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Social and Health Effects of DACA on College Students in Riverside, California

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SOCIAL AND HEALTH EFFECTS OF DACA ON COLLEGE STUDENTS IN  
RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA

By

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A capstone project submitted for  
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## Abstract

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration policy was instituted in 2012 as an executive order under the Obama administration. Since DACA went into effect, it has allowed undocumented individuals who meet specific criteria to obtain a temporary work authorization permit. For this study, I studied the social and health effects of DACA by interviewing participants regarding their educational experiences and mental health. Social effects for this study are defined as the ability of recipients to receive a postsecondary education and finish postsecondary education. Health effects focus on the recipient's mental health as a result of their status. From the interviews it is evident that family has played an important role for all students primarily by influencing the participants' decision to attend college. Although family acted as a source of support, the participants also experienced feelings of increased responsibility toward their families as a result of their protected status. Even though the participants are protected under DACA, many of them continue to live as if they have little to no protections. The effects on the individual are based on interviews with University of California, Riverside (UCR) and Riverside City College (RCC) students that are DACA recipients. The differences between those who attended UCR and RCC are evident when the challenges the participants have faced are discussed. It is clear that older participants endured more hardship when compared to the younger participants as a result of the timing of DACA.

## **Introduction**

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is an immigration policy instituted in 2012 as an executive order under the Obama administration. The stringent policy has allowed 700,000 eligible individuals to obtain temporary legal status. As recipients of DACA, individuals obtain social security numbers and are given permission to work legally in the United States. Since DACA is a recently instituted policy, its social and health effects are regularly studied. However, many studies have provided quantitative data that does not explain why a particular trend is occurring. For this reason, my research focuses on the social and health effects of DACA from a qualitative perspective.

My study focuses on the social and health effects of DACA on college students in Riverside, California, specifically those attending the University of California, Riverside (UCR) and Riverside City College (RCC). I conducted individual interviews with four participants, three undergraduates from UCR and one from RCC. The interviews demonstrate how the participants prepared for college in their high school years. All of the participants were encouraged by their families to attend college, but since they are all first-generation students, they had to rely on external resources to accomplish their goals. Common sources of support in preparation of higher education included programs such as AVID as well as school staff and friends. To finance their education, participants relied on state-level financial aid policies such as AB540 and the CA Dream Act, but the times at which they learned of these resources varied greatly between those who had DACA before graduating high school and those who obtained DACA after graduating high school. When the time came to consider their college options, no participants considered out-of-state colleges. This was due to a combination of pressure from

family and fear of leaving a progressive state like California. Other considerations included the campus location, the financial aid offered, and the campus climate.

While in college, the degree of extracurricular involvement varied between participants. All the participants worked during their college education but their involvement in extracurricular activities varied. Half of the participants have worked and have been heavily involved in extracurriculars related to their career goals, while half have exclusively held jobs not related to a future career in order to pay bills. As participants neared graduation they experienced difficulties planning for the future with the uncertain future of DACA.

DACA had the surprising impact of negatively affecting all of the participants' mental health. Frequent sources of stress or anxiety include traveling, the cost of DACA, and the uncertainty of DACA's future. Nonetheless, the participants are happy to know that they will be able to provide for their families as a result of obtaining their degrees.

## Literature Review

Through the literature, it is evident that familismo<sup>1</sup> plays a major role in the education and health of undocumented youth. Through the lens of familismo, the literature demonstrates the effects that the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals has on recipients attending and finishing their post-secondary education. Similarly, familismo is found to strongly influence recipients' mental health.

Dorantes studies the “extent to which work authorization can affect the schooling and labor market outcomes of undocumented workers” (Dorantes 340). Through multiple methods of data analysis Dorantes is able to conclude that DACA decreased the probability of individuals enrolling in school as well as decreased the amount that were enrolled full-time. Additionally, DACA led to an increase in employment. However, DACA does not appear to alter wages or hours worked. This leads to Dorantes' conclusion that “eligible youth are dropping out of full-time schooling in order to take advantage of employment opportunities” that DACA provides (Dorantes 351).

The trend Dorantes found can be attributed to familismo. Students tended to have high levels of family responsibility, whether it was helping at home or contributing money to the household, which in turn affected their ability to enroll in school (Gonzales 2015, Terriquez 2014). The need for a student's financial contribution to the household led to inconsistent college attendance when a top earning household member suffered an injury, illness, or job loss. Other students contributed by giving their time—caring for younger siblings, running errands, or simply maintaining the household (Gonzales 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Feeling of dedication, commitment, and loyalty to family, typically in Latino/Hispanic culture.

Furthermore, familismo affected the mental health of students both positively and negatively. DACA helped many participants feel a sense of belonging but with DACA came additional family responsibilities. Some were happy to provide support for their families through their newfound benefits, while others felt overwhelmed and stressed with the additional responsibilities (Raymond 2014, Siemons 2016). Familismo also led to positive mental health effects. Some individuals were motivated by their desire to help their family, either direct or indirect family (e.g. community), while others were given hope by them (Benuto 2018, Stacciarini 2014 ). Nonetheless, having protections while other family members did not led to new concerns (Siemons 2016). As a result of the varying responses of recipients, DACA's effect on mental health is inconclusive.

This study aims to relate various articles regarding education, mental health, and employment to familismo and its effects on DACA recipient's postsecondary education and mental health while adding a narrative, through a qualitative approach, to the trends and statistics available in quantitative research.

## **Methodology**

I conducted this study using a qualitative approach in order to better understand the meaning of figures and statistics obtained through quantitative studies on this topic. As a DACA recipient myself, I found it ineffective for quantitative studies to demonstrate the complexity of having DACA when it comes to education and mental health. In regards to my relationship with participants, I was at an advantage since all the participants were of similar age and had similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to mine.

I obtained a sample size of four students for this study. The sample includes three undergraduate students from the University of California, Riverside and one undergraduate student from Riverside City College. The sample consisted of students within 20 - 26 years of age. Half of the sample was female and half was male.

Due to the vulnerability of this group as undocumented students, I used personal contacts first. I then implemented snowball sampling in hopes of obtaining more students, but this was not successful. I recruited students from March to November 2019 and provided all potential participants an information statement. The statement outlined the purpose and procedure for my study prior to participants committing to an interview.

All participants self-reported to be 18 years of age or older, fluent in English, and DACA recipients currently enrolled in school at the University of California Riverside or Riverside City College as undergraduates. Due to time and budgetary constraints, I did not offer compensation for participating in this study. I interviewed participants individually for approximately 45 minutes. Most of my interviews were conducted face-to-face with the exception of one that I conducted over the phone. During that interview, I asked for the participant's verbal consent to be recorded before I started the interview. The sample questions I used for the interview touched



upon topics such as participants' trajectory from high school to college, experience with challenges during their college career, and mental health implications due to their status.

I asked participants to provide additional private information such as their age of migration and the year they first received DACA. This information was necessary for my study in order to see if the timing of DACA had any additional implications in the participants' education or mental health. I stored this information separately from all other typed forms in order to protect the participants' identity. Before and during the interview I informed all participants of their right to skip interview questions or withdraw from the study completely. All audio recordings were transcribed within one week of the interview and then destroyed to protect the participants' identity. During the transcription, I omitted or replaced any identifiable information for confidentiality. I used pseudonyms and unique interview numbers to keep track of the participants' information without directly implicating them in the audio and transcription process. I informed all participants of their right to withdraw their interview from the study at any time using the pseudonym or interview number I provided at the beginning of the interview.

Once the research has concluded, I will provide the final Honors thesis to all participants via email. This study obtained IRB Socio-Behavioral approval from the Office of Research Integrity at the University of California, Riverside.

## **Findings and Analysis**

### **From High School to College**

All of the participants I interviewed decided to attend college either because of their own sense of obligation or because of the persistence of their families. Nonetheless, they all got into college with the help of individuals and groups outside of their family. Some participants relied on programs available at their high schools, such as AVID, while others relied on counselors, teachers, and friends to help them get into college. As for the financing of college, all the participants paid for college with resources such as AB540 and the CA Dream Act. After receiving acceptance letters to different colleges and universities, every one of them took similar approaches in how they made their final decision. Ultimately, participants paid close attention to the location, finances, and campus climate of the colleges they were accepted to.

Many high schools provide programs geared toward helping students prepare for college such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and Puente. Ana was the only participant to indicate that she was involved in such a program. She was involved in AVID from the time she was in middle school through high school, approximately six years. In her words, AVID “feeds you with just the idea of going to college. Doing something better. Doing something different.” Ana knew that she wanted to help her family and understood that attending college would open doors that she would not have without a degree. In this sense, Ana had the opportunity to do something different than what most undocumented individuals without much formal education would do for a living. AVID showed her that it was possible for her to attend college and that it would be a worthwhile investment. Although Ana had been involved in AVID since middle school, the idea and reality of college did not become apparent until her high school

years. Her exposure to the idea of college in high school, along with the support of her family, solidified her goals of attending a higher education institution.

Ana's time in AVID prepared her for the college application process and the rigor of a four-year institution. According to Ana, AVID helped demystify the entire college application process during her junior and senior year. This resulted in Ana easily applying to colleges. The only minor problem she faced was in regards to the citizenship questions she was asked during the application process, but that did not hinder her ability to apply easily. Because AVID encourages students to aim solely for four-year universities, such as the California State University system or the University of California system, Ana never considered attending a community college.

Similarly, other participants' families supported them in their endeavors, but participants had to rely on others, outside their family unit, to succeed. Unlike Ana, all the other participants relied heavily on individuals such as counselors, teachers, and friends. David was informed by a counselor of the opportunity to enroll in a local community college introductory course, and he took advantage of the opportunity. As a result, he became intrigued by the field of psychology and became invested in attending college. From then on, David became well informed about the college application process by attending workshops, using online resources, and seeking help from school personnel. Jason, on the other hand, relied on a teacher he developed a strong relationship with during his time in high school. Jason's teacher essentially helped him navigate the college application process and was a resource for him in determining if any issues would arise due to his lack of U.S. citizenship. Because he was unsure of the financial implications a four-year university would entail, Jason was leaning toward attending community college. He

was not worried, however, because he knew he could enroll in community college regardless of his legal status.

Unlike the other participants that had DACA before they graduated high school, Christina had to navigate through different obstacles, but was fully supported every step of the way by her mother. Through discussions with her counselors Christina knew right away that she would attend community college due to a combination of her grades and the financial attainability of community college compared to a four-year university. Christina was unsure if she wanted to or even could attend college but her mother played a major role. Her own words emphasize how familismo played a crucial role in her going to college. She states, “I knew I was going to continue [and go to college] cause my mom would, you know, push me to, but for me. I don’t know. For me, I didn’t think I had the possibility.” Even with the support of her mother, Christina had trouble applying to her local community college because she was not a U.S. citizen and did not have a social security number. To make matters worse, Christina struggled internally with her future. She did not know what to study. She knew her career opportunities were limited because of her status and this affected her emotionally and mentally. Through these tough times Christina’s mother's insistence pushed Christina to continue with the college application process in hopes of getting into college. To make the application process easier, Christina worked with peers that were undergoing the same process. Nonetheless, because many of them were U.S. born or legal U.S. residents, their application process was different than hers.

Overall, college bound programs in high school appear to positively impact DACA students' ability to get into college as well as assistance and guidance from counselors, teachers, and friends. It is important to note that no participant was able to get into college solely with the help of their family. They all relied on other outside resources to make their dreams become a

reality. Nonetheless, their families played a vital role in encouraging them to attend college (Yosso 2006). The participants' strong ties to their families encouraged participants to pursue higher education with the goal of obtaining a degree that would help them support their families. This shared idea among participants illustrates the importance of familismo. Similarly, external factors such as input from family and friends as well as personal experiences pushed the participants to stay within California.

### **College Decisions**

#### *Out-of-State*

All of the participants I interviewed made intentional decisions to apply solely to colleges and universities that were in-state. Although Jason did apply to out of state institutions, his family's concerns quickly led him to disregard those colleges and universities outside California. As Jason shared:

I've never traveled further than Nevada before coming to college. So all (these colleges) I was applying to were in Pennsylvania or New York. So like I really really thought about it and then also my mom was pressuring me. "What are you going to do and who's going to like take care of you if something goes wrong?" And that's when I was like, yeah I might as well stay [in California] a little longer. You know, close to home.

After further consideration of his family's concerns, Jason decided that it would be safer to stay near his home. He understood that if he left, it would be harder for his family to help him as well as harder for him to help his family. Additionally, it also became clear later on that Riverside would be the optimal location since it would be financially attainable.

For other participants, out-of-state college was never a possibility. This stemmed from their fears of the unknown. Ana provided her input as to why she never considered going out-of-state.

It's hard because you're out there and you hear a lot of crazy stories. They're not as welcoming as in California. And you also get the fact that California is very immigrant friendly.

Ana's words bring to light incidents that have occurred in prior years that have negatively impacted the safety of the undocumented community, especially laws in nearby states such as Arizona. For example, the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act, known as Arizona SB 1070, was passed in 2010. This bill permitted law officers to determine if an individual was legally allowed to reside in the U.S. during a legal stop (e.g. traffic violation). It also penalized individuals who sheltered, hired, or transported anyone without legal residence in the U.S. At the time, the undocumented community was fearful of the possibilities. The act brought up questions of safety for those that resided in Arizona but also for every other undocumented individual in the U.S. The question circling the undocumented community was "If Arizona was able to pass SB1070, would other states follow?" This is essentially the point Ana is making in regards to her fear of leaving California. California is considered to be one of the most progressive states in the U.S. Ana has the ability to feel safe and welcome in California but that may not hold true in other states like Arizona which has obtained an anti-immigrant reputation. One state over and Ana could find herself in a conservative place where she is not welcome. Many of the stories shared among the undocumented community are from word of mouth. Although these stories may be of the worst-case scenarios, many of them hold truth in regards to what could easily happen to anyone at the wrong place at the wrong time.

In the end, concerns from family members and experiences heard from word of mouth led all the participants to disregard out of state institutions. This disregard for out-of-state colleges, shifted participants' attention to in-state colleges and the cost of attending.

### Financing College

After submitting their college applications, all the participants had to find ways to finance their education within the state of California. All of them applied for AB540<sup>2</sup> status and the California Dream Act<sup>3</sup> but how and when they found out about these resources varies greatly between the participants that had DACA before they graduated high school and the participant that received DACA after graduating high school.

Both Ana and David relied on experiences and resources from their high school years to obtain the necessary information about financing college. Ana quickly found out about AB540 and the CA Dream Act through a program hosted by her high school called Peer College Community (PCC). In this program Ana had a peer mentor that taught her about all the different forms of financial aid such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Once Ana disclosed her DACA status, her peer mentor was able to guide her to the appropriate resources which included AB540 and CA Dream Act.

I was part of the Peer College Community...I feel like if I wouldn't have been a part of that program, I would have definitely missed an opportunity (for financial aid). [Now] my tuition is fully covered. It's my rent that's partially covered so I work to cover rent and any other personal expenses.

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<sup>2</sup> AB540 allows those who have lived in California the opportunity to pay in state tuition.

<sup>3</sup> The CA Dream Act is similar to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) but is only for individuals that have DACA.

Even Ana herself admits that if she had not had the proper connections she could have potentially missed out on financial aid since she knew she did not qualify for FAFSA, the common financial aid source for others. Furthermore, Ana has been fortunate enough to have the cost of her college education covered mostly by her financial aid, a combination of grants, scholarships and loans, and mostly works to cover rent and personal expenses. David also relied on resources available at his high school such as college financial aid workshops and worksheets he received from presentations. He also used the internet to clarify any remaining questions he had. For those without DACA at the time of their graduation, such as Christina, their resources for financing college were limited.

For Christina things were not very clear. She met with her college counselor and disclosed her status. Her counselor was then able to inform her about AB540 in order to decrease the cost of her courses. However, Christina was never informed about the CA Dream Act, even after she received DACA. This ultimately led to many unnecessary burdens for the next four years in community college until she learned about the state financial aid program through her younger sister who was actively involved in AVID.

Money. I couldn't take that many classes because I had to pay - well my mom helped me pay out of pocket. I couldn't (cover the cost). It was a lot (of money). And I would - let's say, I was a part-time student. I wasn't full-time.

Before learning about the CA Dream Act, Christina enrolled in very few courses. During her time at Norco College she was always a part-time student. She never had the opportunity to enroll as full-time due to the cost of her education. Even as a part-time student Christina regularly worked with her mother as a janitor to pay for the few units she could enroll in. Additionally, she had to schedule her coursework around work which sometimes affected her



ability to enroll in the courses she needed. The lack of knowledge about the CA Dream Act greatly impacted Christina's expected graduation date and has led her to spend almost nine years in the community college system. After she learned about the CA Dream Act through her younger sister, Christina was able to enroll in all her necessary courses. Although she continued to work with her mother and held family responsibilities, the financial aspect of college became less burdensome on her education which alleviated the stress and anxiety Christina experienced. It is evident that those who had DACA before they graduated high school had an advantage when it came to financing college. Those that finished high school without DACA, such as Christina, were left with little to no resources during the first few years of their college career.

The implications of little to no financial aid are evident when Christina's college education is delved into and compared to those who had financial assistance early on.

### Why Riverside?

When it came time to submit their intention to register, the participants that applied to more than one school had similar reasons as to why they chose the University of California Riverside--location, finances, and campus climate. Ana, Jason, and David all wanted to move away from home to have the "college experience," but wanted to remain close enough to home where they could return regularly and be available if any issues emerged. Similarly, they wanted to attend a University where they felt welcome and as if they belonged. Additionally, finances played a major role in their decision making. All the participants wanted to attend colleges that would not become a financial burden to their family.

For Ana the perfect location was a must.

At the end of the day it came down to “Which one is the furthest but closest?” I didn’t want to be close to home and I didn’t want to be too far away that if I really had a problem I couldn’t come back. So this one [UCR] just kind of hit the jackpot. It’s not that far.

Ana wanted to have the opportunity to have the college experience. She wanted to grow and explore freely. Living on campus was financially feasible at UCR and it was close enough to her hometown that she could return home whenever possible.

Similarly, for David financial stability was an important aspect of his decision-making process but after visiting and spending the night at many campuses around California he soon realized the environment to be another contributing factor.

The first thing was income. I had to look at the money because I come from a poor background. So I had to look at that. That was pretty crucial. That and the location. I kinda didn’t want to live too far away from my parents... I liked UCR better too. I liked the whole diversity....I wanted to get a little bit farther. I thought UC Riverside was the perfect distance. They offered me the most financial aid and I felt welcome. They had a lot of resources.

David was the only participant to disclose that he spent time at different campuses around the state of California. By comparing his experiences, he became fully aware of the fact that not all campuses had the same effect on him. As a result, David preferred Riverside from other campuses he had explored. Riverside also happened to have the ideal location for David. Just like Ana, he wanted to stay close enough to home that he could return if necessary.

Christina, on the other hand, did not have many options. The main factors she considered were location and cost. In the end, she chose her local community college at the time which was

Norco College because it was closest to her home and less expensive than a four-year college. Even though there were other community colleges available, Christina stayed near her home. This was mostly due to convenience and the fact that she did not have reliable transportation.

[Norco] was the closest to me... Closest to me, because I could walk to the campus. To the Norco campus. Not to RCC. To RCC I would have to get a ride. I still went (to school). I walked to school. Sometimes I would get rides with my friend too, if we had classes around the same time.

During the time Christina graduated high school, she did not have DACA which automatically made her ineligible to obtain a driver's license. In the state of California, before the passing of AB 60 in 2013, no undocumented individual was permitted to obtain a driver's license.

California required applicants to show proof of residency which was not possible for Christina. As a result, Christina was not able to drive and had to resort to walking to school. Although she could have merely driven a car without a license her mother prohibited it. The risks associated with driving without a license and without proper documentation, such as proof of residency, outweighed the benefits of driving. Not only could Christina lose the family's only mode of transportation, she could be fined, jailed or even deported.

My mom wouldn't let me drive without a license. Like she would but I wouldn't. She wouldn't let me. Even if I knew how to drive because what if. You know, the "What ifs."

I never drove without a license.

As a result, Christina's mother was the only person in her family that drove, but she drove without a license. Taking into account Christina's school schedule and her mother's work schedule, Christina was frequently left without a mode of transportation to and from school. Christina then resorted to walking the one-hour trip to school and then the one-hour trip back

home. If she was lucky, she would get rides from friends. If Christina had obtained DACA before she had graduated high school, she could have potentially had more freedom in choosing her college since she would have been eligible for a driver's license. Having a driver's license would have given her a wider range of colleges to choose from since transportation may have not been a problem.

The implications of not having DACA are evident even before Christina began college and those challenges continued for Christina during her college career.

### **While in College and Thinking of the Future**

All of the participants I interviewed have had a job or have been involved in on or off campus organizations as a way to finance their college education and associated expenses. Jobs provided steady income for participants and while others were fortunate enough to be involved in paid extracurriculars which acted like jobs by providing income. Other participants have also been involved in extracurricular activities simply to get experience in their field. They did not receive pay as a result of these involvements.

Jason and David are the only participants to have worked and to have been consistently involved in extracurricular activities. Jason aspires to be an immigration lawyer and has been heavily involved in many off-campus organizations. As a result, he has been involved in many enriching experiences such as UC DC and UC Sacramento. The programs are, respectively, geared towards providing students with internship opportunities and exposing students to politics and policymaking. Due to Jason's goals, he has also been involved with community organizations that help undocumented individuals with legal processes and documentation procedures. While these unpaid extracurricular activities directly relate to his career goals, his

paid work has not. Jason has held positions in retail when classes are not in session to cover his unmet expenses. Overall, due to his financial aid, Jason has been able to pay for his education through grants and scholarships, while most of his personal expenses he has managed to cover through paid internships, work, or family support.

Jason's and David's circumstances are very similar as David has a strong interest in activism for his community. David has also participated in programs such as UC DC and has been able to obtain several positions on and off campus that have provided him with valuable experience. David has had many positions such as being a lab assistant, holding an internship with an organization in Costo Hall, and being a member of a Chicano on campus organization. These opportunities have allowed David to gain valuable experiences, sometimes paid, but he has had to work to contribute to his family or to cover personal expenses. He has worked many jobs such as working as a tutor and as a construction worker in his hometown. These paid internships and jobs have been very helpful to David because it has allowed him to be financially stable and help his family when needed.

Although both Jason and David have had positive experiences in their extracurriculars, the process of obtaining positions can be discouraging. In the search of opportunities, they encounter many limitations because of their lack of legal residency or citizenship. As both Jason and David search for jobs or internships for the remainder of their undergraduate education, they face many dilemmas. The most common problem has been finding jobs or internships that accept DACA recipients. David shared his frustrations with the process.

[The problem is] applying to opportunities but you can't apply. That kinda does suck. It just makes you less motivated sometimes. I need to put more mental energy into myself to continue and look for other opportunities.

Many opportunities require applicants to provide proof of authorization to work in the U.S.

Although DACA provides recipients with a work permit, opportunities may be limited to only those who are U.S. citizens. For example, to work for the government, typically at the federal level, employees must be U.S. citizens. Some jobs may also require employees to travel outside the country which is not legally permitted for DACA recipients. Similarly, other institutions that offer internships and scholarships may also exclude DACA recipients because of their funding source or the type of work involved (e.g. contracts with the government). Even though DACA does provide more opportunities when compared to those without a work permit, recipients still have fears. Although they are still in the process of their undergraduate education, they must start planning for life after college. This results in additional stress. Thinking about the future is only one of many factors that participants reported as negatively impacting their mental health.

On the other hand, Ana and Christina diverted their time and attention from school to work in order to finance their education. Ana has briefly been involved with off campus organizations, but has focused her attention on work to finance her education and cover personal expenses while also alleviating some of the debt she has acquired over the years. Ana has worked on campus at UCR for three years. Originally Ana relied heavily on her financial aid to pay for her room and board but after her first year she moved off campus and suddenly experienced the real world. She had to pay for rent, utilities, and groceries - expenses she previously did not have to worry about. As a result, Ana got a job and continued to rely on her financial aid loans to be able to live comfortably. In regards to her future, Ana is optimistic. She believes DACA has alleviated a lot of her worries. As a matter of a fact, when Ana thinks about her future, she thinks of it in a positive light. She is happy to know that DACA will provide her with the resources necessary to obtain a job in social work. In turn, a job will allow her to pay off

her educational debt while also helping her younger siblings, who do not have DACA and cannot reap its benefits when it comes to paying for college. Her income will also allow her to support her parents financially.

It's just like the fact of getting DACA. Being able to get DACA was the crucial part... It was the actual getting DACA... Getting DACA is an assurance for me that I'm gonna be able to do something with it. And like I said, help my family after. So it was the receiving of DACA that was the crucial part that shaped my mindset. Like "Damn, now you need to try harder."

It is evident that Ana is fully appreciative of the opportunities DACA has been able to provide, specifically in her ability to attend college. Her ability to attend college will provide her with the financial stability necessary to be able to support her family. Getting DACA was the most important step since it has opened many doors for her.

In comparison, Christina has also had to work to finance her education, but because she did not have DACA and had additional family responsibilities, finding work was always an acute and urgent need. Christina's family was unable to pay for her education and because she did not learn about the CA Dream Act, until approximately four years after graduating from high school, she worked with her mother as a janitor in order to pay for her education. Even then Christina was not able to enroll as a full-time student. Taking only one to two courses at a time delayed her ability to transfer.

Jason and David were able to work and be heavily involved in extracurriculars, but Christina's circumstances did not allow this. Christina disclosed that she did not have any on-campus involvement for almost the entirety of her college career even though she was part-time. Additionally, Christina's job as a janitor limited her ability to enroll in courses. Christina had to

work and she had to pay for her classes, but her job did not provide the same flexibility many on campus jobs have. Christina would have to put her work first and school second. If there was ever a period where she did not have to work, Christina had to stay at home and care for her younger siblings while her mother worked. This is in sharp contrast to all other participants that have lived on or near campus without their families, and as a result they had little to no day to day family responsibilities. Nonetheless, like the previous participants, specifically Ana, Christina is looking forward to her future and being able to help her family once she finishes her education.

Overall, the participants' involvement with extracurriculars varied greatly depending on their personal circumstances. Those participants that had substantial financial aid were able to spend more time in extracurriculars related to their career goals and did not have to rely solely on paid opportunities. Other participants that felt less financially stable, dedicated themselves to work that was not directly related to their career goals simply to maintain a steady income. Additionally, participants' living situation appears to influence their ability to be involved in extracurriculars, specifically in regards to Christina since she is the only participant to have lived at home throughout most of her college education. Living at home leads to increased family responsibilities.

### **The Effects of DACA and its Impact on Mental Health**

Even though all the participants acknowledge that DACA has had a positive impact on their lives, they also believe that the policy has had some disadvantages. All of the participants continue to conduct themselves in manner that would be most appropriate for someone without any legal protections. Similarly, even though they all have DACA, the participants express an



awareness that it is temporary, which negatively affects their mental health. Nonetheless, as long as DACA exists, they all feel obligated to use it to help their families.

### Participant Behavior

Even now that all the participants have DACA, some of them still conduct themselves as if they did not have legal protection. For example, almost all of the participants indicated that they would not leave California. Those that have gone out of state shared the stress and anxiety they experienced as a result of leaving the state even momentarily. David shared his experience when he traveled outside of California for the first time as part of an educational enrichment program.

Even when I travel - even when I went to DC-- I was worried. I was like, "I'm not sure if I should do this." I talked to one of the counselors. She was like "No, it's okay. You can do this. As long as you don't show your thing (permit)." Just to show the California ID and I'd be fine. It is on your mind.

Although DACA recipients are allowed to travel within the United States, David felt the need to protect himself. Previously, undocumented individuals were not permitted to travel by plane; the memory of this policy makes undocumented individuals feel uneasy even with DACA protections. For David, traveling with DACA was no different and his cautious nature resulted in him speaking with others who had more knowledge about the subject. In regards to air travel, David felt that traveling was a defining part of adulthood; however, he continued to feel unsafe while traveling. He did not believe he would ever be confident enough to assume that he would be completely safe from detention and/or deportation. Jason has also traveled for educational purposes and has admitted to enjoying the experience of leaving California. Nonetheless, their

experiences leaving California and getting on a plane have been stressful. Although Jason has traveled, he now worries about the newly introduced Real ID<sup>4</sup>. Traveling was stressful before the new policy, and the additional stringent measures have only caused Jason to wonder how the Real ID may impact his ability to travel.

On the other hand, other participants have avoided traveling far from California. Ana and Christina have traveled as far as Las Vegas, Nevada but did not consider that a risk. Nonetheless, locations closer to the border are considered more off limits to them due to increased border patrol. Although Riverside County is considered a border county, the presence of border patrol does not become evident until cities one enters the cities closer to San Diego, such as Murrieta or Temecula. These cities are all located further south of California (relative to the city of Riverside where all participants attend college). On the other hand, Las Vegas is located north of the city of Riverside, going away from the U.S. - Mexico border, and near the California - Nevada state line. These geographical features make Las Vegas a less intimidating city in regards to border patrol.

### *The Expense of DACA*

Apart from their cautious nature, all the participants are negatively impacted by the fact that DACA is only allowed in two-year periods. Every single participant has struggled to pay for the \$495<sup>5</sup> fee associated with DACA. This financial burden has resulted in stress and anxiety since participants and their families worry about not being able to pay the fee. It has become

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<sup>4</sup> An act of Congress intended to increase reliability, security and consistency in identification documents such as driver's license.

<sup>5</sup> The application fee for DACA was \$465 and was changed to \$495 with current considerations of increasing the cost to \$765.

more worrisome for participants that apply with the help of private lawyers since the cost of the application process can reach the range of \$1,000. Furthermore, if families have more than one DACA eligible child, they must finance both their children's DACA applications costs. The DACA application fee is treated as a necessary expense from all the participants and their families. This has caused the participants to feel as if they were burdens to their families at some point in time, especially the first couple of times they applied, since they were not able to pay for the application fee themselves. David shared his experiences with the initial cost of DACA and its renewals.

It's pretty expensive. \$500 for two years. Just hoping that they renew it again. I think my mom also, the first time I got it, I think it was \$1,000 because they hired a lawyer to do it. And I felt bad. I was like "No, why?" So the next year I did it by myself ... the whole papers. We still had to pay \$465 - I think it was back then. But it was from my mom's. I didn't have money back then.

The first time David applied for DACA, his family consulted a private lawyer. This was a common course of action for families because DACA was a newly incorporated policy. This was only encouraged further by the stories of individuals that applied for DACA on their own and faced severe consequences such as deportation. As David shared, his family is low income and consists of two individuals that are eligible for DACA, him and his brother. David was the first to apply and as a result his family consulted a private lawyer that charged \$500 for filling out the paperwork and the additional \$465 for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) application fee. The \$1,000 his family spent of the application was considerable given his family income. The cost was more considerable when taking into account the fact that David's brother was also eligible for DACA. This meant his family would have to pay the application fee once

more for another family member soon after David. His inability to alleviate this financial burden from his family contributed to David's feeling of helplessness. The next time David applied, for a renewal, he relied on his family for the \$465 application fee by filling the paperwork without a lawyer.

### Uncertainty of DACA

Even after the participants have to worry about the financial implications of DACA, they are left in a state of uncertainty. No participant has ever been able to relax during their two-year period because they never know if DACA will continue to exist by the time they must renew. The uncertainty has only increased during the Trump administration. Jason shares his struggles with the uncertainty he has faced.

When it comes to the renewal process, I'm not sure if something would happen. Like if there would ever be a denial of a renewal. That comes to mind when it's happening. Especially when it's my second time, and my third time is coming up like in May next year [2020]. For my next renewal. Just like uncertainty of whether the process will still keep going. I've heard that there shouldn't be any reason to deny it but you never really know. So I feel like that's definitely a big issue.

During Jason's initial application and following renewals of DACA, he has experienced two very different political climates. The Obama administration instituted DACA with the intent of providing undocumented students with the opportunity to continue their education. This allowed Jason to obtain DACA and the benefits he has today. On the other hand, the Trump administration has sought to terminate the program. Jason, like the other participants, has worried about the vulnerability of his DACA status. Recipients are provided DACA in two-year

increments. After every two years, recipients must renew. When the Trump administration began its agenda to end DACA, many individuals were fearful that DACA would not exist by the time they had to renew. This fear was fueled by the 2018 announcement that USCIS would no longer accept new DACA applications, only renewals.

In regards to the political climate, many participants have trouble following the news. They feel as if they should stay in touch with the news but use varying coping mechanisms to deal with what they learn. Ana discusses her techniques.

It's going to sound very ignorant. I do like to keep myself informed but I usually tend to separate that from my actual life. I don't think that applies to me even though it does and I know it does. But I tend to live in this little bubble that it doesn't apply to me so it's just like I leave that external to what I'm living.

Although Ana is fully aware of the state of DACA and immigration policies, she finds it best to set that aside from her life. This coping mechanism is helpful as it allows Ana to stay informed while preventing her from stressing about the circumstances.

Even then, the participants admit that they have become desensitized to the news. Jason shares his experiences and the constant ups and downs he faces.

With everything going on in the news - after a while, I feel like I personally have become desensitized to all that stuff. Just because it's so constant. So like when somebody's talking about it, it's like "Oh, it's back again on the news." And like there's also that thing where people were saying like "Oh, they're putting a bill up to the Senate floor." And it's always getting taken out. So nowadays I'm just like "Oh, here we go again." It's gonna get taken down so like why even bother. So it's like that false hope that I just try to stay away from.

Similar to Ana, Jason remains informed but copes with the situation differently. From his experience, there is no need to delve into a possible law or policy until it has been established. By doing this, Jason is able to avoid the anxiety typically associated with the process of establishing a new immigration policy. He prefers to learn of the final outcome instead of following up on the process.

The uncertainty has even led some participants to take unconventional methods to protect themselves. For example, David took a calculated choice in taking the first quarter of the academic year off. He returned to his hometown for the summer to work and decided to continue even after school resumed.

This one had to be more financial. Financial reasons. I was just looking at it, “Should I continue (working)?” I was thinking “I am gonna continue (with school).”...I’m working in construction and I was wondering if I should continue or save up more money in case I might need it. You know with my status and everything. I just want to be prepared...we never know what might happen. Emergencies. Possessions. Anything like that. I’m saving as much money as I can.”

David’s actions exemplify the uncertainty DACA recipients must live with. Recipients are never sure of what will happen, either to the DACA policy or to their unprotected family members. As a result of this uncertainty recipients try to take a proactive approach by considering all the possibilities, but these “what ifs” can easily backfire and negatively impact their mental health.

### Helping Family

Although the participants are unsure of the future of DACA at any given time, they all strive to make the best of it. Every single participant has the goal to help their family financially

after they finish their education. Although they are not quite done with their higher education, they still strive to help their families any way they can while in college.

All of the participants in this study come from mixed status family, which means that while some members of the family are undocumented, others might have DACA, and others might be U.S.-born citizens. For Ana, coming from a mixed status family brings additional challenges because she is the oldest child and she has the legal protections of DACA. Her parents have no legal protections and her younger siblings who are U.S. citizens are too young to understand the implications. As a result, Ana feels an acute sense of obligation to help her family. Although she is currently unable to provide any financial assistance Ana still does her best to help her family out by managing their bank accounts and paying bills. Ana places an enormous amount of pressure on herself to excel in school. As Ana shared, “after this [college] I have to get my pilas. Like do it right.” Ana feels a sense of obligation to finish her education while limiting the financial burden on her family. As a result, Ana has taken loans to pay for education and has worked ever since her freshman year in college to take care of her own personal expenses as much as possible. It can also be stressful for her in regards to the fact that her younger siblings who are also in college or beginning college soon will need financial assistance as soon as possible. Ana’s family has unique circumstances since Ana was able to apply for DACA but her two younger siblings were not able to due to their inability to provide the necessary evidence for the DACA application process. Along with her own personal debt, Ana feels as if she must finish her education and find a job that will allow her to help her siblings in their pursuit for a higher education and her parents.

Similarly, Christina would like to help her mother in the future after fulfilling her nursing program. Even then, Christina has taken very active roles in helping her family. Christina has

worked with her mother to pay for her college education and simply to help mitigate the physical toll her mother experiences for being a janitor. Additionally, Christina has been a caretaker for her younger siblings in the past. She has helped her mother with driving her siblings to and from school, she has cared for her baby brother, and she has helped maintain a household since her mother worked frequently day and night. Although Christina was more than willing to help her mother in any way possible, Christina was held to a high standard since she was the oldest and was the first to have DACA.

Overall, both Ana and Christina's actions exemplify their sense of obligations to their families. Familismo has encouraged Ana and Christina to help their families now in the present in any way possible, such as through babysitting or managing bank accounts, with hopes of providing more financial support in the future once they have received their degree.

#### *Before DACA for Christina*

Christina's educational journey contrasts greatly with those who had DACA before they graduated. Christina struggled with her lack of protections near the end of her high school education. When asked, Christina admitted that she may have suffered from depression due to her lack of orientation. She felt as if she did not have the possibility to make something of herself. She could barely attend college due to the financial implications of higher education and she could not work legally either. Christina truly did not know what to do for her future or how to get it done. Christina was able to share one of her experiences with a professor that indirectly provided support.

I remember I had a teacher. I was taking an English class. We would write journals and he would just read them. And I remember- I think he talked about a conflict you're going



through...a challenge. I wrote that... I wasn't a citizen. And that I would walk to school.

And it would be- like almost as if it was hopeless. That I just wanted to help my mom.

And he would write back. And he was like "Don't worry. It'll get better."

Even though she felt helpless, Christina knew that she had to push through. When given the chance to reflect on her educational journey, Christina can't help but compare herself to others. She cannot help but see how long it has taken her to get to where she is now. Many of her peers have passed her from her point of view. She cannot fathom that she has been in school for over eight years. Nonetheless, she is fulfilling her goals of becoming a nurse as she is currently enrolled in the Riverside City College nursing program.

## **Conclusion**

The trajectories of those who had DACA before graduating high school drastically differs from those who obtained DACA in college. Nonetheless, all participants had to rely on external resources to prepare for college because their families were not knowledgeable on the matter. However, their families were fully supportive of the participant's endeavors of attending college. A supportive community, either through college-bound programs, school staff (e.g. teacher, counselors, etc.), or friends helped students with the logistics of getting into college. For Christina, this time was filled with negative emotions due to her limited future perspective as an undocumented student. She could not legally work and did not receive financial aid through the CA Dream Act. These two factors made it difficult for her to have a positive outlook on her future.

When it was time to decide which colleges to consider, all the participants avoided out-of-state institutions. Additional out-of-state tuition fees, but mostly concerns from family

members as well as fears of leaving the state of California contributed to these decisions. Participants' fears of leaving California stemmed from personal or others' experiences such as those associated with Arizona SB 1070. Since out-of-state colleges were no longer considered, participants and their families shifted their attention to in-state colleges and their associated costs.

To fund their education, all the participants relied on AB 540 and the CA Dream Act. Those who finished high school with DACA quickly found out about these financial aid resources through programs or counselors. On the other hand, Christina did not find out about the CA Dream Act until four years after she graduated high school. This can be attributed to the lack of DACA knowledgeable counselors when DACA was first established, nearly around the time Christina first received DACA. This lack of information resulted in Christina paying out-of-pocket and enrolling part-time for several years, delaying her ability to transfer by almost 8 years.

In the end, all the participants chose to attend college in Riverside. Their reasons involved the location, the financial aid, and the campus climate. Participants wanted to live near enough to home where they could live on campus but return home whenever necessary. For Christina, who did not have DACA at the time of her high school graduation, location and cost were her priority. She was not legally allowed to drive or work so she had to find the closest, inexpensive institution possible.

Once they entered college, their involvements differed greatly. Jason and David were able to work and be involved in paid and unpaid extracurricular activities related to their fields such as UCDC and UCCS. On the other hand, Ana and Christina have worked in positions not related to the career goals. They have also neglected to become involved in extracurricular

activities because of their necessity. Ana admitted to needing the additional income in order to pay for her housing and personal expenses while Christina needed the income to pay for her courses and help her mother financially.

Regardless of their trajectory and involvements, all the participants shared their concerns about their futures and DACA. Since all students are currently nearing their graduation date they are forced to think of their future. Many worry about their potential job opportunities. As a DACA recipient they have had more opportunities available to them but they still face limitations when it comes to scholarships or internships, specifically those involved with the government. They believe these limitations will translate into the job market. additional mental health trends are evident in the participants behaviors, specifically travel. Those who have traveled outside of California have been worried of possible negative outcomes and the implications of policies such as the Real ID. Similarly, participants have also admitted to avoiding traveling down south, anywhere near the U.S.-Mexico border, due to the increased likelihood of encountering border patrol.

The cost and uncertainty of DACA itself has negatively impacted participants' mental health too. Some participants disclosed that they have families where there is more than one eligible DACA individual. This has resulted in large DACA payments, especially during the first time they applied. The current \$495 cost can affect families since many participants come from low income backgrounds. Apart from the cost, the participants have struggled with the uncertainty of DACA. During the Trump administration there has been a lot of campaigning for the removal of DACA which has affected the participants well-being. As a result of this, participants have become desensitized to the news, or use a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with their emotions. Nonetheless, the participants are grateful for the opportunities DACA had

provided for them. With DACA and a degree, they know that they will be able to help their families.

Although this study has researched the social and health effects of DACA, it is important for future research to consider exclusively studying these impacts on DACA recipients that obtained DACA after graduating college. This study included only 1 participant that fits this criterion which can lead to question if other students in similar positions have faced the same challenges.

Overall, the social and health effects of DACA on college students in Riverside, California are clearly illustrated by the participants' narratives. Due to the Mexican/Chicano culture, I expected family to play a vital role in the participants' lives, especially in their journey to attain a degree. It was quickly clear that family encouraged the students to enroll in a postsecondary institution and played a major role as a source of motivation for students to finish their degrees. I also expected community college students to experience more struggles than those who attended four-year universities, but I did not account for the challenges associated with age. It is evident that age played a vital role since the timing of DACA greatly influenced the participants mental health and college journey. It would be beneficial to study the effects on older participants to determine if Christina's experience is common among this population.

Furthermore, it is clear that DACA has provided individuals with the opportunity to improve their quality of life, specifically in regards to their socioeconomic status. Although the negative aspects of DACA, such as its financial cost and uncertainty, have negative impacts on mental health, I believe that it has overall positively impacted the undocumented community. DACA should continue to exist to allow this generation the opportunity to improve their lives.

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