but I hope to reframe the negative public discourse about DACA by focusing on students' strengths and aspirations and to potentially inform policies and practices on four-year higher education institutions. There are no direct benefits to you in this study activity.

The researcher and the University of Nevada, Reno will treat your identity and the information collected about you with professional standards of confidentiality and protect it to the extent allowed by law. You will not be personally identified in any reports or publications that may result from this study. The US Department of Health and Human Services, the University of Nevada, Reno Research Integrity Office, and the Institutional Review Board may look at your study records.

#### Required Language

You may ask questions of the researcher at any time by calling, Matthew Aguirre (775) 225-4024 or by sending an email to [maguirre@unr.edu](mailto:maguirre@unr.edu). You may also contact the principal investigator, Eleni Oikonomidou, Ph.D. (775) 682-7865 or by sending an email to [eleni@unr.edu](mailto:eleni@unr.edu).

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may stop at any time. Declining to participate or ending your participation will not have any adverse effects on your participation in academic or social activities on your campus.

As a token of appreciation, you will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card per interview for a total of \$50.

Thank you for your participation in this study!

Estoy llevando a cabo un estudio de investigación para examinar las experiencias de los estudiantes Latinx DACA en una institución de educación superior de cuatro años con un enfoque en la identificación de la fuerza que poseen estos estudiantes.

Si usted como voluntario participa en este estudio se invitará a participar en dos entrevistas en persona, cada uno dura aproximadamente una hora a hora y media, para un total de dos a tres horas de su tiempo. Además de las preguntas que se le pide, se invitará a participar en una actividad llamada mapa participativo.

Este estudio se considera que tiene un riesgo mínimo de daño. Esto significa que los riesgos a los que participan en la investigación serán similares en tipo o intensidad a lo que ellos encuentran durante sus actividades diarias.

Beneficios de hacer investigaciones no son definitivas, pero espero reevaluar el discurso público negativo sobre DACA, centrándose en las fuerzas y aspiraciones de los estudiantes y potencialmente informar las políticas y prácticas en instituciones de educación superior de cuatro años. No hay ningún beneficio directo a usted en esta actividad de estudio.

El investigador y la Universidad de Nevada, Reno tratará su identidad y la información recopilada acerca de usted con las normas profesionales de confidencialidad y protegerlo en la medida permitida por la ley. Usted no será personalmente identificado en informes o publicaciones que puedan derivarse de este estudio. El Departamento de Salud y Servicios Humanos, la Universidad de Nevada, Reno Oficina de Integridad de Investigación, y la Junta de Revisión Institucional pueden mirar los archivos del estudio.

### **Idioma deseado**

Puede hacer preguntas sobre el investigador en cualquier momento llamando a Matthew Aguirre al (775) 225-4024 o enviando un correo electrónico a [maguirre@unr.edu](mailto:maguirre@unr.edu). También puede comunicarse con la investigadora principal, Eleni Oikonomidou, p.H.d. (775) 682-7865 o enviando un correo electrónico a [eleni@unr.edu](mailto:eleni@unr.edu).

Su participación en este estudio es voluntaria. Se puede detener el estudio en cualquier momento. Negarse a participar o poner fin a su participación no tendrá ningún efecto adverso sobre su participación en actividades académicas o sociales en su campus.

Como muestra de agradecimiento, usted recibirá una tarjeta de regalo de \$25 para Amazon por cada entrevista para un total de \$50.

¡Gracias por tu participación en este estudio!

**Appendix B: 1<sup>st</sup> Interview Questions**

1. What is your current major/year of study and why did you choose this major?
  - i) How long have you been attending this institution?
2. What age did you come to the U.S. and how long have you been a recipient of DACA?
3. Who or what influenced your decision to go to college?
4. Do you think that you were prepared to go to college?
  - i) If so, how were you prepared and for what?
  - ii) If you do not think you were prepared what specifically were you not prepared for? What would have helped you to be prepared?
5. How has your preparedness or lack of preparedness impacted your college experience?
6. What has been your college experience so far?
7. How do you see yourself as a student?
8. How do you define success? What makes a student successful, in your view?
9. What type of support do you have, if any?
  - i) Who do you go to for help with academics?
  - ii) Who do you go to for help with non-academic related problems?
10. How do you pay for your education?
11. Are you active in any clubs and organizations on campus? If so, which ones?
  - i) [if they mention Undocu Club a follow will be] What are your thoughts about the Undocu Club?
12. What do you think about the current political climate surrounding undocumented immigrants and DACA students in higher education?
13. What recommendations do you have for campus officials who work with and for DACA or undocumented college students?
14. What are your plans for the future?



### **Appendix C: 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview Questions**

1. What are unique elements of being a DACA student at college? (review map?)
2. How would your life at college be different or alike if the Undocu Club did not exist?
3. In your view, how is the visibility of DACA in the media influencing DACA students in college?
4. Worst case scenario, DACA is rescinded, how would that impact DACA students?
5. Best case scenario, DACA recipients are granted citizenship, how would that impact DACA students?
6. A couple of individual questions? (tailored to each participant based on first interview)