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A "Master Status" or the "Final Straw"? Assessing the Role of Immigration Status in Latino Undocumented Youths' Pathways Out of School

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Abstract

Previous research on undocumented youth and young adults in the United States asserts that immigration status is a "master status" wherein undocumented status overshadows the impact of other social locations. Drawing primarily on interviews with 45 Latina/o undocumented immigrant youth who stopped out of school, I assess whether the "master status" explanation accurately characterizes how immigration status shapes undocumented youths' pathways out of school. Using an intersectional lens, I argue that multiple social locations disrupt educational pathways and set the stage for immigration status to emerge as the "final straw" that pushes undocumented youth to leave school. Specifically, I show how race, class, gender, and first-generation college student status heavily shape undocumented youths' educational journeys. I find that their resistance to these other forms of marginalization is weakened by the emerging salience of undocumented status as a severe, relatively insurmountable legal barrier. I highlight the process through which these multiple social locations work together to lead undocumented youth to stop out of school. I contend that using an intersectional lens enhances understandings of how multiple social locations intersect and interact over time to marginalize immigrants.

You feel like, … "Why am I even gonna try? … Why would I even want to

graduate high school if I'm not even gonna be able to go to college [because I'm

undocumented]. If I'm not even gonna be able to get a job. So I guess it was just

part of that. And just part of lagging it. – Karen Rodriguez

Karen is a 1.5-generation, undocumented young adult who arrived in the U.S. from Mexico at

the age of eight. Now, at the age of 22, she reflects on why she never received her high school

diploma. She focuses on how her undocumented immigration status discouraged her because it

posed financial barriers to attending college and that, even with a degree, she would likely

continue working in fast food restaurants because she cannot be legally employed. These initial

comments reflect previous research that undocumented immigration status dissuades

undocumented youth from pursuing higher education (see Abrego 2006; Silver 2012). Yet,

Karen also suggests that she was "lagging it". Digging deeper into what she means, it becomes

apparent that a number of other factors led her to stop out of school prior to reaching her

educational goals – disengaging curriculum, discouraging teachers, missing course credits,

working after school, and having no one to guide her college application process. Although she

centers her immigration status as the reason that she stopped out, her high school experiences

suggest that the other social locations she occupies – her low socioeconomic status, race, gender,

and first-generation college student status – structured her pathway out of school.

Previous research establishes that undocumented immigration status severely limits

youths' access to and experiences in higher education (Abrego 2008; Abrego and Gonzales

2010; Diaz-Strong et al. 2011; Enriquez 2011; Flores 2010; Greenman and Hall 2013; Perez

Huber and Malagon 2007; Perez 2012). Highlighting this, most scholars focus on the primary

role of undocumented status and some argue that it is a "master status" that eclipses other social

locations (Gleeson and Gonzales 2012; Gonzales 2015; Terriquez 2015). However, these findings are based largely on the experiences of high-achieving, undocumented college students and undocumented youth who have transitioned to adulthood. I depart from this to assess whether the "master status" explanation accurately characterizes the role of immigration status in the educational pathways of undocumented youth who did not complete high school, obtained a high school diploma or GED but did not attend college, or did not complete community college. Although undocumented status produces a unique and severely marginalized social position, the role of other social locations has been made invisible by the "master status" explanation.

Drawing on interviews with Latina/o undocumented youth in Southern California, I utilize an intersectional lens to uncover how and when undocumented status works with other social locations to structure their educational pathways. I show how race, class, and gender heavily shape undocumented youths' educational journeys early on and begin to push them out of school before their immigration status raises barriers. As they contemplate the transition to college, their first-generation college student and low socioeconomic statuses emerge as barriers and intertwine with undocumented status to heighten these limitations. I contend that undocumented status emerges as the "final straw" in stopping out because it raises unique, severe, and relatively insurmountable legal barriers that weaken resistance to the limitations created by these other social locations. While its prominence as the "final straw" can lead immigration status to be framed and discussed as a "master status," by both undocumented youth and scholars, this framing obscures other forms of inequality that profoundly shape their educational pathways.

Undocumented Status as a "Master Status" that Limits Access to Higher Education

Almost two million 1.5-generation, undocumented youth, who came to the U.S. before the age of 16 and are under the age of 35, are currently living in the U.S. (Batalova and McHugh 2010). As children, they are guaranteed equal access to K-12 educational institutions by the 1982 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Plyler v. Doe* (Olivas 2012). As they leave high school and age into adulthood this protection evaporates and they transition into "illegality" (Gonzales 2015). They face high financial barriers to their higher education pursuits as only 17 states have policies that allow undocumented students to pay more affordable in-state tuition rates and only three states provide access to state-funded financial aid (NILC 2015). Their lack of work authorization means that they have limited access to legal employment and will be underpaid, exploited, and exposed to unsafe working conditions (Fussell 2011; Gleeson 2010). Though they may have always feared and risked deportation (De Genova 2002), this risk is higher once they leave the protected status of childhood and they may limit their social participation (Sigona 2012). Together, these immigration status-related laws and policies raise severe educational, economic, and social barriers to undocumented youths' upward mobility.

Current research on undocumented youths' access to higher education suggests that undocumented status raises a wide array of legal, financial, social, and emotional barriers to persisting on one's educational journey. Many undocumented youth remain unaware of supportive educational policies because they are not embedded in networks with school officials, community leaders, or other undocumented students (Enriquez 2011; Gonzales 2010; Silver 2012). Although in-state tuition policies increase undocumented students' college enrollment rates and decrease high school drop-out rates (Flores 2010; Greenman and Hall 2013), financial barriers still disrupt educational pathways by forcing individuals to sacrifice study time to work,

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enroll in less expensive community colleges instead of four-year universities, take time off when they cannot afford tuition, or stop out (Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Diaz-Strong et al. 2011; Terriquez 2015). Additionally, undocumented students often experience institutional neglect when schools are not prepared to meet their specific needs, may have limited social and emotional support when they do not reveal their immigration status to others, or may face anti-immigrant sentiment; all these factors can discourage their persistence (Perez Huber and Malagon 2007; Perez et al. 2009). Finally, these barriers can create frustration that may lower educational aspirations when they sense that their lack of work authorization will prevent them from using their degree to obtain a job in their desired career (Abrego 2006; Gonzales and Chavez 2012).

Previous research suggests that immigration status operates as a "master status" that trumps all other social characteristics in its effect on individuals' lives. While Gleeson and Gonzales (2012) acknowledge that "undocumented immigrants face multiple levels of inequality, including that which arises from their racial and class status," they argue that "due to the severe restrictions the condition of illegality places on individuals, it proves to be a master status" (3). Building on this, Terriquez (2015) explores the multiple ways that immigration status leads to stop out among otherwise high-achieving undocumented college students and suggests that "the condition of illegality functions as a 'master status' that has an overpowering effect on students' college pathways" (1303). Offering a caveat, Gonzales (2015) argues that illegality emerges as a master status upon the transition to adulthood. Unlike most previous research on undocumented young adults, he focuses on life after school and shows how illegality is a master status for both "college-goers" and the understudied "early exiters," who did not go to or stopped out of college.

Heeding Gonzales (2015), I conceptualize the production of illegality as a process that unfolds over time. To better understand this process, I focus my attention earlier in the lives of "early exiters" to explore the factors that lead them to stop out of school and assess whether the "master status" explanation accurately characterizes the role of immigration status. These pathways represent the educational experiences of the majority of undocumented youth, approximately a quarter of whom do not complete high school and a quarter do not attend college after high school graduation (Passel and Cohn 2009). Further, of the roughly 44% who attend college, more than half will likely not obtain a degree as 42% of all Latina/o college students leave college without a degree and 17% are still working on their degree after six years (Radford et al. 2010).

Undocumented Status through an Intersectional Lens

Characterizing undocumented status as a master status focuses analytical attention on the deep impact of this one particular social location. Although this is important, it glosses over how other social locations may be interacting with immigration status to shape educational pathways. To make this process visible, I draw on intersectionality theory as an "analytical tool to capture and engage contextual dynamics of power" (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013, 788). An intersectional approach envisions social locations as rooted in interlocking systems of oppression, such as racism and patriarchy, where marginalization is produced at the intersection of multiple structural inequalities (Collins 2000; Nakano Glenn 2002; Richie 2012). As Crenshaw (1991) argues, looking at each social location separately misses how multiple power dynamics interact to produce distinct experiences. This framework encourages us to analytically step back to look at how broader power structures come together. It also allows us to unravel how social locations may become more, less, or differently salient over time or in different

contexts (Cho et al. 2013; McCall 2005; Valentine 2007). I adopt this approach to analytically step away from the "master status" explanation and assess how immigration status intersects with other social locations to shape the experiences of those undocumented youth who stop out of school. Though the specific analysis of quotes may read like compounding disadvantage, or how social locations layer onto one another to worsen circumstances, the larger story reveals how multiple structural inequalities come together to shape individuals' experiences.

Previous research on undocumented immigrants hints at the role that other social locations may play in shaping stop out. Many studies have addressed how immigration status and low socioeconomic status work together to raise undocumented youths' financial barriers to higher education (Diaz-Strong et al. 2011; Terriquez 2015). Attention to this intersection likely stems from the interconnected nature of these two statuses as undocumented immigrants are unable to work legally and have a heightened risk of wage theft (Fussell 2011; Gleeson 2010; Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark 2002). Some scholars also develop comparisons of undocumented students across other social locations, like gender (Flores 2010) and race (Enriquez 2016), but the impact of these have not been adequately investigated. Further, research on the broader experiences of undocumented immigrants shows that gender and immigrant generation differentiate how undocumented immigrants experience the limitations associated with their immigration status (Abrego 2011, 2014; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012; Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; Schmalzbauer 2009). This research suggests that multiple social locations likely have a deep impact on the lives and educational experiences of undocumented youth.

Research on the educational experiences of citizen youth suggests that race, class, and gender are key social locations that will likely intersect with immigration status to impact

educational pathways. Latina/o youth attend under-funded and segregated schools, receive negative educational expectations, and have limited access to resources. (Gándara and Contreras 2009; Kozol 2005; Lopez 2003; Noguera 2003; Ochoa 2013; Valenzuela 1999). Additionally, being a racial minority, low-income student, and first-generation college student contributes to lower curriculum tracking where it is difficult to obtain the structural support and institutional knowledge necessary to attend college (Conchas 2006; Ochoa 2013; Stanton-Salazar 1997). Further, gendered expectations ensure that Latino men are more likely to be perceived as troublemakers, which can lower educational expectations and limit their socioeconomic incorporation in adulthood (Agius Vallejo 2012; Lopez 2003). Although Latina women tend to benefit from higher levels of educational expectations and support (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005), those with lower educational aspirations and expectations have an increased likelihood of teenage pregnancy (Beutel 2000; Minnis et al. 2013). Pregnancy can reinvigorate educational goals; however, work demands, family responsibilities, and school policies can force young mothers to stop out (SmithBattle 2007). Although the growing scholarship on undocumented youths' educational experiences acknowledges some of these factors, we know relatively little about the process through which these various social locations come together to shape educational pathways.

Data and Methods

This article draws on a sample from a larger study which consists of 92 interviews with 89 Mexican-origin and three Guatemalan-origin undocumented young adults, ages 20-34. They are all 1.5-generation immigrants, having entered the United States before the age of 16 and spent the majority of their lives living in the U.S. Approximately 40% arrived before the age of six, another 40% arrived between ages 6-10, and 20% arrived between ages 11-16. I purposefully

sampled to include equal numbers of men and women from six education levels: (1) did not complete high school, (2) completed high school, (3) previously attended a two-year college but did not complete a Associate's degree, (4) currently attending a two-year college, (5) currently attending a four-year university, and (6) attended a four-year university and completed a Bachelor's degree (See Table 1). This paper draws primarily from interviews with 45 participants in the first three categories. These 45 individuals often characterized themselves as average or below-average students in high school.

Table 1: Number of respondents by gender and education level.

	Did not complete high school	Completed high school	Attended two-year college; did not receive a degree	Attending two-year college	Attending four-year university	Completed four-year university	Total
Women	8	10	7	8	7	9	**49**
Men	7	6	7	8	8	7	**43**
Total	**15**	**16**	**14**	**16**	**15**	**16**	**92**

Interviews were conducted between November 2011 and August 2012 in Southern California. I recruited from Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Orange Counties which are among the top ten metropolitan areas in the U.S. with the largest undocumented populations (Fortuny, Capps and Passel 2007). I initiated snowball sampling by selecting twelve individuals, with varying levels of education and separate social circles, from the extensive networks I built through four years of previous research with college and community-based undocumented youth organizations. All participants received a $20 incentive for being interviewed and an additional $10 incentive for referring others, usually extended family members, neighbors, former classmates, co-workers, and friends. Participants chose the language of the interview and all but five elected to be interviewed in English. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Interviews lasted an average of two hours and were directed by a semi-structured interview guide that included questions to map each individual's educational pathway and identify barriers and support mechanisms. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using open coding techniques to identify all the factors that led participants to stop out of school prior to realizing their educational goals. This revealed six main disruption factors that I systematically coded for: need to financially contribute to their family, disengaging classrooms, family formation, limited access to information about college, concerns about college affordability, and limitations related to undocumented status. I then conducted an intersectional analysis of each disruption factor by systematically reviewing the coded excerpts and considering how they were shaped by various social locations and structural inequalities. Finally, I developed a process-based analysis by reviewing each case to identify patterns of how and when each disruption factor emerged at different points in the educational timeline.

Setting Up Pathways Out of School Early On: Race, Class, and Gender

Guaranteed access to K-12 education, 1.5-generation, undocumented youth often do not realize the limitations created by their immigration status until they are transitioning into adulthood – obtaining driver's licenses, working, and preparing to leave high school (Gonzales 2015). Indeed, participants suggest that they are largely shielded from immigration status-based limitations during their elementary, middle school, and early high school educational experiences. Rather, their early pathways out of school were often shaped by their classed, raced, and gendered social locations and established before immigration status barriers arose.

Inheriting Parents' Low Socioeconomic Status: Classed Stop Out Factors

Almost half of the participants who did not pursue higher education suggest that their parents' low socioeconomic status disrupted their educational pathways. As children,

undocumented youth are largely dependent on their parents, and thus share in a multitude of economic, emotional, and social limitations that result from their parents' undocumented status (Dreby 2015; Enriquez 2015). In particular, their parents' lack of work authorization restricts them to low-wage, unstable employment that places the entire family in a low socioeconomic status. Although parental undocumented status plays a role, it is youths' class status that fosters stop out due to their attendance of underperforming schools and needing to work to economically contribute to the household.

Undocumented youths' low socioeconomic status often leads them to attend low-resourced and underperforming schools. Limited by their low-income and immigration status, undocumented immigrants tend to live in lower quality, majority-minority neighborhoods with struggling schools (Cort, Lin and Stevenson 2014; Hall and Greenman 2013). Enrique Escobar, who attended but did not complete community college, describes his high school:

> I went to … one of the most known bad [high] schools. … [One teacher,] all he did was just take roll and then he'll literally fall asleep in class. … There were actually kids doing drugs [in the classroom]. … [Students] would leave the classroom [and] nobody would even notice. … They [teachers] would maybe put notes on the board and all you had to do was copy them.

Enrique identifies how structural factors like underpaid and overworked teachers, overcrowding, limited resources, and underdeveloped curriculum all perpetuated a cycle of disengagement. Participants who did not attend college often named these as reasons why they did not like attending school. Notably, those who attended college were often in honors classes, academic programs, or extracurricular activities that insulated them from these factors.

Parental low socioeconomic status contributed to stopping out as some participants disengaged from school when their parents couldn't afford to buy them the items needed to fit in with their peers. Abby Ortiz recalls, "Sometimes because I didn't have shoes. … cause we used to get shoes only when school would start. … For middle school we had uniforms, so it wasn't that bad. But for high school it was like I don't wanna wear the same thing [every day]." Tired of being teased by her peers for her appearance, she ditched class. Eventually she was pushed into adult school to make up credits and left before completing them. Matt Vasquez, who also did not complete high school, explains that he stopped caring about school: "At a young age. I started working at 16. … It got me off track in school … I needed my own things and my mom wouldn't be able to provide [them] because she had bills to pay, rent to pay." Matt effectively tried to avoid a situation like Abby's by getting a job. However, this coping strategy initiated a pattern of disengagement as he fell behind in school and, as he says, started "caring more about the money."

Parental low socioeconomic status also led some participants to enter the workforce in order to contribute to the household. Alicia Medina, who did not complete high school, explains, "At 16 I had to leave school to work. That was a difficult decision because I didn't want to leave. I liked school. But my older sister, when she married, she left with her husband. So I had to start helping my mom with cost of the rent and bills." Losing one of their sources of income, Alicia stepped up and left high school to work full time at a factory. Similarly, Josue Contreras-Ruiz recalls beginning to work at age 13 at a swapmeet and then at age 16 in a restaurant, "To help my parents out [and] save up for immigration [applications]. … I would give the money to my dad and my mom. They were always in debt or something." While Alicia's family's desperate economic situation meant that she had little choice in moving from school to work, Josue's

family was stable enough that he experienced his high school employment as a choice. Thus, he was able to quit his job and forgo contributing to the household when he realized his long work hours were endangering his high school graduation. Alicia and Josue's experiences suggest that working during high school can set the stage for stopping out; however, slight variations in the depth of a household's low socioeconomic status can temper this risk when there is the financial flexibility needed to de-prioritize work and re-prioritize education. Yet, the diverging educational attainment of nine sibling pairs I interviewed makes it clear that family socioeconomic status is not the only factor at work in stop out decisions.

Missing Credits and Continuation Schools: Raced-Gendered Classroom Disengagement

Almost half of the participants who did not pursue higher education suggest that classroom disengagement disrupted their education. Cruz Vargas remembers how his frustration with the curriculum prevented him from completing high school:

> When they would tell me about history, I'd be like, "Well, where are my people at?" … And they'd tell me, "Oh, Mr. Vargas, we're not on that subject." Well, are you saying we didn't exist during that time period then or what? And they'd tell me, "Yeah, but you guys didn't do anything relevant at that point." I'm like, "How does a whole ethnicity not contribute to a certain time!" ... And then they'd just tell me, … "Do you wanna go think about it outside?"

Cruz' attempts to resist racial marginalization by pleading for culturally-relevant curriculum earned him a reputation as a troublemaker and contributed to his being sent to continuation school. Unlike Cruz, most participants were hesitant and underprepared to challenge structural inequalities like these. Yet, they were just as likely to become academically disengaged, with many either failing or barely passing their classes. Alternatively, those who pursued college were

often protected from these forces through placement into honors courses with more engaging curriculum and teachers.

Although men and women both felt disengaged in the classroom and were missing credits from failed classes, raced and gendered notions of Latino young men as troublemakers made men less likely to successfully recover credits than women. Nine of the 13 men who did not attend higher education were referred to or attended continuation school and only two successfully recovered the credits they needed to graduate. Alternatively, only nine of the 18 women attended continuation school and five successfully recovered credits to graduate. Cruz Vargas, who never completed continuation school, and Sara Romero, who left continuation school but then returned a few months later to receive her diploma, exemplify the gendered experiences of this space:

> *Cruz:* It was like a little jail for kids. The cop was there all day. They cared more about what you were wearing than about what you were learning. Instead of being like, "Oh, [do] you need help with something?" They would be like, "What gang are you from?"
>
> *Sara:* You bought the book and you sit in a freaking desk and you do the chapter and then you take a test. And you do the next chapter and you take a test. … I just can't be alone because I won't do anything.

Both Cruz and Sara attended continuation school to resist being pushed out. Although they both note that this space was not conducive to successful credit recovery, their experiences differed as Sara found it isolating and Cruz encountered a hostile environment that consistently criminalized him.

Within this context of classroom disengagement, undocumented status creates an additional burden that weakens students' resistance to the inequalities created by other social locations. For example, Ray Guzman left high school in his senior year, a decision influenced by missing credits and the continuation school's criminalizing environment. When I ask him if he ever considers returning for a GED he remarks, "For what though? I'm still not gonna be able to get a job with a GED [unless] I could get documents." Indeed, Joaquin Salas, who returned for his GED after not receiving a diploma due to missing credits, confirms Ray's suspicion that this has not led to a better job, "Because most of the jobs that I had you don't really need a high school diploma. It's mostly physical work." It is at this point that undocumented immigration status barriers emerge, usually in the form of employment limitations, and intersect with raced, classed, and gendered social locations to push undocumented youth out of high school.

Pregnancy and Parenting: Gendered Consequences of Family Formation

Women's pathways out of school were heavily impacted by family formation as almost half of the women who left school prior to reaching their educational goals cite motherhood as a contributing factor. Victoria Sandoval, who did not complete high school, recalls her struggle to pursue an education while caring for her son: "I got pregnant when I was 17. … I dropped out of high school. My son, [when] he was like ten months [old], I decided to go back to my school." Determined to challenge stereotypes of Latina teenage mothers, Victoria talked the dean into allowing her to return to her high school and enrolled her son in the school's infant care center. However, she found it difficult to balance the competing demands of schoolwork and childcare and stopped out less than a year later. Though I did not interview any men who had children during high school, no men discuss the potential limitation of parenthood on their educational endeavors. As Gilbert Morales notes, fatherhood would not prevent him from attending

community college now that he has his GED, "Because the mom is gonna stay right there [and watch the child]." As he suggests, mothers are expected to spend time with and care for children, which contributes to their stopping out. It seems likely that teenage fathers also face competing demands to work and provide for their family; however, these mothers shared that their children's fathers had already been pushed out or left school to work prior to their child's birth.

Navigating the need to provide for their new families, low socioeconomic status emerges as an intersecting factor that can lead to stopping out. Janet Godinez, who did not complete high school, explains, "I got pregnant and then they sent me to a smaller school, where they had child care. And I could study there, but then my situation changed because my husband didn't have a job, so I was either at school or a job. So I had to let it go and get a job." Though initially able to balance school and motherhood because her husband was financially supporting their family, his sudden unemployment, possibly sparked by his undocumented status, forced her to leave school to work and provide for their family. Without the birth of their son and subsequent financial demands, it seems unlikely that Janet would have left school.

Immigration status raises additional barriers that can discourage undocumented women from resisting the gendered and classed obstacles of teenage motherhood. Norma Mercado, who did not complete community college, remembers,

> I did continue going to school right after marriage … but I got pregnant with my first [child and] I just stopped going. When he turned three I started going again and continued. [And then in] my last semester … [I got pregnant] and I just didn't want to keep going to school. I guess I was just [focused] more on the idea that – well what's the point. I'm never going to get a job in what I want. So I just stopped.

Although she fought for years to pursue her education, Norma ultimately left college questioning the utility of sacrificing time with her children because her undocumented status and lack of work authorization would prevent her from using her degree to obtain a better job. It is at this point that her undocumented status emerges as the final straw. Contrasting this, I interviewed four mothers who were currently enrolled in school or were college graduates who had children while enrolled; each framed her degree as a way to better provide for her child(ren) by demonstrating the importance of education, leveraging their degree to get a slightly higher-paying job, or preparing for when they might be able to legalize their status. Further, they balanced their competing demands through well-developed social support networks that could help with childcare. However, most mothers left school, rather than continuing to resist these barriers, once they became convinced that their undocumented status would prevent these sacrifices from paying off.

Stopping Out During the Transition to College: First-generation College Student and Classed Intersections with Undocumented Status

Those undocumented youth who manage to navigate raced, classed, and gendered barriers to persist in high school face new hurdles as they begin to consider the transition to college. As first-generation college students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, they struggle to obtain basic information about the college application process and financial aid options. As they navigate these other social locations, they realize that their undocumented status presents another barrier that they must obtain information about and overcome. Thus, the risk of stopping out during the transition to college grows as barriers from their first-generation, class, and undocumented statuses intertwine.

Many of the participants who did not attend college never planned to, in part because of their first-generation and low socioeconomic statuses. Take the examples of high school graduates Ivan Cardenas and Marissa Rivera:

Ivan: Never did I dream about college. Never did I say, "I wanna go [to] this one, that one." I thought after high school it's over and you just work.

Marissa: When I was probably in middle school … I knew that I wasn't going to be able to go to school [college]. … I could continue going but I knew that it was going to be a really, really big struggle because my parents are not economically really good … I would have to have a job … [so] I would be juggling work and school and it would be really bad. So since then I put it in my mind, I'm not going to school.

Prior to learning about the specific financial, legal, and emotional limitations their immigration status places on the pursuit of higher education, both Ivan and Marissa did not expect to attend college. In part, Ivan's general lack of awareness about college is related to the fact that his parents only received some high school education in Mexico. Indeed, those participants who were in or had graduated from college were more likely to have parents who attended college in their country of origin; nine had parents with some college education and six had parents who held a Bachelor's degree compared to four and four parents, respectively, of those participants with no or limited higher education. For others, like Marissa, their rejection of college came from an early awareness that their parents' low socioeconomic status would prevent them from covering college costs and a belief that it would be a financial struggle to pay for it on their own. Though shaped by how her undocumented status' prevents her legal employment, this particular consequence is framed as a manifestation of her class status.

Obtaining information about resources meant to mitigate obstacles associated with first-generation college student and low socioeconomic statuses often highlighted how these intersected with and were heightened by undocumented status. Most of the participants who did not go to college were in regular high school classes with little college-going culture. They reported hearing standard high school class presentations, usually in their junior and/or senior years, with information aimed at helping them overcome first-generation and low-income barriers – summaries of types of colleges, application directions, and financial aid information. However, because these presentations often lacked undocumented-specific information, they tended to raise awareness of how their immigration status would reinforce these barriers. Marta Sandoval, who graduated from high school, confesses that she dreamt of attending a local private university but, "Then you find out you can't cause it's a lot of money. You need financial aid; you can't qualify [because it's for citizens]. Maybe you don't have the right information, you're not around the right people, and then you just give up." Marta points to the unique intersection of three factors – her socioeconomic status, immigration status, and first-generation status. Her low socioeconomic status presented a financial barrier that her immigration status magnified by preventing her from accessing aid. Half of the 31 participants who did not attend college explicitly cite financial limitations as a reason why. Additionally, as a first-generation college student, she lacked basic information about college; she did not realize how her immigration status would impact her college access until her high school began providing information to address this marginalized social location. Further, her first-generation status left her with minimal preparation to access the social networks she needed to obtain the information and encouragement needed to resist the limitations raised by her immigration status and persist on her educational journey. Alternatively, many of the participants who pursued higher education

received information about undocumented-specific college support structures, such as in-state tuition rates and scholarships, from teachers and school officials. They built these relationships through their honors classes, academic support programs, or extracurricular activities.

Those undocumented young adults who overcame initial first-generation, socioeconomic, and undocumented status barriers to matriculate to college, often found that their intersecting socioeconomic and undocumented statuses forced them to stop out of college. Leo Campos explains how his undocumented status makes it virtually impossible for him to afford college: "Working a job [at a fast food restaurant] I made $12,000 the whole year. $12,000 is the exact amount that I need for a year and a half [of tuition at a California State University]. … So with an eight dollar an hour job, I won't cut it. Even with two jobs like that, I still wouldn't get it." Forced to work in minimum wage jobs that will not check for a valid social security number, Leo's undocumented status contributes to his low socioeconomic status. It is at this point that his undocumented status begins to function as the final straw that led him to stop out of college one semester after transferring to a four-year university.

On the other hand, participants who were attending or had graduated from college were more likely to muster the financial resources needed to overcome their limited employment options and lack of access to financial aid brought on by their intersecting undocumented and class statuses. David Soto, a current University of California student, explains how he funded his first year after transferring from community college:

> We used to buy things like crazy, … but my mom started saving money [when I was accepted]. … She's like, "You just worry about school." … School was my sole responsibility apart from working at [a fast-food restaurant]. … So the first

quarter I paid for it [with savings from work], the second quarter she paid for it,

and then I got a scholarship for the third.

Personal employment and savings, parental financial resources, and private scholarships are

three of the most common ways undocumented students overcome their inability to access

financial aid. Yet, consistently piecing together these financial resources is difficult when

undocumented status limits income, savings, and access to scholarships. Ultimately, those who

persisted in college, like David, had relatively more robust financial resource options – more

stable or slightly higher-paid employment, fewer financial obligations that enabled them to direct

more of their earnings to educational costs, parent(s) who were able to help pay educational

expenses or defer cost-of-living expenses, and/or received more or higher amounts of

scholarships. Although participants who stopped out of college had some of these, they tended to

exhaust their meager financial resources quickly. Though all participants would be considered

low-income students, slight variations in their personal and household financial flexibility made

the difference in their ability to persist in college.

Feelings about College Attendance: Undocumented Status Emerges as a "Final Straw"

Race, class, gender, and first-generation college student social locations largely set up

undocumented youths' social worlds so that immigration status limitations function as the reason

for stopping out toward the end of their educational pathways. Specifically, participants tend to

highlight the impact that their immigration status had on their emotions and feelings about

college attendance when recounting their final decision to leave school. Now realizing the

tremendous impact this social location will have on their life, undocumented status emerges as

the "final straw" in the stop out process.

One of the most cited reasons for leaving school was an inability to use a degree to obtain legal employment. Matt Vasquez, who did not complete high school, explains, "I see a lot of my friends going to school. They're getting their degrees in things that they want to do for the rest of their lives. I didn't want to because I felt like – Where's that gonna get me without [a] social security [number] and papers and stuff like that. I felt like I was going to waste my time." In addition to feeling like they will be unable to capitalize on their degrees and hard work, Janet Godinez, who did not complete high school, discusses how this feeling is reflected in the opinions of others: "I wanted to go to school [so] I went [and] I signed myself in [for adult school]. I wanted to study childcare. … The teacher told me, it's not worth it. Even with everything [the certification], you can't get a job in that [because you don't have a social security number]. … So that depressed me a lot. So I was like, 'Well I'm not gonna study.'" Despite desires and efforts to continue their education, Matt and Janet's undocumented status eventually raised strong emotional aversions to pursuing their education. It is in the midst of these structural barriers and emotional responses that immigration status becomes the final reason for stopping out.

Although some youth are able to rationalize their educational pursuits and acquire the necessary institutional knowledge to attend college, their immigration status can still lead them to stop out because they are unable to pursue the college careers they had aspired to and that their peers were pursuing. Aida Mendoza remembers,

> I saw everybody filling out their applications, and then I said, I'm done. … I just gave up on everything. I dropped my grades to a C. ... It was kinda demeaning to me. All my hard work. I mean, I go to sleep at midnight trying to do all my

projects, and I have extracurricular activities, and on top of that I was working

two jobs. … It has no reward because of a piece of paper. I was really upset.

As one of the top students in her high school, Aida had been planning to apply to more

prestigious and expensive University of California schools and private colleges. Recognizing her

inability to receive financial aid or travel out of state for college, she gave up. She eventually

applied to and attended a less-prestigious but more-affordable California State University for a

quarter before moving to community college. Yet, her earlier disappointment with being denied

access to the schools she wanted to attend never left her. She eventually stopped out of

community college. Despite being able to overcome many of the structural limitations to college

matriculation, emotional barriers related to immigration status often arise as the final reasons that

undocumented students give for stopping out of school.

Conclusion

Previous research on undocumented youths' educational experiences focuses on how

undocumented immigration status distinctly and severely limits access to, pursuit of, and success

in higher education (Abrego 2006, 2008; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Diaz-Strong et al. 2011;

Flores 2010; Greenman and Hall 2013; Perez 2012). Yet, these findings primarily draw on the

experiences of high-achieving, undocumented college students. Using the case of undocumented

youth who stopped out of school, I contend that a "master status" explanation does not accurately

reflect how immigration status shapes pathways out of school. I highlight how race, class,

gender, first-generation college student status, and immigration status intersect over time to

structure undocumented youths' educational pathways. I argue that these other social locations

set the stage for stopping out and undocumented status emerges as the "final straw" in the

process as it raises new limitations and intersects with other social locations to heighten barriers.

Although other social locations, such as socioeconomic status or pregnancy, could also function as a "final straw" in the stop out process, this position is most often assigned to undocumented status because of the severe, relatively insurmountable, and legally embedded nature of its barriers.

My broad findings align with Gonzales' (2015) point that undocumented status emerges as a master status over the life course and thus, we expect it to be less significant in high school, prior to the transition to adulthood. However, my findings offer a cautionary caveat about how a master status framing obscures other social locations. I elucidate how immigration status does not overpower other social locations but rather works in conjunction with other forms of marginalization. Though the severe impact of immigration status may indeed grow over the life course, it seems likely that other social locations would continue to play a mediating role. Though the master status explanation seeks to appropriately stress the enduring and severe impacts of undocumented status, it endangers our ability to account for other social locations in the marginalization process.

The concept of the "final straw" highlights how undocumented status is experienced in conjunction with and relative to other social locations. Rather than focusing on one social location, I deploy an intersectional lens that makes visible other significant factors that operate in the background. This approach was key to illuminating how immigration status builds on and interacts with multiple social locations to disrupt educational advancement. It also enabled me to begin to disaggregate and explore the complex relationships between undocumented status and socioeconomic status at both the individual and household levels. Though this paper features some comparison across gender, socioeconomic status, and first-generation college student status – additional studies should dig deeper into how specific intersections manifest and play out over

time. Qualitative work could do this by building within-group comparisons into the sampling design to clearly establish how other social locations are at work. Quantitative work should account for the fact that some educational outcomes may be less predicted by undocumented status then by its interaction with one or more other social locations. Further, as I focus on Latinas/os here, future work should compare the experiences of Latina/o and non-Latina/o undocumented youth to shed light on how racialized stereotypes might intersect with undocumented status to impact educational experiences (for example see Enriquez 2016). Finally, comparisons to citizen peers who occupy similar race, gender, socioeconomic status, and/or first-generation college student statuses would help elucidate the extent to which immigration status, other social locations, and their intersection disrupt educational achievement (for example see Greenman and Hall 2013).

In addition to foregrounding the role of other social locations, the concept of the "final straw" highlights the process through which social locations come together to shape undocumented youths' educational pathways over time. Specifically, I show that other social locations can 1) set up a pre-existing state of marginalization for undocumented status to build upon, and/or 2) intertwine with undocumented status limitations to heighten shared educational, economic, or socio-emotional barriers. This suggests that the nature of the process varies depending on when the barriers associated with certain social locations emerge. For example, class can emerge early on as a barrier to be built upon by undocumented status limitations or later on as a barrier that intertwines with undocumented status limitations. Unlike the "master status" narrative that implies a constant barrier, the "final straw" narrative foreshadows the importance of time in this process. The processual nature of these intersections suggests that scholars need to consider how findings might vary at different points in the educational pipeline.

To this end, we need to develop strong longitudinal data to assess how the impact of these intersectional identities shifts over the course of undocumented youths' educational careers and lives. Further, scholars should examine how this process plays out in other contexts, such as in the labor market, during family formation, or when accessing healthcare, to see if immigration status functions as a "master status," the "final straw," or something else in other institutional contexts.

In all, this paper fills a substantive gap in our understanding of undocumented youths' educational pathways by highlighting the diversity of experiences among this population and shedding light on the barriers preventing basic educational advancement among undocumented youth. Though additional college-access legislation for undocumented youth, such as access to in-state tuition rates and financial aid, may help close the educational achievement gap in this population (Flores 2010; Greenman and Hall 2013), my findings suggests that broader educational access policies are also needed to address raced, classed, gendered, and first-generation college student status inequalities. Further, policies would also need to improve parental socioeconomic status, possibly by providing them with an opportunity to legalize their immigration status or obtain temporary access to a work permit, such as with the proposed Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) program. Without these broader changes, the educational achievement gap between undocumented and citizen youth will likely remain, even if they are able to legalize their immigration status or access a liminal legal status through policies like the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which mediates their "illegality" by granting select undocumented youth with access to a two-year work permit and protection from deportation.

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