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Latinx Undocumented Students' College Admissions Process:
The Role of Policy in Shaping Students' Trajectories Into College

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

by

Alexandra Rose Terrones

2023

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2023

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Latinx Undocumented Students' College Admissions Process:
The Role of Policy in Shaping Students' Trajectories Into College

by

Alexandra Rose Terrones

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Patricia M. McDonough, Chair

The purpose of this study was to retroactively explore how Latinx undocumented students currently enrolled at a single University of California (UC) campus navigated policies concerning accessibility and affordability as they worked toward their goal of pursuing bachelor's degrees. Using a critical race theory (CRT) and Latino/a critical race theory (LatCrit) lens, this study examined how policies such as California Assembly Bill (AB) 540; the California Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (Dream) Act; and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) shaped participants' college goals. Moreover, this study explored participants' challenges accessing information that was relevant to their status needs and the forms of support these participants used to navigate this larger policy landscape.

Guided by a critical policy analysis approach that interrogated and scrutinized racial politics driving policy, 19 Latinx undocumented student participants engaged in two

semistructured interviews and completed an educational journey map, an introspective tool used to uncover details about significant people, places, and events shaping their journeys to the 4-year institution. The study also used document analyses to investigate the resources and forms of support available to the participants. These document analyses encompassed resources available at the individual university site, those within the larger UC education system, and those forms of support situated within participants' local contexts.

The study's findings revealed how California AB 540, California Dream Act, and DACA were important in enabling participants to better afford their 4-year institution. Despite these positive effects, the findings uncovered challenges and tensions in accessing accurate information concerning these policies. Along these lines, the findings addressed how these policies are situated within the larger web of college affordability, thereby demonstrating how and where existing policy has failed to consider the full scope of undocumented students' needs. Implications from this study provide practitioners and researchers with ideas that can support the academic trajectories of Latinx undocumented students in a manner consistent with the current policy landscape and emerging policy changes. Given the study's policy-oriented focus, the findings also yielded recommendations for policymakers so the system-level challenges articulated in the findings can be better addressed.

The dissertation of Alexandra Rose Terrones is approved.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandparents.

To my Nana and Papa, and Gunga and Bumpa:

Thank you for being some of my first teachers in life and instilling in me a love for learning.

I love you all very much.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

What comes to mind when thinking about applying to college? Perhaps one might think of creating a list of colleges in which they are interested and using “reach, target, and safety” as a rule of thumb (Franek, n.d.). Maybe this thought recalls images of creating a “brag sheet” or drafting a resume detailing accomplishments and accolades inside and outside the classroom (College Board, 2020). One might recall agonizing over standardized exams or meticulously reviewing personal statements to ensure no grammatical error is left behind. Many of these items are commonly considered pieces used in the process of applying to college.

In the United States, undocumented students preparing to go to college are not limited to these elements alone. In addition to considering some of the aforementioned points, many undocumented students grapple with the reality of their undocumented status and are forced to navigate a wide-spanning, complex web of immigration policies that frequently constrain opportunity (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). A number of these enacted policies are telling of the climate students might have to navigate upon college entry. As such, undocumented students applying to college must consider how this climate may inform their sense of safety and belonging to their college campuses (e.g., Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Muñoz et al., 2018). Within the scope of education, several policies ranging across the institution, state, and federal levels directly impact these students’ college trajectories. These educational policies become important as students consider the amount of support they and their families can expect to receive; for example, many undocumented students are tasked early on with navigating questions such as whether they are even eligible to apply to their desired school (Higher Education Immigration Portal, 2021), or whether they qualify to receive various forms of financial aid (Chavez et al., 2007; Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales et al., 2016; Suárez-Orozco & López-Hernández, 2020).

Through this lens, it becomes clear how undocumented students' journeys to college differ from those of their peers with U.S. citizenship and how immigration and education policies shape these students' college opportunities. This study aimed to unpack these differences further and explored how the current policy landscape directly shapes Latinx undocumented students' journeys into higher education institutions.

Background of the Problem

In 2019, an estimated 3.2 million undocumented children and young adults under the age of 24 resided in the United States (Batalova & Fix, 2019). According to estimates published by the U.S. Department of Education (2015), approximately 5–10% of undocumented students with a high school diploma enroll in college. This number lags considerably behind the overall average college enrollment for high school graduates, at 62% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). These statistical figures point to significant disparities between undocumented students and students who hold U.S. citizenship, particularly regarding degree attainment and access to educational opportunities (Batalova & Fix, 2019; Gelatt & Zong, 2018).

Existing research has suggested undocumented students are a unique student population because they must adhere to a different set of college admissions policies and financial aid regulations than their peers who hold U.S. citizenship; undocumented students also encounter a range of social challenges and political obstacles alongside their college application process (Chavez et al., 2007; Pérez, 2010; Vega et al., 2016). One of the most significantly recurring issues discussed in literature on undocumented students concerns how these students are forced to navigate and decrypt policies set across the federal, state, and institutional levels should they want to receive an education beyond their K–12 schooling (Chavez et al., 2007; Diaz-Strong et

al., 2011; Pérez, 2014). Despite this knowledge, researchers have scarcely explored how education and immigration policy directly impacts students' trajectories into college.

This study built upon previous literature highlighting the experience of undocumented students; yet, rather than policy as a means to create historical background and context, this study directly explored how key education and immigration policies—such as the California Assembly Bill (AB) 540; the California Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (Dream) Act; and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)—influenced the decisions students make as they apply to college. This study grappled with how policy affects the decisions students make during their college application processes, the strategies these students employ to best meet their needs, and from where these students derive support.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to explore how Latinx undocumented students currently enrolled at a single public university within the University of California (UC) system navigated the policy landscape as they worked toward their goals of pursuing bachelor's degrees. In particular, this study sought to understand how education and immigration policies concerning accessibility and affordability have impacted students' college goals and how these same students employed various strategies as they worked to navigate these policies.

I retroactively examined the lived experiences of Latinx undocumented students who were current undergraduates at a single UC campus, identified in the study as University of California Monarch Butterfly (UCMB). California is home to approximately 2 million undocumented immigrants, and conservative estimates suggest California enrolls about 75,000 undocumented students in its public and private higher education institutions across the state (Dow et al., 2019). Compared to other states, California has enacted some of the more

permissive and inclusive policies to account for its growing immigrant demographic (Chavez et al., 2007; Murillo, 2017b; Welner et al., 2017). These aforementioned points made California a unique landscape from which to examine the impact of policy on undocumented students and demonstrate where further action is needed to provide students with greater access to higher education opportunities.

Research Questions

To understand the impact of policy on students' college trajectories, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Latinx undocumented students retroactively make meaning of the personal and academic challenges faced during their period of applying to college in pursuit of their bachelor's degree?
 - a. How do students conceptualize their identity as Latinx undocumented students?
2. How do Latinx undocumented students conceptualize immigration and education policy, and its impact on their goal of pursuing a college education?
3. How does immigration and education policy shape and inform the decisions made by these students during their college application process?
 - a. How does policy influence the strategies, networks, and forms of support these students utilize as they work toward their goal of pursuing a bachelor's degree?

The first research question aimed to understand, on a broader scope, the challenges these students faced as they applied to college as a way to build upon the existing body of literature and affirm the unique needs of this population. This first question's corresponding subquestion sought to capture how students made sense of their identities and how their identities intersected with or influenced their personal and academic challenges. The second question focused directly

on the crux of this study to uncover how the students conceptualized some policies that most frequently constrain undocumented students' college goals (i.e., AB 540, Dream Act, DACA). In particular, the second research question encapsulated the ways policy impacted students' lived experiences as they navigated the college process and the special considerations these students faced during this process as a result of their immigration status. The third and final question sought to address the actions taken by the students to address their unique needs and concerns, with specific attention paid to the strategies and resources these students used to navigate and learn more about relevant policies. The third research question and its corresponding subquestion highlighted how policy and the surrounding political climate informed students' various decisions along the process of applying to college. Examples included (a) whom students included as part of their support network, (b) to whom they disclosed their immigration status, and (c) how they navigated various forms of resources. This final research question served a dual purpose of highlighting Latinx undocumented students' incredible levels of resilience and persistence while also identifying the tools and resources both practitioners and policymakers can harness to support the educational trajectories of these students.

Operationalization of Terms

Before detailing the scope of the study, it is essential to discuss the terms centering this study and acknowledge the history underlying this terminology. In this dissertation, the terms "undocumented" and "Latinx" described some of the collective, shared experiences unique to a population. This subsection operationalizes these two key terms to serve three objectives: (a) to offer clarification as to how I used these terms in the study; (b) to establish a framework demonstrating how the undocumented identity is inherently political in nature; and (c) to set the

stage for later discussion of policies impacting undocumented immigrants, several of which are steeped in racist and nativist ideologies.

What is “Undocumented?”

In this study, “undocumented” referred to individuals who reside in the United States without legal documentation. Under this definition, “undocumented” persons included those who are not U.S. citizens; not legal permanent residents; or do not carry legal authorization through other formal, established means (i.e., work or school visas; Passel & Cohn, 2009, 2011). Over the last century, legality has repeatedly been used as a means to impose “new categories and hierarchies of difference” (Ngai, 2004, p. 3), specifically among ethnic and racial lines. The U.S. government has prompted changes in the undocumented immigrant demographic, more specifically migrants’ countries of origin, through the enactment of specific policies—many of which are fueled by undercurrents of racism and nativism (Kanstroom, 2010; Ngai, 2004). For example, at the turn of the 19th century, the undocumented community in the United States was mainly comprised of migrants from southern Europe.

Not long after, anti-immigration legislation shifted its focus away from curbing immigrants from southern Europe and instead focused on newcomers arriving from countries in Asia. The Immigrant Act of 1924, for instance, immediately halted all immigration from Asia into the United States (Ngai, 2004). In 1942, the United States signed an agreement with Mexico, known as the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, wherein Mexican farmworkers were provided with housing and compensation in exchange for their work growing and harvesting crops on U.S. soil (Kanstroom, 2010; Ngai, 2004). The two countries signed this agreement to address the ongoing labor shortage in the United States amid World War II (Kanstroom, 2010; Ngai, 2004). When the United States terminated this agreement and the Bracero Program formally ended in

1964, many Mexican farmworkers working on U.S. soil were suddenly considered undocumented (Kanstroom, 2010; Ngai, 2004). Labeling these farmworkers as undocumented acted as a means for the United States to demand their removal from U.S. soil (Kanstroom, 2010; Ngai, 2004). The United States continued to observe a steady increase in undocumented migrants from Mexico in the years following.

This very brief history alone suggests the fickle nature of the term “undocumented” and demonstrates how the U.S. government and cultural zeitgeist has used the label over time to target specific racial and ethnic minorities (Ngai, 2004). As such, the provided definition of undocumented and its use in this dissertation should be considered through this lens. The use of undocumented in this study was applied with a critical understanding of how notions of legality often serve the purpose of “othering” and keeping ethnic communities at bay (Brown, 2010). Since the 1970s, Latinx-identifying immigrants have comprised a large portion of the total immigrant population and their share of the U.S. immigrant population steadily increased up until the early 2010s (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.-a). Much of the public discourse on immigration into the United States has centered on people arriving from Latin America, specifically Mexico (Chavez, 2012; see also Andreas, 2009). According to Zong et al. (2018), almost 45% of immigrants, or 19.6 million people, reported having Hispanic or Latinx origins in 2018. Though a wide range of other racial or ethnic categories remains underrepresented in scholarly literature and more needs to be done to examine the divergent experiences that exist within the undocumented community, the narrative of immigration has largely been portrayed as a Latinx issue (Andreas, 2009; Chavez, 2012; Pérez Huber, 2009). The study’s focus on Latinx undocumented students was to uncover challenges related to navigating policy in relation to the college application process that may be unique to this subset of undocumented students.

What is “Latinx?”

This study also employed the term “Latinx,” which is roughly used to describe peoples with heritage from Latin American countries. The term Latinx is distinct from “Hispanic,” which has been traditionally used to describe individuals who speak the Spanish language or are of Spanish descent (Gimenez, 1989). Under this definition, Hispanic describes those originating from Spain and a select number of Spanish-speaking nations in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. This definition, however, excludes those from Central America, South America, and Caribbean nations that do not speak Spanish (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987). Moreover, because the rough translation of Hispanic is “of Spanish descent,” the term Hispanic forces a connection between Spain and Latin American countries through Spain’s violent history of colonization (Gimenez, 1989; Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021).

Conversely, I used Latinx as a term in this study as one that was more inclusive and employed with aims to integrate and affirm the lived experiences of those not adequately represented under the definition of Hispanic. Examples of such communities ill-represented under the Hispanic label include those from non-Spanish speaking countries (e.g., Brazil and Haiti) and those from Indigenous communities (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987). Moreover, I used Latinx as an intentional way to acknowledge the history of colonization in this region and to (re)center the experiences of the communities grounding this dissertation. As opposed to using “Latino” or “Latina,” I also used Latinx to reject the gender binary and to be more inclusive of nonbinary people and the larger LGBTQ+ community (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020).

Although I have primarily used the term Latinx in my own writing, it is also essential to acknowledge how people choose to identify is deeply personal. The term Latinx has become popularized in recent years, especially in academic writing, but only 3% of those who comprise

this demographic use this gender neutral, pan-ethnic term (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). Relatedly, because Latinx is a term that has grown in prominence in recent years, many of the studies I cited and the statistical figures I used to develop the background and justification for this study tended to employ the use of Hispanic (e.g., Higher Education Immigration Portal, 2021; Migration Policy Institute, n.d.-a; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The term Hispanic was popularized in the 1980s by the U.S. government and is still commonly used in surveys distributed at the national level, such as the U.S. Census (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020).

With these caveats in mind, I conclude this subsection by (a) acknowledging the language used to describe one's identity is profoundly personal and (b) reaffirming people's right to choose identifiers they feel are best to encapsulate their community's unique experiences, customs, cultures, religions, and so forth (Gimenez, 1989). Like many communities, the Latinx community is multilayered and is not monolithic. As a researcher, I aimed to be precise with the language I used; however, I offer this background to celebrate this diversity in self-identification and caution about the challenges and dangers of identifiers that aim to be universal in their application.

Scope of the Study

To further examine and unpack the role policy played in shaping these students' journeys to college, I drew from critical race theory (CRT) and concepts stemming from Latino/a critical race theory (LatCrit). CRT originated in the realm of legal scholarship to understand the linkage between race and U.S. law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In this study, I used CRT as a framework to examine the links between race, policy, and education. More specifically, I used Harris's (1993) concept of *whiteness as property* to unpack the malleable parameters of

citizenship and explore how policy often serves as the embodiment of what Harris deemed the “absolute right to exclude” (p. 1731). I specifically used Harris (1993) to discuss how legislator—both at the state and federal level—and higher education administrators have wielded policy to keep racial and ethnic minority communities at the margins. I also used LatCrit to examine how the Latinx identity commonly intersects with citizenship. In particular, I used Pérez Huber et al.’s (2008) concept of *racist nativism* to explore the intricate relationship between racism and nativism and explain how this intersection can be used to analyze participants’ journeys to higher education. These combined frameworks helped scrutinize the larger policy landscape on which this study developed and provided greater context into the experiences these students shared.

To address the research questions and goals of the study, I employed a critical policy analysis (CPA) methodological approach to scrutinize the racial politics of the everyday and investigate how participants understood the policies that impacted their trajectories into college (Atwood & López, 2014; Prunty, 1985). As part of the study’s qualitative research design, I used a two-part approach that included semistructured interviews and document analyses. Each of the 19 participants at UCMB was interviewed twice and completed an educational journey map between the two interview sessions. The educational journey map was a visual tool participants used to help them reflect upon their experiential knowledge and relate critical events and people along their path to higher education. Taken together, the two interviews and educational journey map served to explore how participants conceptualized their college application process, how policy had played a part in their goal of attending college, and how students strategically navigated this period.

In the second part of this study's methodological approach, I used two sets of document analyses. These document analyses served to uncover information about (a) the resources available to undocumented students at UCMB and in the larger system and (b) any additional resources or networks referenced by the students in their interviews or educational journey maps that served the purpose of filling informational or support gaps. The first document analyses set explored the visibility and clarity of resources offered directly from the institution itself and developed a more contextualized understanding of certain points participants raised in their interviews. The second set of document analyses highlighted the far-spanning reach of policy and the fact that many students often look to resources outside of educational institutions to better advocate for themselves and find support that is more specific to their needs.

Significance

Amid policy threats directly impacting the future of programs such as DACA and an ongoing political climate that is hostile toward undocumented immigrants (Adrade, 2019, 2021; Muñoz et al., 2018; L. V. Rodriguez, 2019; Santellano, 2019), immediate action needs to be taken to understand better the lived experiences of undocumented students in the United States. The study contributes to the existing body of work on undocumented students by directly examining how policy sets the stage for undocumented students' college access. When discussing this population of students and how to serve their needs best, it was essential to first consider the extent to which policy was deeply embedded in these students' processes of applying to college. Researchers cannot begin to imagine how to best support undocumented students' college-going trajectories without thoroughly examining the policies frequently constraining the students' opportunity and mobility, both on the front end before students

formally begin their time in college and in the landscape that awaits them during college and after college graduation.

Findings from this study address how those serving Latinx undocumented students in an advisory capacity at both the high school level and college level can better serve undocumented students' needs, specifically through the incorporation of counseling strategies that actively consider the current political climate, already established policies, and emerging policy changes. This study also offers policy implications; although educators and practitioners play a central role in supporting the day-to-day lives of undocumented students, this study directly grappled with system-level issues that require system-level solutions. As such, I concluded this study by exploring possible policy solutions that carry the ability to increase access for future generations of Latinx undocumented students.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to synthesize the current body of literature examining the experiences of Latinx undocumented students, particularly regarding their process of applying to college. The following literature review indicated the wide range of challenges undocumented students face as they transition from K–12 into higher education and affirmed the need to examine how students’ immigration status shapes their academic and career aspirations.

This review of the literature is divided into three main sections. In the first section, I provide an overview and background to key education and immigration policies most frequently impacting undocumented students’ college goals. The second section of this chapter examines school-level elements and details the body of research examining undocumented students’ experiences seeking support within their high school settings. Given the broader focus on undocumented students’ process of applying to college, this second section reviews literature detailing students’ experiences working with high school counselors and their challenges in receiving and seeking out support specific to their needs. The third, and final, section explores students’ social networks outside of the school context. In particular, I examined the body of work detailing how undocumented students’ social networks (e.g., family, friends, peers, people from community-based organizations) shape these students’ understanding of identity and their larger college opportunities. I conclude this chapter by situating the study in this existing body of research and discussing how the current study filled a gap in the literature.

Painting the Policy Landscape

This section outlines some of the most pertinent policies impacting undocumented students’ college efforts and emphasizes how federal, state, and institutional-level policies often set the basis for undocumented students’ access to higher education. In the absence of federal

policy protecting and upholding undocumented students' rights to higher education, many of the policies detailed in this section have implications for how undocumented students are or are not able to access higher education. I begin by highlighting how undocumented students' rights to access higher education itself exist in a legal gray area. Through this environment, I explored how various policies, some more directly tied to higher education than others, have broadened or constricted students' access to postsecondary opportunities. Because this study retroactively examined the lived experiences of Latinx undocumented students in California, I paid close consideration to state-level policies specific to public higher education institutions in the state of California.

Establishing Undocumented Students' Rights to K–12 Schooling

The 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court case brought forth the legal question of whether Texas could deny undocumented students the right to free K–12 public education (Welner et al., 2017). Texas provided free K–12 public education to children who were U.S. citizens or legally admitted aliens; however, in 1975, the Texas legislature decided to withhold state funds from local school districts for the education of children not legally admitted into the United States (Welner et al., 2017). Revisions made to Texas education laws around the same time had authorized local school districts to deny children who were not “legally admitted” the ability to enroll in the state’s public schools (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982; Welner et al., 2017). In 1977, these two legislative decisions were challenged and eventually made their way to the Supreme Court.

Plyler v. Doe raised the question of whether the Equal Protection Clause (EPC) of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution included undocumented immigrants and if state-provided K–12 public education needed to extend to undocumented children (Nienhuser, 2013; Welner et al., 2017). The EPC prohibits states from denying people within the United States’

jurisdiction equal protection of the law (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982; Welner et al., 2017). In the *Plyler v. Doe* ruling, the Supreme Court held the Fourteenth Amendment and EPC were “universal in their application” and would include all people within the United States’ “territorial jurisdiction” (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982, p. 457; see also Welner et al., 2017). *Plyler v. Doe* held by denying undocumented children access to basic education, we as an institution arguably deny them the opportunity to live and contribute to the “structure of our civic institutions” and subsequently to the “progress of our nation” (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982, p. 223). Though Texas officials pointed to the significant costs of educating this grouping of students, the Supreme Court held the financial costs of a “subclass of illiterates” (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982, p. 230) far outweighed the cost of educating undocumented children. The decision reached in *Plyler v. Doe* was made based largely on the economic implications a “subclass of illiterates” would impose upon the United States, noting by denying access to education, such a decision would thereby “[add] to the problems and costs of unemployment, welfare, and crime” (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982, p. 230; see also Crawford et al., 2017; Welner et al., 2017).

In this regard, *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) is most notable for its application to K–12 schooling and ensured access to basic education cannot be restricted based on national origin or citizenship status (Crawford et al., 2017). *Plyler v. Doe* ruled where the state provides free K–12 public education, the state must offer free K–12 public education to undocumented students. This Supreme Court case is also notable in that the ruling forced school districts to abstain from creating barriers that would restrict or prohibit the enrollment of undocumented and immigrant students in public K–12 schools (Crawford et al., 2017; Nienhusser, 2013). The impact of *Plyer v. Doe*, however, applies only to the K–12 domain; as such, undocumented students’ rights to higher education remains in an ambiguous legal area (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Gonzales, 2009;

Kantamneni, Dharmalingam, et al., 2016). Although no federal laws currently prohibit undocumented students from seeking admission to public college campuses in the United States explicitly, no federal policies explicitly affirm undocumented students' rights to higher education, either (Gonzales, 2009; Kantamneni, Dharmalingam, et al., 2016). In the absence of such blanket protections instituted at the federal level, legislators at the state level and higher education institution-level administrators are left to implement policies that can either broaden or further restrict undocumented students' access to higher education.

At the time of the *Plyer v. Doe* (1982) decision, undocumented students' access to K–12 education was extended on the basis that a “subclass of illiterates” (p. 230) would be more costly to the United States than the alternative; however, *Plyer v. Doe*, in its modern application, has failed to take into account that high school diplomas have provided increasingly fewer opportunities for social mobility, thereby making college credentials all the more necessary to deliver on those same goals of promoting economic vitality (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Kantamneni, Dharmalingam, et al., 2016).

In-State Tuition Policies: A Means of Promoting and Restricting Access

Although undocumented students are not barred directly from attending institutions of higher education at the federal level, students' ability to finance the cost of their higher education degree remains a significant barrier to access and one that frequently constrains and limits educational opportunity (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Gonzales, 2010; Vargas, 2010). When considering the lack of federal financial aid made available to undocumented students and their constrained opportunities for employment, undocumented students and their families are frequently left with the question of how they will finance the cost of their education (Chavez et al., 2007; Gonzales, 2010; Gonzales et al., 2016; Suárez-Orozco & López-Hernández, 2020). As

such, policies pertaining to financial aid and college affordability have become critical battlegrounds in determining students' abilities to afford the cost of college and, in turn, their access to higher education.

Undocumented students are ineligible to receive federal financial aid due to their immigration status; in most states, they are also ineligible to receive state-issued financial aid (Crisp et al., 2015; Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Nienhuser, 2013). Though undocumented students can apply for private scholarships (Gonzales et al., 2016), these resources are often hard to come by because many scholarships require applicants be U.S. citizens (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Yasuike, 2019). To increase access to undocumented students, some states have broadened their in-state tuition eligibility requirements to include undocumented immigrants. The prevalence of expanded in-state tuition eligibility requirements is significant in that undocumented students typically fall under the category of out-of-state or international students, thereby subjecting them to even higher tuition rates and contributing to the burden of college affordability (Abrego, 2006; Vargas, 2010).

One example of this kind of in-state tuition policy includes California Assembly Bill (AB) 540, which was signed into law in 2001 and allowed all students who attended secondary school in the state of California for a minimum of 3 years and graduated or attained the equivalent of a high school diploma to pay in-state tuition at California's public colleges and universities (Welner et al., 2017). As such, AB 540 is significant because it allows undocumented students and other eligible students to pursue an education at any of the University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community Colleges (CCC) campuses and pay in-state tuition prices (Chavez et al., 2007).

Across the United States, however, wide variation exists in the prevalence of state laws similar to the benefits offered through AB 540 (Pérez, 2014; Welner et al., 2017). As of September 2023, 23 state legislatures—including Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Kansas, Kentucky, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and Washington—and the District of Columbia provide access to in-state tuition benefits to their state’s undocumented immigrants (Higher Education Research Portal, 2023; National Conference of State Legislation, 2019). Typically, these in-state tuition policies enacted by state legislation require students (a) attend and/or graduate from state public high schools and (b) plan to attend one of the state’s public colleges or universities (National Conference of State Legislation, 2021; Pérez Huber et al., 2009). In the absence of state-level legislation, institutions themselves also have the means of enacting their own policies to expand or increase access to in-state financial aid; for example, the University of Hawaii and the University of Michigan have adopted their own policies via their respective boards of regents that allow undocumented students to receive in-state tuition at their schools (National Conference of State Legislation, 2021). In contrast, six states (i.e. Indiana, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin) have enacted policies explicitly restricting undocumented students’ access to in-state tuition benefits (Higher Education Immigration Portal, 2023; National Conference of State Legislation, 2021). Although I situated this study in California, such variation between states demonstrates the influence of states and institutions in expanding access or restricting it almost entirely through the means of affordability and aid.

Another piece of legislation designed to help expand access to aid is the California Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (Dream) Act, which was signed into law

in 2011 by California Governor Jerry Brown (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Welner et al., 2017). The California Dream Act was inspired by the federal Dream Act proposed in 2001, though the latter has yet to be passed into legislation despite multiple reintroduction attempts (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). Iterations of the proposed federal Dream Act would grant undocumented immigrants who entered the United States as minors temporary residency status and a pathway to citizenship and would, in effect, afford these students increased access to higher education (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011); The federal Dream Act, however, has repeatedly failed to pass through the U.S. Senate (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Welner et al., 2017).

Whereas the Dream Act has failed to gain traction at the federal level, the California Dream Act enabled eligible undocumented students in the state of California to pay California in-state tuition rates and become eligible to apply for nonstate-funded scholarships and state-funded financial aid (Chavez et al., 2007). The California Dream Act was split into two bills: AB 130 and AB 131. AB 130 allows students who meet AB 540 eligibility requirements to apply for nonstate-funded scholarships, whereas AB 131 allows students who meet the same AB 540 eligibility requirements to apply for state-funded financial aid (e.g., Cal Grants; Murillo, 2017b; Welner et al., 2017). These two bills were both signed into law in 2011 and have permitted undocumented students to participate in student financial programs administered by the state of California to the maximum extent allowed by federal law (Welner et al., 2017).

Though the adoption of widened in-state tuition eligibility requirements in some states and legislation such as the California Dream Act has helped to increase access, undocumented students remain still pressed with the challenge of financing their remaining college expenses (Murillo, 2017b). Qualitative research on Latinx undocumented students has repeatedly indicated college affordability and the pressure to maximize all available forms of financial support are

among the most significant stressors (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Gonzales et al., 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Suárez-Orozco & López-Hernández, 2020). To cover their higher education expenses, students often work significant hours and hold more than one job (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011), though this additional labor is often at the expense of these students' productivity, academic engagement, and psychological well-being (Suárez-Orozco & López-Hernández, 2020). Undocumented students must also consider other means of decreasing costs, such as enrolling in their studies part-time or attending community colleges or public institutions to save money (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). Through this lens, existing policies addressing the topic of college affordability should continue to be examined in this light—both in terms of the power they hold in expanding access to undocumented students and these policies' limitations in fully supporting students' needs.

Overview of the DACA Program

In 2012, the Obama administration's Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary, Janet Napolitano, announced a program wherein people who arrived in the United States as children and met the established guidelines could request consideration of deferred action (Napolitano, 2012). This program later became known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Included in DACA as part of its eligibility requirements was a provision stating applicants (a) must be currently enrolled in school; (b) have received either a high school degree or obtained a general education development (GED) certificate; (c) or are an honorably discharged veteran (Napolitano, 2012). Those eligible to receive DACA are not provided with lawful status; instead, they can defer their removal from the United States and are entitled to receive certain benefits, such as work authorization.

The DACA program has faced several legal challenges in recent years, with some of its most recent updates occurring alongside this study's duration. On September 5, 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump announced via the social media platform Twitter his intent to end the DACA program (Colvin, 2017). Following this announcement, then-U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions and then-DHS Acting Secretary Elaine Duke rescinded the DACA program and gave Congress 6 months to enact legislation to protect young undocumented immigrants (Chishti & Bolter, 2017; Duke, 2017). On September 8, 2017, the UC Board of Regents filed a lawsuit against DHS in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California (*Regents of the University of California and Janet Napolitano v. U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Elaine Duke*, 2017). Then-UC President and former DHS Secretary who created DACA during President Obama's first administration, Janet Napolitano, described DACA's removal as "nothing more than unreasoned executive whim" (UC Office of the President, 2017, para. 1) in a press release from the UC Office of the President detailing the lawsuit. On June 18, 2020, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the UC Board of Regents, stating the Trump administration's attempt to strike down the program violated federal law (*Department of Homeland Security v. Regents of the University of California*, 2020).

On July 17, 2020, Judge Paul W. Grimm from the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland ordered the U.S. Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) to review applications from new applicants (*Casa De Maryland et al. v. U.S. Department of Homeland Security et al.*, 2020). Still, then-DHS Acting Secretary Chad F. Wolf announced on July 28, 2020 that although DHS would review DACA policy and decide upon the program's future in light of the June 2020 Supreme Court ruling, no new initial applications would be considered and all renewals would be granted on a 1-year basis, as opposed to the previous 2-year period (Wolf, 2020). On

December 4, 2020, the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York ordered DHS to fully reinstate the DACA program, thereby overturning Wolf's July 2020 memorandum (American Immigration Lawyers Association, n.d.).

On December 7, 2020, both DHS and USCIS updated their official government websites so they would comply with the federal court's order (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2020). Effective December 7, 2020, USCIS would accept new applications for DACA, continue accepting renewal requests, and extend DACA's 1-year grant back to its original 2-year period (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2020). On January 20, 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden issued a memorandum that directed the DHS Secretary, in consultation with the Attorney General, to "take all actions [they] deem appropriate, consistent with applicable law, to preserve and fortify DACA" (Biden, 2021, para. 3). Though the future of DACA looked promising at the time, Judge Andrew Hanen from the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas ruled on July 16, 2021 that the DACA program was unlawful, holding the creation and implementation exceeded the powers given to the executive branch (*State of Texas et al. v. United States of America et al. and Karla Perez et al.*, 2021). In this ruling, Judge Hanen held that DHS could no longer accept new applications, but the program would be permitted to process renewals.

On August 30, 2022, DHS issued a final rule that attempted to preserve and codify DACA so the program would withstand pending litigation (American Immigration Lawyers Association, n.d.; DACA, 2022). With the announcement of the DHS' final rule in place, DHS Secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, led an effort to appeal Judge Hanen's July 2021 ruling, arguing the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals should reconsider the DACA program with the new regulations from the August 2022 final rule set to take effect on October 31, 2022 (DACA, 2022). On October 5, 2022, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals maintained that the 2012 creation

of DACA was not legal and returned the case back to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas to assess whether the language of the August 2022 final rule had “material differences” (*State of Texas et al. v. United States of America et al.*, 2022, p. 10) from that of the 2012 memorandum that first established DACA.

As the final rule had been set to take effect on October 31, 2022, Judge Hanen issued an order that effectively blocked regulations from the final rule from going into effect at the end of the month—thereby maintaining the previous provision that DHS could continue to accept DACA renewals, but would be unable to grant DACA status to any new applicants (*State of Texas et al. v. United States of America et al.*, 2022). On September 13, 2023, Judge Hanen announced he found no material differences between the 2022 final rule and the 2012 memorandum, thereby deeming DHS’ August 2022 final rule unlawful (*State of Texas et al. v. The United States of America et al. and Karla Perez et al.*, 2023). At the time of writing in October 2023, USCIS is still able to accept and process renewal applications from existing DACA recipients, though the program is unable to grant DACA status to any new applicants (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2023).

DACA and Implications on Education

Though DACA has been far from a perfect solution and has continued to face legal challenges, DACA does carry some significant benefits related to students’ educational trajectories (Murillo, 2017b; Pérez, 2010). As Pérez (2014) noted, DACA recipients’ abilities to seek out work has better allowed these students to finance the cost of pursuing higher education. DACA recipients may choose to allocate some of their pay earnings toward their higher education goals and offset their reliance on other, albeit often extremely limited, forms of financing their education (Pérez, 2014). Although undocumented students still cannot receive

federal financial aid, some colleges or university systems and individual schools use the FAFSA to determine aid eligibility (Pérez, 2014).

Another benefit of DACA concerns in-state tuition policies, as some states and school systems have created specific provisions that explicitly mention DACA as part of their eligibility requirements (Pérez, 2014). Some states and school systems (i.e. Arkansas, Idaho, Maine, Mississippi, and Ohio) have broadened their in-state tuition eligibility requirements to include those with DACA status (Higher Education Immigration Portal, 2023). Some states even have enacted enrollment bans against undocumented students who do not have DACA status, including the states of Alabama, South Carolina, and some college and university systems in Georgia (Pérez, 2014). As an example, Alabama passed legislation prohibiting students who are not lawful permanent citizens or cannot show they have a nonimmigration status from enrolling in the state's public colleges and universities; however, undocumented students with DACA may enroll in the state's community colleges and eight of its public colleges and universities at in-state tuition prices (Higher Education Immigration Portal, 2023).

Although the focus of this dissertation was on undocumented students in the state of California, the reach and application of DACA within the educational sector simultaneously demonstrates a few important points. First, though DACA has increased undocumented students' access to higher education and widened access to other taken-for-granted social rights, the impact of DACA has not necessarily been universal in its application (Murillo, 2017b). Relatedly, the amount of variation in how states and university or college systems consider the DACA status highlights yet another challenging policy landscape that undocumented students must navigate as they consider the colleges they would like to apply to and where they would most likely be able to find support. Finally, both the benefits and limitations of DACA

emphasize federal policy's role in broadening access for undocumented students. These considerations affirm the need for education researchers to consider the reach of policy and law and explore how these arenas shape the day-to-day decisions made by undocumented students during their college application journeys.

Navigating a Contentious Political Climate: The Drive to Action

Previous researchers have indicated the importance of considering how the livelihoods of undocumented immigrants are inherently political and that the denial of higher education opportunities must be situated within a sociohistorical context (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Groce & Johnson, 2021). Denying and constraining access to social resources, including that of higher education, has long been used as a strategic tool to keep minoritized communities at the margins (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). Higher education, in particular, represents a pathway of accessing greater levels of political, social, and economic capital (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011). Situating undocumented students' challenges related to college access in this sociohistorical framework indicates why these oppressive structures have continued to operate.

In a study assessing how Latinx undocumented college students experience campus climate, Muñoz et al. (2018) explained, "The prospect of maintaining normalcy and a positive outlook hinge on how the national immigration policy discourse will influence undocumented students' livelihood" (p. 43). Recent research on undocumented students more broadly has pointed to how Donald Trump-era rhetoric surrounding immigrant and undocumented communities has created a hostile climate for undocumented students (e.g., Adrade, 2019, 2021; Muñoz et al., 2018; L. V. Rodriguez, 2019; Santellano, 2019). Although Trump no longer holds the title of U.S. president, much of his politics have fueled racist, nativist sentiments that have continued to persist (Adrade, 2021). The Trump administration launched attacks not only on

programs such as DACA, but also posed highly credible threats to the undocumented community's physical safety, exacerbated fears of deportation, and prompted undocumented immigrants and allies to question their futures (Muñoz et al., 2018). Similarly, the emboldened racist nativism espoused by many of his supporters have continued to loom large (Andrade, 2021; Muñoz et al., 2018). The impact of the Trump administration on immigration discourse is evident; however, researchers must consider that even in the presence of Democratic or more progressive administrations, there remains no sweeping legislation with strong aims to provide undocumented immigrants with pathways to citizenship and improve access to societal fixtures such as education.

The combination of recent direct policy threats that would jeopardize the livelihoods of undocumented immigrants and the lack of uncertainty surrounding the future poses the question as to how undocumented students navigate this space of liminality and how or where educational spaces can better serve as a means of providing solace and hope for students (Chavez et al., 2007). Educational researchers must continue to critically reflect on research's ability to inform day-to-day practice to ensure the needs of undocumented students are adequately met. Acknowledging how federal policies and state laws impact the educational trajectories of undocumented students, how these laws and policies have changed over time, and how these laws and policies may change in the future has direct effects on the degree to which research can provide practitioners who work in a direct advising capacity to undocumented students on how to support this vulnerable student demographic (Chavez et al., 2007; Diaz-Strong et al., 2013; Kantamneni, Dharmalingam, et al., 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016).

Role of High Schools and College Counseling

The policies described in the previous section indicated the complexity surrounding undocumented students' access to higher education and the highly contentious nature of such matters across federal, state, and institutional lines. Undocumented students aiming to continue their education beyond K–12 are tasked with navigating the intricate web of policies described in the previous portion of this literature review and face additional hurdles that further complicate the students' abilities to meet their educational goals amid perpetuated systems of discrimination and oppression.

This second section examines undocumented students' experiences seeking college support in their school contexts. This section encapsulates the support that undocumented students do or do not receive from their high schools. In particular, I explored how school-level factors shape students' process of applying to college. The following section explores literature on challenges undocumented students face within the context of their high schools, highlighting how barriers faced in this local schooling context likely intersect with and compound those policy components defined in the previous section.

Fostering Relationships With High School Staff and Status Disclosure

Research on high school students' college choice more broadly has emphasized the role of high school staff in providing students with the necessary resources to make informed decisions regarding their post-high school objectives (García & Tierney, 2011; Gonzales, 2009; McDonough, 2005; Perna et al., 2008). Similarly, high school students who have consistent and frequent access to a college counselor are more likely to be equipped with the information needed to navigate the college application process (McDonough, 1997). Gonzales (2010) also observed these same positive outcomes, focusing specifically on the trajectories of

undocumented students and how students' relationships with high school staff help students mitigate barriers to access. Gonzales found the undocumented respondents who were enrolled in postsecondary education shared with one another a promising connection with their high school teachers and counselors (see also Yasuike, 2019). In light of the relationship between high school students and high school staff, a need exists for continued and closer examination of the unique experiences of undocumented students and the degree of support they receive from their high school personnel as they pursue their college goals (Gonzales, 2010).

In determining if or how resources pertinent to undocumented students are made accessible at high schools, researchers must first consider how schools typically conduct needs assessment and how concerns surrounding immigration status disclosure may affect the degree to which high schools visibly promote resources relevant to this demographic. More generally, high school counselors are often faced with high student caseloads and cannot meet the needs of all their students (McDonough, 1997). To mediate these effects, counselors often find themselves in the position of having to cater the bulk of their counseling services to students who serve as the majority of a school's overall student body demographic (Bryan et al., 2011; Nienhusser, 2013; Woods & Domina, 2014). As such, populations outside the majority or dominant group are often placed at a disadvantage and find themselves in positions of having to individually seek out those resources themselves when help is not made readily available nor visible to the student (Nienhusser, 2013; Woods & Domina, 2014). This model of placing the onus on students to reach out to receive support is noteworthy in that doing so often requires undocumented students to disclose their immigration status to school officials to receive guidance and resources specific to their needs (Muñoz, 2016; Nienhusser, 2013).

Nienhusser (2013) examined different types of activities and counseling strategies employed by high schools, and he found significant variations in activities related to undocumented students' college choice; for example, schools with a greater number of undocumented students held a greater number of activities catered to this population. Though the approach of tailoring counseling services based on the amount of interest adhered to notions of supply and demand, Nienhusser emphasized the need for educators to be mindful this practice rests upon the willingness of undocumented students to be forthcoming about their immigration status. The practice of waiting for students to initiate a relationship with their counselor fails to adequately acknowledge the psychological factors associated with undocumented students' decisions to disclose their status and its mental health implications (Kam et al., 2018). Due to the stigma attached to being undocumented, undocumented students may feel hesitant to reach out to school personnel and share their status (Gonzales, 2010; Muñoz, 2016; Murillo, 2017a; Suárez-Orozco & López Hernández, 2020; Yasuike, 2019). Some undocumented students may even evade high school staff as a way to preserve this facet of their identity and keep this information safe (Nienhusser et al., 2016; Roth, 2017).

Trust is an essential element of counselor–student relationships; without trust, undocumented students may feel hesitant to reach out to their counselors (Kantamneni, Dharmalingam, et al., 2016; Roth, 2017; Yasuike, 2019). Even in instances where the student has a positive relationship with their teachers and other school staff, undocumented students are still often selective with whom they share this information and will weigh factors such as the length of time they had known that adult, the characteristics of the school, and the risk to them and their families (Muñoz, 2016; Roth, 2017). These considerations demonstrate the highly complex

nature of status disclosure and suggest the need for closer examination into why undocumented students might either conceal or disclose their immigration status.

Kam et al. (2018) examined adolescents' decisions to disclose their own or their family's undocumented status to their counselors. The researchers identified three types of profiles (i.e., indifferent disclosers, concerned revealers, and anxious revealers) and examined each profile's corresponding mental health implications (Kam et al., 2018). Findings from this study illuminated the range of psychological factors influencing students' decisions to confide in a counselor, with particular focus paid to the diverse ways students may choose to indicate or subtly allude to their undocumented status. Though Kam et al. refrained from taking a prescriptive approach to emphasize that the decision to disclose one's status is an individual one, the researchers provided a more nuanced glimpse into forms of documentation disclosure (i.e., direct versus indirect disclosure), what specific factors were found to be more strongly correlated with depressive symptoms, and insight about students' decision-making processes. Muñoz (2016) also examined the notion of status disclosure, wherein they found the stigmatization and socialization of students' citizenship status played a hand in both students' understanding of their immigration status and how or if they chose to disclose their status to others.

The limited availability of resources that cater to undocumented students and students' hesitance to disclose their immigration status perpetuates a cycle wherein students' college application needs continue to be unmet (Kam et al., 2018; Muñoz, 2016; Nienhusser, 2013). Considering these constraints, the current body of literature has emphasized that to ensure undocumented students are supported during their college application and their subsequent transition into higher education, future researchers must consider the highly contentious and

political nature embedded in the topic of disclosure (Muñoz, 2016; Murillo, 2017a; Roth, 2017; Suárez-Orozco & López Hernández, 2020).

Constrained College Choice Information

Nienhusser et al. (2016) illustrated undocumented students are also likely to encounter restricted access to college choice information, mainly manifested in the form of institutional agents who are unaware of specific information relevant to undocumented students' college choice processes (see also Tivette & English, 2017). In Nienhusser et al.'s qualitative study, participants voiced they felt these agents did not take the initiative to become informed about undocumented students' needs. Nienhusser et al. asserted this knowledge gap negatively impacts undocumented students' college choice process, leaving these students with unclear information about how to navigate decisions related to selecting and applying to college. Additionally, Nienhusser et al. pointed to the role of insensitive staff members in denying college opportunities, citing instances where students were discouraged by institutional agents from applying to schools or were sent messages that the process of applying to college as an undocumented student was almost impossible. Some student participants in Nienhusser et al.'s study also reported institutional agents failed to understand the gravity of their immigration status and handle this information with proper discretion.

Related to policy and as indicated by the literature described in previous sections, an incredible amount of variation exists between states on the amount of support offered to undocumented students seeking postsecondary education (Pérez, 2014). Undocumented students seeking to obtain bachelor's degrees are forced to decode and learn policies scattered across federal, state, and institutional levels, including policies tied directly to their immigration status and other policies surrounding the larger issue of affordability and how to finance the cost of

their education (Chavez et al., 2007; Pérez, 2014). As such, the role of the counselor or high school staff member often becomes one of helping students navigate these complex policy webs and assisting them in determining how these students might be able to cover their living and educational expenses (Chavez et al., 2007). Still, as Murillo (2017b) noted, the evolving political and social landscapes have catalyzed rapid changes in policy, requiring counselors maintain a continuous level of engagement with these topics to stay up to date (see also Nienhusser, 2018).

Given counselors' already high caseloads and difficulties meeting students' needs, continuing education may be hard to come by, and counselors may face difficulty in adequately delivering on those needs (Nienhusser, 2018). Challenges in staying up to date on policy so that counselors can pass along this information to students coincide with existing structural constraints already impeding counselors' abilities to support students; these constraints include high student caseloads, limited numbers of personnel, and competing organizational priorities (McDonough, 1997; Perna et al., 2008). These structural limitations are even more prevalent in schools that serve low-income communities and communities with greater proportions of students of color (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Gonzales et al., 2015; McDonough, 1997).

Moreover, this fact becomes more pertinent when considering that undocumented students frequently come from low-income families and attend high schools that predominately serve low-income communities (Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2013; Gonzales et al., 2015). The prevalence of undocumented students attending schools that are structurally ill-equipped to support students' college-going efforts offers some explanation as to why access to college choice information that is relevant to their needs remains significantly limited. The inclusion of structural constraints in this subsection simultaneously serves to demonstrate why practitioners

may not be up to date on information relevant to undocumented students and highlights some of the tensions counselors face more generally in understanding and meeting diverse student needs.

Supporting the Whole Student

The literature has illustrated a need for counselors to understand “how societal, contextual, cultural, and personal influences have affected the academic and vocational development” (Kantamneni, Shada, et al., 2016, p. 328) of undocumented high school students. Examining the systemic, academic, and work-related barriers that undocumented students face is crucial in understanding why undocumented students are often forced to reevaluate their academic and career goals along their educational trajectories (Abrego, 2004; Chavez et al., 2007; Kantamneni, Shada, et al., 2016). Understanding the barriers that constrain and limit opportunity would better position practitioners to advise their students more effectively on college-related matters and to more fully affirm and support their students’ emotional and psychological needs (Kantamneni, Dharmalingam, et al., 2016). Moreover, researchers have found practitioners who aim to understand the broader immigration landscape better and engage in advocacy-based work help improve undocumented students’ educational outcomes (Crawford et al., 2019; Groce & Johnson, 2021).

Kantamneni, Shada, et al. (2016) found as undocumented students navigated the challenges during their college admissions processes, many students noted feeling “exhausted” (p. 329) by needing to be strategic as they overcome educational barriers. As such, Kantamneni, Shada, et al. stated within the context of college advising, there needs to be a clear differentiation between informational support systems and emotional support systems. Informational support systems refer to the specific details embedded within the college application process and how counselors or other personnel would help students navigate these matters.

Conversely, emotional support systems suggest a level of care for students that considers their emotional and psychological well-being. Examples of this emotional support might include tending to a student's sense of security and safety or alleviating feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear (Kam et al., 2018). Making the clear differentiation between these two different types of support illustrates a need for counseling and intervention strategies that account for the full range of challenges undocumented students encounter during their college application processes and underscores the need for college counselors to extend their guidance beyond merely relaying details about the admissions process.

Looking Beyond the School: Role and Influence of Social Networks

Although undocumented students often face a range of adverse emotional and psychological effects stemming from their undocumented status (Kantamneni, Shada, et al., 2016), these students exhibit incredible levels of resilience, academic promise, and achievement despite systemic, academic, and socio-emotional barriers (Pérez et al., 2009; Pérez, 2010). Pérez (2010) suggested a closer examination of undocumented students' social networks consisting of "the social and moral support from family, peers, school agents, and academic programs" (p. 32) is needed to understand better how these students have persisted considering obstacles already articulated in this literature review.

This third and final main section explores students' social networks and the interpersonal relationships they cultivate along their college application journeys. In particular, this section considers the impact of students' interpersonal relationships. This section includes how interpersonal connections fuel students' college ambitions, how students leverage these connections as they make sense of their identities, and how these connections are mobilized as a tool to aid them in navigating systemic barriers. In this section, I focused on the relationships

students build with family, friends, and peers, along with the relationships they cultivate in other spaces (e.g., community-based organizations).

Understanding Self and Identity

Undocumented students often find themselves at a paradoxical crossroads as they begin the process of learning and making sense of their immigration status. In many cases, these students have resided in the United States for several years and have gone through similar educational experiences as their peers with U.S. citizenship (Chavez et al., 2007; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2013). Researchers have discussed how the transition between the end of high school and into adulthood is often the first time that undocumented youth grapple with their status, and where students often come to terms with some of the dangers and consequences of being undocumented in the United States (Muñoz, 2016, 2017a; Vargas, 2010). With the discovery of their immigration status, these same students learn upon graduation, the opportunities available to them diminish (Abrego, 2004; Chavez et al., 2007). Although many of these students have grown up in the United States and have been socialized to understand the U.S. values of “meritocracy and upward mobility through hard work” (Abrego, 2004, p. 225), students making sense of their undocumented status are forced to grapple with the now-constrained options available to them and the systemic barriers in their path (Chavez et al., 2007; Gonzales et al., 2013; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2013).

Students’ legal consciousness and how they make meaning of their immigration status have important implications for how students conceptualize their long-term goals as they look ahead to applying to college (Gonzales, 2011; Muñoz, 2016; Vargas, 2010). Literature on undocumented students’ legal consciousness has emphasized that how students make meaning of their immigration status has substantial ramifications on how they form their post-high school

aspirations and on whom they choose to lean for support (Nienhusser et al., 2016).

Simultaneously, legal consciousness also has important implications for examining how undocumented students might shift their academic and/or career goals in response to learning about their undocumented status (Chavez et al., 2007; Gonzales, 2011; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2013). In Nienhusser et al.'s (2016) study, some student respondents shared they reconsidered their post-high school objectives amid uncertainties as to whether they would be able to find gainful employment after college graduation. Because the college application process frequently prompts students to consider their identities and subsequent opportunity prospects (Nienhusser et al., 2016), students often turn to family and peers for support (Gonzales, 2011).

Role of Family and Peers

Muñoz (2016) highlighted when students first learn of their undocumented status from their parents and families, their family members often share this message through the lens of fear and caution the students to be mindful of their behaviors and actions. Students' understanding of their immigration status is shaped by their social contexts (Muñoz, 2016). Although this socialization holds the potential to reinforce and uphold sentiments of fear, many students in the Muñoz's (2016) sample also viewed sharing their immigration status as a means of self-empowerment in that disclosing their status helped "unpack stigma and shame" (p. 725) and reclaim their power (see also Diaz-Strong et al., 2013; Pérez Huber, 2009).

Families often play the important role of offering students emotional support by acting as a source of motivation, encouragement, and comfort (Enriquez, 2011; Pérez Huber, 2009; Pérez et al., 2009; Yasuike, 2019). Though the parents of the participants in Enriquez's (2011) study had limited educational experiences from which to draw, these same parents offered students important messages regarding their abilities to succeed and persist in the face of systemic

barriers (see also Yasuike, 2019). Undocumented students may also look to their own family histories for motivation. Some student respondents in Yasuike (2019)'s study noted they saw their families' hard work and the sacrifices family members made. Some student respondents saw their family members' persistence as a source of inspiration and felt a duty to honor and repay the sacrifices made by their families (Yasuike, 2019; see also Pérez Huber, 2009). Families also wield the ability to mitigate feelings of anxiety and support students as they encounter barriers, thereby promoting a successful transition into college (Gonzales, 2011). Gonzalez (2011) found students who had support in financing the cost of their college goals and received family support in delaying or minimizing work obligations were able to commit more time to their academics and therefore were better equipped to reach favorable academic outcomes.

In the absence of solid and effective school-based support, families also can become "guides to the future" (Abrego, 2004, p. 225) by shining a light on what is possible for undocumented students to achieve while also providing early notice of certain barriers that lay ahead. Simultaneously, if students' undocumented cousins and siblings have had negative experiences navigating the post-high school domain, those students are also likely to carry similar sentiments, thereby lowering these students' post-high school aspirations (Abrego, 2004; Nienhusser et al., 2016). Peers who also hold undocumented status serve a similar function to that of family in that they help to illuminate resources and information (Enriquez, 2011). Though most respondents in Enriquez's (2011) study found themselves in weak networks that included other undocumented students at their high school, these peer networks served as a way to learn more about critical information, such as California AB 540 or who among the community was "undocu-friendly" and could offer more targeted support.

Family and peer relationships offer students a framework to understand their identity as undocumented immigrants and (re)frame their goals for the future. The reviewed body of research indicated family and peers play an important role in students' educational trajectories, thereby suggesting students' social networks should be observed more closely to understand how students persist in the face of obstacles and achieve their goals of pursuing bachelor's degrees (Gonzales, 2011; Muñoz, 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Pérez et al., 2009; Pérez Huber, 2009; Yasuike, 2019).

Lifting While Climbing: Role of Community-Based Supports

Previous research has also demonstrated the role of organizations outside of the school context and how these organizations shape undocumented students' college ambitions; for instance, Trivette and English (2017) examined how a nonprofit organization whose mission was to support the college-going efforts of a cohort of undocumented students—most of whom were Latinx students—influenced students' college choice process. Students in the study reported not being able to rely exclusively on their high school counselors for support. As many of the students in the study came from families with little-to-no college information on which they could directly pass to their students, the nonprofit organization served a critical role in bridging that informational gap for students (Trivette & English, 2017). In this study, Trivette and English found community-based organizations were also valuable in providing students with a sense of hope and instilling in them a sense of advocacy. Many students who took part in this program wrote in their college applications their experiences with protesting and engaging in other forms of activism (Trivette & English, 2017).

In a similar regard, Nienhusser et al. (2016) highlighted how facilitating partnerships between high schools and external community-based or university student organizations may be

helpful in further meeting the needs of undocumented students, suggesting there may be benefits in extending students' preexisting support systems and implementing multileveled support networks. This same sentiment was echoed by Yasuike (2019), wherein they found participants who enrolled in nonprofit community programs partnered with local high schools and community colleges benefited from such support. The undocumented student participants in this study reported these community programs facilitated the formation of their college aspirations and helped them envision themselves as college students (Yasuike, 2019). These programs contained a partnership element that helped fill information gaps and ensure students received guidance on the broader college and financial aid application processes (Yasuike, 2019). Enriquez (2011) also highlighted students' social networks, comprised of students' families and their larger communities, play a vital role in helping students patch together resources that support their educational goals. Amid existing research that emphasized the importance of tapping into students' social networks, community advocates can also further bolster these benefits by disseminating information beyond the student. Working intentionally with other stakeholders (e.g., parents, high school staff, college personnel) is critical to supporting students' needs (Chavez et al., 2007).

Although community-based networks are significant in that they help to equip undocumented students with needed resources and information, these same networks also serve the function of community empowerment as a tool for change. Student participants in Enriquez's (2011) study shared the resources and support lent to them by members of their community were meant to be paid forward and extended to future generations of undocumented students. As such, the role of community is not only to take resources for one's own personal gain, but also to give back and lend a hand to those students who come after them (Enriquez, 2011). These notions of

reciprocity and the practice of sharing resources, both within and throughout the community, act as a deliberate form of resistance. Undocumented students lifting their peers and members of their community as they climb serves not only as a way to counter the oppressive structures in place meant to constrain opportunity, but also to boldly and loudly proclaim their belonging in spaces of higher education (Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2013).

Goals and Contributions of Current Study

As this literature review suggests, undocumented students face myriad challenges as they navigate their college application processes. Despite a growing understanding of the role of college counseling specifically within the high school context and the influence of students' larger social networks outside the school, I aimed to draw specific connections to how these experiences are directly shaped by the policy landscape. The purpose of this study was to examine in greater detail how policy shaped Latinx undocumented students' process of applying to college and the decisions they made along this process.

Although gaining admission to higher education is only one small piece of the larger conversation surrounding systemic injustices that impede undocumented immigrants' access to educational opportunities and upward mobility (Ovink, 2017), this study sought to unpack the strategies used by students and explore how they leveraged their networks to propel them toward their goals of pursuing bachelor's degrees. In essence, this study grappled with the question of how policy is embedded into the very process of applying to college and how this influence in turn shaped students' decisions during this process. I explored how practitioners, both at the high school level and college level, can better serve the needs of undocumented students and employ strategies that actively consider the policy landscape. Such examination also lent itself to begin theorizing where additional legal and policy support may be needed to ensure undocumented

students can gain access to higher education and persist to degree completion at rates comparable to their peers with U.S. citizenship.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Using the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory (CRT) and Latino/a critical race theory (LatCrit), I aim to scrutinize the policy landscape described in Chapter 2 and highlight how policy has frequently served to disenfranchise marginalized communities. In Chapter 2, I discussed certain structural and academic barriers named in existing literature that have frequently impeded undocumented students' access to higher education. In Chapter 3, I discuss in more direct terms, using these theoretical frameworks, how these barriers are deeply tied to notions of race and racism.

I begin this chapter by describing the origins and genealogy of CRT. I provide an overview of the seven tenets that have commonly guided CRT scholarship and in this discussion, I highlight one of the CRT legal tenets, *whiteness of property* (Harris, 1993). In doing so, I discuss how the *whiteness of property* tenet may be used to highlight how policymakers across the federal and state lines and administrators at the institutional level habitually use citizenship as a means to exclude racial and ethnic minorities. This section on CRT is followed by a discussion on LatCrit and how this specific offshoot of CRT helped advance the framing of this study beyond what CRT would have been able to achieve alone. In the discussion of LatCrit, I examine Pérez Huber et al.'s (2008) concept of *racist nativism* and discuss how I used this concept in this dissertation to explore connections between racism and nativism. I conclude this chapter by discussing how these two combined frameworks work with one another to challenge the structural barriers described previously in this dissertation, and to justify why critical examination of policy and its ramifications on Latinx undocumented students is necessary.

CRT

CRT is a theoretical framework used to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct issues of social justice, emphasizing the necessity for researchers to consider the reality of racialized society and how it impacts peoples' everyday lives (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2010). CRT originated in the late 20th century in the realm of legal scholarship to explore the role of racism in U.S. law and explore how racism is deeply embedded into the very fixtures that comprise individuals' day-to-day lives (Matsuda, 1991). In a piece describing the genealogy of CRT and its use in the field of education, Ladson-Billings (2010) emphasized the very nature of race and how racial categories are conceptualized (and the fluidity of these categories) creates structures where whiteness is upheld as the norm, and everyone is "categorized in relation to these points of opposition" (p. 9). Since its creation, and as alluded to previously, CRT has also transcended the field of legal studies and has been used as a theoretical framework in the field of education to challenge the dominant discourse of race and racism in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). Education researchers have used CRT primarily as a framework to view how "educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000, p. 40; see also Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn & Parker, 2006).

Overview of CRT Tenets

Concerning CRT's use in legal scholarship, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) identified a set of commonly used tenets guiding CRT scholarship. The first tenet of CRT posits that "racism is ordinary;" in this respect, racism is an everyday, commonplace experience shared by most people of color in the United States, thereby making it difficult to ever fully "cure or address" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). The second tenet concerns the notion of *interest convergence*.

This second tenet holds that preserving a system that favors and prioritizes whiteness over people of color serves important purposes and functions (Bell, 1980, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998). In other terms, these purposes and functions are ones that, by design, are meant to preserve white supremacy and keep communities of color at the margins. The third tenet refers to the *social construction* thesis, which holds that concepts of *race* and *racism* in and of themselves are created and molded by social thought (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The *social construction* thesis asserts race has no specific nor fixed biological or genetic basis; rather, race is constructed and continually molded by society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

The fourth tenet of CRT focuses on “differential racialization,” which emphasizes the ways the “dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 8). In their historical overview of CRT, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) illustrated this tenet by pointing to U.S. reliance on communities of color to respond to shifting needs in the labor market, specifically in agriculture. Delgado and Stefancic’s (2001) example of the U.S. reliance on Mexican agricultural workers, in particular, mirrored some of the history provided on the term “undocumented” in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I specifically discussed the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, wherein Mexican farmworkers were contracted by the United States to grow and harvest crops on U.S. soil (Kanstroom, 2010; Ngai, 2004). When this formal labor agreement ended in 1964 amid emerging developments in agricultural mechanization, many Mexican farmworkers who had been working on U.S. soil were then considered undocumented (Kanstroom, 2010; Ngai, 2004). Suddenly, these farmworkers’ roles in the United States and their perceived value to the nation had shifted, casting these workers in an undesirable light.

The fifth tenet of CRT concerns Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) concept of *intersectionality*, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of social categories (e.g., race, gender, citizenship status, sexuality) and how a person's combined identities shape an individual's relationship with privilege and oppression. Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) description of *intersectionality* aimed not only to understand how this interconnectedness takes place on the micro or individual-person level, but also strives to hold structural and political systems accountable for the ways these systems perpetuate and uphold white supremacy and the power ascribed to other majoritarian groups (see also Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Guidroz & Berger, 2009; Harris & Patton, 2019). The sixth tenet Delgado and Stefancic (2001) identified concerns the unique voice that people of color share. The unique, firsthand experiences of people of color with racism provide them with a perspective that differs from those who benefit from whiteness, thereby offering them a unique lens from which to "access law's master narratives" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9; see also Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Matsuda, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Tate, 1997).

In addition to these five commonly used CRT legal tenets outlined by Delgado and Stefancic (2001), scholars have also frequently considered Bell's (1992) *permanence of racism* and Harris's (1993) *whiteness as property* as part of CRT's foundational tenets (Capper, 2015; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). The *permanence of racism* tenet closely mirrors Delgado and Stefancic's (2001) mention of "racism as ordinary" (p. 7), wherein the concept of racial permanence holds that racism has remained an enduring fixture of U.S. life due to its conscious and unconscious origins (Bell, 1992; see also Capper, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). Finally, Harris's (1993) *whiteness as property* posits because of racism's role in the United States and the ways in those in power have continued to reinforce conceptions of race, whiteness functions in ways similar to that of property (see also Capper, 2015; Ladson-Billings,

1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). I explore Harris's (1993) *whiteness as property* tenet in greater detail in the following section, including its connection to the topic of serving Latinx undocumented students and the tenet's use in guiding this dissertation.

As mentioned previously, many ideas that originated in CRT legal scholarship have also extended into educational research to scrutinize the role of race and racism in educational contexts (Ladson-Billings, 2010). In educational scholarship, researchers have applied several of the aforementioned CRT legal tenets to explore the specific contexts of (a) educational spaces (e.g., instruction, curriculum, administration, student services or support) and (b) how race and racism shape the everyday experiences of students, faculty, and staff in these specific spaces (Ladson-Billings, 2010). I used CRT as a theoretical framework in this dissertation to examine the linkages not only between race and policy—as intended in its original conception for legal scholarship—but also look to CRT in education to further examine the connection between race, policy, and education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997).

CRT as a broader framework—encompassing the goals and objectives of both CRT in legal scholarship and CRT in educational scholarship—offered a unique perspective through which to view the college trajectories of Latinx undocumented students. In legal scholarship, CRT by design aims to demonstrate how race is embedded into the larger legal and policy landscape (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). In other words, I used CRT and its guiding tenets in this dissertation to explore the ways in which Latinx undocumented students experience race and racism within the educational context and as a means through which to connect these experiences to larger systems of oppression and domination. CRT was used in this study to highlight how the implementation of policies concerning accessibility and affordability and the challenges undocumented students face in receiving the information needed to navigate the process of

applying to college are signifiers of a larger system designed to marginalize and exclude ethnic minorities.

Whiteness as Property

In this dissertation, I drew heavily on Harris's (1993) tenet of *whiteness as property* to (a) deconstruct some of the oppressive structures impeding undocumented students' access to higher education and (b) guide the discussion on how many of these barriers have served as a means to uphold white supremacy. *Whiteness as property* is a CRT legal tenet that describes how whiteness operates similar to tangible forms of property (Harris, 1993). Harris (1993) identified four primary ways in which whiteness operates similar to property: (a) rights of dispositions; (b) rights to use and enjoyment; (c) reputation and status property; and (d) the absolute right to exclude.

Rights of dispositions refer to the notion that those who do not meet the parameters of whiteness are not able to easily access or inherit whiteness and its associated privileges (Harris, 1993; Harris et al., 2019). *Rights to use and enjoyment* refer to the principle that those who are white can deploy and take advantage of their white privilege and leverage this privilege over people of color (Harris, 1993; Harris et al., 2019). *Reputation and status property* broadly refers to how whiteness confers a specific type of reputation and status to its holder (Harris, 1993, Harris et al., 2019). Finally, the *absolute right to exclude* allows those who possess whiteness to control who is white and who is not, thereby determining who is granted access to white privileges (Harris, 1993; Harris et al., 2019).

The property functions of whiteness highlight that conversations surrounding undocumented immigration and notions of illegality must consider who creates and controls access to multiple societal functions. In other words, and most closely in line with the absolute

right to exclude, researchers must critically examine who controls the malleable parameters of who is deemed a citizen and who is not. The absolute right to exclude must prompt researchers to reflect on to whom the privileges of citizenship are conferred and how these same privileges are leveraged to actively exclude groups of people. Given the prevalence of undocumented immigrants who identify as racial and ethnic minorities (Chavez et al., 2007), researchers need to actively engage with and confront how definitions of U.S. citizenship and the privileges associated with citizenship keep communities of color at the margins.

Harris (1993) also explored the convergence of racial and legal status. Harris framed legal status in this context in terms of who is deemed a “slave” and who is “free.” In this seminal work on *whiteness as property*, Harris (1993) examined how captured Africans sold in the early Americas were distinguished from other forms of “unfree” (p. 1716) white labor. In her analysis, Harris noted the construction of white identity and the formation of racial hierarchy ideology were deeply tied to the nation’s growing reliance on chattel slavery. Harris (1993) also stated, “Although not all Africans were slaves, virtually all slaves were not white. It was their racial otherness that came to justify the subordinated status of Blacks” (p. 1717). As time went on, one’s whiteness defined the legal status of a person. The continued subordination of Black slaves was later recognized and codified by law, with some of the earliest versions in the 1680s taking the form of slave codes (Harris, 1993). Laws of this type would uphold the unjust, violent conditions already seen in practice within the United States, and further restrict Black people from obtaining and thereby benefiting from both status and property rights. Harris’s discussion of the convergence of racial and legal status is noteworthy, as I argue here in this study that it is important to examine the interconnectedness between race and legal status. The conflation of

race and legal status is an intentional act to further disenfranchise racial minorities while simultaneously upholding the status of whiteness and white supremacy.

To place this larger discussion of *whiteness as property* back in the context of higher education and illustrate how this tenet manifests within the realm of college access, I again return to the literature outlined in Chapter 2. Although no federal or state laws currently exist prohibiting undocumented students from higher education, undocumented students still face significant barriers complicating their abilities to afford and gain entry into higher education (Vega et al., 2016). Given that undocumented students are barred from receiving federal financial aid (Nienhuser, 2013), students faced with out-of-state or international student tuition rates are often unable to afford costs associated with their higher education (Vargas, 2010). Kantamneni, Dharmalingan, et al. (2016) found many undocumented students feel overburdened by the need to exhaust all resources available to them as they navigate their college admissions process. Moreover, as undocumented students come to grapple with the realities of their immigration status and the narrowed options available to them, many students reconsider their post-high school objectives (Chavez et al., 2007; Gonzales, 2011; Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2013). Through this analysis of the literature, I emphasized it is essential for future researchers to consider how these barriers to access closely mirror the absolute right to exclude, specifically in who controls these barriers and for what purposes.

Whiteness as property can also be used to illustrate some of the less tangible forms of property conferred to those with U.S. citizenship, specifically regarding feelings of safety, security, and stability. These notions show up most prominently in the discussion of students' status disclosure. Within the context of college access, status disclosure and the anxiety surrounding this process of sharing one's status remains one of the most prominent, recurring

trends in the literature (Gonzales, 2010; Kam et al., 2018; Kantamneni, Dharmalingam et al., 2016; Muñoz, 2016; Murillo, 2017a; Nienhusser, 2013; Roth, 2017; Suárez-Orozco & López Hernández, 2020; Woods & Domina, 2014; Yasuike, 2019). The experience of status disclosure is one of the many ways in which the fear and uncertainty surrounding status disclosure keep many undocumented immigrants in the shadows.

In summary, CRT and the tenet of *whiteness as property* can be used to dissect further the privileges attached to whiteness and how this privilege has been and continues to be leveraged against communities of color. This section of my theoretical framework was used to continue the discourse started in previous chapters and, in doing so, highlight how policy must be considered and researched using a critical lens. In talking about policy and how it directly impacts Latinx undocumented students' educational trajectories, CRT as a larger framework and a focused application of the tenet *whiteness as property* were best poised to analyze and scrutinize how policy is used to further marginalize communities of color.

LatCrit

LatCrit is a framework that closely mirrors CRT, but with special consideration paid to the unique experiences of Latinos and Latinas in the United States (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Though CRT offers a lens through which to explore how race and racism are entrenched into societal fixtures, including that of education, scholars use LatCrit to examine in greater detail the unique lived experiences of the Latino/a community and how this population experiences issues related to language, culture, customs, and immigration status (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). LatCrit also offers a more focused lens to view how the Latino/a community uniquely experiences race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). LatCrit is most notable for its ability to capture and articulate

experiences unique to the Latinx community that would otherwise be overlooked by the white/Black binary that frequently dominates discourse on race in the United States (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Pérez Huber et al., 2008).

LatCrit was layered into this dissertation's theoretical framework to provide a greater level of specificity beyond what CRT would be able to achieve alone. Because I focused on the lived experiences of Latinx undocumented students, LatCrit offered a way to examine how this population of students uniquely experiences racism and explore how racism is embedded in education and immigration policy. To better explain and account for both student participants' Latinx identity and their identities as undocumented immigrants, I looked to Pérez Huber et al.'s (2008) concept of *racist nativism* and explored how this idea connects to Harris's (1993) tenet of *whiteness as property*.

Racist Nativism

The concept of *racist nativism* draws from the CRT framework, specifically LatCrit, to highlight the complex relationship between the dominant U.S. society and immigrant communities (Pérez Huber et al., 2008). Pérez Huber et al. (2008) defined *racist nativism* as the act of ascribing values to real or imagined differences between native and nonnative peoples with the overarching intent of “justify[ing] the superiority of the native, who is perceived white, over that of the non-native, who is perceived to be People and Immigrants of Color, and thereby defend the right of whites, or the natives, to dominance” (p. 43). The definition of *racist nativism* by Pérez Huber et al. (2008) closely mirrored Harris's (1993) concept of *whiteness as property*, in that both concepts highlight how those in power have used the racial otherization of People and Communities of Color as a tool to uphold white supremacy. Pérez Huber et al.'s (2008) concept of *racist nativism* extends some of the theoretical ideas previously discussed in this

chapter by providing a lens through which to view how immigrants of color uniquely experience both racism and nativism in the United States.

Pérez Huber et al. (2008) discussed how *racist nativism* draws upon LatCrit to support its framing. The authors shared *racist nativism*, guided by the aims of LatCrit, can be used as a means to highlight how racism affects Latinos/as in the United States and expand typical discussions of race beyond the white/Black binary (Pérez Huber et al., 2008). Where Pérez Huber et al. (2008) provided a working definition of racism, the authors also noted white supremacy is “central to the experiences of *all* People of Color within the United States” (p. 41), thereby offering this concept to show how the experiences of people of color with oppression are closely linked to one another. Through this framing, the concept of *racist nativism* holds two objectives: (a) to challenge the dominant discourse surrounding the topic of immigration in the United States and (b) to better understand the unique lived experiences of immigrants of color residing in the United States who are continually subjected to racist nativist attitudes (Pérez Huber et al., 2008).

Pérez Huber (2010) also previously applied the concept of *racist nativism* in her scholarly research to understand the lived experiences of Chicana undocumented students in spaces of higher education. Pérez Huber (2010) drew from Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) term *intersectionality* and explored how Chicana undocumented students’ gender, legal status, and race intersect with one another and uniquely impact their experiences on U.S. college campuses. *Racist nativism* was used in Pérez Huber’s (2010) study to understand how Chicana undocumented students’ educational journeys were shaped by the racist nativism sentiments shared by their teachers, professors, and peers. In addition, Pérez Huber (2010) shed light on students’ own internalized racist nativism and how these negative self-perceptions frequently emerged as the students

grappled with what it means to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant living in the United States.

I employed the concept of *racist nativism* in this dissertation to unpack the intersections between racism and nativism and explore how these two specific, interconnecting identities shape the educational experiences of Latinx undocumented students as they look ahead to pursue their college goals. *Racist nativism* as a concept offered a lens to examine how Latinx undocumented students uniquely experience the college admissions process and provided justification for more closely examining students' experiences navigating policy.

Chapter Summary

Taken together as a whole, I used CRT and LatCrit to understand the unique backgrounds and experiences of Latinx undocumented students as they navigate their process of applying to college. CRT and its guiding tenets were used in this dissertation to highlight how racism is embedded into everyday institutions and to highlight how the myriad challenges Latinx undocumented students face reflect the enduring effects of race and racism. I drew on the CRT tenet of *whiteness as property* (Harris, 1993) to offer a more focused analysis through which to (a) further understand the oppressive structures in place impeding access to higher education and (b) recognize how many of these systemic barriers operate in ways that uphold white supremacy and the benefits and privileges associated with whiteness. Finally, the inclusion of LatCrit, layered with the concept of *racist nativism*, was used to intentionally articulate how Latinx students uniquely experience racism. This framework offered a more precise lens through which to understand how Latinx undocumented students' trajectories are impacted by both racism and nativism. I used the combination of these theories to scrutinize the broader policy landscape I described in earlier chapters and provide greater context into the experiences students share in

future chapters of this dissertation. Both CRT and LatCrit were used in this dissertation to (re)frame students' experiences within this context and shift the responsibility of change onto larger institutions themselves. The challenges and plights faced by Latinx undocumented students are emblematic of endemic racism; therefore, this dissertation aimed to directly establish a connection as to why greater scrutiny into policy is needed and rationalize why systemic change is ultimately required to bridge gaps in educational attainment and provide increased access for future generations of marginalized students.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This chapter provides more detail on how I executed this study and explains the rationale behind the study's methodological design choices in connection with the study's research questions and theoretical framework. First, I begin this chapter by discussing critical policy analysis (CPA) as a methodological approach and its connection to the study's critical race theory (CRT) and Latino/a critical race theory (LatCrit)-based theoretical framework. Next, I review why this study employed a qualitative approach and explain its appropriateness in examining the selected student demographic. I follow this section with more information about the study site and the eligibility criteria that were used to select participants. Next, I include more details about the two-part approach to data collection and analysis. This chapter concludes with information on how I cultivated and maintained researcher trustworthiness and credibility during the research process.

CPA

CPA offers a critical view into the world and “interrogate[s] the policies of the everyday” (Atwood & López, 2014, p. 1136; see also Marshall, 1999; Prunty, 1985). By design, CPA emerged as a way for researchers to examine how policy impacts individuals' everyday lives—and as part of this analysis specifically, to understand how racism manifests daily (Prunty, 1985). Prunty (1985) outlined six main “signposts” of CPA that served as the overarching principles guiding this approach. First, CPA must demonstrate a commitment to social justice; for a study to be considered CPA, the piece must be overtly political (Prunty, 1985). Second, a CPA piece must “expose the sources of domination, repression, and exploitation that are entrenched in, and legitimated by, educational policy” (Prunty, 1985, p. 136). In other words, CPA must shed light

on and explore the relationship between power and policy and must do so through an advocacy-type lens siding with marginalized groups.

Third, Prunty (1985) argued critical analysis of educational policy should aim to understand the values institutionalized in society by the very process of enacting and implementing policy, including the ways these values manifest and permeate through educational spaces. Fourth, CPA must address the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed and scrutinize how marginalized groups' consciousness are frequently shaped by their economic and political power, often leading these groups to "unknowingly abet their oppressors" (Prunty, 1985, p. 136; see also Atwood & López, 2014). Fifth, a critical policy analyst must be committed to praxis, because raising awareness alone is "necessary but not a sufficient condition of emancipation" (Prunty, 1985, p. 137). In other words, researchers engaging in CPA must be willing to extend their work beyond commonly used sentiments of "drawing attention to" and "shedding light on;" instead, CPA must thoughtfully consider ways spaces of education can be transformed (Prunty, 1985). Sixth and finally, Prunty (1985) acknowledged CPA should just occur in various spaces and across multiple activities. In other words, Prunty (1985) encouraged critical policy analysts to explore the ramifications of policy beyond the more "formal" spaces in which policymaking takes place (e.g., government or legislation-type spaces) and instead explore how policy manifests in the everyday in often taken-for-granted practices.

In a piece discussing CRT as a theoretical framework and its ability to scrutinize the racial politics of the everyday, Atwood and López (2014) explored the use of CPA as a methodological approach. Whereas CRT can be used as a theoretical framework to guide and center discussions of race and racism, CPA can be employed as a methodology alongside CRT to "assess the world around us—those visible and hidden structures, apparatuses, discourses, and

frameworks that shape our world and our everyday understandings of it” (Atwood & López, 2014, p. 1138; see also Prunty, 1985). As noted in Chapter 3, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) argued “racism is ordinary,” thereby making it difficult for racism to ever be fully “cure[d] or address[ed]” (p. 7). Other CRT scholars have long echoed similar sentiments that racism is an enduring fixture that is commonplace and widespread in U.S. society, partly due to racism’s both conscious and unconscious origins (Bell, 1992; Capper, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). With this sentiment in mind, the combined use of CRT and CPA aims to expose and examine racism in some of its “most ordinary and common forms” (Atwood & López, 2014, p. 1141).

I used CPA as a methodological approach guided by the teaching of CRT, including the tenets outlined in Chapter 3, to challenge and unpack the ways in which the oppressed interact and engage with policy in the everyday. Atwood and López (2014) argued CPA is not just a way of approaching policy analysis strictly from a mechanical sense; rather, using CPA as a methodological approach has important implications for the ways in which policy is considered as a construct, and the understanding generated from using this approach (see also Young & Diem, 2018). Moreover, CPA as a methodological tool aims to expose the relationship between (a) what policies say and aim to do at face value and (b) what policy actually does in practice, with special consideration paid to how policy often codifies systems of power in relation to one another (Diem et al., 2014; Young & Diem, 2018).

Guided by the overarching theoretical frameworks of CRT and LatCrit, including that of Harris’s (1993) *whiteness as property* and Pérez Huber et al.’s (2008) *racist nativism*, I used CPA in this dissertation as a mechanism to understand the ways policy affects Latinx undocumented students’ everyday lives. In particular, CPA provided a means to directly explore

the racial otherization of Latinx undocumented students, as posited by the theoretical concepts of *whiteness as property* and *racist nativism* and examine how policy upholds systems of power. As noted by Young and Diem (2018), CPA requires researchers to consider the theoretical framework throughout the research process, including but not limited to the study's data collection process, data analysis, and the interpretation of the findings originating from the study at hand. As such, this dissertation aimed to consider the relationship between theory, methods, and action, with the overarching goal of disrupting the barriers frequently impacting Latinx undocumented students' access to spaces in higher education.

Qualitative Research Design

In line with the aims and goals of a CPA methodological approach, a qualitative design uniquely lent itself to engaging with questions as to how Latinx undocumented students engage with relevant policies concerning postsecondary access and affordability. Given the purpose of this study, qualitative design was best poised to uncover how participants made meaning of their lived experiences via words and expression (Creswell, 2014; Weiss, 1994). Critical policy researchers also more commonly prefer qualitative approaches over quantitative approaches, because qualitative design better enables researchers to explore how participants make sense of the racial politics of the everyday (DeLeon & Vogenback, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Diem et al., 2014; Young & Diem, 2018). Qualitative research design assisted in uncovering experiences that comprise the human condition and exploring how participants perceived and ascribed meaning to the world around them, their relationship with others, and themselves (Weiss, 1994). As such, the purpose of using a qualitative research design in this study was to center the experiences of Latinx undocumented students and explore how they ascribed meaning to the policies with which they engaged—either directly or indirectly—during the process of

applying to college. In connection with the study's research questions, I used a qualitative approach to understand (a) how Latinx undocumented students currently enrolled in a public university in California made meaning of their experiences applying to college and the strategies they used, (b) how policy shaped their trajectories into college, and (c) the myriad of decisions surrounding this process.

Study Site

This study was conducted at a public 4-year university within the University of California (UC) system, which is identified by the pseudonym University of California Monarch Butterfly (UCMB). The monarch butterfly is a commonly used symbol used to represent the immigrant community (F. Rodriguez, 2018). I focused on the UC system due to its unique relationship with the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. DACA was established in 2012 by then-DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano (Napolitano, 2012), who went on to become the UC president the year following DACA's establishment until 2020 (UC Office of the President, 2019). The UC system also played a pivotal role in challenging the Trump administration when the DACA program was first rescinded in 2017 (*Regents of the University of California and Janet Napolitano v. U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Elaine Duke*, 2017). I situated the study within the context of the UC to explore how even in a university system that prides itself in "shaping issues of national importance like the DACA program" (UC Office of the President, 2019, para. 6), Latinx undocumented students continue to experience challenges accessing and affording the 4-year institution.

At the time of this study, UCMB had an undergraduate population that exceeded 20,000 undergraduate students, and according to most recent reports, over 20% of its entering freshmen class identified as Hispanic. University estimates indicated the institution had an undocumented

student body of at least 600 undocumented students during this time frame; however, these same reports did not specify how many of these undocumented students identified as Latinx. Although the overall total of undocumented students at UCMB was relatively small in proportion to the larger student body and there was no information specifying how many undocumented students at this campus also identified as Hispanic or Latino, I selected this institution as a site due to the prevalence and visibility of resources on campus that catered specifically to undocumented students.

UCMB has a few select offices on campus that cater specifically to undocumented students, all of which focus on a different aspect of the undocumented student experience. Some examples of programs include those that assist students in navigating financial aid; developing postgraduate plans; promoting the inclusion of these students in research and/or policy-type career fields; and providing a space on campus for these students to de-stress and connect with others in their community. Similarly, UCMB maintains a database of active student organizations on campus, thereby making it easy to identify student organizations with either an undocumented and/or Latinx focus. Although I did not inherently aim to make claims about the utility or value of these campus resources or programs, the visibility of student-focused supports at UCMB significantly aided in the study's participant recruitment.

Another key consideration in the selection of UCMB as the study site included the fact that it was a public institution in a state that allows undocumented students who attended high school in state to pay in-state tuition. This policy reduces the amount of financial strain placed on undocumented students and their families, especially considering undocumented students are barred from receiving federal financial aid. According to UCMB's website, the university has continued to approach the 25% Hispanic student body threshold needed to reach the formal

Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) designation, according to federal law (Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities, 2019). Though the impending designation of UCMB as an HSI does not inherently reflect a commitment to Latinx students or even undocumented students, UCMB enrolled a considerable number of students who met the study's participant eligibility criteria and, subsequently could speak to the study's research aims.

In a broader context, California has the largest Hispanic population in the United States; according to the 2020 U.S. Census, approximately 39% of California respondents indicated they were either Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). California also has the largest undocumented immigrant populations in the country, with this figure hovering at 2.7 million people as of 2019 (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.-b). Similar studies have indicated approximately 50% of California's immigrants were born in Latin America (Johnson et al., 2022). Across the United States, California has been one of the leaders in enacting policies aiming to increase access to education. Through policies such as Assembly Bill (AB) 540 and the California Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (Dream) Act, undocumented students residing in California have increased opportunities to receive in-state tuition and apply for public grants and scholarships (Chavez et al., 2007; Murillo, 2017b; Welner et al., 2017). These specific policies have reduced the financial strain placed on undocumented students and their families (Chavez et al., 2007; Welner et al., 2017).

Although additional studies are needed to show the divergent experiences of undocumented students from across the policy spectrum, this dissertation contributed to the larger discussion surrounding undocumented students by exploring how students currently enrolled at UCMB navigated policy as it pertained to their college-going efforts. Because many undocumented students view public universities as appealing options due to greater affordability

than private institutions (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011), I chose to focus this study on a public institution in California. Although California has more permissive finance-related policies that benefit undocumented students than those of other states (Chavez et al., 2007; Murillo, 2017b; Welner et al., 2017), situating the study within the state of California offered a lens through which to view how these policies can help expand higher education access, while also acknowledging their current limitations.

Participant Selection

The participants in this study consisted of Latinx undocumented students enrolled at UCMB as of Spring 2023. All students invited to participate in the study needed to share the following characteristics: (a) were 18 years or older at the time of the study; (b) self-identified as undocumented; (c) had attended high school in the state of California; (d) were enrolled at UCMB as an undergraduate student; and (e) self-identified as Latina/o/x or Hispanic. These criteria ensured participants met the essential characteristics alluded to in the study's research questions.

I chose to study Latinx undocumented students currently enrolled at a 4-year institution, as retroactive introspection aided in speaking to the broader picture of their college application processes and what they learned throughout their journey of applying to college. I captured participants' sentiments post-high school matriculation with the hope that participants could offer a more robust understanding of their experiences as undocumented students navigating the college application process when compared to undocumented high school students currently going through this process. An example that best demonstrates the utility of retroactive introspection is that among those participants who indicated an interest in going on to graduate or professional school after their undergraduate studies, these participants often explained how

their support networks and access to resources had changed over time. These discussions with participants frequently highlighted the role and value of these types of supports in connection to their college application process, but also in shaping these participants' educational trajectory as a whole. In summary, focusing the study on Latinx undocumented students currently enrolled at a higher education institution provided a more thoughtful articulation of the strategies, networks, and forms of the support they used along this process.

At the same time, I recognized limiting my study to Latinx undocumented students currently enrolled at a higher education institution could produce the effect of excluding voices who had not enrolled in college altogether due to a variety of different factors. Such factors may have been relevant to understanding the challenges faced by this student demographic and how policy colored their educational trajectories. Similarly, although collecting the perspectives of undocumented high school students going through the college application process at the time of this study would have certainly helped develop a larger perspective on how Latinx undocumented students navigate this process, I limited the scope of the present study to undocumented students currently enrolled at a higher education institution and to those over the age of 18 in an attempt to further safeguard this already vulnerable participant population.

On a related note, focusing the study at a single 4-year institution may not be able to capture the divergent experiences of those students at different institution types, including those at the community college. To better capture the experiences of students enrolled in California's community colleges, I broadened the eligibility criteria to include students who entered UCMB at both the 1st-year and transfer levels. This decision to include both 1st-year and transfer-level admits enabled me to explore students' experiences understanding and navigating policies such

as AB 540 and California Dream Act, specifically in how these policies intersect with larger issues of financial aid and affordability.

One additional consideration that went into the development of the study's participant selection criteria was whether to limit the study to students with or without DACA status. As DACA has remained in a continuous state of flux since its first rescission by the Trump Administration in September 2017 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2018), the population of college-going undocumented students without DACA will likely continue to exponentially grow. As such, broadening the study to include both students with and without DACA better positioned the study to meaningfully articulate how policies such as DACA impact(ed) students' college-going efforts and develop implications for practice that directly consider this growing demographic.

Participant Recruitment Procedures

To aid in participant recruitment, I used the support of student organizations and on-campus support programs that provide services to undocumented undergraduate students at UCMB. Study flyers were distributed and posted through email listservs relevant to the targeted demographic, which were coordinated with the support of the personnel who organize these information streams. In addition, participants who had already agreed to participate in the study were asked to refer the study to other possible participants they believed could help address the study's intended goals. To acknowledge and affirm the emotional labor involved in sharing their experiences, participants were compensated with a gift card upon completion of the study.

In total, 19 participants at UCMB were enrolled in the study. This number was selected to unveil patterns that would provide a glimpse of the experiences of Latinx undocumented students at UCMB and demonstrate the range of strategies students used as they navigated the policy

landscape. I interviewed 19 participants with the expectation that this figure would allow for ample diversity in participants' experiences. In combination with the study's approach to data collection, which I describe in more detail in the following section, this figure enabled me to achieve greater depth into participants' experiences and draw meaningful trends from the data.

Data Collection Methods

This study was conducted using a two-part approach. I collected data using semistructured participant interviews and document analyses, on which I elaborate in the following sections. Interviews were selected as one of my data collection methods for this study because humans symbolize and make meaning through language (Flick, 2018; Seidman, 2013). Consistent with the aims of CPA, these interviews served as a valuable medium for participants to share their experiences navigating systemic barriers, along with policy's role in shaping their trajectories into college. In the second part of this study's approach, I used document analyses to supplement the information gained in my interviews and help build a more contextualized understanding of points raised in the participant interviews. Together, these two forms of data collection allowed me to understand both undocumented students' personal and academic challenges during this period of application and how students strategically use various forms of support to navigate systemic barriers.

Part 1: Participant Interviews

The structure and organization of the interview protocol was broken into two parts to gain valuable information on the participants' educational and familial backgrounds, in addition to how they made meaning of their college application processes more broadly (see Appendix A; Flick, 2018; Weiss, 1995). The first interview focused on exploring participants' backgrounds, how they made sense of their identities, and began exploring how their identities had impacted

their educational journeys thus far. The second interview focused more closely on the details of participants' educational trajectories, including how and where these students sought out information relevant to their needs and the resources or forms of support that aided them in this process. To encourage future connections between research and practice, consistent with the methodological approach of CPA (Prunty, 1985), participants were prompted to consider how their experiences might inform implications for practice and policy during the second interview. In total, I held 35 interviews and 16 of the 19 participants completed the study in full, which included the second interview and submission of their educational journey maps.

A central component of the participant interviews came in the form of educational journey mapping. The use of educational journey mapping sought to uncover more about students' educational trajectories and provide them with an opportunity to identify specific people or events they found particularly important in shaping their higher education journeys (Annamma, 2017). The educational journey map was to be completed after each participant's first interview and before the second interview; I asked participants to prepare their educational journey maps on their own before the start of the second interview (see Appendix B). Participants' maps were explored in-depth during their second interview and allowed me to gain additional insight into their educational experiences. Furthermore, the loose structure of the educational journey map provided participants with ample room to reflect upon and explore nontraditional or less common forms of support (e.g., the role of peers, social media, community members).

Although the questions included in the interview protocol focused largely on students' educational journeys, participation in the study may have triggered memories of past traumas, either personal or familial. To mitigate any participant discomfort and support my student

participants, I compiled a list of campus and community resources for all participants involved in the study to ensure these participants (and their families) were connected to or were aware of resources should they want or require additional support. Because the focus of this study was related to students' educational journeys, I also included information about graduate school and financial aid resources.

Part 2: Document Analyses

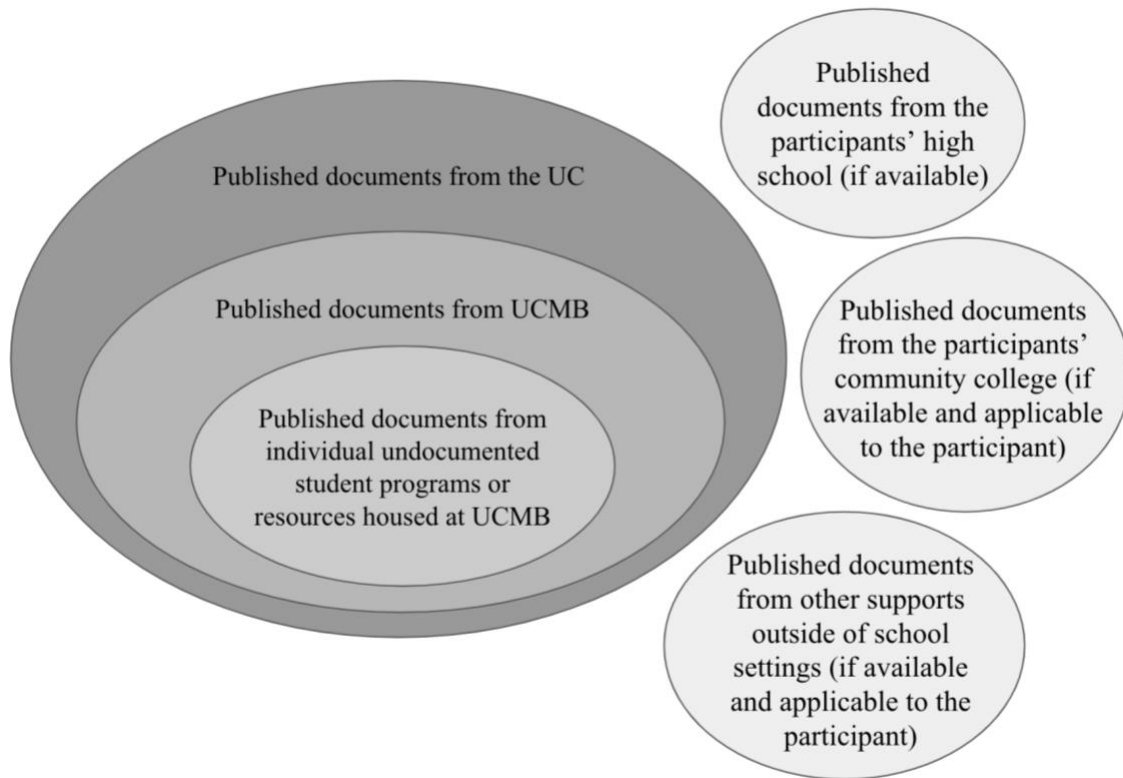
To provide background context and a more nuanced glimpse into the points raised in participant interviews, I engaged in two sets of document analyses, as illustrated in Figure 1. Both sets of document analyses aimed to contextualize the findings obtained through the interviews and serve as a form of data triangulation. Because CPA aims to understand the relationship between what policies say at face value and what policies actually do in practice (Diem et al., 2014; Young & Diem, 2018), the goal behind using these sets of document analyses was to examine the lengths students often take to find information relevant to their needs. One set of document analyses focused specifically on the resources available at the study site and its related entities. The other set of document analyses encompassed any additional resources, programs, or networks referenced by the students in their interviews or educational journey maps. These two document analyses sets are explained in further detail in Figure 1.

This first set of document analyses, depicted on the left-hand side of Figure 1, focused on university-owned and affiliated websites. This first document analyses set was broken into three spheres: (a) published documents or resources from UCMB's Undocumented Student Program and related undocumented student-focused programs at UCMB; (b) published documents from UCMB as a whole (e.g., statements of affirmation or solidarity, information for undocumented students via UCMB's admissions or financial aid units); and (c) published documents or

resources from the larger UC system. This first set of document analyses aimed to collect background information on the programs undocumented students might already use at the study site, these programs' primary goals, and who works at these programs. These data were also used to examine whether UCMB or UC operations reflect a commitment to undocumented student success and provide pathways to success for its students. Furthermore, a review of available information that was relevant to undocumented students helped assess whether the site had created any pathways or forms of support catered specifically to prospective undocumented students. Such information also aided in determining the level of support the institution itself offered to students as they aim to understand and navigate policy.

Figure 1

Document Analyses Visual



The second set of document analyses, depicted on the right in Figure 1, encapsulated resources outside of the university context and included all other resources, programs, or networks the student participants referenced in their interviews or educational journey maps. In the interview protocol, a large subset of questions was geared toward understanding more about students' high schools and the other forms of support students receive outside of their college or university settings (e.g., peers, social media, online forums). This second set of document analyses served two objectives: (a) to tease out more information about the students' high school contexts and the types of resources currently being offered at participants' high schools and if applicable, the participant's community colleges; and (b) to explore all other forms of support existing outside the school as a way to explore their utility to students and gain additional context behind students' experiences. The inclusion of this second set of document analyses aimed to demonstrate the far-spanning reach of policy and how students will often look to resources and networks outside of the school setting to help them uncover information specific to their needs.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data obtained through the interviews and educational journey maps, I first analyzed the data using a deductive approach that drew from concepts in my literature review and theory chapters. In the earliest stages of coding, I used *in vivo* coding to pay attention to the specific words and language participants used as they described their experiences. I also employed evaluation coding, which serves to ascribe "merit, worth, or significance of programs or policy" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 140; see also Rallis & Rossman, 2003). Given this dissertation focused on the impacts of policy and the strategies students used to navigate the policy landscape, the use of evaluation coding enabled me to (a) pay attention to policy's significance and its impact on students, and (b) lay the groundwork to provide recommendations for action

similar to the goals of CPA and guided by the larger frameworks of CRT and LatCrit (Saldaña, 2016). To analyze the documents obtained for the document analyses, I first coded these forms of data by using values coding and paid specific attention to how these data reflected the programs' or institutions' values, attitudes, and beliefs toward serving undocumented students or marginalized students more broadly (Saldaña, 2016).

Across all three forms of data, I employed structural coding, which served to identify how the data connected back to the research questions (Saldaña, 2016). As part of the second cycle of coding, I used a combination of axial and theoretical coding. The former coding approach served in creating conceptual categories and drawing linkages across the different data forms, whereas the latter coding approach aided in drawing relationships between categories and assessing how the data connected to the study's theoretical framework (Saldaña, 2016). Using the codes generated by the aforementioned coding approaches, I sketched out a coding tree to organize the data into larger themes and subthemes, categorizing the data in accordance with how these themes responded to each of my research questions. The organization of these themes into how they addressed my research questions served as the basis from which I formulated my assertions.

To carry out the coding process, I used a combination of analog and digital coding methods. I used hand coding as the primary method of coding participants' educational journey maps and document analyses due to the range and diverse format of these materials. I also used hand coding in earlier rounds of coding interviews and educational journey maps to better immerse myself in participants' experiences. As the dissertation's data collection period progressed, I turned to digital qualitative data analysis tools and used these to provide structure and organization to my coding process.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

As a form of data triangulation and to ensure the findings of this study aligned with the lived experiences of my participants, all participants were contacted for a member check, where they received a copy of their interview transcripts. Participants had the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy and provide any additional insights, information, or responses to the study's emerging themes (Creswell, 2009). Providing participants with the opportunity to review their transcripts aided in making sure that participants' stories felt authentically represented and in turn increased the study's trustworthiness. To further establish credibility, I also used peer debriefing to share how I applied codes to the transcripts, linked together categories, and generated the final themes or findings (Janesick, 2015; Miles & Huberman, 2014).

Limitations and Reflections

Because this study focused specifically on a single site, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to all institutions serving Latinx undocumented students, nor to the experiences of all Latinx undocumented students navigating their college application process; however, the selection of this site for this study provided insight into the particular topic at hand and explored the role that policy plays in directly shaping students' educational trajectories and their goals of pursuing a bachelor's degree. I also wanted to acknowledge the diverse range of experiences among Latinx undocumented students; limiting the study's scope to a more progressive geographic region may have constrained the generalizability of these findings. Latinx undocumented students attending college or university in a more conservative state than California would likely have had different experiences to share than the ones studied in this state, especially in those conservative states with restrictive or even discriminatory immigration policies (Roth, 2017; Trivette & English, 2017). Though generalizability remains a weakness

often found in qualitative methodology (Queirós & Almeida, 2017), this study aimed to establish why scholarly attention on this population of students is needed and set forth an urgent call to continue examining the role of policy. In a similar regard, although I focused on the lived experiences of Latinx students, future studies may expand upon this work, especially when considering many of the policies in place constraining opportunity often affect the entire undocumented population.

One challenge that arose in the pilot study of this dissertation concerned the range of diversity in Latinx undocumented students' experiences. In this retroactive examination of Latinx undocumented students' trajectories into college, many student participants had modified their educational and career goals during their college application process. In this pilot study, participants shared (a) they had considered colleges or universities that did not match their academic qualifications; (b) they took extended breaks away from their studies; (c) they had moved between institutions; and (d) they had opted to begin their college journeys at the 2-year institution, unaware the 4-year was an option to them. Given the much smaller scale at which this pilot operated, I struggled to obtain data saturation and draw meaningful patterns across students' experiences. Conversely, I found these divergent experiences among my participant pool helped illuminate this student population's personal and academic challenges.

In crafting this dissertation's research design, I faced the question of whether to constrain or broaden the participant eligibility criteria. To highlight the many ways in which policy can shape students' experiences, I intentionally decided to keep the eligibility criteria in its current form similar to what was used in the pilot study. Still, to address this challenge from the pilot study, I increased the number of overall participants and retooled portions of my methodological approach to account for some of these emerging themes from the pilot. For example, within the

interview protocol, I included a subset of questions that explored participants' support within their high school context and a separate subset of questions that examined students' experiences at community college to be used with participants who attended a 2-year institution prior to attending the 4-year institution. The educational journey map instructions were also restructured to include probing questions that better enabled me to understand gaps in participants' educational journeys, how and when participants began to understand their immigration status and the challenges this status imposes, and so on. By increasing the overall total number of participants and readdressing the methodological design to include the aforementioned changes, I was better positioned to demonstrate how students navigate policy influences the strategies that students employ and the forms of support on which they lean.

A similar limitation that concerned the study's participant eligibility criteria was that this study was only able to capture the experiences of participants who felt comfortable enough to disclose their status with me. As part of the participant recruitment process, participants had to initiate contact with me to express their interest in participating and to receive further information. By this very process, most participants were required to disclose their immigration status to a stranger they had never met before. This willingness to disclose such information with me suggested all participants enrolled in the study felt some degree of security and/or safety in disclosing their immigration status. Consistent with existing literature on undocumented students' status disclosure, this study's findings should be considered through this lens. Undocumented students who are less able or willing to disclose their immigration status might make sense of their journeys into college in different ways than those who were forthcoming with their status, specifically the ways in which these two groups navigated and made meaning of systemic barriers.

Statement of Researcher Positionality

Prior to beginning my doctoral studies, I began a college counseling academic certificate from a highly regarded program. Although I do not intend to become a college counselor in a K–12 setting, I pursued this certification to understand better what comprises a strong college-going culture, the factors contributing to a student’s opportunity structure, and which student populations are often underrepresented in these conversations. In these courses, I found a lack of instruction focused on how to specifically share and implement college-related information in the practice of college counseling and guidance that specifically addressed how to develop counseling strategies that tend to the needs of diverse student communities.

Although the program had indicated through its courses that undocumented students face a unique set of challenges in their college application processes through its discussion of the lack of federal financial aid support and the prevalence of in-state tuition policies like that of California AB 540, the certificate program’s curricula included little-to-no instruction on how to specifically advise this population of students on the college admissions process. My approach to this dissertation and interest in the larger topic of supporting undocumented students was shaped by the certificate program’s curricula and focus, which focused mainly on the needs and experiences of “traditional” students; the large majority of counselors and practitioners enrolled in the program served in predominantly white, affluent schools and communities. The curriculum did little to support college counselors in advancing their knowledge of diverse student populations and how they might employ counseling strategies to meet these diverse counseling needs. Marginalized identities, including those identities related to students’ or their families’ immigration status, were largely ignored; when actually included, these populations were discussed largely in terms of these students’ challenges and limitations.

In response to this issue, I combined tenets from theories such as CRT and LatCrit to highlight how the experiences students face in pursuit of their college goals are shaped by race and racism. I used this theoretical framework to build context behind the obstacles students face and demonstrate how students have found ways to persist despite systemic barriers, constrained college information, and more. I selected this topic and was drawn to the arena of policy because, to ensure future generations of students are provided with increased access to higher education, the topic of policy must be addressed.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I detailed the study's methodological design approach and how this approach was shaped by the study's research questions and theoretical framework. This chapter provided important insight into how the data were collected and analyzed. With this context and background established, the following two chapters function as the study's findings chapters. In Chapter 5, I introduce each of the 19 participants and provide a brief narrative arc showcasing each individual participant's journey to college. In Chapter 6, I present the main findings and explore how participants conceptualized their identities, made meaning of their journeys to college, and described their experiences navigating relevant policies along their process of applying to the 4-year UCMB. Finally, to conclude this study, Chapter 7 offers discussion on how these findings address the research questions and includes implications for practice, policy, and research.

CHAPTER 5: PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTIONS AND BACKGROUNDS

Before detailing the findings of this study, I present this chapter, wherein I introduce each of the 19 participants. This chapter outlines key demographic or biographical details that impacted the participants' journeys to college and provides a glimpse into their educational trajectories. This chapter should not be seen as a standalone, dedicated findings chapter; rather, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a glimpse into each participant's unique circumstances and to establish the climate through which the participants navigated their journey to college. For instance, many participants began their college application efforts around the same time the former-president, Donald Trump, took office—additionally, several participants applied to college amid the COVID-19 global pandemic and the subsequent transition to remote learning. As such, this participant introduction chapter aims to unpack some of these time-specific commonalities and provides an early glimpse into each of the participants' primary forms of support and obstacles they encountered along the way.

To begin this chapter, I provide an overview of the 19 participants included in the study. This section serves in establishing participant pseudonyms and providing general insight into the participant pool breakdown (e.g., freshmen or transfer-level admits, students with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA] status or students without DACA status). Then, I introduce each individual participant. I provide a narrative arc for each participant that introduces the most essential details comprising these students' journeys to college, mirroring the structure of these participants' educational journey maps. This introduction provides critical background information that sets the stage for the findings further detailed in Chapter 6. In Chapter 6, I spend more time drawing trends and highlighting patterns across the data I obtained, showing how and

where policy was embedded into these participants' trajectories and the strategic ways participants navigated policy along their process of applying to the 4-year institution.

Participant Overview

A total of 19 participants were enrolled in the study. The participants enrolled in the study are included in Table 1. In Table 1, I incorporated basic information on the participants, such as the pseudonyms referenced in the study; their major(s); and their country of origin, if specified by the participant in either their interviews or educational journey maps. I also include details such as their year of study at University of California Monarch Butterfly (UCMB), whether the participants were admitted at the freshmen or transfer level, and whether the participant had DACA or another protected status recognized by the U.S. government. Table 1 shows a total of 13 participants were admitted to UCMB at the freshmen level, whereas six participants were admitted at the transfer level. I explored some of the different experiences of those students admitted to UCMB at the freshmen level versus those at the transfer level in Chapter 6. Of the participants who were admitted to UCMB at the freshmen level, there were three 1st-years, two 2nd-years, two 3rd-years, and six 4th-years. Among the participants who were admitted to UCMB at the transfer level, there were two 1st-year transfers, three 2nd-year transfers, and one 3rd-year transfer. I separated freshmen- and transfer-level admits in an attempt to better encapsulate the time each participant had been at UCMB, along with the time that had lapsed since their matriculation to the 4-year institution. Similarly, I separated the participants by their admit level in an attempt to minimize confusion, as each of the transfers enrolled in the study struggled to articulate their year at UCMB while simultaneously acknowledging the length of time they were enrolled at the community college.

Table 1*Participant Demographic Information*

Participant pseudonym	Admit level to UCBM	Year in school at UCMB	Major(s) and minor(s)	Country of origin	DACA or related status classification
Ximena	Freshmen	3rd year	Political science Minor: Policy	Mexico	DACA recipient
Teresa	Freshmen admit	4th year	Education policy Minor: Ethnic studies	Mexico	DACA recipient
Antonio	Transfer admit	3rd year transfer	Political science Communication	Mexico	DACA recipient
Oscar	Freshmen admit	1st year	Computer science	Unspecified	Does not have DACA
Raquel	Transfer admit	1st-year transfer	Sociology Minor: Ethnic studies	Unspecified	Does not have DACA
Jessica	Freshmen admit	4th year	Psychology Education	Mexico	DACA recipient
Ana	Freshmen admit	3rd year	Psychology (Pre-health)	Mexico	DACA recipient
Chris	Freshmen admit	2nd year	Sociology	Unspecified	Does not have DACA
Joana	Transfer admit	2nd-year transfer	Ethnic studies Minor: Political science	Mexico	Does not have DACA
Alejandro	Transfer admit	2nd-year transfer	Political science	Unspecified	Does not have DACA Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipient

Participant pseudonym	Admit level to UCBM	Year in school at UCMB	Major(s) and minor(s)	Country of origin	DACA or related status classification
Diana	Freshmen admit	1st year	Life sciences (Pre-health)	Honduras	Does not have DACA
Ivan	Transfer admit	2nd-year transfer	Linguistics Computer science	Guatemala	Does not have DACA
Selena	Freshmen admit	2nd year	Life sciences (Pre-health)	Mexico	Does not have DACA
Isaac	Freshmen admit	4th year	Political science	Unspecified	DACA recipient
Lizeth	Freshmen admit	4th year	Psychology Minors: Ethnic studies	Mexico	DACA recipient
Brianna	Freshmen admit	4th year	Life sciences	Mexico	Does not have DACA
Melissa	Transfer admit	1st-year transfer	English Minors: Writing, psychology	Mexico	Does not have DACA
Lucia	Freshmen admit	1st year	Psychology	Mexico	Does not have DACA
Karina	Freshmen admit	4th year	Life Sciences (Pre-health) Minors: Psychology, ethnic studies	Mexico	DACA recipient

Note. Some details regarding participants' majors and minors were changed and/or omitted to protect participants' identities.

The final column included in Table 1 indicates whether the participant was a DACA recipient or had another form of a protected status. This particular column is important later on in Chapter 6 wherein I discuss how DACA—both the status itself and the legal challenges the policy has faced in recent years—shaped participants’ journeys to college. A total of eight participants were DACA recipients and the remaining 11 participants did not have DACA. Of those 11 participants without DACA, one participant was granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) during the span of his participation in the study. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) uses the TPS program to identify countries or regions where current conditions prevent people from returning to that region safely (e.g., armed conflict, environmental disaster, epidemic; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.). Under this program, people who originated from TPS-recognized countries or regions are eligible to receive protections that closely mirror those protections afforded to those with DACA, such as protection from deportation and work authorization (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.). This last column is presented mainly as a binary category (i.e., having DACA versus not having DACA) because this configuration most accurately depicts the data that were obtained from the interview protocol. Though I acknowledge the existence of other protected statuses beyond DACA, I did not inquire with participants about these using the study’s data collection instruments; therefore, those statuses extend beyond the scope of this study.

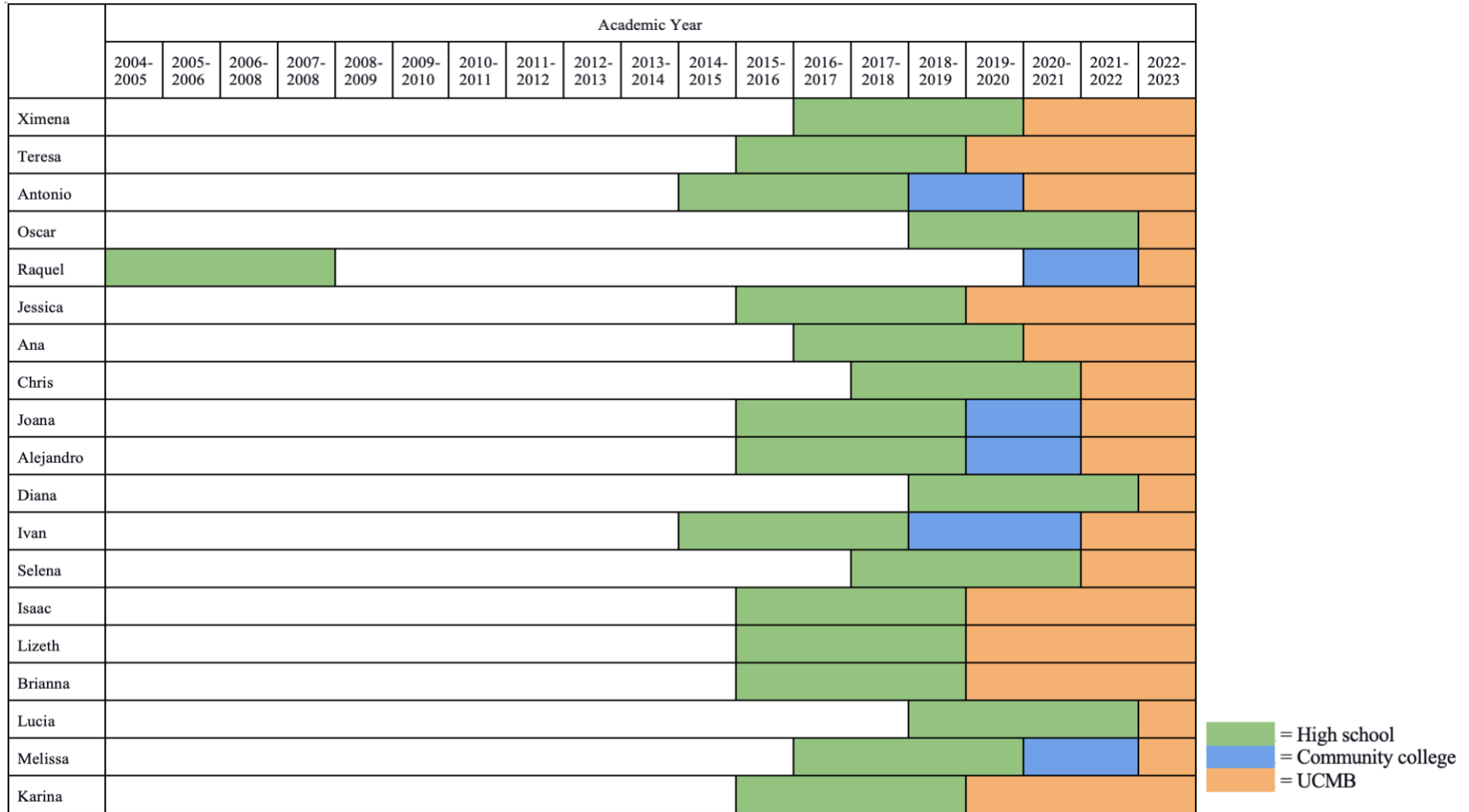
A few trends emerged concerning participants’ years at UCMB and how this information coincided with their immigration status. All eight of the participants who were DACA recipients were upperclassmen (i.e., juniors and seniors) at UCMB; meanwhile, all five participants who were lowerclassmen (i.e., freshmen and sophomores) did not have DACA. The trend of upperclassmen at UCMB being more likely to have DACA than the lowerclassmen is likely

because DACA was first struck down in September 2017 and did not return again until December 2020. In the case of the five participants who were lowerclassmen at UCMB, DACA had been struck down before they reached the age of 15, the minimum age needed to be eligible to apply to DACA. Roughly half of the total 11 participants without DACA reported applying to the program after its December 2020 reinstatement; however, their applications were not processed in time before DACA was rescinded once again in July 2021.

Figure 2 depicts a timeline illustrating the years (a) each participant spent in high school; (b) community college, if applicable to the participant; and (c) UCMB. This figure does not extend beyond the 2022–2023 academic year, which was the period during which I collected data. Eighteen of the participants fell within the 18–24-year-old age bracket, with most of these participants concentrated around the 20–22-year-old age range. The density in the 20–22 age range was consistent with the large concentration of 3rd years and 4th years enrolled in the study, which I highlighted earlier. One participant was in her early 30s and identified herself as a nontraditional student. These details surrounding age and the timing of the participants' college journeys are notable for a number of reasons. As also depicted in Figure 2, approximately 14 of the 19 participants were enrolled in high school and/or community college at the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic in the United States, when academic operations in California public schools operated almost exclusively via remote means (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2020). As such, many of these participants' relationships with faculty and staff at the high school and/or community college levels were cultivated in a time where in-person or face-to-face interactions were limited. The remaining five participants who had not dealt with the ramifications of COVID-19 during their process of applying for college entered UCMB at the 1st-year level in Fall 2019; thus, the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic and introduction of

Figure 2

Participants' Academic Timeline



remote learning occurred after their matriculation to the 4-year institution. This context is important to note in the sense that depending on the timing of a participant's entry to UCMB, the modality in which they received or accessed support varied.

Participant Introductions

The previous participant overview served in providing a glimpse into the participant pool and a few key characteristics shared by the 19 participants enrolled in the study. In what follows, I individually introduce each participant and present some of the main features or characteristics that marked each participant's journey to college. In this section, I heavily use details from the participants' educational journey maps as a way to provide a general structure or layout of each participant's journey to college. These educational journey maps provided the foundation for this chapter and served as a way of outlining some of the more significant events that marked each participant's journey to UCMB.

Figure 3 depicts the study's data collection timeline, spanning from early February to early July 2023, and the approximate timing of each participant's interview(s). This section adopts an organization that follows this chronological timeline, wherein the first participant enrolled in the study is presented first and the last participant enrolled in the study is presented last. This study's data collection period coincided with developments in the UC's Opportunity for All campaign and, beginning in June 2023, as the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas began to hear oral arguments regarding the future of the DACA program. I introduce Opportunity for All and discuss both this emerging institution-level policy and DACA later in Chapter 6; however, the organization of this section serves in highlighting how developments related to DACA and Opportunity for All emerged in the participants' interviews.

Figure 3

Participants' Study Participation Timeline

	Month(s) of participation					
	February 2023	March 2023	April 2023	May 2023	June 2023	July 2023
Ximena	■					
Teresa	■	■				
Antonio		■				
Oscar		■				
Raquel		■	■			
Jessica		■	■			
Ana			■			
Chris			■	■		
Joana				■		
Alejandro			■	■		
Diana				■	■	
Ivan				■	■	
Selena					■	
Isaac					■	
Lizeth					■	
Brianna				■	■	
Lucia					■	
Melissa					■	
Karina						■

Ximena

In interviews with Ximena, she spoke about how college was “something [she has] always wanted to do” and how she “was always geared in that path.” In fifth grade, her teacher recommended that Ximena’s mother enroll her in her school’s Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) course. AVID is a course developed through a nonprofit organization that is meant to provide historically underrepresented students in higher education with opportunities to engage with various college readiness topics (AVID, n.d.). For example, in sixth grade, Ximena completed a college project wherein she had to research the costs of attending college, college majors, and high school course selection. Ximena also began to learn more about some of the barriers she would face as an undocumented immigrant looking to go on to college.

Although Ximena was enrolled in the AVID course from fifth grade until 12th grade, she spoke about the challenges of receiving support from her school as she navigated the process of applying to college. Ximena’s AVID program encouraged its students to begin drafting their personal statements as early as their junior year of high school; however, Ximena shared she would often procrastinate on these statements due to her undocumented identity and explained how this identity frequently brought on a sense of uncertainty as to what the future would hold. Although Ximena received DACA shortly before Trump took office, Ximena discussed the stress of not being able to plan for the future. Specifically, Ximena spoke about how she has only been able to “plan for a future that’s within the expiration date of [her] DACA.” In essence, Ximena largely only thought about her future in increments of 2 years at a time. Ximena shared although AVID provided her helpful guidance on what classes to take while in high school and building a strong “student profile,” the AVID program “kind of went under the assumption that everyone was documented.”

As an example of this assumption, Ximena highlighted how financial aid and geographic location were the two largest factors in where she applied to school. Ximena lived primarily with her mother growing up, as her mother and father got divorced when she was at a young age. Throughout her adolescence, Ximena noted she was responsible for helping her younger sister and her cousins get ready for school each morning. Ximena's younger sister was in high school at the time of this study and had grown up with several undisclosed medical issues. Because of her familial obligations, most notably the health of her sister, Ximena spoke about the stress of selecting a college close to home. In the event that her mother was to be deported or another family emergency were to arise, Ximena wanted to be close enough so that she could take over her sister's care. Ximena emphasized when selecting which colleges to apply, she felt the need to "be realistic about things and have a backup plan in case things go wrong."

After school each day, Ximena would go to work for several hours; each night, when she would return home, she would spend her remaining waking hours working on her school assignments. This schedule left her with little time to work on her college applications, and Ximena noted she "didn't really have the space to just be able to look at things, talk things through, or talk with people." Though she shared that she was close with her English and AVID teachers, Ximena spoke repeatedly about not wanting to be a "burden" and her reluctance to "bother" them with questions that were specific to her undocumented identity. As such, most of the information Ximena acquired related to college was driven largely by her own efforts on her own time.

As a 3rd-year student at UCMB at the time of her interviews, Ximena was considering applying to graduate school and was thinking of pursuing either law school or a program focused on urban development. Much of this early interest in graduate school had been shaped by one of

her professors from the most recent academic year; however, Ximena was quick to note that she was still in the early phase of determining what programs would make the most sense to her, given her concerns about being able to plan only so far ahead and again keeping in mind her familial obligations. She spoke about wanting to build a career where she “can support [her]self, [her] family, and give back to the community where [she] grew up in,” but also noted she was trying to manage the “cards that [she] and [her] family were dealt.”

Teresa

From first through seventh grade, Teresa resided in the Northern region of the United States and later moved to a rural area in California before the start of her eighth-grade year. Teresa often spoke at length about how moving to a rural, agricultural community shaped how she understood her own educational trajectory. Reflecting on the rural community in which she spent her final middle school year and high school years, Teresa explained:

A lot of the students either worked over the summer, worked during the weekends, or ended up dropping out of school and working in the fields for the rest of their lives similar to their parents to make money and then eat to survive. It’s not that they aren’t smart enough. It’s not that they don’t want to get an education. It’s often that they don’t understand that there’s different avenues or believe that education is too expensive to dream of schools like [UCMB].

From eighth grade through her high school graduation, Teresa shared she and her younger brother took a 1.5-hour bus ride to school each morning. Teresa noted although she regularly spoke with her college counselor and had positive relationships with her teachers, she found most of these supports to be “surface level” in nature. Teresa only ever sought out her counselor for support enrolling in classes or during instances where someone from the school was absolutely needed. In Teresa’s senior year of high school, a man approached her once after school while she was waiting for a bus and gave her a flyer that advertised “Help for College Essays.” Teresa joked about how, normally, she would have thought “stranger danger” and

would not have looked into the offer any further; however, a few days later, Teresa decided to call the man, named Daniel, and met up with him at a local restaurant to learn more about the services he was providing. At the time, Daniel was a recent college graduate with a background in supporting local students interested in going to college and had aspirations of pursuing a master's in counseling program. Daniel and his partner, Andrea, later became two of Teresa's biggest advocates and forms of support during her college application process.

Part of the significance of Teresa's relationship with Daniel and Andrea was that she was able to receive a great deal of individualized, one-on-one attention. Daniel and Andrea helped to "demystify the concept of financial aid" and "guided [her] through the whole process." With any question Teresa had, Daniel and Andrea were there to answer it. In instances where Teresa's questions could not be answered by the two of them, Daniel and Andrea introduced Teresa to others in their networks. This form of networking allowed Teresa to gain a much greater and detailed level of insight into how to best prepare for college and tangible strategies on how she might navigate the universities to which she had been admitted. Andrea, in particular, was a wealth of information as a DACA recipient herself. Given this shared background with Teresa, Andrea was able to quell any anxieties that Teresa encountered in her process of applying to college by offering her firsthand experiences.

At the time of my interviews with Teresa, Andrea was a PhD student. Teresa spoke highly of Andrea and noted because of Andrea's shared background, Andrea had been able to instill in Teresa a sense of hope for the future. Through Teresa's relationship with Andrea, Teresa began to develop a sense of pride and ownership in her undocumented identity. Teresa recounted how Andrea told her, "[Our status] is what it is. We are here, but at the same time, we have so much to contribute and share with others. There's no reason to hide that." Prior to

meeting Andrea and Daniel, Teresa had seen being undocumented in terms of the limitations and boundaries this status poses; through these mentor relationships, Teresa began to see her status as “part of [her] intersectionality, but also as one of [her] strengths.”

As a “product of mentorship,” Teresa spoke at great length about how she hopes to extend a hand to undocumented students who have come after her. She shared her goal of pursuing a master’s degree in public policy and law program after graduation from UCMB. Though Teresa was weary about the challenges she may face, she described feeling a sense of hope that this goal is possible and that she planned on networking “[her] way to understand how that system works just like [she] did in undergrad.”

Antonio

Up until the middle of high school, Antonio largely did not pay much attention to his schooling, which was evident in his fair share of D and F grades. In his junior year, Antonio’s older sister, Belinda, sat him down for a “deep talk” mirroring that of an intervention. Antonio explained how Belinda helped him realize that he was not “dumb” and encouraged him to “seek support from [his] teachers.” At this time, Antonio also gained a deeper understanding of what it meant to be undocumented. He shared people all around him “began to tell him that [he] needed to apply to college” and Antonio began to understand obtaining a college degree as a tool for “social mobility.” He described how, as an undocumented immigrant, he saw going to college not only as a way to “secure a good job, but also find a community of support” that would enable him to “access more resources.” Antonio subsequently revamped his studying habits and began to shift his attitudes toward schooling.

At the start of his senior year, Antonio shared he quickly put together applications to apply to a few public universities throughout the state of California. Despite his sincere efforts to

improve his academic record from the previous years, Antonio's academic profile was not strong enough to earn him admission to most of the schools he applied. Though Belinda herself obtained only a high school education, she encouraged Antonio to enroll at their local community college the following academic year.

Antonio shared how he "truly felt like a failure for going to a community college." He struggled to meet other Latinx people in his classes and noted he "felt out of place" in many of his honors classes. Although he joined the honors program at his community college and other mentorship programs, Antonio recalled greatest form of support and inspiration came in the form of a transfer success program offered by UCMB. This program provided prospective community college transfer students throughout the state of California the opportunity to receive mentorship and support from current undergraduate students at the university. Part of what made this programmatic experience memorable was its emphasis on supporting the trajectories and celebrating the academic achievements of historically underrepresented student populations and those students who came from low-income or first-generation backgrounds. Participants of the program were able to attend an overnight program during the summer months wherein they received a crash course detailing the process of transferring to the University of California (UC) system. In addition, each participant received a mentor who would then follow up with them over the course of the academic year.

Through this program, Antonio was able to connect with other undocumented community college students looking to transfer and hear the stories and perspectives of current undocumented undergraduate students. Antonio spoke about the power of meeting the likes of "undocumented poets, undocumented financial advisors," and so on. Previously, Antonio "never really knew that they [undocumented personnel] existed because the undocumented community

is very hidden.” He shared how, because undocumented immigrants tend to be lower income, he struggled to imagine himself in a place like UCMB. Through this exposure to the experiences of other undocumented immigrants, he felt “reassured knowing that [he] could do this too” and recounted this sense of eagerness about being able to seek “tips and advice from them.” Most notably, the program also covered topics such as critical race theory (CRT) and taught concepts such as intersectionality to its participants. Antonio shared how learning about intersectionality provided him with a lens to understand his identity and how being a gay, undocumented man had shaped his experiences to date.

In reflecting back on his experiences of transferring to UCMB, Antonio emphasized the role that representation played in helping to see himself at the university and how this event encouraged him to become more open with his status and “dream big.” At UCMB, Antonio had continued to engage with the program of which he had been a part, but as a staff member supporting various projects taking place in the unit. At the time of his interviews, Antonio was preparing to graduate the coming spring and shared his plans of pursuing a career in technology.

Oscar

Oscar spoke about how he had always loved math and science, but never gave much thought to attending college. In his sophomore year of high school, Oscar began hearing more about college, but thought he could not go to college because of his status. Though he had always passed his classes with ease, Oscar turned down the opportunity to take International Baccalaureate (IB) classes and instead opted to simply “vibe” through high school.

Oscar shared he had not received much support from the high school. For context, his school’s academic counselor had been fired halfway through Oscar’s time in high school and a new permanent counselor was not hired until the April of his senior year, after he had already

“finished everything.” Oscar shared the previous counselor who had been fired would often tell her students that “state schools were too out of reach for them, to be realistic, and to apply to trade schools or community colleges.” In reflecting back to these interactions with his former counselor, Oscar exclaimed, “What the fuck was she saying? Aren’t you supposed to encourage your students?”

The COVID-19 global pandemic hit the United States in the second half of Oscar’s sophomore year of high school. One of the only primary ways Oscar was still able to interact with his peers in person were his cross-country practices. Through cross-country, Oscar met a peer named Cynthia, and the two began to grow close. Cynthia confided in her mother, Lorraine, that Oscar was undocumented and did not think he could go to college. Lorraine, who was a community college professor, dispelled the notion that Oscar could not go to college and affirmed that he would be able to continue school past high school. Over time, Lorraine became one of Oscar’s fiercest advocates. Oscar shared how Cynthia and Lorraine provided him with a new perspective on his academics and their encouragement was what led him to consider applying to the 4-year institution.

In the absence of school-based support, Lorraine connected Oscar with people in her network at the community college. Most notably, Lorraine connected Oscar with a faculty member who was familiar with the California Assembly Bill (AB) 540 and the California Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (Dream) Act. That faculty member provided Oscar with step-by-step instructions on how to complete his needed forms. In another example, because his and Cynthia’s high school did not offer any calculus courses, Lorraine helped Oscar enroll in a calculus course at the community college where she worked. Lorraine walked him through how to fill out his application and ensured he received the tuition fee

waivers for which he was eligible as a high school student. With Cynthia's and Lorraine's encouragement, Oscar later enrolled in the school's IB program. Although he completed all necessary IB courses, Oscar's paperwork was not processed on time, and he was therefore ineligible to receive his IB diploma. He described how Lorraine went to the counseling office and was "pissed" that he was not able to receive the diploma that he spent time working toward. Oscar laughed as he thought back to Lorraine going into the office "screaming and shit," but his tone suddenly shifted back to one that was more reflective and sentimental in nature. Oscar paused before sharing, "Lorraine's done a lot for me. She means a lot to me."

Oscar also spoke highly of another peer named Luz, whom he met in his junior year of high school. Although Oscar had received encouragement from Cynthia and Lorraine to apply to the 4-year institution, he remained "scared" and "intimidated" by the thought of applying to college. Luz was also undocumented, and Oscar felt a sense of relief knowing someone else had many of the same concerns as him. Oscar shared seeing Luz's stress and hearing someone else "voice the same concerns that [he] had" actually "helped [him] through the process." Luz was able to hire a private counselor to assist her in the process of applying to college and funneled some of the information she received to Oscar so he would benefit from that knowledge as well. Given Luz shared with Oscar an interest in computer science, Oscar felt inspired by Luz's tenacity and unrelenting desire to go after her dreams of attending an elite institution. Oscar remarked if Luz "is in a similar situation that [he's] in and she's still applying to school, that means [he] definitely can apply to school, too."

Raquel

Raquel was the only participant in the study who identified as a nontraditional student. After graduation from high school, Raquel planned on going to her local community college to

enroll in a certificate program as a way to improve her earnings potential as an undocumented immigrant. She graduated from high school in 2008 and at the time of her graduation, AB 540 had been passed into legislation, but it would take another 2 years before California's Dream Act would be approved by the state assembly. Raquel attempted to enroll at her local community college and received an itemized statement outlining the costs for the upcoming fall semester. Raquel had been classified as an out-of-state resident and as a single teenage mother, she knew she could not afford the out-of-state tuition price posted on her statement. She inquired with the community college's financial aid office to ask about the charge; although AB 540 had been passed for almost 7 years by the time Raquel attempted to enroll, the financial aid officer erroneously told her that she would need to pay out-of-state tuition. Raquel did not have the means to finance the out-of-state tuition and she instead worked various jobs over the following 12 years to "provide for [her] kids." Raquel shared if the financial aid officers with whom she spoke back in 2008 were properly informed on how to support a "person with these characteristics," she "would have done [community college] then."

In 2020, not long after the COVID-19 global pandemic began, Raquel began to follow various accounts on Instagram, a social media site. Raquel wanted to make sure her oldest child, who was in middle school at the time, had access to opportunities far beyond what Raquel could ever imagine for herself, and she began exploring adult school courses. Raquel followed various social media accounts including those operated by local community college, college access programs, and other programs of the like. Around this time, Raquel stumbled upon a post from a nearby community college that advertised the California College Promise Grant, wherein eligible students are able to receive 2 years of education at a California community college for free. The post included a caption that specifically said, "Immigration status not required to apply." Raquel

recalled when she read the post, she exclaimed, “Oh my God, I’m going to check it out. I kid you not, it was 2 [o’clock] in the morning and I’m here browsing and reading all the requirements and I applied. I applied to community college.” Although Raquel did not have DACA and shared she does not know what opportunities would be available to her after graduation, she wanted to pursue school for her now-three children and provide them with a “role model to pursue their education as well.”

Upon enrolling at the community college, Raquel connected with the college’s Dream Resource Center and shared how being connected with the program helped her to become more open with her status. She shared how in seeking out the center, she knew program staff were “supposed to help [her]” and had likely “already gone through the training.” She also shared how social media continued to be a tool she used not only as a “source of information,” but as a space to “give [herself] ideas of what [she] could do.” Through social media, she was able to get a sense of the sheer number of undocumented immigrants “that are out there dealing with the same thoughts, the same doubts, the same issues.” Finding and building community—both at her community college’s Dream Resource Center and in online spaces—helped Raquel navigate the process of applying to the 4-year UCMB as an undocumented immigrant and make sense of her undocumented identity.

Jessica

As a student in the education major at UCMB, Jessica recalled borrowing many ideas from her coursework and using this foundation as a lens to describe her experiences. Jessica attended charter schools for the second half of middle school and throughout high school. She shared she would meet with her counselor on occasion but did not have meaningful relationships with her teachers in that she did not receive any direct, one-on-one support. Consistent with

some of the themes introduced in this study's literature review, Jessica emphasized many of her teachers and counselors in high school simply lacked the time to meet with each student individually and cited other structural constraints impacting these figures' ability to fully support her (e.g., lack of resources, training, continuing education). As an aspiring school-based therapist or counselor, Jessica shared how she would like to make a positive impact in her future students' lives but noted she has struggled to remain hopeful knowing how some of the challenges she faced in accessing her counselors are part of a larger, systemic issue.

Jessica's older brother, Victor, who was 5 years older than her, attended a California State University (CSU) institution and frequently exposed Jessica to various forms of college-related information. Although Victor attended a CSU and Jessica primarily looked at applying to UC institutions, Victor provided Jessica with a "guiding pathway" for her to work from, in the sense that she "followed [her] brother's footsteps, trying to see what works for [her] and see how can [she] can integrate that into [her] approach." At the insistence of Victor, Jessica applied to a college-readiness program offered through a local nonprofit in which Victor had also participated when he was in high school. Jessica was admitted to the multiyear program that was geared around the themes of self-exploration, identity development, and college access, and she shared how the program was significant in addressing her needs in ways that her high school did not.

Although the nonprofit program offered a substantial amount of one-on-one advising and support, Jessica shared many of the program's financial aid workshops and resources were tailored to students with U.S. citizenship. She found this focus to be problematic, especially considering the program's mission of supporting the underrepresented student populations residing in her school district; for example, the program scarcely showed scholarship opportunities that did not require a social security number or that applicants be U.S. citizens.

Jessica would often have to turn to online searches to learn about additional opportunities. Jessica confided in Victor and shared her frustration on how conversations surrounding affordability and financial aid often overlooked students without citizenship. Victor shared he had noticed the same tendency while he was a student in the program as well. Though both Victor and Jessica were unsure as to how many undocumented students were active participants in the nonprofit program, both noticed “a lot” of students in the program had immigrant parents or were from mixed-status families.

Together, both Victor and Jessica approached the program director to share their concerns and advocate for additional resources for undocumented students. Jessica shared she was scared to approach the program director alone and her brother coming along with her was essential in backing up her perspective. Following this conversation, the nonprofit’s leadership team was quick to “accept the feedback, because they knew that they were working with a demographic of different students.” The nonprofit brought on an additional counselor who shared the same immigrant background as Jessica and Victor. Until further resources could be established, Jessica was offered a brand ambassador position with the nonprofit where she was able to provide the nonprofit with further direction on where additional resources were needed.

Ana

Of all participants enrolled in the study, Ana exhibited the most discomfort in talking about or reflecting on her undocumented identity. In the informed consent process, I outlined the study’s purpose and gave an overview of topics that would be asked in the interviews. Though Ana indicated that she would like to participate, she declined to answer a few questions that pertained to immigration status.

Ana was the oldest of four children and spoke about how she wanted to go to college to prove to her siblings—and herself—that “your place of birth shouldn’t be a determinant of where you end up in your life.” Ana had been a part of Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) in high school, a program geared toward supporting low-income students as they prepare to go to college (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Through GEAR UP, Ana shared that she was able to learn more about how to apply for college and shared how program staff would work individually with students to “properly fill out everything, make sure there’s no mistakes, and check in with every student before submitting applications.” Though her status was a driving factor in her motivation to attend college, Ana said she rarely shared her immigration status with others throughout her process of applying to college. This reluctance to share was largely due to an incident in middle school where she had witnessed a peer being “made fun of” due to that peer’s status. Ana described although “those kids are grown up now,” the event nonetheless “took a toll” on her and left a lasting impact on how she viewed her immigration status.

Ana left her camera off for the duration of the interview and in reflecting on her experiences, I noticed she would begin to open up, only to quickly wrap up her thoughts before diving into any rich detail. Sensing Ana’s hesitation, I moved to the set of questions focused on status disclosure and how students make sense of their undocumented identity. Ana indicated typically, unless absolutely necessary, she largely preferred to not think about her status. She described her hesitation to think about her status, noting:

Talking about my status makes me little bit sad. It makes me want to cry. I try not to think about that as much because of that. When it’s time to fill out the financial aid or whatever, I have to look at that. I just try not to subject myself too much to that.

Ana also shared that engaging with the language of policies (e.g., DACA, AB 540, the Dream Act) made her “emotional.” Ana explained how being undocumented, she often feels “dehumanized” and she preferred to not confront issues such as these to whatever extent she can. As such, the very process of applying to college constantly required she be in the “right headspace.”

Unfortunately, I was not able to meet with Ana for a second interview because she had recently lost her work authorization paperwork and was scrambling to begin the process of obtaining a new copy. I struggled to fully learn the narrative arc of Ana’s journey to college and obtain depth especially in the absence of her second interview and the educational journey map; however, her one interview held a great deal of significance to the study. One of this study’s inherent limitations was all interested participants were likely to be open regarding their status to some degree—either at the time of applying to college or as current undergraduate students. Ana more closely represented a subset of undocumented students who are less willing to share this personal information with others, including with random strangers like myself.

Chris

Chris described himself as a “talkative person” who loves to strike up conversation and “make connections” with others. Despite this characterization, Chris noted he has always been reluctant to share his status with others because he has feared how this information would “burden” others and “put a lot of pressure” on them to have the answers. He described feeling wary that if he did share, he would fall into the trap of “trauma dumping.” Because he felt no one could do anything that would change his predicament, Chris saw no value or utility in confiding with others.

Chris shared he became “good friends” with his high school counselor but reflected on how he often danced around his status any time they would discuss his college plans; for example, Chris spoke how he had struggled to select a major when his job prospects postgraduation were limited, and he had difficulty feeling optimistic about his future. Although Chris’s concerns about what he would be able to do with a degree lingered in the back of his mind while applying, he never shared these anxieties with his counselors despite speaking to her regularly. When it came time to apply for financial aid, Chris sent an email to a representative from his local community college to ask a question about the Dream Act. Chris did not realize, however, that he accidentally sent the email to his counselor instead. The counselor replied to Chris’s email to let him know that she was “not sure about that” and she “didn’t know how California Dream Act works.” In a state of panic, Chris pretended the incident never happened and both he and his counselor never spoke of Chris’s status in any conversation thereafter.

One key feature of Chris’ interviews and educational journey maps I found to be most fascinating involved his relationships with his two best friends, Gabriela and Janae. Throughout high school, the three of them discussed their plans to attend college and would share various resources such as internships and scholarships in their text group chat. Despite their close friendship and camaraderie, Chris said he never shared his immigration status with his two friends. Other than his close family, Chris thought he was the only undocumented person he knew. In conversation one day, Janae shared that she was undocumented, and Chris recalled feeling amazed to learn that someone with which he was already close shared his undocumented identity. Although Chris did not share his own status with Gabriela and Janae until a bit later down the road, Chris recalled feeling a sense of hope—both in seeing Janae’s continued interest in going to college and in witnessing Gabriela’s compassion toward Janae and her unwavering

allyship. When Chris shared his status with Gabriela and Janae, the three were able to better navigate various resources and opportunities together, but with greater consideration paid to Chris's and Gabriela's status. Gabriela and Janae were also essential fixtures in preserving Chris's mental health, which began to crumble under the pressure of maximizing any and all available forms of financial aid.

At the time of our interviews together, Chris shared one of his biggest priorities at this stage of his life is to practice giving himself compassion and grace—something he faced trouble doing while in high school. In Chris's first 2 years of his undergraduate career, he discussed intentionally seeking out programs geared toward supporting the transition of underrepresented student populations and connecting with UCMB's Undocumented Student Program. Chris had also been able to attend UCMB alongside Gabriela. The two remained close friends and still frequently share resources and opportunities with each other.

Joana

In the 11th grade, Joana began hearing more and more about college, particularly from her peers. Though she always enjoyed school, Joana largely thought that “maybe college wasn't for [her], because [she] thought [she] wasn't able to go or that [she] wouldn't be able to afford it.” Joana confided in her English teacher that she was undocumented and she was unsure whether she could go to college. The teacher replied to Joana, “I don't think you can. Going to college wouldn't be worth it, either. If you don't have legal status, it's not worth going. You're just gonna fill in a room for someone that deserves to be there.” Joana later approached her counselor and shared the same concerns that she told her 11th-grade English teacher. Although the counselor affirmed that she could go to college as an undocumented immigrant, the counselor

had limited knowledge about resources and the financial aid opportunities that were available to her.

As many of her peers prepared to go onto college, Joana said she “didn’t want to feel left out.” In her senior year, a representative from her local community college came to the high school to encourage students to enroll in the school. In the community college representative’s presentation, they outlined some of the various services they had to offer, including the Dream Resource Center on campus. At that moment, Joana saw two options in front of her: either “go to college, or do nothing and get a job that paid under the table.” After seeing the resources that were available at the community college and learning she could receive the first 2 years of community college free through the California Promise Grant, Joana decided to enroll in community college. Depending on her experiences at the community college, she described thinking “if it works out for [her], then [she will] consider going to university.”

In revisiting Joana’s interview transcripts and educational journey map, I was quickly reminded how deeply she embodied the notion of transfer pride. In fact, a key portion of her educational journey map centered around the idea that “going to community college was the best thing [she] had done for herself.” At the community college, Joana was able to find a “community that [she] can depend on, that [she] could ask questions to, and know that they’ve experienced it firsthand.” Immediately upon enrolling at the community college, Joana connected with the community college’s Dream Resource Center, as she had first heard about this resource through the previously mentioned community college representative. Joana spoke about how the staff helped their students with everything ranging from course selection, transfer preparation, to legal support. Joana also became heavily involved in the student club for undocumented students and undocu-allies, and later became the vice president for the club. Joana

said she would spend hours creating PowerPoint presentations and planning workshops geared around several topics to better serve the club's members. In her leadership capacity, Joana often collaborated with Dream Resource Center staff to ensure her presentations included detailed and actionable information.

Joana's participation in both the Dream Resource Center and undocumented student club significantly facilitated her understanding of the mechanics of applying to 4-year institutions. Most importantly, Joana shared how these spaces of community were essential to preserving her mental health and well-being, particularly in 2020 as the Supreme Court deliberated on whether the Trump administration acted improperly by terminating the DACA program. Both the Dream Resource Center and student club offered safe spaces where students could "talk about [their] feelings and reflect on what's going on, and be there for one another." In the process of learning more about the process of transferring and hearing the stories of her undocumented peers, particularly those who were older than Joana or more advanced in their studies, Joana felt inspired to continue her education beyond the 2-year and obtain her bachelor's degree.

Alejandro

When I thought back to Alejandro's participation in the study, he stood out as one of the best examples of how the educational journey map helped unfold participants' stories. In listening to him explain his educational journey map and the events he included, I was able to learn details about his journey to UCMB that would have otherwise been challenging to uncover with the questions from the interview protocol alone. The most notable detail that I learned from Alejandro's educational journey map was that while at community college, he had applied to the 4-year institution not just once, but twice.

When he first applied to transfer, Alejandro said he navigated the process of completing his application primarily alone; most of what he learned about applying was due to his own efforts. Alejandro described relying heavily on online tools to determine how to best approach crafting his application and to get a sense of what he would need to apply to financial aid. In this first application cycle, Alejandro had been accepted to a number of UCs and CSUs, and even submitted his Statement of Intent to Register (SIR) at another UC, different from that of UCMB. In completing his Dream Act, he approached his mother to inquire about his family's tax information so he could include this information on his financial aid forms. His mother feared how this information would be used and that she would be subject to deportation, ultimately declining to give Alejandro the information altogether. As a result, Alejandro tried to progress without his parents' tax information, and his financial aid ultimately got denied. The UC to which he submitted his SIR encouraged Alejandro to take out a private loan, but he discovered his loan options were extremely limited without a history credit and a social security number. Alejandro ultimately withdrew his SIR and returned to the community college for another academic year.

In the time between completing the Dream Act and the start of the following academic year, Alejandro became unhoused and spent a period of time living in his car. He had been kicked out of his house "without notice" by his mother. To support himself, Alejandro began regularly working over 60 hours a week and stayed with his girlfriend's family as an interim form of shelter until he could figure out a longer-term housing solution. The period when he was unhoused also coincided with some of the earlier months of the COVID-19 global pandemic, where shelter-in-place statutes were widely implemented. As an undocumented immigrant without DACA, he shared the challenges of securing a job position to help provide for himself

and “stay afloat.” Though he worked a considerable number of hours each week, Alejandro was paid minimum wage typically under exploitative conditions. Shortly after Alejandro had been kicked out of his family home, his younger brother had also been kicked out, leaving Alejandro to “take care of him, pay for his rent and his food.” In reflecting on the cards he had been dealt and the responsibilities he had to juggle while also maintaining his full-time student status, Alejandro shared he became “resentful” of those with citizenship who did not have to worry about the same stressors.

In preparing to apply to college a second time around, Alejandro became more proactive seeking resources. With the support of a staff member through his community college’s financial aid office who specialized in working with varied student populations, Alejandro was able to gain one-on-one support completing the Dream Act. During this second attempt at completing the Dream Act, Alejandro completed the forms as an independent, meaning he was no longer reliant on the specifics of his parents’ financial information and could instead input just his own information. Though the community college pushed Alejandro from one office to the next until he finally was able to connect with a financial aid officer with more specialized knowledge, Alejandro felt a sense of relief knowing that there were “workarounds” that would enable him to apply for financial aid.

As a graduating senior at UCMB at the time of this study, Alejandro was gearing up to attend a master’s program in urban planning with the hope of being able to serve communities with dense populations of people of color. Between my first and second interviews with Alejandro, he was able to obtain TPS. Alejandro noted how, with this new status, he felt hopeful about the opportunities ahead of him. Through TSP, Alejandro would be able to seek

employment during his graduate program and was optimistic about how this new status would change both his and his younger brother's lives.

Diana

A subtle yet significant detail that I tried my best to note in my interviews with Diana was what she did with her hands. Each time I asked question that either directly or indirectly concerned her status, Diana would clutch her plastic water bottle and steadily crinkle the soft plastic with her fingertips as she spoke. Whenever Diana discussed her mother, younger siblings, her high school counselor, and her former math teacher, she would release her grip on the water bottle; set it off to the side; and proceed in sharing her thoughts, though with a palpable sense of ease and confidence.

Diana's mother was a regular fixture in her educational journey map and often appeared in pictures each time Diana depicted a graduation or another notable academic milestone or accomplishment. Diana's mother attended college in Honduras before coming to the United States. Though Diana's mother had some college experience, her mother's degree had little utility in the United States—both in the sense of employment prospects and in how the information gained through her collegiate experience in Honduras translated to the U.S. educational system. Despite being unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system, Diana's mother would regularly advocate on Diana's behalf. Diana shared that her mother enrolled her in a charter elementary school soon after migrating to the United States and kept her in charters for the entirety of her primary and secondary schooling. Diana's mother hoped in this setting, Diana would have greater access to individualized attention. Her mother also felt that charters could offer Diana "smaller class sizes," a characteristic that was important to her because Diana was still enrolled in English Language Development (ELD) courses at the time. In her interviews,

Diana spoke about the importance of completing her bachelor's degree for her family. Diana shared how she was pursuing her bachelor's degree because she did not want to "repeat" some of the "struggles" her mother had faced, noting she had "opportunities that [her] mom didn't have." As the oldest of four children, Diana shared how her younger siblings had also been a strong source of motivation and that she has held herself to a "high standard" knowing they are watching her as she progresses in this journey.

Early in high school, Diana connected with her counselor, Mrs. Conejo, and the two steadily built a relationship as the time to apply to college inched closer. Whereas Diana's mother continued to be one of Diana's fiercest advocates and provided her with ample emotional support, Mrs. Conejo provided Diana with rich, detailed information on the mechanics of applying to college. Though Mrs. Conejo did not readily have information pertaining to the Dream Act and AB 540, the counselor frequently sought out additional information to better support Diana. Another valuable mentor came in the form of Diana's eight—grade math teacher, Ms. Ramos. She shared with her students that she was formerly undocumented and spoke about the importance of "getting good grades because your status doesn't really matter." Prior to hearing Ms. Ramos's story, Diana said she did not know whether undocumented people could go to college. After hearing Ms. Ramos's story, Diana began to see going to college as a realistic goal, something Diana had always been interested in due to her mother's influence. As a middle school graduation gift, Ms. Ramos gifted Diana a book cataloging the stories of various undocumented people and what they went on to achieve. As a college freshmen, Diana said she had held onto the book and had revisited it often over the years, where the book had frequently served as a reminder that "opportunity is out there."

Ivan

Ivan came to the United States from Guatemala in elementary school and discussed the challenges of learning a new language and acclimating to the U.S. educational system. He shared how he had struggled academically due to the language barrier and “didn’t really grasp the material” in his ELD courses. Seventh grade was a turning point in his academic journey in that Ivan began to see an improvement in his academic performance and had begun to see patterns in “what the classes were teaching and how to do assignments.” At this point, Ivan said he began to “realize that [he is] capable of pursuing education and that was when [he] first started thinking about going to college.”

Ivan also met one of his closest friends, Michael, in seventh grade. Ivan shared that Michael had family and friends who went to college, and “understood the educational system” better than Ivan did. Through his friendship with Michael, Ivan was able to learn more about honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. As a first-generation college student and first-generation immigrant, Ivan was largely unaware of what he needed to do to go to college and what opportunities he should look out for. In that sense, Michael and some of Ivan’s other peers played a valuable role in providing Ivan with crumbs of information that Ivan would then explore further on his own time. Ivan said his friends played a critical role in helping him to understand “how college worked” because his high school counselor was not very “approachable.” He rarely met with his high school counselor largely due to her “rudeness.” Ivan shared the few times he met with her were only out of necessity, such as being mistakenly enrolled in advanced foreign language courses for which he did not have the needed prerequisites.

In reflecting back on Ivan's interviews, part of what made Ivan such a critical informant was that he took a highly systematic and methodical approach to researching college information. As a result, Ivan was able to share a bit more into the specific strategies he used to research various concepts online; for example, when Ivan heard Michael speak about AP classes or heard they were taking courses at the high school that offered college credit, Ivan would look at the high school's website or the local community college's website to learn more. When Ivan's friends spoke about FAFSA or applying to scholarships, he would plug those same keywords into his browser's search bar followed by the word "undocumented" to see how what his friends shared applied to him and his status. Through this approach, Ivan learned about the Dream Act and AB 540, and became familiar with these policies early on. Ivan also described relying heavily on community forum-driven websites such as Reddit and College Confidential, where he was able to seek out the stories and perspectives of other undocumented students. These community-driven sites, which are heavily built by the contributions of its members, allowed Ivan to cross-reference the college information he had found from his search engine-driven research and hear the testimonies of other undocumented peers who had successfully gone to college. In summary, Ivan's independent research online was helpful in providing Ivan with a well-rounded feel of the U.S. higher education system in the absence of in-person resources and support personnel to guide him.

During community college, Ivan sought out his community college's Dream Resource Center and attended the workshops the center offered on the transfer process, though he never directly connected with the Dream Resource Center's support staff and his peers who frequented the center. Ivan attributed his reluctance to engage in these spaces to social anxiety, noting he is on the "quieter side." Ivan would use the Dream Resource Center's workshops as a way to stay

apprised on general information related to transferring and would often seek out additional resources online to “fill in the gaps.” Although the strategy of using online resources was something with which he was well acquainted, Ivan reflected on the challenge of not always knowing “what exactly [he was] looking for.” One notable challenge he encountered was that his community college did not offer all the classes needed to complete his intended major’s prerequisites, thereby requiring he enroll at a second community college. Ivan was tasked with the challenge of navigating not just one community college institution, but two community college institutions.

Once at UCMB, Ivan had been able to develop a greater sense of community; in his interview, he identified a few student spaces that he regularly frequents. As Ivan did not have DACA, we spoke about some of his tentative plans for after graduation. He was interested in pursuing a career as an independent contracting software engineer or as a freelance web developer. Ivan shared he first learned about freelance opportunities through his online research, as he heard how many undocumented students have been able to pursue freelance positions as a way to navigate some of the employment barriers imposed by the lack of legal work authorization.

Selena

Selena joined the AVID program at the start of high school at the recommendation of her older brother, who had also been in the program when he was a student. Selena shared how the “filler” course provided her with the opportunity to regularly reflect on her goals for the future and how she used the course as structured time where she could work on “college stuff.” Selena went through most of high school without sharing her status and did not meet with her counselors to discuss her college ambitions until her senior year of high school. Although Selena

did not share this piece of information until much later in her high school career, she explained how she always went through high school knowing college was an option to her as an undocumented student. Selena attributed this awareness to how her school frequently acknowledged and considered the needs of undocumented students, namely using inclusive language and the thoughtful framing of college-related activities.

For example, whenever her teachers or counselors would discuss financial aid, Selena noted they highlighted both FAFSA and the Dream Act alongside one another. Her teachers and counselors also discussed how anyone could go to college, regardless of their immigration status, income level, or other designations. Selena's counselors also shared applying to financial aid would not put undocumented students "at risk" and reassured students that applying would not affect their ability to become citizens someday or that it would subject them to deportation. Because her counselors had always integrated these details that spoke to her intersecting identities, Selena went through high school always knowing that college was possible as a low-income, undocumented immigrant. Selena felt if she ever needed support, she knew where to ask.

Selena admitted how even though she felt like she would be warmly received by her counselors, she still felt a sense of nervousness and anxiety about approaching them. Though Selena personally did not have any negative experiences sharing her status, she still held a lot of reservations making her status known. She reflected on how social media and the news had shaped her feelings on whether to share her status with anyone. After observing a number of people on social media who expressed their disdain for undocumented immigrants, Selena recalled pondering, "Will my counselors see me differently because of my status, or will they exclude me from things?"

Selena did not directly approach her counselors regarding her status until later in her senior year, after she had already completed the Dream Act. Although she had received some aid through the Dream Act, Selena still had a great deal of unmet need that she needed to cover. Without DACA and the accompanying work authorization, Selena knew she needed to double-down on her scholarship efforts. Selena originally did not plan on telling her counselors her status but shared that she felt a sense of relief when her counselors reiterated their support for her and asked her what they could do to help her. Selena worked extensively with her counselors in the following months to identify scholarships for which she was eligible to apply. Her counselors also generously provided her with gift cards so she could furnish her dorm room and have a way to cover some of her early expenses in college.

Isaac

As with a few other participants, Isaac was a part of AVID and joined the program at his older sister, Daniela's recommendation. Isaac remarked that he saw AVID as an "easy" elective to add to his course schedule. Most of the value Isaac took away from the AVID program came in the form of the visits the program would take to local college campuses and regular classroom visits from local college campus representatives. When speaking about the support he received from the high school, Isaac offered one primary point of criticism. He stated his school primarily pushed local UC and CSU institutions, as these were the institutions with which his teachers and counselors were most familiar. Isaac did not explore any schools beyond those he was exposed to through AVID because he was "afraid of bothering [his] teachers."

Isaac shared that his primary form of support in navigating the college application process was Daniela, who was a recent graduate of UCMB. By the time Isaac began high school, Daniela had already begun her studies at UCMB. Isaac recalled how Daniela would come "home

on the weekends and cry to [her] mom” about the challenges she faced in transitioning to the rigors of college coursework. Having been through the process of applying to college and subsequently experiencing the demands of being a college student, Daniela was able to offer her younger brother a great deal of advice and “open the door for [him].” Daniela spoke regularly with Isaac about his plans after graduation and supported him through the process of applying to college—including filling out the Dream Act, seeking out the paperwork needed for AB 540, and determining where to apply.

Because Isaac largely followed in his sister’s footsteps and had someone to walk him through each step of the process applying to UCMB, I asked Isaac more about his postgraduation plans. Specifically, I used this line of questioning as a point to compare and contrast how he approached applying to undergraduate and graduate programs with the hope that this approach could unveil additional reflections on his journey to UCMB. Isaac planned to attend law school at a private university in the eastern region of the United States at the start of the next academic year, where he hoped to pursue either immigration law or intellectual property law. Although Isaac had experience applying to financial aid prior to law school, he still had to learn the process of applying to aid in a completely different state with different financial aid policies.

Previously, when Isaac was applying to undergraduate programs, Daniela was there to point Isaac in the right direction. She was on hand to assist Isaac with completing his financial forms, often working on these with him step by step. Fast forward to the point of the interviews—Isaac shared how he had to quickly learn how to navigate a new financial aid process, but without the support of a trusted mentor who had also been through that same process. Isaac asked if his law school could connect him with any current undocumented students attending the program to help get his questions answered and to hear the perspectives of

current students; however, Isaac was dismayed to learn his graduate school institution could only identify two other undocumented students. At the time of his first interview, Isaac was traveling between UCMB and the location of the graduate school he planned to attend. I unfortunately was not able to reestablish contact with Isaac to schedule his second interview and did not receive his completed educational journey map.

Lizeth

This study's data collection period was not the first time I met Lizeth; in fact, she had participated in the pilot study for this dissertation 3 years prior in March 2020. Reconnecting with Lizeth was notable in many ways for me as a researcher. Specifically, hearing Lizeth's reflections on applying to college and the support she received during that time reaffirmed the methodological design choice of retrospective introspection. Lizeth's Spring 2023 recounting of her journey to college looked obviously very similar to when she first told her story to me in Spring 2020; however, the difference between these two retellings reflected the value and impact she ascribed to these academic events and milestones.

For example, both in 2020 and 2023, Lizeth described how she was not open with her status until after she received DACA, noting how this status "provided [her] with a bit of a cushion to be safer about sharing [her] experiences." In the second half of her senior year, she published an article in her school newspaper describing her experiences applying to college as an undocumented immigrant and was met with "mixed responses." Given the wider platform with which this information was shared, Lizeth's status became a topic of conversation in spaces throughout the school. Lizeth shared how some of her peers viewed her UCMB acceptance as part of the university's effort to fulfill a "quota" and that she was seen as "just a diversity number." Lizeth shared her disappointment about how her peers failed to consider that her

acceptances were “because of [her] effort or grades.” Lizeth also described negative reactions from her academic counselor and teachers. In both the 2020 and 2023 interviews, Lizeth recounted how a teacher shared with his class—a class in which Lizeth was not present and from a teacher she did not have—that Lizeth “only got in because [she is] undocumented or because of the status that [she] has.”

As a result of these experiences, Lizeth discussed in 2020 how going to college was part of an effort to “prove everyone wrong” and combat others’ perceptions of undocumented immigrants. In her 2023 interviews, as a college senior, Lizeth had moved on from this idea and was now finishing the degree for herself, noting the value of her degree now reflected “what [she] is learning, gaining, and growing.” The articulation of this growth was particularly profound knowing how the aforementioned event impacted her and the ways that this event even shaped some of her early college experiences. Although this study largely focused on participants’ experiences before coming to their 4-year institution, the events predating attendance at the 4-year campus do not exist in a vacuum and have implications beyond just the period of simply applying.

Lizeth’s primary form of support for applying to college came in the form of her neighbors, a group of five sisters who had all attended UC schools and were immigrants themselves. The five sisters provided Lizeth with information ranging from how to craft her personal statements to applying for financial aid, and even provided her support connecting to student affairs staff at UCMB who helped aid in her transition to the college. In addition to the information the five sisters provided, Lizeth also shared how the sisters helped in addressing her emotional needs, such as encouraging her to “be kind to [her]self” and acknowledging the ways

that her “high school wasn’t the best at instructing in these areas.” Her sisters also reminded her that there were “no dumb questions that [she] could ask them.”

I share more about Lizeth’s reflections on DACA later in Chapter 6, particularly in relation to how DACA had changed since the time we last spoke and the subsequent uncertainty surrounding DACA’s future. Unfortunately, we were not able to schedule a time to meet to conduct the second interview and discuss her revised educational journey map for the study’s current 2023 iteration due to repeated scheduling issues. I had not heard back from her as the study approached its data collection period end date with all other remaining participants completed and data analysis almost finished.

Brianna

Shortly before Brianna’s first interview began, she asked if she could crochet off to the side as a way to bring her a sense of comfort during the interview. Brianna’s pre-prepared grounding strategy ended up being particularly useful; she quickly became emotional as she described just how little she knew coming to college and the challenges she had faced getting to where she was at the time of the interviews. Early in the first interview, I asked participants to describe their reason or motivation for attending college. Brianna explained she went to college for her family; however, she began to cry as she spoke about how applying to and eventually attending college had created distance between her and her family.

Brianna grew up in a household that upheld traditional gender norms, describing how, in her culture, “males are viewed more favorably than women.” Brianna’s family expected her to marry young so she could obtain citizenship through that marriage, and with the hope that her future male partner would “support [her] who would then eventually support them.” Due to these values, Brianna’s family did not approve of her goal to attend college, and her mother and

grandmother in particular were vocal with their concerns. Brianna's family was not only distressed to know that Brianna would not be marrying young, but they were concerned that they would be responsible for helping Brianna finance her degree. Brianna, who had a twin brother, reflected on how she was treated differently than brother. Her brother attended community college for a brief period of time, but he did not experience the same type or degree of scrutiny as Brianna. Although Brianna shared that her mother grew to accept her college aspirations as her years in college went on, Brianna described the period in which she applied to colleges as "brutal."

Coming into college, Brianna knew very little about financial aid. Most of what she knew about college came from two of her best friends and her counselor, though as a first-generation college student, she was not familiar with what questions she should ask and thus took much of what she learned about college at face value. Brianna shared how she "trusted [her teacher] more than [herself] because [she] had no idea what [she] was looking at." Because of her limited knowledge, Brianna's teacher largely determined the schools to which she applied. The teacher calculated that of the schools to which Brianna had been accepted, UCMB offered the most aid; thus, Brianna committed to UCMB on a whim, without any understanding of how much unmet need she still had. Upon coming to college, Brianna quickly realized how little she knew and entered a state of crisis as she searched for ways to lower her cost of attendance and sought opportunities to fund her remaining expenses. As an example of how little she knew about financial aid coming into college, Brianna did not know that she would be unable to seek on-campus employment as an undocumented student without DACA and without any other similar paperwork used to establish employment eligibility. Brianna did not apply to many scholarships in the previous few months to cover any remaining need that was not covered through the

financial aid she received. She cried as she reflected on her freshman year and the constant feeling of fear about where that money was going to come from, especially as the topic of finances continued to distance her from her family.

Once at UCMB, Brianna became heavily involved in a research lab and described how the space had provided her with a sense of community at the university. Although Brianna shared that she spends most of her time at the lab, she spoke about the challenges of not being able to receive compensation for her work. In instances where she has been able to receive money, these funds have typically come in the form of research grants that are more flexible with how the award money can be used, thereby enabling the lab's primary investigator to offer her money in the form of a stipend. At the time of our interviews, Brianna was considering going on to graduate school so she could continue her research training, though she shared fears about whether she would encounter some of the same financial challenges she had navigated during her undergraduate studies.

Lucia

Lucia identified three people who had the most profound impact on her journey to college. In fact, each person had their own dedicated portion on Lucia's educational journey map where she outlined their significance to her, and these details were separate from her main educational timeline. These three people were: Mr. Aguilera, her Associated Student Body (ASB) teacher; Mrs. Flores, her college and career counselor; and a young staff member from a local after-school college access program, Silvia.

From ninth grade onward, Lucia served as part of the ASB, her high school's student government. Mr. Aguilera was notable in that he saw Lucia's potential and connected her to opportunities that would further Lucia's academic development. When she first told Mr.

Aguilera that she was undocumented, Mr. Aguilera revealed he had many undocumented friends growing up who had “made it far.” Lucia explained how the event “made [her] feel heard and understood, while letting [her] know that because others have done it, [she] can too.” Mr. Aguilera was a young teacher who graduated from the same high school as Lucia. Because of his young age relative to Lucia, she described their relationship as being “very close” and would often observe how he spoke about his colleagues at the school. Mr. Aguilera was once a student of Mrs. Flores, the high school’s college and career counselor, and spoke highly of his former teacher and now-colleague. Lucia recalled one instance where Mr. Aguilera mistakenly addressed Mrs. Flores as “mom.” Lucia described Mr. Aguilera’s flub as significant, in that he likely would not have addressed Mrs. Flores as such if he did not have a trusting relationship with her.

At the recommendation of Mr. Aguilera, Lucia applied to be a peer counselor at the school’s college and career center. Lucia had not formally met Mrs. Flores prior to beginning the peer counselor position and although the two did not interact regularly until the start of Lucia’s senior year, Lucia immediately felt that she could trust Mrs. Flores. Through the peer counselor position, Lucia received detailed training on the mechanics of applying to college and began working on her college applications and financial aid much earlier than her peers so she would have the firsthand experience to then guide her peers. As part of the peer counselor training, Lucia learned about FAFSA. Lucia recounted how during that presentation, Mrs. Flores directed her students to refer any students without U.S. citizenship directly to her so she could provide additional assistance. Mrs. Flores briefly explained what the Dream Act was, though with little detail, especially in comparison to how she had presented about FAFSA. After this training session, Lucia approached Mrs. Flores to share that she was undocumented and was met with

warmth and kindness. Mrs. Flores also encouraged Lucia to connect with Silvia, a young staff member from the local Boys and Girls Club who was regularly stationed at the high school site. Without directly divulging to Lucia that Silvia was also undocumented, Mrs. Flores told Lucia that she and Silvia “have a lot in common.” Silvia was a recent graduate of UCMB and had returned to the area to support the local youth in her community. Lucia recalled being overcome with emotion to the point of tears knowing that another undocumented immigrant had gone on to college. Hearing Silvia’s story instilled in Lucia this sense that “as long as college was something [she] really wanted, anything was possible.”

At the start of her senior year, Lucia planned on going to a local community college; however, these three mentor figures encouraged her to “set her sights higher” and often pointed out Lucia’s “potential, which [she] was hesitant to acknowledge.” The post-high school opportunities Lucia considered were broadened because of these three figures. She continued to learn more about financial aid and ways to strengthen her application through these three individuals’ mentorship and support.

Melissa

Throughout the study’s data collection period, I heard various participants speak about using their campus’ Undocumented Student Program, be that at their former community college and/or now at UCMB. Melissa enrolled in the study toward the very end of the study’s data collection period. Because of her positionality as a student worker at UCMB’s Undocumented Student Program and the training she had received through this position, Melissa often offered nuanced takes on the questions from the interview protocol and provided rich insights that greatly shaped the study’s implications for practice section.

Up until ninth grade, Melissa thought that she would not be able to go to college as an undocumented student. In a meeting, Melissa's counselor asked about her post-high school aspirations and Melissa explained that she was not sure, thinking her options were limited because of her status. Her counselor quickly dispelled this myth, and Melissa said she began to have a semblance of hope for the future and a regained sense of "confidence." Although Melissa felt secure in sharing her status with her counselor in this meeting, she became increasingly more guarded and protective over her status as time went on as she began to experience microaggressions firsthand and began to learn more about the dangers in sharing this piece of information.

As one example, Melissa recounted an instance where her history teacher spoke disparagingly about undocumented immigrants. The teacher went on a diatribe sharing how she thought "immigrants were stripping the jobs away from the people here and that they were just stealing money from the government and having babies to get food stamps." Melissa had not ever shared her status with her history teacher but spoke about how the event solidified in her a sense of fear. She described:

From then on, I didn't want to share that information because I was like, "I don't know what you're going to do. I don't know how you're going to see me. I don't know if you'll possibly even sell me out."

Melissa entered the UCMB at the transfer level and noted going to community college was essential in meeting her "financial, mental, and status needs," an idea she unpacked in detail in her educational journey map. Toward the end of her high school experience, Melissa struggled with her mental health and received the diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Prior to receiving this diagnosis, she described how she thought that she was "lazy and wasn't smart" and saw community college as an opportunity to "figure out how to be a good

student” and develop “healthy habits.” Melissa also shared how the community college path provided her with a route to better explore her interests at a lower cost rate compared to that of the 4-year institution and was a way for her to “buy time.” A recurring theme in Melissa’s educational journey map was her motivation, specifically the ebbs and flows in her desire to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Melissa’s dips in motivation typically occurred when confronted with the ways that her status might impact her future employment opportunities, noting a very real fear that she would be unable to pursue a career that she “cares about.” In the time Melissa spent at community college, she was able to learn more about her skills presented and gain a greater sense of clarity on how she might put her degree to use.

Melissa stated the community college was also essential in preparing her for the 4-year university in that the community college equipped her with the self-advocacy skills needed to thrive at a large research university. Melissa frequently sought out her community college’s Dream Resource Center and would often meet with their designated counselor who supported her in the areas of selecting classes, preparing to transfer, reading personal statements, and so on. Though Melissa spoke fondly of her community college’s Dream Resource Center and the support she received through that space, Melissa also recalled finding it difficult to build a sense of community with other undocumented students. Melissa navigated a large portion of her time at community college during the COVID-19 global pandemic. She noted being a student in the time of remote learning allowed her to work extensive hours and begin accumulating enough savings that could then be applied toward her tuition upon transferring. At the same time, being online made it difficult for her to connect with people beyond the staff at the offices she frequented.

Upon entering UCMB, Melissa was adamant about finding and cultivating spaces of community that she yearned for while at the community college. She sought out UCMB's Undocumented Student Program the summer before starting school and was still working there at the time of data collection. After graduation, Melissa hoped to pursue a career in writing and journalism with the goal of dispelling misconceptions about undocumented immigrants and providing a voice to communities that are often "hidden and concealed" from the general public.

Karina

Karina joined the AVID program in seventh grade, though said that she did not fully understand what the program was or how it may help her in the future. Still, she recalled being "excited" at the thought of going to college and "motivated" by the slew of guest speakers the program brought in. As high school went on, Karina cultivated meaningful relationships with her AVID teacher and her counselor, though Karina noted she did not share her immigration status with them until the second half of her senior year. Karina remembered sharing with her AVID teacher her concerns about the cost of going to college. Her teacher remarked on the importance of "investing" in herself and explained, "If [Karina] want[s] to provide for [her] family, [she] need[s] a well-paying job."

When it came time to apply for financial aid, Karina had only heard about the FAFSA, but knew she would not be able to apply for aid using this process. Seeing FAFSA taught in large workshop-type formats reinforced in Karina the idea that she was different from her peers. She described how she often felt "left out." In light of the limited support available for the Dream Act, Karina attended the FAFSA workshops with the hope that she would still be able to learn information that she could apply toward the Dream Act. Karina noted most of the information taught did not apply to her, and she began to compile a list of questions to ask her

counselors. When Karina sought the support of her counselors, they refused to help her out of fear of misadvising her and “put[ting] her family at risk.” In the absence of support and seeing she still needed to apply to the Dream Act, Karina did a great deal of independent research online.

As her senior year progressed, Karina recalled approaching her assigned counselor once more as she faced difficulty identifying scholarships that did not require applicants to be U.S. citizens. With the support of Karina’s assigned counselor, she connected with a donor whom Karina credited with helping her to “feel excited about higher education again.” At this stage of her journey, Karina had already encountered multiple challenges accessing support, especially as a “first-generation student without the support of older siblings to rely on.” Karina said she shared her story with the donors and noted because they were “moved” by her personal journey, the donors continued to support Karina by covering her tuition and various educational expenses for the full 4 years of college.

As a graduating senior at the time of the interview, Karina reflected on her goals of becoming a doctor and how she hoped to provide care to low-income communities. She spoke about the challenges of her and her family facing “a lot of barriers when it came to healthcare, especially as an undocumented immigrant.” In particular, Karina discussed the financial and language barriers that prevented her parents from accessing healthcare whenever a need arose. Karina intended to pursue emergency or family medicine with the hope of being “able to provide support for the Latino community, and even more, just other underserved communities.” Throughout her time at UCMB, Karina was heavily involved on campus and shared about the value of building community around her Latinx identity.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview into the 19 participants enrolled in the study and outline of each individual participant's journey to the 4-year UCMB. Chapter 5 should be viewed as a companion to Chapter 6. In thinking about policies such as DACA, AB 540, and the Dream Act and how these policies impacted participants' educational trajectories, I argue there is value to humanizing each of the participants. CPA aims to explore how policy codifies systems of power and understand the relationship between what policies aim to achieve at face value and what policies actually do in practice (Prunty, 1985). My goal in establishing each individual participants' narrative arc within this chapter was to tell their stories in a way that humanized each of them and have their stories represented in a manner independent from the next participant.

Because a central component to the study's methodology entailed the educational journey maps, this chapter intended to honor each individual participant's journey to college and ensure these details were represented in this study. In Chapter 6, I refer back to many of the details shared in this chapter as I describe the main findings that emerged. In what follows, this next chapter introduces three large themes, with each theme loosely resembling each of the study's guiding research questions.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings of the study. As indicated in Chapter 1, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Latinx undocumented students retroactively make meaning of the personal and academic challenges faced during their period of applying to college in pursuit of their bachelor's degree?
 - a. How do students conceptualize their identity as Latinx undocumented students?
2. How do Latinx undocumented students conceptualize immigration and education policy, and its impact on their goal of pursuing a college education?
3. How does immigration and education policy shape and inform the decisions made by these students during their college application process?
 - a. How does policy influence the strategies, networks, and forms of support these students utilize as they work toward their goal of pursuing a bachelor's degree?

This chapter is broken into three large sections, wherein each section loosely resembles the three main research questions. The first section examines how participants made sense of their identity as Latinx undocumented students and through this lens, explores participants' early exposure to college. The second section examines policies concerning accessibility and affordability, and details participants' experiences understanding financial aid and how this facet of applying to college uniquely impacted them. Finally, the third section builds upon the two previous sections by exploring some of the forms of support participants used as they attempted to make sense of policy and the resource-seeking behaviors they used to address informational gaps.

On Being Undocumented: Making Meaning of Identity

I begin the findings chapter with how participants made meaning of their identities as Latinx undocumented students, given this topic anchored many of the other findings included in this chapter. Observing how participants understood their identities—including the limitations imposed by their status, the relationship between immigration status and race, and the weight behind whether participants had DACA or not—provided a meaningful foundation for how these participants conceptualized their desire to pursue a bachelor’s degree. I follow this investigation with an exploration into participants’ earliest exposure to college and when they first began to imagine college as a possibility. This topic is followed by a subsection on the perceived value of having a bachelor’s degree as an undocumented immigrant. Finally, I conclude this section with an exploration into status disclosure and participants’ early sentiments on whether or not to share their status with others around them. This final section on status disclosure had meaningful implications for how participants were or were not able to access information related to policy as their college application efforts progressed.

Identity Salience

Approximately two thirds of participants described an evolving understanding of their undocumented-ness, wherein they had early inklings of what this identity meant when they were younger; the identity took on a more complex meaning as time went on. For instance, Antonio described coming to learn what it meant to be undocumented as a “collection of experiences.” He explained:

When I was younger, my parents would try to avoid the police. I recall my parents would try to avoid certain parts of the neighborhood. My dad didn’t really drive either. My parents would take the bus here and there. My parents always told me, “Don’t tell people where you’re from.” At the time, I thought those experiences were fairly normal. Over time, I kind of saw it as weird. I asked them stuff like, “Why do we actually avoid the

cops or why do we cross the street when we see them? Why is there so much of this sense of fear?” Those experiences made me question what is going on.

Although Antonio did not have the specific terminology to describe his family’s experiences and would not learn the term undocumented until years later, he reflected on the events that made him suspicious of his and his family’s status. Antonio’s suspicions were later confirmed when watching a news program on the television channel Univision, where he and his family listened to a report on a new immigration policy under George Bush’s administration. At that point, his family told him he would not be able to return to Mexico and he needed to be mindful of the way he behaved at all times to avoid drawing attention to himself.

Many participants received messages from their families that their status was something to be fearful of and were taught to be wary of actions that would put them or their families in danger. Chris recounted an experience that was similar to how Antonio first came to learn about his status. Chris explained:

I sort of always knew that I was undocumented because growing up, my parents always told me, “If someone asks you where you’re from, don’t answer that question. If they ask you to speak Spanish at school, say you don’t know Spanish.” [My parents] gave me little clues that innately put the idea within me that I am undocumented. My parents were always very open about our status. They didn’t really try to hide that part of my identity because they wanted me to be fully aware so I wouldn’t put myself in dangerous situations that would lead to me being deported.

The aforementioned example illustrated how Chris’ undocumented identity was framed in his early adolescence. Similar to Antonio, Chris learned he needed to be cautious of his actions and the risks that go hand-in-hand with being an undocumented immigrant in the United States. To minimize this risk, Chris needed to conceal details about his upbringing and culture so as to not draw the curiosity of others.

The timing of when participants came to the United States also shaped their understanding of being undocumented; for example, Ivan was one of the very small subset of

participants who came to the United States after early childhood. He arrived in the United States when he was 10 years old. Because Ivan was older at the time of his immigration, he wrote in his educational journey map: “From the moment I stepped foot on U.S. soil, my family told me that I was going to be undocumented and what it meant to be such. I accepted such fate, as did my family.” Ivan’s family entered a financial crisis when they were living in Guatemala and could no longer afford to send him to school there, thereby causing him to miss school for an entire academic year. Ivan had a heightened sense of awareness of his family’s decision to immigrate compared to the other participants who arrived in the United States at an earlier age. As such, Ivan navigated middle school and high school already familiar with some of the challenges that might emerge.

In contrast, Joana immigrated to the United States in early elementary school. Though Joana’s mother directly told her that she was undocumented in early middle school, she brushed it off because she did not think the status was “that big of a deal.” Joana explained when she began high school, many of her older friends got their first jobs and began receiving their driver’s licenses. She collected a few paper job applications from businesses in her area and approached her parents with excitement, eager to share with them her plans to get her first job. Joana recalled:

I told my parents, “I’m planning on applying to jobs and [the applications] are asking for social security. What does that mean?” They’re like, “You don’t have one.” So I asked, “How do I get one?” They said, “You really can’t get one.” It was overwhelming to see my peers go off into the real world when I was stuck being only a student. I saw all my friends getting their driver’s licenses and they were getting their first jobs. I was stuck having to bus it to school. It became really stressful . . . feeling like I was stuck in this box that I couldn’t escape so I got really depressed. I remember speaking to [my parents] and breaking down and telling them, “Why me? Why did I have to be undocumented?”

Joana’s understanding of what it meant to be undocumented was defined largely by the limitations imposed by her status, as evidenced in her continued use of the word “stuck.” Joana’s

realization that she would not be able to have the same coming-of-age milestones as many of her peers with citizenship caused her to enter a state of hopelessness, unsure as to what the future would hold. Most of the participants who immigrated to the United States at a young age shared sentiments similar to Joana's. Across the larger participant base, participants frequently cited examples of watching their peers get their driver's licenses and apply for their first jobs; a few remarked on the impact of watching their peers go on trips with their families across state lines and to other countries. Through such observations, these participants' early understanding of what it meant to be undocumented was often framed through the lens of what they were or were not able to do.

Approximately half of the participants reflected on how the early years of Trump's presidency shaped their understanding of what it meant to be undocumented. The Trump administration catapulted the topic of immigration into the national spotlight (Andrade, 2019; Andrade, 2021; Muñoz et al., 2018; L. V. Rodriguez, 2019; Santellano, 2019); as a result, many of these younger participants began high school at a time when immigration discourse was widely prevalent. In Winter 2017, Lucia was in seventh grade and was offered the opportunity to attend an overnight trip at a university close to the California–Mexico border. Lucia's mother did not feel comfortable with her daughter being that close to the border and declined the offer on Lucia's behalf. Lucia expanded on the significance of missing out on the overnight trip in her second interview and the surrounding context at that point in time. In the following quote, she referenced the increased presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Lucia explained:

Around this time was when Trump won the presidency. I remember my parents being worried and the people around us being worried. I think that established that fear, the initial [hesitated]. . . . That was the first time I was scared of my circumstances because at this time, people were posting a lot on social media that “ICE is here” or “ICE is over

there. Be careful.” Knowing how much hatred [Trump] had for people like me and my family made me scared of being out—doing nothing wrong—and getting deported.

The prior quote illustrated how Lucia’s understanding of what it meant to be undocumented had been shaped by the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election and the tangible and credible threats to her and her family’s safety in the period thereafter. Lucia came to understand that being undocumented would not only cause her to miss out on opportunities such as the overnight camp, but that the risk of being undocumented extended to places far beyond the context of schooling.

Intersection of Immigration Status and Race

When reflecting on the intersection between immigration status and race, many participants highlighted that there is a difference between being Latinx with U.S. citizenship and being Latinx without U.S. citizenship. Less than roughly half of the participants shared how they once conflated the experience of being an immigrant with being undocumented, not realizing the distinction between the two. Many of these same participants attributed this confusion to the fact that many of their Latinx peers had parents who were immigrants and explained how the media commonly depicts undocumented immigrants as either Latinx or Hispanic.

Whereas some participants referenced the experiences shared by Latinxs as a collective, most participants’ responses to this question focused primarily on the challenges of navigating a new country that was markedly different from that of their home country. For instance, Antonio explained:

My family and I are navigating a system that is very different from Mexico. You know, the economic system has certain advantages, but the financial system here is different. The banking system here is different. The educational system here is different. In that sense, I don’t blame my parents for what they do or don’t know.

Antonio highlighted the myriad ways in which the United States and Mexico, his home country, differ. Antonio expressed compassion for his parents' limited understanding of the societal and fiscal structures of the United States. Although he had faced considerable challenges learning and navigating these structures as a first-generation immigrant, Antonio explained he has tried to situate the challenges he has faced within this context.

In a similar regard, roughly half of the participants specifically reflected on the challenges of learning English as a second language. Seven of the 19 participants included taking English-language development (ELD) classes as a defined event within their educational journey maps. These participants often cited the example of language to highlight the dichotomy between the need to assimilate into U.S. culture and the desire to stay connected to their cultural roots. In one example, Selena shared how taking ELD classes early in elementary school made her feel different from her peers. Despite spending her elementary years in the United States in a region that had a dense proportion of Latinx individuals, Selena shared in her second interview:

I always struggled to feel like I belonged in the United States because a lot of people made me feel like I was an outsider. I didn't speak any English because my family raised me speaking Spanish. I was shocked when no one else spoke Spanish at my school. Even if they were Hispanic or Latino, they didn't speak any Spanish because their parents hadn't taught them. I would cry because I didn't really know anybody, and it made me feel uncomfortable that I was the only one who didn't know the [English] language.

Although Selena felt relieved to see people in her elementary school who looked like her and her family, she began to see the ways in which she and her family differed from them. Selena's realization that her peers and their parents could not speak Spanish contributed to her growing sense of feeling like an "outsider" despite their shared ethnic identity.

When reflecting on their status and ethnic identity, some participants also discussed the malleable parameters used to define notions of (il)legality. Joana, who was an ethnic studies major, discussed a class she took on the K–12 schooling experiences of Chicanos in the United

States. She explained the value of being able to learn her people's history through the major and how the course offered her a way to contextualize her educational experiences. Joana highlighted a sentiment that is commonly evoked by many of the Mexican-born participants; specifically, Joana explained how present-day California was once a part of Mexico and referenced how the United States annexed over half of Mexico's territory in 1848. Joana noted:

We see colonization as a beautiful thing and something that was meant to happen, when in reality, [colonization] involves a lot of genocide and a lot of bad tactics in order to colonize my people. Because I am Mexican. I was born in Mexico. Knowing that where I'm standing was once Mexico, it's really bittersweet. If all of this was still Mexico, if we were never colonized, I probably wouldn't have to deal with being undocumented because I'd be home.

Joana's quote highlighted how colonization has shaped the concepts of legality and illegality. If half of Mexico's territory had not been ceded to the United States, Joana would not be considered "undocumented" on present-day California soil. Ana expressed similar sentiments after referencing how California had once been part of Mexico and questioned, "Who is really illegal? I feel like [the U.S. government] can't really label people 'aliens' if they're the ones who are creating them." In this quote, Ana similarly interrogated the nature of (il)legality and what it means to be undocumented. Joana and Ana's quotes both suggested how immigration policy—specifically how (il)legality is defined—mirrors many of the same purposes behind colonization, in that colonization is used to uphold systems of power and oppression.

Undocumented Versus DACAmented

I did not explicitly indicate on the study's participant recruitment materials whether the study was open to both undocumented immigrants with and without DACA. I instead used the blanket term "undocumented" as part of the eligibility criteria listed on the study's recruitment materials. This framing of the criteria was intentional because I sought to enroll undocumented participants regardless of whether they were DACA recipients. Interestingly, when I received

email inquiries from those interested in participating, a few participants with DACA specified that they were undocumented but did not wholly identify with the “undocumented” label due to their DACA status. This difference in terminology used to articulate and describe participants’ experiences continued in the formal interviews as well.

Roughly half of the participants with DACA described using the label “DACAmended” in an effort to recognize how those with DACA are given work authorization, are eligible to apply for advance parole, are afforded protection from deportation, and so on. Lizeth, a DACA recipient, offered the perspective that using the terminology DACAmended was a way to acknowledge her privilege as a DACA recipient, pointing to how those who are “fully undocumented” do not have access to the same opportunities that she has. Two thirds of the participants without DACA similarly described feeling different than their peers who are DACA recipients and shared how they are not able to access the same opportunities; for instance, Raquel, who did not have DACA, remarked on how many of the fellowships and research opportunities she had encountered limited their application eligibility to students with DACA. Raquel spoke about how DACA creates a sense of stratification within the undocumented community, noting:

Institutions as a whole should start thinking about their [eligibility criteria] and reframing their resources and programs to accommodate everybody. The framing of these opportunities separate undocumented students even further. At the end of the day, they’re all your students. Knowing that I don’t have DACA does make me less than. I don’t feel less than but in technical terms, I am at the bottom of the hierarchy. I feel like you have your students that are U.S. citizens and then your residents. Then you have your DACA students, and then you have your undocumented students.

Without DACA, Raquel described the experience of sitting at the lowest rung of the institution’s hierarchical ladder. In her breakdown of this hierarchy, Raquel defined “DACA students” and “undocumented students” as two separate groups. Raquel had access to a much

narrower range of opportunities compared to her DACAmented peers and those of even “higher” statuses. The systemic denial of opportunity had reinforced the notion that she and all other students without DACA are valued less than her other peers.

Because the DACA program was awaiting further review from U.S. District Court Judge Hanen at the time of the interviews, some participants cautioned how this differentiation between undocumented and DACAmented may not hold the test of time. Lizeth shared that although she had DACA and was able to take advantage of its benefits during her undergraduate studies, she expressed doubt about the longevity of her DACAmented identity amid legal threats to the program. She expanded:

I think about [my status] a lot in the sense that I do have DACA, so I am very privileged to be able to work and I’ve worked on campus. I think about how in the future and how I’ll be able to work as well but I know with the DACA decisions, all of that is thrown up in the air. I had an instructor for one of my classes who was also on DACA who spoke about the realities of maybe teaching one day and then not the next day, and how that could affect your ability to enter the workforce in the future. That uncertainty always concerns me.

Despite enjoying steady on-campus employment for almost the entire 4 years she had been at UCMB, Lizeth’s quote highlighted the fickle nature of her status as a DACA recipient and how threats to DACA made her feel unsure about what the future could hold. Although Lizeth had greater financial security compared to her peers without DACA, she underscored how the struggles shared by these two groups of participants are inextricably linked to one another.

In a similar regard, I included a set of questions toward the end of the second interview that encouraged participants to share their recommendations for policy and practice. I share in greater detail the recommendations for policy, practice, and research in Chapter 7; for the purposes of this section, almost all the participants in the study—both those with and without DACA—emphasized the growing importance of addressing the needs of undocumented students

without DACA. Raquel summarized this idea by sharing, “DACA is basically dying. Unfortunately, DACA is dying which means that a lot more people will be undocumented without DACA.” Several participants with DACA also caveated their experiences by including a disclaimer that their educational experiences would likely differ from the large number of students without DACA who will inevitably come after them. Taken together, these sentiments reemphasized the notion that the college-going population will continue to see a rise in the number of undocumented students without DACA.

Even when the DACA program was last accepting new applications, several participants commented on the inaccessibility of the program. For context, 8 of the 11 participants without DACA shared they applied to the program during the period when applications were last open, but noted the application process closed back down before their applications could be approved. All eight of these participants expressed frustration with the high price tag of the application process, which includes both the \$495 application fee and the added costs of obtaining legal counsel to help guide them through the process (DACA, n.d.; Regents of the University of California, Davis Campus, n.d.). As one example, Raquel was a single mother at the time when the Obama administration announced the rollout of the DACA program in 2012. Although Raquel met the program’s eligibility criteria when the program was first introduced, she did not have discretionary funds to cover the \$495 application fee. Raquel did not have the additional income to cover this expense until almost a decade later, when she resumed her studies at community college. Though she had applied to the program in early 2021, the program had shut down again before her DACA application could be processed.

Early College Exposure

Eleven of the participants shared that they did not think going to college was a possibility until middle school or early high school. Although many participants had encouragement from their families to do well in school, several participants had been familiar with the ways in which undocumented immigrants are excluded from society by the time they reached their early adolescent years. As a result, over half of participants assumed at one point or another they would not be able to attend college. Seeing college as no different than the many other opportunities afforded to only those with U.S. citizenship, these participants held onto the assumption that they could not attend college until this notion was proven otherwise.

As one example, Lucia described how her history of being denied opportunities led her to operate from the assumption that she would be unable to seek future opportunities such as college. She recounted a specific college-related program from her freshman year of high school for which she had been ineligible to apply due to her status. Lucia described how not being able to apply to the program reinforced this notion that her opportunities were inherently limited as an undocumented immigrant. She explained:

When I see people around me doing stuff like studying abroad and joining different clubs, I feel like I'm really limited. In reality, I don't know. I honestly admit that I don't usually look into things because I feel like I don't have the same opportunities. Anytime anyone around me joined something or said they were doing something, it's kind of like, "Oh, well I can't do that." It is an assumption I have because of past experiences. Back in freshman year of high school, I think that's when I became the most aware that I had been making this assumption because there was this program that provided us the opportunity to go tour colleges, but one of the requirements on the application was a social. [The program] was something all my friends wanted to do but I couldn't. Because of stuff like that where I didn't qualify and I was restricted, I just have that assumption now that I can't do much.

Watching peers access different opportunities that she had been ineligible or unable to pursue reinforced in Lucia the perception that she "can't do that"—a phrase she repeated twice in

this brief quote. Although Lucia developed a strong support network in high school as the years progressed, Lucia shared that she often felt defeated to the point where she was reluctant to look into opportunities any further. Her prior quote suggested how not being able to pursue the same college-oriented program as her peers reinforced in Lucia that college was yet another opportunity beyond her reach.

Joana also held the assumption that she could not go to college as an undocumented immigrant. In 11th grade, her teacher asked her about her plans for after graduation and he remarked on Joana's academic potential. Sensing the teacher believed in her, Joana disclosed her status to him and shared that she did not know whether or not she could go to college. Joana shared her teacher replied:

I don't think you can [go to college] and it's really not worth it, either. If you don't have legal status, it's not worth going to college. You're just gonna fill in a room for someone else that deserves to be there.

Joana later sought the support of her academic counselor at the high school, who reassured her she could, in fact, go to college and that there were resources to support her. Joana demonstrated not only the shared experience of being unsure whether undocumented students can apply to college, but also the critical need to ensure that others in undocumented students' networks do not perpetuate this same misconception.

Of the eight participants who had seen college as a possibility from an early age, this awareness was often facilitated by someone or something else. Jessica, Isaac, Selena, and Lizeth all had older siblings who attended college. Though these four participants' siblings had varying degree objectives and attended various institutional types in the state of California, these four participants described being consistently exposed to direct evidence that undocumented immigrants could go to college. Similarly, Diana's mother had attended college in Honduras and

though her mother was unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system, she enrolled Diana in a charter elementary school that heavily encouraged its students to pursue college. Diana's mother's educational background, in combination with the elementary school that touted its college-going culture, instilled in Diana the sense that she was destined to go to college. Another example was Ximena, who joined her elementary school's Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program in fifth grade. Although Ximena shared her high school AVID program did not adequately address her needs as an undocumented student, Ximena's AVID program in elementary school provided indication that college was a possibility. The two primary exceptions to this notion were Teresa and Ana, in that both were the only two participants who had always been interested in continuing their studies beyond high school independent from another entity. Because the two participants had always spoken with their families about their goals to attend college from an early age, Teresa and Ana never developed the impression that they would be unable to pursue college due to their immigration status.

Across the wider participant base, many participants spoke about how others in their lives played the eventual role in shaping their early college aspirations. These figures either signaled to them that college was indeed a possibility as an undocumented immigrant or made their existing college dreams feel more tangible than they were before. Many of these influential figures were articulated in the participant introductions in Chapter 5. Generally, participants cited the following groups of people as having the greatest influence on the notion that they could go to college: peers (i.e., Oscar, Raquel, Chris, and Joana), family members (i.e., Jessica and Isaac), teachers (i.e., Brianna and Lucia), counselors (i.e., Ana, Diana, Selena, and Melissa), and community members (i.e., Teresa and Lizeth). Several participants listed here had mentors who were also undocumented or were previously undocumented, thereby acting as a valuable form of

representation. I revisit some of these groups of support and the larger topic of representation in the final section of this chapter that details students' social networks; however, these groupings of people emphasize the role others played in challenging these participants' misconceptions that they could not go to college.

Value of College: Balancing Hope With Pragmatism

In the first interview, I asked participants to explain their reasons or motivations for pursuing a bachelor's degree. Through this line of questioning, all participants described how they had struggled to define the following: What is the value of an undergraduate degree, namely for that of an undocumented student? Nearly all participants struggled to articulate a concrete, definitive answer to what they hoped to get out of an undergraduate degree. In what follows, the participants reflected on how their desire to attend college had taken on new layers of complexity as time progressed.

Over two thirds of the participants shared in some form how their decision to attend college had been shaped by the desire to honor their parents' sacrifices in coming to the United States. For instance, Teresa shared her parents migrated to the United States specifically to seek "better opportunities for themselves and for [herself]." She expanded by highlighting:

Both of them didn't have the opportunity to pursue higher education or any form of secondary education because of the pay. They were both very poor growing up in Mexico, so they didn't have the opportunity to do that. They wanted me to have that opportunity.

This quote highlighted Teresa's desire to seek opportunities to which her parents had not been afforded. Teresa's decision to go to college emerged in part to fulfill her parents' dream of providing better opportunities for their children. Oscar shared something to a similar effect, describing how he decided to pursue college to "break the generational cycle of being a labor worker and have a less labor-intensive job compared to [his] parents and grandparents and so

on.” Oscar hoped to use his engineering degree to attain upward mobility and live a life that was different from the family members who had come before him. In this sense, many of the participants thought of college as a vehicle to improve their and their families’ living conditions and forge a path that honored the sacrifices of their ancestral line.

Some participants shared other family driven reasons behind their desire to attend college that extended beyond their parents or grandparents. Roughly one third of participants described the desire to be a role model to some of their younger family members. For example, Raquel shared how she resumed her studies at the community college to provide “a better life for [her] children and give them a role model image for them to pursue their education. Nowadays, you have to have an education. You have to have a degree if you really want to get somewhere.” Because her children had gotten older, with her oldest child in high school at the time of this study, Raquel pointed out the value of an education and the doors a degree can open. Raquel highlighted how going to college was less about her own mobility; rather, Raquel resumed her studies so she could extend this knowledge to her children and provide them with a model that they too could go to college. Ana also shared she pursued college largely to demonstrate to her four younger siblings with the following notion:

Even if you come to a different country than the one you were born in, you can make a change in your life, get an education, and pursue your dreams and goals. I want to set an example that no matter what, any circumstances you can overcome and your place of birth shouldn’t be a determinant of where you end up in your life.

Mirroring the participants who remarked on the influence of having an older sibling who attended college, Ana hoped to instill in her younger siblings a sense of hope for the future and provide them with evidence that they too could go after their goals as an undocumented immigrant.

Relatedly, participants also conceptualized college as a way to open doors to new opportunities they otherwise likely would not have been able to access due to their immigration status. As one example, Antonio shared how he faced significant academic difficulty in the first half of high school and how his older sister staged an intervention with him after coming across his report card. Disappointed by Antonio's academic performance, Antonio recalled that his sister told him: "Because of our status, we have to work 10 times harder than other people and these grades are not okay. I know you can do better. I know you can push yourself." Antonio described how this moment lit a "spark" in him and he subsequently began to take an interest in his studies. This quote emphasized Antonio's increasing awareness of the challenges of being an undocumented immigrant and how obtaining a college degree could signal to others his potential. In essence, Antonio realized a college degree would provide him with more opportunities than a high school degree would.

Many participants without DACA reflected on the value of a college degree relative to the postgraduation job market that awaited them. Without work authorization, undocumented students without DACA may encounter significantly constrained job prospects after graduation. Selena, a participant without DACA who was interested in pursuing a career in health care, shared that she presumed going to college would provide her with increased opportunities to learn relevant skills. She explained:

I thought it would be easier if I went to school to be able to help people than to do it without a degree. Sometimes people who have more degrees and have more education will get that job over you who doesn't. I thought to myself, I wouldn't want my lack of education to be the reason that I won't get a job.

Throughout her first interview, Selena demonstrated an acute awareness of the barriers she may face in obtaining employment without work authorization. Unlike some of the other barriers she may encounter, Selena's quote suggested she had seen college as something in her control.

Selena felt having a college degree would provide her with an added advantage in the job market compared to those who may have less education.

Similar to Selena, Raquel grappled with the realities of her status and reflected on her job prospects postgraduation. Raquel expressed the notion that although immigration policy may or may not shift in coming years, earning her bachelor's degree would theoretically provide her with a fixed qualification. She explained:

I try not to overthink the future too much. Maybe in the next year, there might be something that will be helpful for undocumented students or undocumented people overall. I have to push myself to continue my studies because, in 5 years' time, I know I'll still have my degree. That's not going to get taken away from me. Even if, for example, I get my degree and I can't work after I graduate, in 5 years' time I might be able to have the career I want.

Raquel emphasized how her academic training is something that she will forever carry with her, and her degree is something that cannot be stripped away. Even if she is unable to pursue the career she wants immediately after graduation, Raquel's quote suggested how her degree had provided her with a sense of hope for the future. If the circumstances surrounding her status were to change for the better, Raquel's degree would better position her to chase the career she wants.

Some participants approached the decision to pursue a degree from a more pragmatic lens, describing the need to have a backup plan if immigration policy or their own circumstances took a turn for the worse. Ivan and Melissa were two participants who shared that in a worst-case scenario, they could theoretically take the skills they acquired in college and pursue careers outside of the United States. Ivan, a linguistics and computer science double major, shared how he might explore freelance positions and would consider relocating to Canada if his circumstances necessitated his removal from the United States. Even before beginning his studies at community college, Ivan had viewed going to college as a way to buy himself time. He

recalled a discussion he had with his mother regarding his plans for after high school graduation. He explained, “I told her I wanted to go to college because it was the best decision. [Going to college] was the one thing I can do while I wait for my papers.” Although the phrasing of Ivan’s last sentence conveyed hope that he would someday be able to receive his papers, Ivan’s earlier comment about his willingness to relocate and take his skills elsewhere suggested going to college had been a way for him to gauge his options and develop an action plan in the event his circumstances changed.

Melissa discussed the continued value her degree would hold if she were forced to return to Mexico or if there ever came a need to immigrate somewhere else. Melissa articulated the following from the vantage point of when she first began her studies at the community college, noting:

As an undocumented individual, I felt like realistically I wasn’t going to be able to find a good and steady career. Still, I know degrees are valuable. U.S. degrees are still valuable outside the United States. Even if—God forbid—I end up having to move back to Mexico or end up deciding to immigrate somewhere else, I’ll still have that degree. I wanted to feel like I would be safe in the career that I want, and I wouldn’t have to consistently work in retail or food service for the rest of my life the way that I’ve seen my mom do. I can tell it’s really draining, and I don’t want to feel like that. I decided to continue my education because even if I couldn’t use my skills at all here in the United States, then I know that I could possibly go back home or go to another country and use my degree there.

Melissa’s quote reemphasized many key sentiments shared by several of the participants thus far in this section. Melissa highlighted the sacrifices made by her mother to provide for her family and her desire to pursue a high-paying, less labor-intensive career than that of her mother. Melissa grappled with the realities of her lack of work authorization and the challenges she may face in finding a career that could offer her stability. All the while, Melissa recognized the utility of a degree from a U.S. institution. Although she did not want to leave the United States, Melissa’s quote highlighted how going to college may afford her opportunities to use her degree

in other contexts outside the United States, thereby enabling her to achieve a sense of stability one way or another.

Introduction to Status Disclosure

Consistent with existing literature (Gonzales, 2010; Kam et al., 2018; Muñoz, 2016; Murillo, 2017a; Nienhusser, 2013; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Roth, 2017; Suárez-Orozco & López Hernández, 2020; Yasuike, 2019), participants in this study frequently discussed the topic of status disclosure and shared how their relationship with sharing their status evolved throughout their academic journeys. With participants' reasons or motivations behind attending college established, I conclude the larger first section on identity with the concept of status disclosure to highlight how participants' emerging understanding of their identities and college goals shaped their thoughts on whether to share their status with others. Because status disclosure was often central to how participants accessed information related to policy, I return to this concept throughout the larger findings chapter.

Participants often came to understand what their status meant through the lens of fear and exclusion; all but two of the participants reported a heightened sense of worry about whether to share their status with others and with whom they could safely share this information. Selena described how she had been reluctant to share her status with others throughout middle school and the large majority of high school. She explained:

In middle school when I started talking to people and making friends, [my mom] was afraid that people would report us or something. It's always a fear of my mom's so she told me not to tell anybody. [My status] was just something that I kept close to me, and I wouldn't really tell people. That's when the fear started picking up on me that my family and I would be separated if anyone was ever to find out. I barely tell people, even to this day, because of the fear. I don't know if I can trust people with that certain information.

Selena's quote highlighted her mother's fear that if others were to find out their family's status, they could potentially risk getting reported to immigration authorities and being separated from

one another. Observing her mother's fear, Selena became increasingly wary of others learning about her status.

Selena's fear became so deep-seated that she grew increasingly self-conscious of a scar on her arm from a vaccine that is widely administered in Mexico upon birth, the Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccine. In both her educational journey map and second interview, Selena described how she grew up nervous that the scar on her arm would signal to others that she was born in Mexico and they would become suspicious of her immigration status. Both Lizeth and Lucia remarked on the same exact BCG vaccine scar on their arm and spoke about the fear of drawing unwanted attention to themselves that could subject them and their families to harm. This awareness on the part of Selena, Lizeth, and Lucia suggested a hyper-awareness of what made them different from their U.S.-born peers. This one specific example shared by all three participants suggested status disclosure extends beyond uttering the phrase, "I am undocumented." Status disclosure is also implicated in the ways that participants do or not show up as their authentic selves in various spaces.

A little more than half of the participants also noted the concern about how others would perceive them if they knew their status and how they would be treated as a result. The participants who noted this specific concern often shared instances where peers had joked about undocumented immigrants and how these instances further instilled in them a reluctance to share their status with others. To name a few examples, Ana recounted how a middle school peer had been "made fun of" after telling her classmates that she was undocumented, and Ana described how the event "took a toll" on her. Diana was in seventh grade at the time of the 2016 presidential election and began to hear peers making joking remarks about undocumented immigrants, which led her to feel uneasy. Diana described how this climate made her feel

“weird” about disclosing her status and noted she did not want to be put in a position where she would be made to feel “different from everyone else.” Isaac went to a high school that was primarily Latinx and shared how he only disclosed his status to a small group of close friends.

When asked if he had shared beyond his close friend group, Isaac shook his head and stated:

I didn't want to deal with my status being the butt end of the joke. Whenever the sirens would ring in the distance, my friends would joke, “Oh, they're here for you.” Shit like that. With my friends, it's fine, but with strangers though, I didn't want that.

The collective experiences shared by Ana, Diana, and Isaac demonstrated how these participants were concerned about how others would treat them if they were to learn their status. All three participants recalled specific instances where they or another undocumented immigrant had been the target of jokes from peers. Though Isaac indicated in the prior quote that he had been fine with friends making the joke, his sentiments suggested a reluctance to share his status with a wider audience where, unlike his friends, he might not be familiar with the intentions behind the people making the joke.

To that end, Melissa described an event that occurred in high school that made her question others' intentions. As detailed in Chapter 5, Melissa shared an instance where a teacher of hers shared their belief that immigrants were in the country to “steal” jobs and money from the government. Melissa had been more open with her status in middle school, but events such as the one with her teacher led her to become increasingly protective over her information, fearful that she might unknowingly disclose her status to someone who harbored anti-immigrant views. Melissa's example demonstrated how displays of nativism, especially in educational spaces, can further contribute to undocumented students' fears regarding their safety and shape their subsequent status disclosure decisions.

Related to the notion of how others would perceive them, roughly one fifth of participants also shared the concern that others would pity them and that their achievements, or their accomplishments would be diminished due to their immigration status. Selena, who did not share her status with her counselors until the final few months of her senior year of high school, reflected on her decision to keep her status largely to herself. She remarked:

Even now and all throughout high school, I would never let anybody know, even my teachers, because I felt like maybe they might see me differently or something. I thought in my own head that they were going to be like, “Oh, I have to help you more or do something.” But I didn’t want any special treatment. I didn’t tell anybody, even during my college application process. I also didn’t want them to think that [hesitated]. . . . A lot of people have this perception that it’s way easier for undocumented students to get into college because they want to let you in because of pity or something like that. I didn’t want anyone to think that.

Selena’s comment highlighted a few important points. First, Selena’s quote indicated that she was worried how her teachers would perceive her and that they would feel a greater inclination to support her—when, in reality, she wanted to be treated the same as any other student at her school. Furthermore, Selena’s remark about others’ assumptions that it is easier for undocumented students to get into college reflected a fear that her admission to University of California Monarch Butterfly (UCMB) would be chalked up to factors outside of her own merits. Selena’s quote signified both a reluctance to share out of fear of how others would perceive her and the fear that her achievements would be reduced to others pitying her for her immigration status.

Another main theme shared by some of the participants concerned how their decisions of whether or not to share their status looked different at various stages of their academic careers. The participants who obtained DACA soon after turning 15 (i.e., the minimum age required to apply) reflected on how the status afforded them an additional layer of protection if they were to share. Lizeth, who went on to write about her status as part of an op-ed in her school newspaper

during her senior year of high school, remarked how having DACA provided her with a greater sense of safety. She explained how her thoughts surrounding status disclosure had changed since becoming a DACA recipient, noting:

Knowing that because I have DACA, it provides me a little bit of cushion to be safer in sharing my experiences. I think from elementary and middle school, it was very much, “Don’t say anything.” In high school, it was me figuring things out—reading more on the news and just figuring out that it was okay for me to speak about it, especially after seeing other people my age speak about their status as well. Now, I just feel more comfortable speaking about it.

Lizeth’s sentiments about DACA emphasized how the status provides its recipients with a greater sense of protection compared to those who do not have DACA. Hearing the stories of other DACAmented individuals demonstrated to Lizeth that she would be safe in sharing her status with others, which later led Lizeth to share her status with a much wider audience via her school’s newspaper. Lizeth’s experience suggested how participants with and without DACA may be inclined to think of status disclosure in different ways, with those who have DACA at a greater advantage over those without DACA in terms of their immediate safety.

Across the wider participant base, only two participants reported that they had always been forthright in sharing their status. Both Oscar and Raquel were open with their status in academic spaces before their college application efforts began, and noted this openness was integral in their ability to navigate various educational spaces. In large part, Oscar’s and Raquel’s openness had been fueled by the desire to maximize the support available to them. Oscar remarked that he shares his status “a lot more than [he] should,” suggesting he had an awareness of the risks ascribed to sharing his status, especially as an undocumented immigrant without DACA. He later lamented that if being undocumented did not have the negative stigma it carries, schools would be able to “provide a lot of kids with more support.” As a parenting and nontraditional student, Raquel described how she was open with “anyone and everyone” and

emphasized, “If I didn’t disclose [my status], I wouldn’t have gotten the help I needed.” Raquel’s statements demonstrated how she saw sharing her status with others as a necessity to get the support she needed to transfer from the community college to the 4-year UCMB. Both Oscar and Raquel’s thoughts reflected how their decisions to share focused largely on their ability to access resources and the information needed to apply to the 4-year institution.

Examining the Effects of Policy

The second section examines policies concerning access and affordability. In this section, I specifically discuss the California Dream Act, California AB 540, and DACA, and how these three policies shaped participants’ journeys to college. Because all 19 participants identified as low-income, each of the three policies highlighted directly impacted participants’ abilities to finance the costs of their education. In this section, I also discuss the topics of work authorization, scholarships, and loans, and situate each of these topics within the framework of college accessibility and affordability to highlight where existing policies have often fallen short in addressing students’ needs; additionally, I suggest where future attention ought to be paid. Finally, building off the previous section on how participants conceptualized their identities as Latinx undocumented students, I conclude this second section by exploring participants’ challenges staying up to date with policy developments and understanding how these developments impact them.

California Dream Act

The California Dream Act was the first of three policies that were explicitly included in the study’s interview protocol. Participants often called the support they received through the Dream Act essential to their ability to attend college. Though all participants were in unanimous agreement that the aid they received through the Dream Act was crucial in their ability to finance

their studies, participants' experiences began to vary more substantially as they recounted how and where they learned about the Dream Act. One of the most pressing issues concerning the Dream Act was the timing of when participants first learned about the Dream Act and relatedly, where participants were able to find support and access resources related to the Dream Act.

Most of the participants first learned about the Dream Act in relation to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Specifically, almost two thirds of the participants shared they learned about the Dream Act shortly after learning they would be unable to apply to the FAFSA, as the FAFSA application requires applicants to include their social security number on the application (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). As one example, Karina described how she began to look into the FAFSA after hearing about the application at her high school. She explained:

I thought I was supposed to fill out a FAFSA form, and I remember going onto the [FAFSA] website, and then it mentioned something about my citizenship status. I was like, well, I'm not a citizen. I don't know if [the FAFSA website] said something like "You need to do the Dream Act instead." Maybe I Googled it, and that's how I found out that I had to do Dream Act instead.

This quote demonstrated how Karina learned about the Dream Act only after realizing that she would be unable to apply for financial aid using the FAFSA application. Though Karina expressed uncertainty as to how she learned about the Dream Act, Karina's quote suggested she had to look elsewhere to learn more about what options were available for non-U.S. citizens and students without a social security number.

Several participants discussed how the resources surrounding the Dream Act often paled in comparison to the resources dedicated to the FAFSA. Of those participants who discussed the Dream Act in relation to the FAFSA, these participants described how their high schools hosted workshops on the FAFSA and provided support to students as they completed their FAFSA applications. Using Karina again as an example, she described the FAFSA workshops hosted by

her high school. Though Karina already knew that she would need to complete the Dream Act by the time her high school offered its FAFSA workshop, her high school did not offer any support for the Dream Act. She attended her school's FAFSA workshop with the hope she would still be able to receive support completing the Dream Act. She recounted:

I reached out to my counselors and was like, "Hey, I need to fill out the Dream Act because I'm undocumented. How do I do that? Can I get help?" They told me that I could sit in at one of the FAFSA workshops, but that most of the information wouldn't apply to me in regard to certain categories. I remember still going to the FAFSA workshop because I wanted to learn about the similarities and differences between the two. I remember asking questions specifically about my parents, their citizenship status, and their taxes. The person in charge of the workshop told me that they couldn't help me and that they didn't want to give me any advice because they didn't want to put my family at risk, especially because of my parents' status. That really scared me, and I felt really alone. I felt very defeated. I was like, "Whoa, there are resources for FAFSA but not for Dream Act." I ended up filling out the [Dream Act] form all on my own and it was really scary.

Karina highlighted the prevalence of FAFSA-dedicated resources at her school and the absence of similar resources dedicated to the Dream Act. Seeing that her high school did not offer any resources related to the Dream Act, Karina had to disclose her status in an attempt to address some of the questions she had. Although Karina took initiative and sought out the financial aid resources that were available at her school, the counselors at her school outright refused to help her any further out of fear that they would misadvise her and put her and her family in a dangerous position. As a result, Karina emphasized how the absence of resources and denial of support made her feel isolated. Without the school's support, Karina had to go about completing her Dream Act application on her own without any means of support to guide her.

Alejandro, who began his higher education journey at the community college, described how he had encountered similar challenges accessing Dream Act resources at his community college. Alejandro shared that in the process of learning more about what financial aid options

were available to him, he had been pushed from one uninformed financial aid officer to the next.

He explained:

Getting through the financial aid process was really difficult since I didn't really know anything about the financial aid process or how to apply for it. It took me a really long time to figure that out. A lot of the financial aid officers who helped me when I was in community college assumed I had social security and was using FAFSA. So when I told them I didn't have a social, they were like, "Oh, you don't have social security? Oh, I have no idea how to deal with your case." I had to go through multiple different officers until I got one who understood what I was supposed to do and that I needed to complete the Dream Act application.

Similar to Karina's high school, Alejandro's community college focused its resources almost exclusively on the FAFSA and operated under the assumption that all of its students were U.S. residents and had social security numbers. Similar to when Karina told her counselors that she was undocumented, Alejandro had to disclose to financial aid officers details that hinted at his status to uncover information specific to his needs. Elsewhere in his interview, Alejandro described how he took a more guarded approach to sharing his status. When seeking support, Alejandro often referenced his lack of a social security number and the fact he had not been born in the United States instead of outright declaring he was undocumented. In light of the limited number of financial aid staff who were familiar with the Dream Act, Alejandro had to engage in repeated status disclosure behaviors until he finally connected with a financial aid officer who was knowledgeable about the Dream Act. Alejandro's quote highlighted how status disclosure is embedded in the very process of seeking support.

In a similar instance, Melissa recalled an example where she scheduled a Zoom appointment with her community college's financial aid office to ask a question regarding her Dream Act application. To her surprise, Melissa was greeted by a student worker who revealed she was unfamiliar with the Dream Act. Melissa shared how the student worker's unfamiliarity

with the Dream Act made her feel scared and led her to question the safety in seeking support.

Melissa explained:

I scheduled a counseling appointment with financial aid because I was confused. I got in a Zoom with another student because I guess she worked at the financial aid office, and I was confused because I was expecting someone else, but I was like, “[The student worker] should know what they’re doing.” I began asking some questions about financial aid. I honestly don’t remember what they were, but she was like, “Can I take a look at your FAFSA or award letter?” I was like, “No, I have Dream Act,” and then she said, “I don’t know what that is.” I thought about it later and was like, how are you in the financial aid team and don't know what that is? I felt very turned against and it made me scared. What if I get in trouble? In my head, I was like, what if she puts me in problems or says something? I know what immigrants go through. I know what ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] is. I know what’s going on. So I’m like, what if she’s not a good person and doesn’t like immigrant people and then shares that information? I was afraid.

Melissa’s quote reemphasized the scant resources available to undocumented students seeking information and the lack of personnel who have, at least, some understanding of the Dream Act. When met with a financial aid student worker who stated she was not familiar with the Dream Act, Melissa felt disoriented and entered a state of panic. Melissa’s comment that she “knows what immigrants go through . . . [she] know[s] what’s going on” suggested she was familiar with some of the threats many undocumented people face with respect to safety as detailed earlier in this chapter. Although Melissa and the financial aid student worker’s interaction was brief, Melissa expressed fear that her information had fallen into the wrong hands and that she could be reported to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Participants commonly identified the Dream Act as the first time they confided in someone they were undocumented. In fact, over half of the participants described having to out themselves to receive financial aid support specific to the Dream Act. One example came from Lucia, who was enrolled in a peer counseling program offered through her high school’s college and career center. As part of her onboarding for the peer counselor position, Lucia received

detailed information on the process of applying to college so she would be able to support her peers. In following quote, Lucia described some of the training she received on financial aid and how this training led her to share her status with her college counselor. She explained:

When I started my senior year of high school, I joined the peer counseling program. The college counselor was our teacher. Because we were peer counselors, we were informed of the FAFSA process. [The college counselor] mentioned that students like me had a different application. At this point—I think it was a week or two into senior year—I realized that I should probably let her know that I was one of those students. When I told her, she was really understanding and comforting. I never really voiced that to somebody. It was then that she told me about the different applications, like the Dream Act.

Relative to most of the other participants, Lucia was one of the small handful of participants who received an ample amount of support from her high school. Not only was her college counselor knowledgeable about the Dream Act, but another staff member stationed at her school's college and career center was also undocumented. That other staff member lent Lucia her direct, firsthand experience completing the Dream Act application and Lucia described how she had worked on the Dream Act at each step with that staff member. Even in circumstances such as these where the outcome was favorable, Lucia's quote highlighted how she had to disclose her status to learn more about the Dream Act. Instead of providing all of the peer counselors with a baseline understanding of the Dream Act, the peer counselors were instructed to refer undocumented students to the college counselor for further assistance—only then was the name of the Dream Act application revealed. Although Lucia was able to establish a larger team of support at her high school, her example demonstrated how the Dream Act is typically rendered as a specialized niche, wherein only a few individuals are knowledgeable on how to complete the application and what the process entails. Because of the limited few who are familiar with the Dream Act, this practice holds the potential of placing undocumented students in a position where they must disclose their status to multiple people. Similarly, the practice of referring

student cases to the next person also poses privacy risks, namely in how sensitive information is transmitted from one party to the next.

Across the entire participant base, only one participant shared how she had been able to learn about the Dream Act alongside the FAFSA. Because the two forms were taught alongside one another in the presentations and resources offered through her high school, Ana never had to disclose her status to receive support on how to complete the Dream Act. In the following quote, she described attending a financial aid workshop that was organized for all her school's graduating seniors, noting:

It was a presentation where they included both applications, and they said which one you needed to fill out. It wasn't outing students. The counselors told us, "If you're undocumented or if you don't have a social, this is the application you have to fill out." I knew I was undocumented, so I knew which one to fill out. When they were checking our applications, the counselors knew what to check for in the different applications.

Ana's quote highlighted how presenting the two applications—the FAFSA and the Dream Act—alongside one another helped demystify the process of applying for financial aid. Notice how Ana also used the phrasing of "outing" oneself. Unlike several of the other participants who had to initiate support themselves or share intimate details concerning their status to receive that support, Ana never had to reveal her status to any of her counselors. Ana was able to receive support from her counselors who knew how to complete the application and she was able to learn about the process in the same space as her peers with U.S. citizenship.

Participants also commonly reflected on questions that were asked in the Dream Act application itself. The Dream Act application requires participants to share intimate details such as their address(es), dates of birth, contact information, number of people in their household, name(s) and location(s) of school(s) attended, and their individual and parental financial information (California Student Aid Commission, n.d.). Because the Dream Act application

warns applicants that completing the form inaccurately amounts to perjury, many participants expressed fear that completing the forms wrong or inaccurately could lead them and their families to face unwanted consequences—be that with their institution, or with the law.

As one example, Melissa shared how she struggled to interpret questions on the Dream Act related to her mother's finances and faced the added challenge of trying to determine what information would be safe to include on the application. She described, "It was really confusing trying to get financial information from my mom because I also want to protect her. I was like 'I don't know if I can say this. I don't know what's good or bad.'" As she filled out the form, Melissa felt conflicted as to whether it was safe to include her mother's information. On one hand, Melissa needed to fill out the form to receive financial aid; on the other hand, Melissa ruminated over the fear that her mother could be deported and they would be separated from each other. This quote established how the questions posed in the Dream Act not only concern the safety of undocumented students, but undocumented students' families as well.

Another common example participants used to illustrate this idea concerned how many of the participants and their families worked "under the table" jobs. Roughly three fourths of the participants used this specific terminology to describe the often cash-based jobs they and their families had to make ends meet. Joana described how she faced difficulty trying to report her parents' tax information on the Dream Act application. She explained:

My parents don't do taxes because they [only] get paid in cash. They work under the table. So the application itself, when I had to do it on my own, it was very complicated, because I didn't understand what the form was asking me because I have never filed for taxes either. My parents didn't file for taxes. I just had to put zeros for everything and I was hoping I wasn't committing fraud or some sort of, you know . . . because [the application] does warn you about that stuff.

Before offering further commentary of Joana's quote, notice the similarities in the following quote from Karina. Karina described filling out the section of the Dream Act that asked about her parents' tax information. She noted:

My biggest fear was my parents' citizenship status. I was afraid that ICE would deport them, and they'd find out where we're living. I was afraid of the taxes section because my mom doesn't work. She's a stay-at-home mother. My dad is a mechanic and he gets paid in cash, so he doesn't have any forms to verify his income. I was just very afraid of that section. I didn't want to lie, but I was also like, I'm not lying, because he doesn't get paid in checks.

As undocumented immigrants without any form of work authorization, both Joana and Karina's parents took on "under the table" jobs to help support their families. Joana, as a student without DACA, similarly worked an "under the table" job. In the absence of W-2 forms or other comparable tax documents to verify their income, Joana and Karina both faced difficulty determining what figures to include on their application that accurately captured the financial situations of their respective families. In Karina's quote, she referenced the fear that she was committing fraud, reiterating the earlier point about how the Dream Act application warns applicants that misreporting their information amounts to perjury. Similarly, Karina described how she felt unsure if she had been lying on her form when, in fact, she was reporting her family's financial information to the best of her ability. Although the Dream Act is used by undocumented immigrants to apply for financial aid, both Joana and Karina's experiences suggested the Dream Act application fails to adequately account for financial situations where applicants and/or their families do not have easily quantifiable data to report.

On the note of reporting parents' tax information, Alejandro shared how his mother refused to supply him with her tax information out of fear for how this information would be used. Though Alejandro's experiences were more extreme compared to those of Joana and

Karina, Alejandro described how his mother's fears ultimately led to his financial aid application getting denied. He described:

I was supposed to transfer to the 4-year after my 1st year in community college but I couldn't because there were issues with the tax part of my Dream Act. As undocumented immigrants, my parents were really scared. Their taxes had discrepancies. My mom was like, "We can't afford to do this. It's too much. I'm going to get deported. I'll lose everything and you'll also get deported." She decided not to give me her tax information and my financial aid got denied.

Alejandro's quote indicated the profoundness of his mother's fears. He suggested that his mother had been scared to include her information altogether out of fear for how such disclosure would expose her to harm, or that she would face repercussions due to the "discrepancies" on Alejandro's parents' tax forms. Because Alejandro did not have the information needed to complete his Dream Act application in full, his application was denied and the school to which he had been admitted was not able to offer him any sort of financial aid package. Without this aid, Alejandro withdrew his intent to register and spent an additional year at the community college.

Diana also reflected on how not only did she have to include her parents' financial details on the Dream Act, but she also had to share these details with whoever was assisting her with completing the Dream Act. Diana described how the language included in the questions made it difficult for her to discern what the form was asking her to include about her family's finances, and how her confusion required her to seek help from her counselor. She expanded on the significance of reaching out for support, noting:

It's private information that you don't want to tell other people, like your household income. But you have to tell someone because now you need to ask your counselor all about this. Sometimes people don't want to tell other people all their financial information.

Diana's comment demonstrated her reluctance to share financial details with her counselor and how she had seen no choice but to share these details to receive the assistance she needed.

Although Diana had a positive relationship with her counselor, as indicated in Chapter 5, Diana's remark highlighted that her mother's financial information encompassed details she would have rather kept private.

Selena similarly made a passing remark on the note of financial aid, describing how completing her Dream Act application and seeking support in the process of doing so amounted to her "giving [her] life away" because "you have to give them your information." Selena's comment, albeit brief, suggested how the process of applying for financial aid runs counter to what many of the participants were taught about their status—specifically that the details surrounding their status ought to be kept private and approached with the utmost discretion.

Though participants most commonly cited deportation and perjury as the two repercussions causing them the most worry, some of the freshmen- and sophomore-level participants without DACA shared how they were once concerned that applying for aid would weaken their chances of someday obtaining residency. For instance, Selena held the belief that applying to and receiving financial aid would be used against her if DACA were to ever reopen applications for new applicants, or if she were to try to obtain lawful residency via another path. In the process of detailing the support she had received from her counselors on the Dream Act, Selena explained the role her counselors played in reassuring her that she would not be "at risk" if she applied for financial aid. When probed further about what she meant by "at risk," Selena explained:

I felt like maybe the state is offering me aid to help me into college but then later on after accepting the aid, they were going to be like, "Oh, psych. This is going to affect you one day when you're trying to apply to become a resident or whatever."

Selena believed that California offering her financial aid via the Dream Act was part of the government's veiled attempt to sabotage her chances of becoming a lawful resident. Selena's comment highlighted how she previously thought applying for financial aid would reflect poorly on her as an undocumented immigrant and illustrated the fear that receiving aid would hurt her chances of becoming a resident. Such a misconception illustrates that extending support to undocumented students goes beyond the mechanics of simply how to complete the form. In addition to providing assistance with completing the application, support for the Dream Act also encompasses assuaging students' concerns about how the information included in the application will be used.

Tuition Policies in California

The second policy directly referenced within the study's interview protocol was California AB 540. As a reminder, AB 540 permits all students who (a) attended secondary school in the state of California for at least 3 years and (b) graduated or attained the equivalent of a high school diploma to pay in-state tuition at any of California's public colleges and universities (Welner et al., 2017). At the time of the interviews, most participants demonstrated a baseline understanding that AB 540 enables them to receive in-state tuition and they need not pay nonresident tuition so long as they meet certain established criteria. Still, the overwhelming majority of participants were not familiar with the history of the policy and the full eligibility criteria that would enable one to receive in-state tuition. This subsection further details the impact that AB 540 had on participants' journeys to college and the timing of when participants first came to learn about AB 540.

Several participants described how AB 540 helped make attending college more affordable and noted without the policy, they would have likely had to have made alternative

plans. For instance, Alejandro recounted going on a campus tour at a local public 4-year university while he was still in high school. One of the professors leading the tour informed students of AB 540, describing how the policy enables most California high school students to receive in-state tuition at state schools. Before this campus tour, Alejandro assumed that if he were to attend college, he would have had to pay nonresident tuition. He described his reaction to learning about AB 540, recalling:

Oh my God, I can actually go to college and not worry about the cost. It was pretty scary because I thought, “I’m going to have to pay . . . what? Like \$40 or \$50k out of pocket? Where am I supposed to get something like that?” AB 540 made me more like, “Oh, I can actually go to college.”

Alejandro had previously been under the impression that he would have been classified as a nonresident due to his lack of papers and would have had to pay a much higher price tag to go to college. Notice how he used the word “actually” twice in the quote. The repetition of this phrase further established how the provision of AB 540 signaled to him that going to college would be more attainable than he had previously thought.

Ana, a freshman-level admit, shared how AB 540 was what led her to consider pursuing the 4-year institution in the first place. She described:

If it weren’t for AB 540, I don’t think I would have gone to the college I would have. As a [college] freshman, I probably would have resorted to a community college. AB 540 makes a 4-year college degree more attainable to students like me.

Similar to Alejandro, Ana described how, without AB 540, she would have had to figure out how to pay the high nonresident price tag “out of pocket.” Ana recognized the community college route as an option that was more affordable than the 4-year route, describing how she would have likely begun her studies at community college. Although AB 540 does not address whatever need remains with the new in-state price tag in place, the very fact that AB 540 shaved off a significant portion of the tuition Ana thought she would have to pay allowed her to widen

her college options. Ana went on to add several UC and CSU institutions to the list of the colleges to which she applied.

Although all participants voiced similar thoughts on how their academic goals had benefited from AB 540, the participants varied widely in terms of how and when they first learned about AB 540. Less than one sixth of participants were familiar with AB 540 before the start of their senior years. In other words, only three participants learned about AB 540 well before they began weighing their post-high school graduation goals or began applying to schools. As referenced earlier, Alejandro first learned about AB 540 through a college campus visit he had taken while still in high school. Melissa first learned about AB 540 in the same conversation when she learned she could go to college as an undocumented student. When she told her counselor she did not think she could go to college, Melissa recalled that her counselor remarked, “There’s AB 540, there’s scholarships. You can apply to college.” Though the counselor did not go into the specifics of AB 540, Melissa shared how the conversation planted a seed in her that such options did exist.

Oscar, the third and final participant who learned about AB 540 before the start of their senior year, first learned about AB 540 through his friend’s mother who was a professor at the local community college (i.e., Lorraine). Both Lorraine and one of her colleagues at the community college brought AB 540 to Oscar’s attention. The colleague helped Oscar complete his AB 540 application later down the road. Oscar shared, “Without them, I would have been so confused when they charged me out-of-state tuition. I would have been like, ‘What just happened?’” Oscar’s quote highlighted his belief that if he had not received the support of Lorraine and her colleague, he likely would not have known to look out for the application and would have been blindsided by the nonresident tuition price.

A much larger subset of students did not learn about AB 540 until well after they already complete their Dream Act. UCMB does not send out detailed financial aid award notifications to its incoming students until late spring at the earliest, and mid-July at the latest. In the following quote, Lucia described how she did not learn about AB 540 until after she received UCMB's financial aid letter. She shared:

It didn't make sense to me why my tuition was so high. I ran to [my high school counselor], and she explained to me, "Oh, this is why." She was the one who helped me print out the AB 540 application, fill it out, and turn it in. She actually got it mailed for me. It wasn't until I had to do the AB 540 application that I became aware of it. I honestly had no idea that was a thing, again, until I had to do it. I think that's been a challenge, for sure, not being informed of these things.

As Lucia described, her counselor was pivotal not only in assuaging her concerns, but also in ensuring that Lucia was equipped with necessary support as she submitted the paperwork to establish her AB 540 status. Lucia emphasized twice in the quote that she had not been aware of AB 540 until after she met with her high school counselor and inquired as to why her tuition had been set so high.

Chris had a similar experience, in that he first learned about AB 540 after receiving his financial aid letter from UCMB. Upon receiving his financial aid letter, he was alarmed to see how markedly different his tuition cost was from his friend who attended the same high school as him and who had also been accepted to UCMB. Chris described:

We were just comparing the financial aid information we got. My tuition was triple the tuition cost compared to her. I was like, "Wait, why is this so much for me?" Then I saw all these fees and realized they were charging me for out-of-state tuition. I was like, "Wait, what? Why is it that out-of-state tuition? I'm graduating from the same high school as [my friend]."

Chris's quote similarly emphasized how he entered a state of panic upon seeing his much higher price tag compared to that of his friend. When he mentioned that he graduated from the same high school as his friend, such a detail suggests he was confused as to what prompted him to

receive the nonresident notation, and that he likely had taken a much longer inventory of what made him different from that of his peer. Chris and his friend both entered UCMB on the same private scholarship and upon seeing the charge, Chris approached the private donors to let them know that his tuition was much higher than he originally expected. Chris explained how one of his donors reviewed his award letter and she was the one to introduce him to AB 540. That donor pointed him in the direction of UCMB's financial aid office so he could request an AB 540 application.

Karina similarly described how she had first learned about AB 540 after she had been charged as a nonresident student. Like Chris, Karina remarked that she "didn't understand [the nonresident tuition charge] because [she] was living in California and it didn't make sense to [her]." She reached out to UCMB's financial aid office and recounted telling the financial aid officer over the phone, "Hey, I'm freaking out. I'm not out-of-state." In one of the more severe examples shared by participants, Selena recounted how she had not received her financial aid award notification until after she had already moved into the dorms at UCMB. At this point, she still was not aware of AB 540, nor knew any additional action was needed on her part to establish her eligibility to receive in-state tuition. She explained:

I literally already moved in, and I still didn't have a financial aid letter. I was calling financial aid every day. When I did talk to someone, they were basically just like, "Oh, you had to fill out this [AB 540] form and then submit it." I was like, "When were you guys planning on telling me that I had to do that?" The financial aid officer was like, "Well, somebody was supposed to reach out to you." Well, no one did. UCMB never got in contact with me to tell me that I needed to send in an AB 540 form to confirm that I went to school here. No one ever told me that.

Selena expressed her frustration that not only had UCMB failed to provide her with her financial aid notification in a timely manner, but the university also failed to notify her that she would need to complete the AB 540 application to certify that she attended high school in the

state of California. At the time of move-in, Selena still had an incomplete picture of what college was going to cost her and had to repeatedly reach out to the financial aid office to inquire about her financial aid notification. Only through her repeated efforts was she able to learn about AB 540 and what was required of her to initiate this status.

The experiences of Lucia, Chris, Karina, and Selena all demonstrated how they first came to learn about AB 540 in a state of panic or crisis. After being handed the bill for the upcoming academic term, Lucia, Chris, and Karina were sent into a frenzy as they tried to determine where the nonresident charge had come from. In that scramble to determine if the nonresident tuition figure was correct, their sense of panic suggested the notion that these participants temporarily questioned whether they would be able to see their college dreams through. In the case of Selena, who pointed out that she had already moved into the residence hall by the time she learned about AB 540, her panic suggests she feared that her college experience was about to be ripped away from her. These four participants' experiences learning about AB 540 at a much later point stood in sharp contrast to the experiences of Alejandro and Melissa, who described earlier in this subsection that learning about AB 540 earlier on in high school provided them with a sense of relief. All the participants' experiences detailed in this section demonstrate the importance of equipping undocumented students with the knowledge that support like AB 540 exists. If this knowledge is established earlier on in students' educational journeys, undocumented students would likely be able to better assess which institutions are financially within their means and would be better positioned to seek out the appropriate forms used to establish in-state tuition eligibility. Such early exposure to AB 540 would circumvent the panic that participants described when they found out about AB 540 after receiving their financial aid notification.

Some participants who were transfer-level admits also shared how they had not learned about AB 540 until they were already in community college. These participants recounted similar experiences where they had not learned about AB 540 until after they received their bill for the coming semester. Joana recounted how she had been charged out-of-state tuition at her community college and met with a counselor at her community college's Dream Resource Center to ask about the tuition and fees charges assessed to her account. She explained:

I spoke to my counselor and she was like, "You shouldn't have to pay this much." She asked me these screening questions to see if I qualify for AB 540 and I did. I was able to. I answered "yes" to all the questions that I needed to qualify for AB 540. She told me, "Okay, fill out this form and take it to the admissions and records office." I had to submit a different form to admissions and records so they could adjust my financial aid coverage and the fees I was gonna have to pay because I was being charged for out-of-state tuition. I didn't know about AB 540.

Because Joana's counselor was part of the Dream Resource Center, the counselor was familiar with AB 540's eligibility criteria and used this knowledge to screen Joana's eligibility. She assisted Joana with completing her AB 540 application, and Joana was able to have her tuition fees adjusted. Joana's experience mirrored many of the challenges previously articulated by several of the freshmen-level admits and demonstrated how early exposure to AB 540 applies not only to students wishing to attend the 4-year institution, but to community colleges as well.

All participants included thus far in this subsection on AB 540 were able to establish support with their AB 540 application one way or another. Raquel's story differed from those of the other participants in that she was not able to receive that same support. Raquel described how she attempted to enroll in her local community college in 2008 shortly after graduating high school. Before the start of the Fall 2008 semester, she received a statement of charges for the coming semester and noticed that she had been assessed the nonresident tuition fee. She inquired

with the community college's financial aid office about the charge, and the financial aid officer falsely reaffirmed that she would need to pay the nonresident tuition. She recounted:

At that time, there was already the law of AB 540 but they didn't tell me that. They just told me, "Well, you're gonna end up paying twice as much than if you were a resident." I'm a low-income person and because my mom was a single mom, she couldn't really afford for me to go to school. Like I mentioned, I was also a teenage mom. I have to work for my kid because I have to now provide for my kids, so school is probably just not gonna happen for me. I think that if the person that I spoke to [at the financial aid office] was informed or was trained enough to know, "Hey, if a person with these characteristics comes in, let them know that there's this other option," then I think I would have [gone to college] then.

Even though AB 540 had been passed into legislation in 2001, Raquel was told by the financial aid officer that she would need to pay nonresident tuition. Because the financial aid offer did not attempt to further screen Raquel's eligibility for AB 540, this detail suggests the financial aid officer was not aware of this policy. As a teen mother, Raquel did not have the financial means to continue her studies if it meant that she would need to pay nonresident tuition. She shared if she had known about AB 540 in 2008, she would have likely continued her studies and not taken a 12-year gap in her studies. Raquel's story demonstrated that AB 540's impact hinges upon having adequately trained staff and personnel to help guide undocumented students to the appropriate resources. Without staff who are trained on AB 540, undocumented students like Raquel may be pushed out of the higher education pipeline.

California College Promise Grant

Though not included in the study's interview protocol, the California College Promise Grant (CCPG) was referenced by half of the transfer participants as the primary form of tuition assistance with which they were familiar upon enrolling at the community college. The CCPG waives the first 2 years of enrollment fees for eligible California residents who attend a California community college (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, n.d.).

Undocumented students who satisfy the AB 540 eligibility criteria are eligible to apply to the CCPG (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, n.d.). Although the CCPG is not a policy per se, roughly half of the participants who were transfer-level admits spoke about AB 540 in relation to the CCPG. These participants shared how they discovered the CCPG prior to learning about AB 540 and how they learned about AB 540 in the process of applying to the CCPG.

Prior to learning that she was AB 540 eligible, Joana described how she was introduced to the CCPG in 12th grade. Joana recalled an event at her high school where she was able to connect with representatives from various community college campuses in her area. She met with a representative from the community college she would eventually attend and described how learning about the CCPG through the representative was what prompted her to consider applying. She explained:

In 12th grade, we had people come from different community college campuses around the area and they talked to us about their community college. One of the campuses was the college I went to and so I was able to meet with their representative. She informed me that the application was free and that there was a program called the Promise Grant that promises 2 years free of community college. I was like, "Well, I'm not going to have to pay for college so I might as well just do it." Because the application was free and because I was promised to get 2 years free since I graduated from a California high school, I decided to apply for community college. I decided I'm just going to do it for the 2 years free and I'll be done.

Joana's quote highlighted how both the free application and the CCPG were strong incentives for her to attend community college. At the time, Joana did not see herself pursuing a 4-year degree but was intrigued at the idea of being able to attend community college for substantially less money than she originally imagined. In the portion where she referenced graduating from a California high school, such a detail suggests she was familiar with her eligibility to benefit from the CCPG benefit through its AB 540 provision. Later in her

interviews, Joana described how the waived tuition through CCPG allowed her to trial what being a college student was like. Reflecting on her thought process at the time, she recalled, “I’m gonna go to community college and see how it goes. If I like it, if it works out for me, then I’ll definitely pursue going to university.” Instead of paying tuition at the 4-year institution, going to community college and applying for the fee waiver via her community college’s CCPG application provided Joana with an accessible means to explore her academic interests and give her time to form her academic goals.

Participants’ knowledge of the CCPG was often facilitated by peers as well. In the following quote, Ivan described how his friend made a passing reference to a “fee waiver” and explained how the mention of this fee waiver encouraged him to explore his options further. He recounted:

Something my friend would tell me was that he knew people who would get a fee waiver, so they didn’t have to pay for tuition. So I looked into that. I went to the community college’s website and I clicked on the financial aid option. I saw that they had a link to the [CCPG] fee waiver. When I was analyzing the fee waiver, I read that AB 540 qualified, so I looked into it and I applied. I filled out the form. I went to the community college admissions office, I gave it to them, and they waived my tuition.

Although Ivan’s friend was a U.S. citizen, Ivan was intrigued by the idea of receiving his first 2 years of community college for free and began exploring what financial aid options were available to him as an undocumented student. Once he became equipped with a rough approximation of what information to look for, Ivan was able to identify resources on his community college’s website, where he learned more about the AB 540 eligibility criteria and his community college’s CCPG application process.

Lucia was a freshmen-admit to UCMB, but up until the start of her senior year of high school, she planned on attending a local community college. Lucia described how she frequently attended events hosted by her local community college’s campus. Through visiting these events

and speaking with an older friend who attended that same community college, Lucia became somewhat familiar with the CCPG, or at least the fact that it waived 2 years of tuition for eligible California community college students. She explained:

I always heard about how you could go to [the local community college] for free. There's a swap meet there during the weekend. I don't know too much about what the Promise thing means, but I have a friend who goes to that community college. I've heard a little bit about [CCPG] from these sources. I was always set on college, but I was firmly set on community college because of the financial aspect. I knew that the first 2 years of community were free. I also was worried that I would be unable to apply anywhere else because of being undocumented.

Lucia's quote suggested that due to her proximity to the community college and the repeated exposure to some of its resources, Lucia developed this intuition that her first 2 years of community college would be free. Although Lucia could not pinpoint the exact moment at which she was exposed to CCPG, she explained she "always knew" of the perks the grant offered to eligible students. Because Lucia was low-income, she remarked on how she had always envisioned herself attending the community college because of its recognizable affordability and because she had not yet been exposed to the reality that she could apply to other university types within the state.

Because CCPG is not a form of tuition assistance that is specific to the undocumented student population, I suspect the CCPG's broader eligibility criteria makes it more likely that students—regardless of their immigration status—will come across this form of tuition assistance. Still, the three participants whose experiences were included as examples in this subsection suggested that informing students of their financial aid options has a tremendous effect on undocumented students' sense that it is possible to pursue a college degree. Though both Joana's and Lucia's college goals grew to encompass obtaining a 4-year degree, the availability of tuition assistance via the CCPG planted the seed that they could go to college

without having to spend above and beyond their families' means. Along these lines, increasing the visibility of AB 540 in a manner that is similar to the widespread visibility of the CCPG could produce similar positive effects on undocumented students unsure of whether they can go to college.

Addressing Remaining Financial Need

In the previous subsections, I explored how resources related to the Dream Act and AB 540 have often been limited and pointed to how the effectiveness of these policies rests largely on undocumented students receiving this information early in their journey to college. Although the bulk of participants' college costs were addressed largely through the aid provided through the Dream Act, almost all participants reflected on the challenges of addressing their financial need that still remained. Although many of the findings extended beyond participants' initial period of application to the 4-year university, these findings spoke to the broader challenges of addressing undocumented students' financial need and where existing policies have failed in considering these needs.

DACA and Work Authorization

DACA was the third and final policy included in the study's interview protocol. Although I discussed DACA in the earlier sections of this chapter and how the status shaped participants' sense of identity, I included DACA in this subsection to explore this policy's role in addressing participants' financial needs. As established in Napolitano's (2012) DACA memorandum, eligible DACA recipients can receive work authorization during their period of deferred action. In other words, DACA recipients are able to legally seek employment opportunities during the 2-year period their DACA is valid (Napolitano, 2012; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2023). Within the context of this study, the participants with DACA described how the work

authorization benefit had enabled them to seek paid positions. The money earned through these legal work opportunities directly allowed participants to allocate funds toward whatever financial need remained after the Dream Act and contribute toward their living expenses.

Seven of the eight participants with DACA shared about the paid positions they had held either on or off-campus and described how being able to work had provided them with a reliable source of income. Jessica discussed her ability to work and compared her experience to a peer of hers who is undocumented without DACA. She described:

I have a friend who is non-DACA and he can't work. I'm working to pay for my tuition, but he can't even work and all his money has to come from scholarships and fellowships and just him applying to other things. Sometimes those opportunities are limited to people who have social security numbers so securing any opportunities is hard for him. For me, it's a little bit [hesitated] . . . not easier, but in a sense, it is because DACA is something that backs me up. I can work for a little bit, get some money, and pay off some debt. I can see the differences between people who are able to access those resources and people who aren't.

Jessica seemed to acknowledge that her experience financing her own education was not without its own challenges; still, she emphasized how the experiences between undocumented students with and without DACA differed categorically. Jessica described how her DACA status and the corresponding work authorization provided her with a greater sense of financial security. Where she mentioned being able to pay off some debt, this point suggested that having work authorization provides program recipients with greater flexibility as to how they allocate their income. Jessica's experience directly contrasted with her friend, who was unable to work and was forced to rely heavily on other sources of funding despite their limited availability. I discuss scholarships in greater detail in the subsection following this one; however, Jessica's quote set up some of the primary ways in which DACA shapes college affordability.

Compared to undocumented students with DACA, undocumented students without DACA are frequently at a greater disadvantage within the context of college affordability.

Without work authorization, students without DACA are not able to seek employment opportunities that would enable them to more effectively contribute toward the cost of their education (Pérez, 2014). For instance, Oscar described his desire to work so he can save money.

He described:

You know, I wish I could get a job. It would be nice to be able to work off-campus at like In-N-Out, Starbucks, you know . . . somewhere. But I can't because I don't have a social [security number]. That, or even a summer job before school. That would have been nice because you know, I could have saved the money.

Oscar's emphasis on the word "somewhere" suggested a sense of hopelessness. Without the ability to obtain a social security number afforded through the DACA program, Oscar was left with virtually no options to seek employment. He described how he would have used that income to save money toward his college expenses, something he shared was hard to do under his current circumstances. Diana similarly iterated how without DACA, many of the jobs she could take were in the form of "under the table" jobs, a widely used phrase highlighted earlier in the chapter. She explained:

Being undocumented means you can't really get a job unless it's under the table, meaning you're going to get little. Maybe like a babysitting job or pet sitting or stuff like that. Aside from the aid I receive from the school, I have to look for ways to get my money.

The reappearance of the term "under the table" here in Diana's quote pointed to how undocumented people without DACA still try to make ends meet and get around the barriers in place. Still, Diana's quote emphasized how people without DACA are often relegated to jobs that offer low wages, thereby making the task of comfortably covering one's expenses all the more challenging. Diana emphasized that beyond the aid she receives from the Dream Act, she has had to figure out a way to make ends meet with the limited opportunities she has.

Lucia described the mental ramifications of not being able to contribute toward the cost of her education. She described how she began the DACA application process in 2021 when the

program was last open to new applicants, only for the program to shut back down a few months later. Lucia shared:

Without [DACA], I'm unable to work. I can't pitch in financially even if I wanted to. I think for sure, that's one of the things I think about being the most challenging. Because again, I started the DACA process when there was an opening. As soon as I started, DACA was shut back down. That was discouraging. This is kind of more emotional, I guess, but there's the feeling of "you shouldn't be here" and that maybe I should have picked the alternative [to college]. That's something that I kind of deal with every now and then. Because again, it all ties back to not being able to do anything about the financial stuff.

Lucia's quote emphasized how, without DACA, she had limited means of changing her predicament. Without work authorization, Lucia was limited in the ways that she was able to contribute toward the cost of her education. Her comment regarding how she had tried to obtain DACA, only for the program to shut down once more, highlighted her frustration and possibly even reflected a sense of hopelessness. For Lucia, the denial of the opportunity to provide for oneself compounded the feeling that she did not belong in the United States and led her to question if she should have picked an alternative path for herself, one that likely was not as costly as obtaining a degree.

Lucia was not the only participant whose experiences touched upon the mental health ramifications of not having work authorization. Brianna, another participant without DACA, was part of a research lab on UCMB's campus, but mentioned because of her lack of work authorization, she does not get paid for her work. Despite being at the lab for 30–40 hours each week, Brianna said she was only able to be paid if and when her lab received a grant. If that award was flexible enough in its rules for use, then Brianna might have been able to receive compensation in the form of a stipend. These infrequent stipends were Brianna's only source of income throughout her collegiate years. In her first interview, Brianna cried as she discussed the significant stress of trying to afford college as an undocumented student without work

authorization. She described the challenges of being infrequently compensated for her work and how this barrier impacted her time at UCMB. She explained:

Finances have been the bane of my existence. It's literally why I'm so sad. Navigating college now has been the worst experience ever because financially I cannot provide for myself legally. No matter how much help my [research] lab has tried, they cannot guarantee me the money that I deserve to be paid or financial aid isn't willing to give me any more aid. [Getting through college] was a lot of doing math and calculations and trying to figure out what the cheapest thing would be to minimize my cost of attendance. My financial situation has been the hardest thing ever. We've been trying for a long time for me to get paid, but it's really hard.

Although Brianna shared in her interviews that she had a positive relationship with her research lab's primary investigator and the rest of her lab team, the prior quote demonstrated how Brianna's lack of work authorization caused her a great deal of financial instability. To be clear, Brianna devoted a great deal of her time to the lab because she was interested in pursuing research. Brianna described the incredible value of being able to foster connections in her area of study and the hands-on research training the position offered her. Brianna stated she was aware of the fact that her lab could not guarantee her compensation for her time. In light of these conditions, Brianna was tasked with considering how and where she could lower her cost of attendance so she could pursue a largely unpaid position that aligned with her academic and professional interests.

Many of the participants' experiences thus far demonstrated how a lack of work authorization impacted non-DACA participants' abilities to address their remaining unmet financial need while at the 4-year. In the following quote, Alejandro described how his lack of work authorization impacted him in community college. He described how without work authorization, he faced difficulty seeking opportunities that were relevant to his professional interests in urban planning, which would allow him to build a strong resume to support his goal of transferring from the community college. He explained:

Getting a job or internship to pay for living costs or even getting professional experience was really difficult because I didn't have a social security or work permit. Getting a job that would pay me well for the school, like for a university or college, was not going to happen. I worked in a couple of restaurants or a couple of factories that paid me \$15 or \$16 an hour, but I probably could've worked on-campus or at an internship or at an office job that would've paid me a little closer to \$20, \$21, or \$22 an hour. A lot of internships that I wanted to do working in the federal government or working in certain state-level jobs or internships, I couldn't get even if I wanted to because of my status. It put me at a disadvantage compared to other students, especially since I was trying to transfer from community college to UCMB. Putting my application together was really difficult because I was barred from a lot of opportunities other students had.

As an undocumented immigrant without DACA and without work authorization, Alejandro was unable to pursue opportunities that aligned with his interests. His quote highlighted his belief that his inability to gain relevant professional experience likely dampened the strength of his application. Though Alejandro was able to gain admission to UCMB, Alejandro's quote still emphasized how he had been forced to work low-wage positions when many of his peers with U.S. citizenship or work authorization had been able to seek higher paying and, as the quote seemed to suggest, higher skill jobs.

For additional context, at the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic in March 2020, Alejandro had been kicked out of his home and was temporarily unhoused. During the time that he was in community college, Alejandro's younger brother had also been kicked out of their family's home, and Alejandro described the challenge of not only providing for himself, but for his brother as well. Alejandro depicted this period of his academic journey in his educational map and included a picture to represent this time. The animation-style picture included roughly 15 cartoon people and most notably, all the people in the image had brown skin. Next to this image, Alejandro wrote, "I was forced to work 60+ hours every week to maintain myself and stay afloat while attending school." In his second interview, he expanded further on the significance of this period, noting:

I was a low-wage worker at a restaurant in this hotel and I obviously had to work illegally. I only got paid \$15.50 and this is when the labor market was really tight. I had to do it because I had to provide for my brother because he also got kicked out, so I had to take care of him, pay for his rent, pay for his food, and stuff like that. It was really hard being a student, being undocumented, being a low-wage worker trying to work—doing all that. It made it pretty hard.

Alejandro's quote highlighted how he had to work considerable hours at this low-wage job for him and his brother to survive. Situated in the context of Alejandro's larger set of responsibilities, Alejandro's quote emphasized the challenges he faced balancing his studies with also trying to make ends meet. Returning to the aforementioned picture used in his educational journey map to represent this period in time, the inclusion of an image that depicted brown-skinned people suggested that many of the places at which he worked were densely populated with other people of color who were also trying to provide for themselves. Alejandro was granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) over the span of his participation in the study; as such, the experiences he described largely concerned his lack of authorization up until the point of his interviews. As he looked ahead to graduate school, Alejandro spoke about how the work authorization he would be able to gain through TPS. Alejandro expressed his excitement that he would not have to work nearly as hard as he did to support himself through his undergraduate studies.

These collective experiences demonstrated how undocumented students without DACA are often left to their own devices as they determine how to address any remaining financial need left after the Dream Act. The purpose of this subsection was not to take away from or diminish the significance of the aid provided to students by the Dream Act; rather, the purpose of this subsection was to highlight how a lack of work authorization negatively contributed to non-DACA participants' ability to both access and afford the 4-year university.

Scholarships and Loans

Nearly half of the participants in the study highlighted the role of scholarships in being able to finance their remaining unmet need; however, these participants also highlighted the challenge of identifying scholarships to which they were eligible to apply. As one example, Diana estimated that 80% of the scholarships she came across required applicants to have U.S. citizenship or provide “some sort of work permit.” Jessica estimated that among the scholarships to which she had been introduced through her college access program, only “two of the 50 scholarships were open to anybody.” Though participants’ estimates varied, participants consistently indicated that the overwhelming majority of scholarships they came across required applicants to have U.S. citizenship.

Because of the limited scholarships open to undocumented students, roughly one third of the participants who entered UCMB at the freshmen level described how the topic of scholarships necessitated the support of their counselors and/or teachers, and this need reflected the point where they first disclosed their status with someone at school. For instance, Selena described how she told her counselor she was undocumented because she “didn’t really know how to go about applying to scholarships, so [she] asked [her counselor]. With [Selena’s] permission, [the counselor] told the other counselors at the school who also were able to help [her].” With a team of counselors now behind her, Selena applied to approximately 30 scholarships, and the award money helped her pay for the full 1st year of her undergraduate studies.

Similar to Selena, Karina described how after coming across a number of scholarships that required applicants to be U.S. citizens, she reached out to her AVID teacher and college counselor for support. In the case of her AVID teacher, this conversation had been the first time

Karina shared her status with him despite being in AVID for all 4 years of high school. Karina described how both the AVID teacher and college counselor assured her they would “make sure to look for scholarships that don’t require citizenship status.” The counselor was later able to connect Karina with a scholarship offered through a private donor, who continued to renew Karina’s scholarship each of the 4 years she spent at UCMB.

Whereas Selena found 30 scholarships to which she could apply, and Karina was able to connect with a donor who offered her a generous scholarship award, both participants’ experiences highlighted two key points. First, both participants had to share their status with staff at school so they could receive support identifying scholarships with more inclusive eligibility requirements. In other words, this disclosure came at a point of desperation after repeatedly encountering scholarships that excluded them from applying. In light of the limited scholarship opportunities available to undocumented students, both participants felt they could benefit from the support of an adult at their school so they could receive support in their scholarship efforts. Second, because these two participants were able to identify and secure scholarships after that support had been established, the change in outcome suggests the need for practitioners to seek and promote the visibility of scholarships with undocu-friendly eligibility criteria so these opportunities can be more easily accessed by undocumented students.

Given only a small proportion of scholarships are open to undocumented students, a few participants described the stress of finding scholarships that were open to them and the pressure to maximize every opportunity for which they were eligible. This sentiment was particularly profound among the participants without DACA who shared without work authorization, scholarships were their primary source of funding used to address unmet financial need. Chris, who did not have DACA, shared how the pressure to apply to every scholarship he possibly

could take a toll on his mental and physical health in his senior year of high school. Chris described the period of time after he got accepted to UCMB, referring to his acceptance as his “golden ticket.” With limited time left in high school, Chris warned his two friends—one friend who was also undocumented without DACA, and another friend who was a U.S. citizen—that they needed to take applying for scholarships more seriously once the trio had received their college acceptances. Chris’s friends later staged an intervention with him and shared their concerns for his health. Chris recounted these events in the following quote, including the pressure he felt in the final few months of his senior year. He described:

I remember I spent so much time applying for specific scholarships. I was overwhelming myself. I would tell [my friends], “You guys need to start doing this because you never know. You guys would want to have some financial aspect covered even just by a little.” Finances were the big issue that hindered my decision of wanting to go to college to begin with, especially after I got that notice of the golden ticket. I remember there was a lot of pressure. I would stress myself out, overwhelm myself, and overwork myself. From there, [my friends] helped me. They realized that I was not in a good mental space. I wouldn’t take time for myself. They noticed me being depleted mentally and physically while I was applying for all these scholarships.

Chris’s remarks to his friends were indicative of the stress he felt in trying to address his remaining need. Even if the award amount for the individual scholarships to which he applied was small, he recognized how every amount added up as evidenced where he mentioned having “some financial aspect covered, even just by a little.” Once equipped with his “golden ticket,” Chris’s quote conveyed a sense of urgency in the final few months of high school to apply for as many scholarships as he could. Chris spent a considerable amount of time applying for scholarships but at the expense of his well-being, requiring his friends to step in.

Melissa, who also did not have DACA, described a similar pressure to maximize scholarship opportunities. Even in community college, she described the pressure to apply to as many scholarships as she could so she could save the money for when she transferred to the 4-

year and provide herself with a financial cushion in case any unexpected expenses arose. Similar to Chris, Melissa described how she has continued to spend a great deal of time applying for scholarships:

I knew that I didn't want to end up not being able to complete my education because of financial issues, so I never really take a break. I'm always applying for scholarships. Even if school is not happening, I'm like, "Let me save up some money right now as fast as I can in case of anything."

Melissa shared how even in the summer months or in the break periods throughout the regular academic year, the financial piece of her academics is always on her mind. Melissa described not wanting to let finances cause her to not finish her degree or stop her studies; as a result, she has worked tirelessly to maximize whatever limited opportunities are available to her.

All three of the 1st-year participants—Diana, Lucia, and Oscar—remarked on the stress of being able to secure additional scholarships beyond their 1st years, describing how they had only been able to receive enough aid to help them finance their 1st year of college. All three of these participants did not have DACA. As such, these three participants' primary means of being able to support themselves—outside of the aid they receive from the Dream Act—came from whatever scholarships they received. At the time of her interviews, Diana shared that she was already thinking about applying for scholarships for her 2nd year and noted all of the scholarships she received were one-time awards that were already applied toward her 1st year of college. Because her mother prepared to send Diana's younger brother to college within the next year, the support Diana could expect to receive from family was extremely limited. Knowing that she cannot work and will not be able to receive any form of financial support from her family, Diana was in the process of applying to as many scholarships as possible so she can continue her studies at the time of interviews. Relatedly, Lucia described in the following quote how her

scholarship search for her 2nd year of study had not been as fruitful as her scholarship efforts for her 1st year of studies. She explained:

Last year, I applied to and received so many scholarships so I knew I had that to rely on in my 1st year at UCMB. This year, I just spend a lot of time thinking about my sophomore year and whether I'll be able to afford school next year or not.

Finally, before diving into further commentary on Diana and Lucia's quotes, notice how Oscar's following quote parallels some of these same themes. Oscar repeated his uncertainty as to whether he would be able to afford the following academic year and if he would be able to receive the same kind of funding via scholarships that he had been able to enjoy in his 1st year.

He explained:

The only reason I'm here [at UCMB] is just because I won so many little scholarships and that basically covered my whole tuition, my housing . . . my everything for this year. I'm just like . . . I don't know. I'm concerned for next year just cause like, I don't know if a lot of those scholarships are for all 4 years or if it's just a one-time thing. I don't know. I don't know how I'm going to afford school next year, because I don't want to ask my parents for help because they're struggling to do their own thing. I don't want to add a burden to them. I don't . . . I don't really know what I'm gonna do next year.

All three of these participants' experiences highlighted their reliance on scholarships and how these funds had helped them to afford college thus far. Diana's comment highlighted how her family has other financial obligations beyond her academics. Diana had been left to determine how she would be able to afford the next academic year so her mother can support her younger sibling as he prepared to go to college as well. Similar to Diana, Oscar also mentioned his parents' financial state. Because his parents were already struggling financially, Oscar expressed his reluctance to ask his parents for financial support. Without DACA and the means to work, scholarships play a crucial role in enabling these participants' abilities to continue their studies at UCMB.

My ultimate goal in highlighting how the topic of scholarships emerged in the data was to situate this form of aid within the larger web of college affordability and in relation to the policies of DACA, AB 540, and the Dream Act. Both Lucia's and Oscar's quotes suggested how scholarships are a flawed, imperfect way of financing a college degree. Unlike a work position that would offer them a fixed and steady source of income, the amount earned from scholarships is directly influenced by how many scholarships are available to them, how many scholarships they apply to, the award amount for each individual scholarship, and so on. Applying for scholarships is not a guaranteed and consistent form of income. Without work authorization and given their heavy reliance on scholarships, Lucia and Oscar expressed their concern over how they would be able to afford their sophomore year and beyond. Oscar, in particular, expressed five times in the span of a brief quote his uncertainty as to whether he would be able to continue at UCMB.

Some participants also discussed the role of loans, though this topic was addressed to a lesser extent than that of scholarships. Though undocumented immigrants are not inherently barred from receiving student loans, lenders can impose their own stipulations as to who is or is not eligible to receive loans. California Senate Bill (SB) 1210 authorizes participating UC and CSU campuses to offer loans to its AB 540-eligible undocumented students (Postsecondary Education: California DREAM Loan Program, 2014). According to a website from the UC system that details undocumented student resources, some UC campuses allow undocumented students who are AB 540 eligible to apply for loans, whereas other campuses do not allow undocumented students to apply for loans altogether (Regents of the University of California, n.d.-c). On this page, however, the UC does not specify which campuses participate in the DREAM Loan Program and makes no reference to SB 1210 (Regents of the University of

California, n.d.-c). As of December 2023, UCMB's financial aid website contained no mention of SB 1210 and loan options for AB 540-eligible students; thus, it is unclear whether UCMB participates in the DREAM Loan Program. With this background in mind, among the six participants who mentioned loans within their interviews, they each displayed varying levels of understanding as to whether they would be able to seek loans as undocumented immigrants at UCMB.

In one instance, Alejandro dismissed loans as an option altogether, describing how many of the loans he has come across required a history of credit and a social security number. The financial aid office at his community college recommended he consider loans upon transferring to UCMB. Upon receiving this advice, he exclaimed, "I literally have no avenue to take out loans." Brianna was another participant who expressed her frustration that she had been offered loans by UCMB's financial aid unit. When Brianna arrived at UCMB and realized she would be unable to work on campus, she felt overwhelmed as to how she was going to pay the large amount of need that remained after the aid offered through the Dream Act. As Brianna faced incredible difficulty identifying scholarships for which she was eligible and came into the university with little scholarship money, she sought counsel from UCMB's student affairs unit tasked with supporting students in economic crisis. UCMB's financial aid office, in consultation with the economic crisis unit, did not adjust Brianna's financial aid award amount. Instead, the financial aid office presented her a range of loan options she believed she was ineligible to receive as an undocumented immigrant. She explained:

I think financial aid offices should be educated more on how to deal with undocumented students because some of them do not know that undocumented students cannot work but then they offer us loans and jobs that we cannot take. This causes more problems than actually helps us because we're being offered resources that don't apply to us.

Next, I discuss a few of the remarks made by participants who briefly considered taking out loans to finance their college degree; however, participants' differing senses of whether they were or were not able to take out loans strongly suggested there is a need for greater clarity surrounding what financing options undocumented students are or are not eligible to receive. In addition to providing this clarity for undocumented students, Brianna's quote also provided a strong justification for educating practitioners so they may be better equipped to support undocumented students.

Even among the participants who briefly contemplated taking out loans, these participants described their reluctance and/or their families' reluctance to take out the loan(s) knowing they would likely have difficulty paying the loan amount back. For instance, Antonio was offered a loan at another UC campus that amounted to \$5,000. He described his reaction to seeing this figure, recalling, "What the heck? I can't afford this." In another example, Teresa remarked on how her parents make almost the same amount as what 1 year of tuition would cost. She described that there "would be no way" for her parents to pay any loan amount back and that because of their status as low-wage workers, her parents had been "very, very scared of loans." Karina similarly described how her parents were wary about loans but noted she had explored loans as a possible worst-case option if she could not secure the additional funds she needed through scholarships. Karina was later able to find a full 4-year scholarship, but in the following quote, she recalled the period when she had taken the possibility of loans more seriously:

I remember thinking to myself, "Okay, I'm just not going to tell my parents about it. I'm going to take the loans out myself, and then I'll figure it out." I knew if I told my parents that I had to get loans, they wouldn't let me go to college. I just remember keeping loans [as an option] in the back of my mind, but thankfully those two [scholarship] sponsors, once they told me that they would take care of me, it was a huge relief.

Karina highlighted her parents' reluctance to take out loans, and she speculated that they likely would not have let her go to college if they knew. Karina's comment highlighted how she had been frustrated with her unsuccessful scholarship efforts and how, at this point, she was willing to take out loans alone without her parents' knowledge so that she could pursue her bachelor's degree. Karina's remark earlier that she would "figure it out" also suggested that she, at that point, was unfamiliar with the process of taking out and paying back a loan. Though Karina had work authorization and greater means to pay back loans relative to the participants without DACA, not being familiar with the terms and conditions of a loan posed a concerning amount of risk (e.g., not being able to pay back the loan amount or the additional amount accumulated from the loan's interest rate).

A Note on Basic Needs

The study's interview protocol focused largely on how participants were able to finance the costs associated with earning their degree. Though I centered the study largely around participants' academic expenses, I would be remiss if I did not mention how participants' basic needs and living expenses factor into the picture of college affordability as well. The findings offered an incomplete look into participants' challenges meeting their basic needs during their time in community college and/or UCMB. Still, I present the following information in an effort to demonstrate how the topic of basic needs coincides with the academics piece and where additional exploration is needed.

Participants shared that the aid afforded through the Dream Act was typically not enough to address their living expenses while in school. Six participants identified themselves as either current or former commuter students, and described how living with family and commuting to school was one way of lowering their living expenses. Although this strategy had been largely

effective in lowering participants' cost of living, Joana described how commuting negatively impacted her ability to meaningfully engage with the university. She explained:

I felt like I was missing out on a lot of club activities. I would get to campus to go to class and right after, in order to beat traffic, I would leave. I didn't have time to actually engage in anything, aside from school or from classes on campus.

Joana's quote indicated how she had to compromise on facets of her collegiate experience to lower her cost of attendance and afford school. One participant—Alejandro—was at risk of homelessness for nearly half of the time that he had been at community college and at one point in his 1st year in community college, he lived out of his car. Three participants also shared they were food insecure and described how on-campus initiatives at UCMB that are designed to tackle food insecurity are typically limited to students with U.S. citizenship. These combined experiences provided strong evidence for how many of the financial stressors discussed in previous sections of this chapter extend beyond the academic setting and have important ramifications for these students' quality of life during the time they are students.

Several participants also shared how they felt obligated to provide for their families and would allocate a portion of their earnings to share with their families—be that from whatever job(s) they had or the scholarships they received. As a DACA recipient, Karina shared she had applied to DACA largely so she could support her family financially and described how that had been her intent long before she decided she wanted to go to college. Ximena, who shared a household with her single mother and a younger sister who was disabled, described the need to support her family so her mother can refocus her attention on her sister's health. In another instance, Oscar shared how his mother needs surgery to address longstanding issues with her nerves but noted his family cannot currently afford the surgery. Oscar expressed a reluctance to ask his parents for any form of financial support while he is in school and noted even with his

own constrained financial state, he will still try to help his mother financially in whatever way he can. All of these collective experiences reflected the mounting pressure undocumented students have to provide for themselves while also supporting the needs of their loved ones.

Although further exploration is needed to understand the financial hardships faced by undocumented students during their time in college, this subsection on basic needs suggests how the stressors associated with financing a college degree further compounds any existing financial hardships or obligation. Participants' experiences further suggested how the provision of additional financial support or expanding existing resources to be more inclusive of undocumented students would help to alleviate some of these challenges.

Opportunity for All Campaign

This study's data collection efforts occurred at a time when a policy proposal was picking up steam at the UC level. For background, the federal Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) passed in 1986 bars undocumented workers without work authorization from being able to work legally in the United States (Motomura & Arulanantham, 2022). As a result of IRCA, noncitizens must be able to supply work authorization paperwork to legally work within the United States (Motomura & Arulanantham, 2022; Opportunity for All Campaign, 2023). Within the context of the UC, hiring policy stipulates that all applicants must be able to legally work in the United States in accordance with IRCA guidelines (Motomura & Arulanantham, 2022; Opportunity for All Campaign, 2023). In June 2022, a student coalition named Undocumented Student-Led Network (USN) based at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) launched the Opportunity for All campaign (Opportunity for All Campaign, 2023). The Opportunity for All campaign is built upon the premise that previous interpretations of IRCA are wrong (Motomura & Arulanantham, 2022; Opportunity for All Campaign, 2023). In

collaboration and consultation with immigration law scholars at UCLA School of Law’s Center for Immigration Law and Policy (CILP), Opportunity for All argues that IRCA does not apply to states (Motomura & Arulanantham, 2022; Opportunity for All Campaign, 2023).

In a letter describing Opportunity for All’s legal theory, Motomura and Arulanantham (2022) referenced the fact that IRCA’s text only explicitly references the federal government, but never does the text explicitly reference states or state entities. In addition—and consistent with existing precedent from the U.S. Supreme Court—in instances when federal law does not explicitly mention states, federal law is unable to forcibly bind state governments into complying with said law (Motomura & Arulanantham, 2022). Using this line of reasoning, USN and CILP argue that IRCA’s ban on hiring undocumented workers does not apply to states and state entities, such as the UC (Motomura & Arulanantham, 2022; Opportunity for All Campaign, 2023). Based on this legal theory, USN and CILP posit that the UC can hire undocumented workers without work authorization.

After months of student organizing, the UC Board of Regents unanimously voted in support of Opportunity for All on May 18, 2023 (UC Office of the President, 2023a). The UC Board of Regents called on Board of Regents Chair, Rich Leib, to form a working group that would “consider relevant issues and develop an implementation plan and a legal strategy” (UC Office of the President, 2023b, para. 2). The UC Board of Regents’ working group announced they would release an update in late November 2023 (UC Office of the President, 2023b), though no formal updates were shared as of mid-December 2023 when this dissertation was filed (Kaiser & Kodialam, 2023; Kodialam, 2023). This study’s data collection efforts spanned from February 2023 to early July 2023, thereby coinciding with the Opportunity for All campaign as it picked up momentum and when the UC Board of Regents voted in support of the campaign. Although

the study's interview protocol did not contain questions about Opportunity for All, nearly all of the participants referenced this emerging policy as something they would like to see fully implemented by the UC.

Participants most commonly evoked the Opportunity for All campaign in relation to the Dream Act, AB 540, DACA, and scholarships—all of the items discussed in this second section centered around policy. Given the “Equitable Student Employment Opportunities” policy is still in development and has not yet been implemented by the UC, none of the participants were able to comment on how Opportunity for All directly impacted their own journey to college. Still, I include Opportunity for All as part of the findings because all the participants who mentioned Opportunity for All spoke about how this emerging policy would address some of the financial challenges highlighted throughout this second section.

Roughly one third of the participants remarked on how with Opportunity for All, undocumented students without DACA would finally be able to receive compensation for the work they were already likely performing on campus. For instance, Brianna remarked, “They’ll finally get paid for the free labor they already do because they at least [will] have an opportunity to do something.” Teresa also similarly commented on how undocumented students will be able to receive compensation for their efforts on campus and how the university has an obligation to support their undocumented students financially. She explained:

Everyone contributes to this university, and they benefit from our labor. There’s no reason why we shouldn’t be getting paid. As I mentioned, I come from a place of privilege. I’m a DACA recipient. I have two jobs, and I get paid for both of them. But I really do feel for people that don’t [have DACA] because it doesn’t make any sense. If you’re willing to admit people to this university, you have to be able to support them and that means financially as well.

Both Brianna’s and Teresa’s quotes highlighted the notion that undocumented students are already within higher education settings and participate within the university. With the

introduction of Opportunity for All, undocumented students without work authorization would be eligible to seek compensated roles at the UC campuses and be honored for the work they contribute. Unlike Brianna, Teresa had DACA and referenced the two paid positions she had maintained on campus as an undergraduate student. Teresa's comments seemed to reflect the inequities between her experience receiving compensation for her labor and how undocumented students without DACA are currently ineligible to receive compensation for their labor. In her final sentence, Teresa shifted responsibility onto the university to reflect on its supposed commitment to undocumented students, emphasizing that supporting undocumented students extends beyond admission into the university. Teresa's comment suggested that supporting this population also means providing them with opportunities to finance their degrees and sustain themselves financially during their time in college.

Similar to Teresa, Raquel emphasized the notion that universities ought to consider what providing support to undocumented students looks like in practice beyond simply admitting students from this population into their schools. Raquel, who was actively involved in research programs in community college but has been unsuccessful in her pursuit of opportunities to deepen her research training at UCMB, described how Opportunity for All can help her seek positions that made her want to come to UCMB in the first place. She described some of the challenges she has encountered trying to apply for research positions due to her status and how Opportunity for All would help to level the playing field. She explained:

Certain programs require you to be either a U.S. citizen or you need to have DACA, which to me is messed up because not everybody has DACA. If you don't have DACA, you're kind of pushed to the side. I think that defeats the purpose of the experience [at UCMB]. We're not able to get research assistant positions. I could have just gone to the next school over because what is the point of [going to] UCMB then? There's a campaign going on, the Opportunity for All, which would allow students to be hired as student workers. I think that's one example of figuring out ways that support students aside from just accepting them into these institutions. How can we give [undocumented students] an

equitable experience? If we're giving citizens the opportunity to be research assistants, let's figure out a way to do it for undocumented students.

Because UCMB is a research university, Raquel transferred to UCMB with the thought that she would be able to acquire additional research experience. Because Raquel did not have DACA, she expressed her frustration that she had not been able to make the most out of her undergraduate experience because of her status and questioned whether UCMB provides its undocumented students—specifically without DACA—the academic experience the university claims it provides. Similar to Teresa, Raquel highlighted this notion of extending support to undocumented students beyond their initial admission and said the university needs to consider various facets of the collegiate experience so undocumented students can access the same opportunities as their peers with U.S. citizenship.

With the opportunity to seek on-campus employment at the UC campuses, undocumented students are better poised to seek positions that offer them a consistent and stable source of income that then help offset their reliance on other forms of funding (e.g., scholarships). For instance, Selena did not have DACA and without work authorization, she had been adamant about applying to every scholarship opportunity that came her way during her senior year of high school. She commented on the time spent applying for scholarships and contrasted this form of funding to what a part-time, on-campus job would be able to afford her. She explained:

Sometimes I don't have the time to apply to a lot of scholarships or I miss scholarship deadlines. I feel like if I would have the opportunity to work instead it would be on a consistent schedule, instead of applying to all these scholarships and then maybe not getting them. It's a steady flow of money instead. It's a certainty. It's something that's usual and always on time.

Being able to seek on-campus employment via Opportunity for All would allow Selena to achieve a sense of security and stability. The ability to work on campus would provide Selena the opportunity to earn money in a manner that is consistent and is on a regular, reliable interval

schedule, unlike scholarships. Opportunity for All would enable students like Selena to address any unmet financial need. Selena's comment reflected an eagerness to provide for herself in a manner that would offer her greater financial stability and security.

In addition to providing undocumented students the ability to address remaining unmet financial need, Opportunity for All would also help students finance their living expenses or the many expenses that arise during the time they are enrolled as students. Teresa expanded on Opportunity for All's significance in allowing undocumented students without work authorization a greater means to financially support themselves:

There's a lot of expenses in college, whether it's housing or you know, your car breaks down, you get into an accident, health insurance, etc., etc., or like, you need glasses, braces, etc. The expenses never really stop. Sometimes I don't know where my check goes and I don't even know what I bought. There's also the cost of food. . . . Basically, everything that we need to survive. We need to make sure undocumented students can work.

Though Teresa had DACA, she emphasized that Opportunity for All would enable undocumented students without DACA to provide for themselves and keep themselves afloat during their time as students. Consistent with what participants highlighted earlier about extending support to undocumented students beyond their initial admission, Teresa's comment suggested that Opportunity for All would support students financially and ensure these students' most basic and fundamental needs are met in college.

Along these lines, Lucia described that the UC Board of Regents passing the Opportunity for All campaign into the development stage is a step toward being better "seen and understood by the university." Lucia's comment suggested how Opportunity for All is a tangible act of allyship that could lead to a better understanding of the challenges that undocumented students face. Selena similarly commented that Opportunity for All's passing is "one of the biggest steps [the UC] has taken in a long time." As a sophomore at UCMB, she described how Opportunity

for All would likely have powerful ramifications for those who enter the UC system long after her and how the policy would help in alleviating financial stressors. She explained:

I think it's very good to see because hopefully I'll be able to benefit from it but it's not me. I hope the next cohort within the next couple of years will be able to benefit from that just because I feel like it's really an integral part of being able to live the full college experience because you're not always worrying about, "Oh, money this. Oh, money that."

Both of Selena's sentiments highlighted how the passing and introduction of Opportunity for All would enable her to make the most out of her undergraduate studies without the need to constantly worry about finances. Because Selena had 2 more years at UCMB, she was hopeful that she will be able to take advantage of this policy; yet, what was most salient was her hope for future generations of undocumented students who will benefit from Opportunity for All.

Although Opportunity for All extends beyond the process of applying to college, including Opportunity for All in this section was meant to explore how this emerging policy fits within the larger framework of affordability. As the participants in this study had varying experiences in terms of how and when they first learned about policies such as the Dream Act or AB 540; Opportunity for All is positioned to help address some of these inequities so undocumented students without work authorization can both access and afford all that the college experience has to offer. Along these lines, the passage and full implementation of Opportunity for All would better enable undocumented students to continue their studies.

Staying Up To Date With Policy

In discussing the likes of the Dream Act, AB 540, and DACA, many participants reflected on the overwhelming pressures to stay informed on policies that may impact them. In this final subsection concerning policy, I unpack the challenges participants had encountered staying informed of both current and emerging policies while also balancing this effort with

preserving their mental health and well-being. This subsection aims to provide context as to why the greater topic of policy is one of contention and to further demonstrate how the undocumented identity is inherently political in nature.

Nearly three fourths of the participants described their desire to be proactive and learn about the policies directly impacting them. Still, many participants described how the act of staying informed often weighs heavily on them. For instance, Selena explained although policy is ever-changing, she has to be careful with the amount of time she pays to policy to not affect her studies. She described:

I struggle trying to be present and still be in my education while learning about [policy]. Being like, “This can happen today” or “This can also not happen.” There’s always something new happening with the policies, but then it’s like I can’t focus on it always. It’s something that’s always in the back of my mind, but it’s not something that I can focus on every day because I have to do homework and I also have to study.

Although new developments are always occurring, Selena suggested the constant back-and-forth speculation as to how policy might change impacts the amount of time she can dedicate to the topic. Selena’s reference to her studies suggested if she allows herself too much time to educate herself and stay informed, her academics will likely suffer. In a similar vein, Lucia described how she tries to filter some of the news she comes across to protect her mental health. She described this approach in further detail, stating:

I think staying informed is really hard because anytime something serious in regard to [my status] is mentioned, it kind of throws me off. I’m put in a mood because it’s something completely out of my control. When I do hear stuff, it’s usually the good stuff. Just recently, I saw that UCs are trying to allow us to work and stuff. Opportunity for All was the first time since DACA that I had really looked into something.

Similar to Selena, Lucia exhibited a reluctance to stay informed on the wider range of information concerning DACA. In this quote, Lucia highlighted that whatever developments in policy that do or do not occur are beyond her control. This detail suggested Lucia’s approach errs

on the side of self-preservation, wherein she tries to limit the amount of “serious” news she consumes. Lucia’s example of Opportunity for All demonstrated a “good” example of policy and suggested how this event is one of the rare instances where a policy had been designed in favor of undocumented immigrants.

DACA was one major policy that the participants continually expressed uncertainty around. In the interviews, many participants described how this specific immigration policy had impacted their relationship with consuming information. As one example, Teresa was heavily involved in various research projects focused on the educational trajectories of Latinx students. She described how although she has to be informed of policy developments because of the research she does, she has been scared to learn more about DACA beyond what is required of her. She explained:

[Staying informed] is really draining. Because of the work I do and the things that I’m involved in, I have no option but to stay on top of it for the most part. With DACA, though, I don’t normally stay on top of all the updates of what’s happening in the courts, just because it’s so close to my future. I think it would make me too anxious to really understand what’s going on.

This quote demonstrated that DACA has a greater meaning to Teresa beyond the research on which she works. For Teresa, developments in DACA directly impact her future and what she will or will not be able to do. Teresa’s quote emphasized how policy has the potential to impact her day-to-day life and she suggested a more detailed understanding of DACA would heighten her sense of worry and fear.

In the process of staying informed about DACA, participants also shared the challenges of learning about credible and verifiable policy developments, as opposed to speculation about what might come. For instance, both Ximena and Chris described the challenge of determining what developments they actually need to worry about and filtering out information that is either

incorrect or premature in its reporting. Ximena described how listening to the news is often overwhelming due to the speculation about what might or might not occur. She explained:

I feel like sometimes it can just be overwhelming to hear things like, “Congress might pass this,” “Senate might pass that,” or “Biden said this.” At this point, I kind of have to tune it out because I just get so overwhelmed. It’s so exhausting hearing, “Oh, this might happen” but then it doesn’t actually happen.

Ximena’s repeated emphasis on the word “might” suggested how immigration reform and issues surrounding immigrants are commonly framed through a speculative lens. Mirroring what some of the other participants included in this subsection thus far, Ximena’s quote demonstrated her desire to distance herself from the news cycle to some degree in an attempt to not get overwhelmed by the possibility of what developments may or may not occur. Ximena’s last sentence also suggested that doing so is also an attempt to manage her own expectations about what will or will not occur in the future.

Similar to Ximena, Chris described how the speculative discourse on immigration reform, specifically DACA, has made it challenging to discern what information is accurate and what reports to which he ought to pay attention. Within Chris’s quote, I paid particular attention to the varying sources of information from which he receives information:

I’m not sure who or what to believe. My mom says this, my aunts say that, and then the internet says this. There are all these different ways that information is being framed that it ends up being entirely different information. I feel like there’s *so* much information out there. For example, I remember my mom would watch the news and she would tell me, “Oh, vi en la tele que alguien iba a hablar de DACA” [I saw on TV that someone was going to talk about DACA]. Then my aunts would also call my mom whenever they had information about DACA. Then I would also have to tell my mom about what my aunts said, “That’s not what I’m hearing on social media or the news.”

Chris described how the information he receives about policy comes not only from the news, but also from his family members and the internet. Chris implied that the multitude of sources from which he consumes news creates a heightened sense of confusion over what to believe. His quote

seemed to suggest how differing reports perpetuate an endless cycle wherein parties are continually left wondering what policy threats are real or not, or how the newest DACA updates would or not affect them.

Some participants described reading primary sources straight from the government in an attempt to gain greater insight into how policies currently affect them or how they might affect them in the future. This approach, however, also presented its own challenges; many of the participants who attempted to do so described how the language included in official government resources is not accessible to the common person. For instance, Joana described the challenge of interpreting highly technical legal jargon and explained how she had struggled to understand how policies would affect her in practice. Joana, who was one of the few participants who was heavily involved in undocumented student advocacy and support groups, described how even she struggled to understand the information published through official government entities, including on the U.S. Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) website. She explained:

One of the biggest challenges is just trying to understand policy itself because a lot of the language used in policies is difficult to understand. I don't have a background in law or policy so understanding them is a big issue for me. In a lot of the posts, comments, and videos from USCIS, the language can be very easily misinterpreted and can be confusing sometimes. It's hard to understand how these policies will directly affect us. When I hear a policy in regard to immigration, my first instinct is just to panic. What's going to happen to me? Is something bad gonna happen to me? Am I not going to be able to finish school? Just hearing the words "immigration policy" or something in regard to immigration reform, it gives me a lot of anxiety. Even working at a law office, I've been able to read bills and stuff like that. Sometimes when I'm reading them though, I'm like, "Oh my God, this is dense."

Joana's thought encapsulated the notion that understanding policy is a two-part effort. Consistent with the literature that explores CPA's use as a methodological tool (Diem et al., 2014; Young & Diem, 2018), Joana's quote highlights that understanding policy is both (a) the act of trying to make sense of what is written on the page and (b) the act of trying to determine

how policies will directly impact them. Like many of the other participants included in this subsection, Joana emphasized a fear as to how policy will impact her and how developments will impact various areas of her life. The fear she exhibited also closely paralleled findings concerning identity earlier in this chapter. Joana's comment about how her first instinct was to panic reemphasized how the undocumented identity is shaped by fear, including the fear of the unknown and the fear of what might occur. Furthermore, Joana's comment that she does not have a background in law or policy suggested the level of intricate knowledge needed to make sense of how policy impacts her. This detail pointed to the need for increased transparency on the part of the federal government, but also the need to ensure those most directly impacted by policies have the means and the tools necessary to learn more.

The Future of Policy

Reflecting on their own educational experiences thus far, many participants questioned if and how policy will continue to change in the future and whether these developments would be in undocumented immigrants' favor. Because many of the participants had witnessed DACA come back in and out of effect for the last several years, many participants expressed skepticism as to whether undocumented immigrants' conditions will improve over the years to come.

One common example of this skepticism concerned Opportunity for All. Although Opportunity for All was still in its early development phase at the time of this study, many of the participants who were interviewed after the UC Board of Regents announced its support of the campaign in May 2023 expressed fear that the UC would fall short of its supposed commitment to undocumented students. For instance, Selena expressed fear as to how the UC might take advantage of its undocumented workers if Opportunity for All were to move forward. Selena oscillated between sharing her excitement as to how this development will impact future

undocumented students while also sharing her concern as to how it might open up undocumented students to exploitation. She explained:

What if on-campus employers treat you differently or overwork you just because they know that you necessarily don't have the permission to work and you can't work elsewhere? [The UC Regents] might've said yes right now, but what if the wages are different? What if your tax money doesn't come back to you? I'm not saying that this isn't a great opportunity and that I'm not thankful for it. It's just. . . . [hesitated] These are things that come to mind when they do this. The UC system might be doing it for their own greedy stuff like money. At the end of the day though, it's still support, and no matter what, we're going to have to accept it. Even though I don't know what the outcome is going to be and I don't know if it's going to affect us in any way, I think it'll still be very helpful.

Selena's two questions concerning wages and taxes are among the many considerations the UC ought to iron out as it plans the Opportunity for All's implementation. What was most evident in Selena's quote was her concern that the UC is implementing the policy for its own benefit. She continually returned to the question as to how undocumented workers may or may not be exploited. Selena eventually ceded to the notion that she and perhaps even the larger undocumented student community will accept whatever support the university system is willing to provide this population, even if those gains are small.

Like Selena, Melissa shared some of her own concerns about Opportunity for All's development phase. Melissa questioned whether the constituents of the UC will see any meaningful updates by the then-planned November 2023 update, or if this stated date was the UC Board of Regent's attempt to dampen the growing pressure that resulted from the campaign. She explained:

I feel like sometimes I can be really negative about this, but at first, it was very exciting. I felt like steps were moving forward but now I feel like [the UC] is trying to prolong it for as long as they can so that this doesn't happen. The same thing happened with DACA. It was constant updates of the same thing, just reworded differently so that people would feel like they're getting updates, but in reality, we're not getting any updates.

Like the participants, I remain waiting to see what happens with Opportunity for All and what updates will be shared. I do not have any additional insight or context about Opportunity for All to further counter or justify Melissa's claims; however, I wish to draw attention to how Melissa incorporated DACA as an example in her quote. Melissa's comparison between Opportunity for All and DACA demonstrates how the undocumented community has a shared history of waiting for change to happen and being assured by those in power that change will come—only for that change to not happen. The inclusion of Melissa's quote is not meant to undercut the significance of Opportunity for All; rather, Melissa's thought here demonstrates how the history of being denied opportunities shaped how she has conceptualized this emerging policy.

In the wake of the upcoming 2024 elections, some participants similarly reflected on how politicians have continued to overlook immigration reform. Roughly one third of the participants reflected on how although they remain hopeful that conditions will improve, they have seen how those in higher positions have failed them before. As one example, Joana described how in community college, she was more hopeful about her future; hearing from one of her older undocumented friends made her think differently about whether change would occur. She recounted:

When I was in community college, I had a best friend and she was undocumented, too. She was older than me, so she's known what it's like to be undocumented for longer than I have because she has lived through it longer. She would sometimes break down and be like, "I don't want to do this anymore. There's no point in doing this." I would tell her, "It's going to be worth it. You just have to be patient." She was like, "I've been told to be patient all these years and nothing has happened." It does get hard to just want to keep going because you start to think about how it's been years. They keep giving us these promises that there's going to be immigration reform, but nothing has happened.

Joana's quote about her friend demonstrated how her friend's declining sense of hope had caused her own sense of hope for the future to waver as well. Some of the context surrounding

Joana's friend's remark about no longer wanting to do "this" suggests the friend meant pursuing higher education; however, the friend's comment also speaks to a much larger picture of navigating the United States as an undocumented immigrant. Reckoning with the little action that has been taken to address immigration reform, Joana's comment seemed to imply that she too was skeptical as to whether any change will be brought forth and if the promises made in the future will actually produce meaningful change.

One participant highlighted how immigration reform has often been used as a buzzword in election cycles but noted politicians have fallen short of their promises time and time again. Raquel described her continued disappointment with both political parties and how candidates have evoked immigration reform but have failed to meet their campaign promises once in office. She explained:

There's always that one candidate where I'm like, "Oh my God, this person is gonna do [enact immigration reform]," or "This person really has a good heart and is really gonna push for" . . . like, the things that matter to me. I understand how the president, for example, doesn't have all the power. It falls down into the Senate and the House. Even those representatives there, when you guys do all your talking about what you support, we believe in you but then you fail us. I think it's a continued disappointment that these representatives once they get into office, they fail. I feel like they continuously use immigration as a talking point, but then they don't do anything about it. Of course, that goes for both parties. Both parties have failed.

Raquel's quote demonstrated how politicians have often touted immigration to attract attention on the campaign trail. Though she was ineligible to vote, she shared her excitement at seeing candidates speak about issues that most directly impact her, and how this instills in her a sense of hope. Her repeated emphasis on the word "fail" further emphasized that despite immigration being used as a "talking point," no meaningful action has occurred.

Ximena repeated a very similar point to Raquel, though in a manner that was much more direct and pointed in its certainty that no meaningful change is likely to occur. Ximena explained:

Something I kind of accepted a long time ago was that there will probably never be a pathway to citizenship for DACA. Unfortunately, that's just the way things are no matter what party is in the house. Neither party will ever agree or will actually pursue giving undocumented students a pathway to citizenship. A lot of us work and pay taxes but we're paying taxes without representation. It doesn't really seem like exploitation right off the bat but economically, it wouldn't benefit [the government] to give us a pathway to citizenship. Unfortunately, that's just something I had to accept a long time ago.

Ximena's quote was more pessimistic than Raquel's quote and was perhaps the most cynical take shared across the wider participant base. Ximena was resigned to the idea that immigration reform would ever turn in favor of undocumented immigrants and expressed strong doubt that she would have the chance to receive a path to citizenship. Ximena's comment about exploitation also shared some similarities with Selena's earlier comment about whether the enactment of Opportunity for All is for the UC's own monetary gain. Ximena suggested because the government benefits from the taxes paid by undocumented immigrants without the need to represent them, the government has no incentive to support undocumented immigrants.

Although this final subsection did not directly concern participants' journeys to the 4-year institution, the subsection provided insight into how participants had conceptualized some of the policies that most directly concern them. Although the focus of this dissertation was rooted within the context of higher education, I situated participants' conceptualizations of policy within a larger framework of systemic failings to demonstrate some of the tensions that challenge staying informed. Understanding participants' complex relationships with staying up to date on policy updates offered additional context and explanation as to why these participants faced challenges accessing critical information in their journeys to the 4-year UCMB. Along these

lines, the repeated denial of opportunities and the uncertainty that continually surrounds this population extends far beyond that of education.

Broadening the Scope of Support: Networks and Resource-Seeking Strategies

In this third and final section of the findings chapter, I explore some of the participants' strategies, networks, and forms of support they used as they navigated their journeys to college. Where the previous section focused heavily on individual policies, this third and final section encompasses some of the ways in which these participants persisted in their efforts of applying to the 4-year university. In this section, I highlight how participants accessed information related to policy and draw attention to a few key overarching themes.

I begin this section by reintroducing the topic of status disclosure and some of the reasons behind participants' decision to disclose to others. I then discuss the topic of representation and its role in both enabling the participants to access key information and reconceptualize their identities. In the latter half of this third section, I explore the community college context and how this institution type uniquely supported the transfer participants' academic, financial, and status needs. Finally, I conclude this section with an examination into how participants strategically used digital or online modes of support to access needed information when in-person support had been limited or constrained.

Revisiting Status Disclosure

Earlier in the chapter, I highlighted the role of status disclosure in relation to how participants conceptualized their identities as Latinx undocumented students. The earlier subsection on status disclosure focused on how participants' conceptualizations of identity shaped their perceptions of whether their status was something that was safe to share. In this

second subsection on status disclosure, I revisit the topic of status disclosure and focus more on the specific act of sharing one's status.

Although many participants expressed a reluctance to share their immigration status with others, participants often reflected on those with whom they did share their status. Across the participant pool, all participants described how trust is central to both their willingness and ability to share their status. Instead of heavily focusing on the different groups of people in whom participants commonly confided (e.g., peers, community members, teachers, counselors), I explore some of the overarching qualities and characteristics commonly shared by the people in whom participants put their trust. This approach of identifying common themes is meant to honor the diversity in these participants' networks—as explored earlier in Chapter 5—and provide takeaways that would more meaningfully drive implications for practice.

Fostering Trust and Indicators of Trustworthiness

Participants most commonly shared their status with those whom they already had an existing relationship; for instance, Antonio described how he preferred to develop a meaningful relationship with someone before sharing his status so he could more accurately determine if he would be safe sharing. He explained:

It takes me time to kind of disclose my status with other people. It takes me time on an individual level to meet someone and then tell them. Once I feel comfortable or I feel like this person won't be hostile if I tell them, then I feel like I can safely disclose it.

Antonio's thoughts highlighted both the significance of a relationship's duration and the quality of the relationship itself. Both factors were important in whether Antonio had shared his status. His quote reflected the utility of establishing a relationship first, and how that period lends itself to ensuring the person with whom they share their information is someone who is safe and can be trusted.

Brianna similarly described how one of the only people she told about her status in high school was a teacher of hers from Grades 9–12 in high school. She described why she approached him when it came time to apply to college, noting:

He was my freshman teacher and I had classes with him all the way through high school. I was already very fond of him. He was also the best teacher in the school. He was one of the few teachers that made me feel safe. I felt comfortable sharing, “Hey, I’m undocumented. I have no idea what this process is. I need help.” He made sure that everything was a little bit clearer when I had no idea what was going on. He was just a great guy, super kind. He leveled with us a little bit better than most teachers.

Brianna’s quote highlighted how the decision to disclose her status with the teacher had been built on 4 years’ worth of relationship building. Seeing that her teacher had a history of being kind and had been more approachable than some of her other teachers, Brianna felt safe enough to trust him with this detail. Though the teacher was limited in the amount of support he was able to provide, the teacher provided Brianna with enough information to help her gain admission into some of her top schools.

Brianna primarily shared her status with that teacher and that teacher only. Lucia described a similar experience confiding in one of the teachers she had since ninth grade, noting how the teacher’s positive reaction empowered her to share her status with more people. She described how her teacher’s reaction to her disclosing her status provided her with a sense of reassurance that people wanted her to succeed and were there to support her. In the following quote, she recounted Mr. Aguilera’s reaction and the significance behind his response, stating:

After I told him about my status, he told me to look at his Hydroflask [water bottle]. When I did, I noticed there was a sticker of a butterfly on it and it said “Dreamer.” He told me about how growing up, he had a lot of undocumented friends who made it really far and he saw us as special rather than different. Because it was a really old sticker, I knew it wasn’t something he was saying just to make me feel better, so it made me understand that not everyone sees it as a bad thing. After feeling different for so long because most of the people around me are citizens and stuff like that, it was kind of encouraging and motivational to know that there are people who don’t see it as something negative. Mr. Aguilera was not forced to see things that way. He himself is a citizen. There was no need for him to be like, “Ah, yes, undocumented students.” He felt that way

on his own so that reassured me and reminded me that there are people out there who want to support me and who are rooting for me.

Mr. Aguilera's reaction to Lucia's disclosure was significant in that his response helped her to reframe the notion that she was different from her peers. Lucia described how the weathered sticker on her teacher's water bottle was noteworthy in that there was weight beyond his verbal display of support. Though Mr. Aguilera was not undocumented and was a U.S. citizen, Lucia found comfort knowing that other undocumented immigrants had gone on to succeed and she could find other allies similar to Mr. Aguilera. This positive act of disclosure was instrumental in Lucia going onto share her status with other mentor-like figures, who together formed Lucia's wider network of support.

Even among people she knew, Melissa described how she would often pay attention to others' behavior in a space and whether they demonstrated signs of unsafe behavior that could potentially signal their hostility toward immigrants. Melissa summarized some of the qualities she looks for in a person before deciding to share her status with someone. She explained:

I'm open to talking about my status when I know that I'm in a community where that's okay, but usually when I don't feel safe, that's not even somewhere I will go. I think it could be as simple as are they Mexican or something? Are they white? I think it depends on the situation. Do I know these people? People don't always show signs that they're unsafe, but have I seen weird habits or behaviors from them before, like saying racist comments? It just depends on that: their actions or who they are as a person.

Similar to Antonio, Brianna, and Lucia, Melissa posed the question about whether she knows the person with whom she is considering disclosing her status. In this quote, Melissa also described how she pays attention to whether she and the person have any commonalities in terms of their ethnic or cultural background. Toward the end of this quote, she explained the challenge of knowing what views a person has, and that this information was not always apparent; still, she explained how she tries to note any prejudiced behaviors that would indicate a person's unsafety.

Although the previous experiences focused heavily on people that the participants already knew, several other participants also spoke about how they often used referrals to broaden their circles of support. Specifically, participants spoke about how introductions set up by others they had already trusted aided in their ability to access critical information. In one example, Teresa had a mentor named Andrea, who was also undocumented and had DACA. Because Andrea graduated from a college on the East Coast, Andrea connected Teresa with contacts from her network who could better provide Teresa a glimpse of what it would be like to attend any of the UC campuses as an undocumented immigrant. Teresa highlighted this form of support and the information she gleaned from the informational interviews she had with both contacts of Andrea and her partner, Daniel. Teresa explained:

Andrea helped me with [preparing] my line of questions. There were very basic questions that I wanted to ask. For example, some of my basic questions regarded the programs for undocumented students, low-income students, and students of color. I asked about if they have scholarships, what their financial aid looked like, and more about their housing. Those were the key things I wanted to know about. After that, Andrea and Daniel encouraged me to ask about majors, student life, student engagement, student orgs, access to Latino food or produce, and events that I would be interested in engaging in. I wanted to know what life outside of school looked like and I was able to understand that from those peoples' perspectives.

Although Andrea had limited firsthand knowledge of attending a UC school, the contacts Teresa had met through Andrea and Daniel enabled Teresa to access a much wider range of knowledge. Because these contacts were already acquainted with her two mentors, two figures Teresa already trusted, Teresa felt empowered to make the most of these kinds of informational interviews and use them to her advantage. The information Teresa received about financial aid was now no longer limited to just Andrea's and Daniel's professional knowledge and personal experiences. Through these informational interviews arranged by the existing contacts she trusted, Teresa gained a diverse and varied understanding of the kinds of financial support that

were available to undocumented students at each of the UC campuses before deciding which UC campus to attend.

Across the participant base, referrals were a common way of extending participants' networks and forging a sense of trust. To name a few examples, Lizeth had neighbors, and all five of the daughters in that family were recent UC graduates. Although all the five daughters provided Lizeth with meaningful support, Lizeth shared how they introduced her to staff at their respective campus Undocumented Student Programs. Through these introductions, Lizeth was able to address any questions she had that concerned her status throughout the process of her applying to college. In a different instance, Oscar's friend's mother worked at a community college; because he had already been acquainted with the friend's family, Oscar trusted that whomever the mother would introduce to him at her place of work would have his best interests in mind. Through his friend's mother, Oscar was introduced to a faculty member at the community college who was familiar with the AB 540 process and the Dream Act application, and he was able to benefit from this faculty member's expertise.

Whereas previous findings cautioned against the practice of passing undocumented students from one entity to the next, these examples demonstrated instances where participants were referred to another entity by someone they already trusted. Because participants' existing relationships had been built on the principles of trust and care, these participants were more willing to disclose their status and seek out the support of extended contacts. In light of many participants' reluctance to share their status with others, this detail suggests how fostering trust is essential in situations where the student can be best supported elsewhere or through other means. Promoting the feeling of safety can aid in developing individual relationships and in establishing a much wider network of support.

Significance of Representation

Over two thirds of the participants spoke about the value of having people who shared similar identities or backgrounds, and how a shared background often facilitated a willingness to share their status. These participants highlighted both the significance of finding mentors and forms of support who shared their undocumented identity, along with finding people who could understand their cultural identities. In one example related to the undocumented identity, Selena had a teacher in high school who was formerly undocumented, and that teacher frequently shared with her students details surrounding her academic journey. Though Selena did not disclose her status with her teacher, Selena described the significance of learning about her teacher's journey and the value of having educators who share similar backgrounds. She shared:

I never told [my teacher] that I was undocumented, but she was very helpful. She told us about how she navigated college. She gave tips and advice to all her students, not just me specifically. She grew up in the same school district as me. It meant a lot to know that I wasn't the first undocumented student to go to college and I wasn't going to be the last. I think it would be better to receive counseling support from somebody who's already been through undergrad in that situation and knows what they're doing. Having somebody who understands being an undocumented student or is from the Hispanic or Latino community would be helpful because those people would understand me. Sometimes you need people who look like you, have the same forms of living, and can understand where you're coming from. I think it's helpful because it helps me not feel isolated, like, "Oh, I'm not the only one."

Selena described how having a teacher with a shared background and who was from the same community as her high school meant a great deal to her, as it signified that someone like her had gone to college before. Though she ultimately did not disclose her status to the teacher, she described how having counselors with the same or similar background would have likely benefited her, similar to the way that Selena benefited from learning about her teacher's lived experiences.

Other participants similarly evoked the importance of having educators of shared background and how a shared background helped to facilitate a sense of trust in others. In one instance, Alejandro described how he had been connected with a financial aid officer at his community college who was Latinx and formerly undocumented. Alejandro explained the significance of connecting with a financial aid officer from a similar background and why he likely would have felt less comfortable had the financial aid officer been from a different cultural background. He shared:

Having that cultural knowledge is really important. I feel like Latinos, we all interact with the fact that Latino parents are usually super strict. They're very strict with academics and stuff like that. Someone who's Latino would understand our parents' dynamics or that our families want [us] to have a better life. Same thing for other ethnicity groups. For example: Vietnamese people, if they have that shared cultural knowledge and stuff like that, that makes it easier to communicate and be open about their situation. I probably wouldn't have been as open with an undocumented counselor that was Vietnamese as much as a Latino one, just because the Latino one probably would understand my situation more through their own exposure to our cultural identity.

Because of his shared background with the Latinx financial aid officer, Alejandro implied that he had felt more comfortable confiding in the counselor details surrounding both his status and his family. Because Alejandro was estranged from his family beginning his 2nd year of community college, developing that sense of trust and feeling safe enough to disclose details surrounding his family situation was essential in allowing him to learn more about financial aid options as an independent student. Alejandro suggested that if this financial aid officer had been from a different cultural background, he would have faced greater difficulty in communicating his needs.

Over half of the participants also spoke about the importance of finding a community of undocumented peers, both in terms of accessing information and finding support from those who had already gone through the process or who would be embarking on that process alongside

them. Along these lines, roughly one third of the participants spoke about the power of college access programs and how the communities built in these programs were instrumental in finding support from people who looked like them. For instance, both Antonio and Raquel had been part of the same transfer support program. As part of this program, members were able to attend workshops that were meant to help prepare them to apply to transfer and connect with a team of current undergraduate mentors. Antonio participated in an overnight, residential experience offered through the program that was just for undocumented students. He explained how the college access program, which aimed to be inclusive of varying student populations, made him feel more inclined to share his experiences in the program's spaces and described the significance of this approach in the following quote:

[This program] did a really good job trying to be as inclusive as possible. They recently added a lot of services for other demographics of people, which included parenting students, veteran students, nontraditional students, and so on. Because the program had that level of awareness and didn't just solely focus on a specific transfer student, that made me think to myself, "Damn, this is a place where I can be transparent and I can share my experiences." I knew that my experiences would be listened to and they gave me an outlet to be able to do that. I knew I was safe there, you know.

Though Antonio found the greatest benefits in the undocumented student-specific spaces the program offered, his quote suggested how being inclusive of varying student groups can help foster a safe environment. The program's attention to detail provided clear indication to Antonio that he would be safe to attend the overnight experience and participate in the undocumented student-specific sections offered through the program. Because the program had indicated a willingness to support various student populations and had made this commitment evident in other generalized spaces, Antonio felt more inclined to share his experiences and seek out the specialized support that was available.

At the time of his interview, Antonio was a member of the college access program's current student staff. He described his experiences mentoring the program's cohort of undocumented community college students. Though he spoke from a present-day perspective, the following quote provided additional insight into the program's inclusive counseling practices. In what follows, Antonio described working with undocumented students in a one-on-one setting and how he has approached the topic of financial aid applications using an open-ended approach. He explained:

For a student who doesn't want to talk about it very openly and I know that they are based on our student-level data, I don't try to force anyone to answer what they don't want to answer. I don't try to get a response out of them. I try to speak in a way that's very inclusive. When we're talking about financial aid, I won't just mention FAFSA. I'll mention to the student, "Have you looked into FAFSA or the Dream Act?" Using that inclusive language is a way for me to include topics that relate to the undocumented identity, and not just talking about one or the other.

Antonio's example spoke to how the program had been mindful of diverse student populations and how these group's needs would vary from one to the next. By speaking about the FAFSA and the Dream Act alongside one another, Antonio is able to ensure that all participants—regardless of their immigration status—gain exposure to these two financial aid forms. As his quote suggested, this practice is also helpful in supporting the needs of undocumented students who might not feel safe enough to disclose their status.

Whereas several participants affirmed the need for more educators who shared similar backgrounds, Teresa offered a slightly more nuanced perspective wherein she discussed the need for educators to at least be familiar and trained on issues that surround the larger undocumented community. Teresa indicated her preference to have educators who share a similar background to her but noted in instances where this may not be possible, these educators should at least have some history demonstrating their commitment to social justice issues. She explained:

People need to come from similar backgrounds and be trained on issues regarding undocumented students. These people don't need to be undocumented per se, but they can't just have a "book"-level context of what's going on. As an undocumented student or even as a student of color, I don't trust people that have just read it in the books. If you haven't been through something similar or don't have at least some sort of background in social justice or advocacy, I'm not going to trust you.

Teresa suggested a need for educators to have a deeper understanding of undocumented students beyond what can be easily read or accessed in a book. Teresa's quote implied that supporting undocumented students extends beyond just knowing that these students need to complete the Dream Act as opposed to the FAFSA, or that they need to pay attention to scholarship eligibility requirements; instead, educators need to understand how these students' trajectories fit within much larger frameworks tied to issues of social (in)justice, systems of power and oppression, and so on. For this reason, Teresa described how she is more likely to trust someone who has this understanding or has experienced these issues firsthand.

Personal Statements and (Re)Examining Identity

As indicated in earlier sections of this chapter, the topic of financial aid was often the inciting factor in participants' decisions to disclose their immigration status with someone. Another point that commonly prompted participants to open up about their status was the process of writing their personal statements or, as they are referred to in the UC system, the Personal Insight Questions (PIQ). For freshmen applicants, the UC provides a total of eight PIQ prompts, and applicants must respond to four of those questions (Regents of the University of California, n.d.-a). For transfer applicants, the UC has one required question, and then they must answer three out of seven additional questions (Regents of the University of California, n.d.-b). Because the PIQs for both freshmen and transfer applicants are meant to provide admissions a glimpse into the applicant, eight participants described how the process of writing their responses led them to share more about their immigration status with others.

Similar to the process of completing financial aid applications, some participants described an initial reluctance to share and write about their status within their PIQ responses. For instance, Melissa contemplated whether or not to write about her status and shared her concern about how the people in admissions who were reviewing her application would perceive her. She described this concern and why she ultimately chose to write about her status in her PIQs. Melissa explained:

I mentioned my status in at least two of my responses. It was scary because I know the people reading these, they're in really high positions and could possibly be people that aren't supportive of immigrants. It was risky, but I also knew that a lot of students do mention their status. I felt like [sharing my status] wasn't really something that they could use against me and if they did, then I could do something about it. [Sharing my status] took a lot of guts but I felt like [my status] was such a big part of the type of questions that they were asking, like "What is a big struggle you have?" and stuff like that. The PIQs revolve around topics like that, and I felt like I couldn't not mention them. My status is a big part of my educational journey.

Because of the nature of the questions that are asked in the PIQs, Melissa felt her status was an integral part of who she was and her journey at that point. Because her status was central to her identity, she ultimately chose to write about her status and elected to integrate details surrounding her identity into her responses despite her initial hesitation. Melissa's commentary that sharing her status took "guts" and had been a "risky" choice mirrored some of the previous findings, specifically those related to the process of financial aid and how status disclosure had been embedded in that process. Melissa's experience suggested status disclosure plays a much larger role beyond the scope of financial aid and is something that undocumented students consider throughout the larger process of applying to college.

All eight of the participants who spoke about the PIQs shared how the process of writing their responses placed them in the position of having to consider or rehash their personal traumas. For instance, Jessica described how she had been encouraged by her high school

counselors to lean into the traumatic elements of her story; for Jessica, this approach meant writing about her journey coming to the United States. She described her thoughts on this kind of approach, noting:

My counselors told me, “The better the sob story, the better off I was to get the admissions office to be on your side.” It sucks that I had an actual traumatic story to write about. I didn’t like the fact that it would be seen as a “sob story” rather than just my experiences. I definitely talked about my status in my personal statement, but it was just for the sake of getting admitted. My counselors and my teacher who proofread those personal statements never really reached out to me to ask if I needed any support.

Jessica did not previously share her status with those at her high school, but she was encouraged to evoke whatever trauma she had in her PIQ responses to capture the attention of admissions reviewers. Jessica expressed her discomfort with the idea that she had traumatic experiences that would fall under this notion; even worse, Jessica expressed concern that her experiences would likely be reduced to “sob story.” Likely seeing no other alternative way of approaching her PIQs, she shared how she ultimately wrote about her status for the sake of being accepted. Her final comment conveyed that in the process of reading her PIQ responses, her counselors and teacher learned of Jessica’s status. Though her PIQ responses centered around more negative aspects of her identity and related experiences, she recalled how these individuals never checked in on her to see if or where she may need additional support. This detail suggested that she had been disappointed by their impassive reaction and lack of care.

Diana similarly described how she struggled to frame her experiences in a manner that did not focus so aggressively on the trauma of being undocumented and how she aimed to depict her experiences from a different lens. She explained her desire to take a different approach, one that centered on how being undocumented has shaped her in other ways. Diana recalled:

My counselor was like, “You have to be very vulnerable in these applications because [admissions] wants that vulnerability, but you have to know how to write it.” I wanted to showcase that [my status] wasn’t just about the trauma of being undocumented. I

included my status, but it was more about how it shaped me and how I used it to do better in my community. I honestly felt like I did better in my community, and I didn't just stop there because of my immigration status. That's something my mom has taught me: just work around [your status] because if you just let it drain you, then you're not going to get anywhere. My mom was open to me sharing that story in my statements and being vulnerable.

Diana's counselor encouraged her to be vulnerable but without the heavy emphasis to write about adversity. Although Diana had her own share of challenges to write about, similar to Jessica, Diana described how she wanted to stray away from the portrayal of being undocumented as something that is singularly rooted in the experiences of trauma. With her mother's encouragement, Diana instead chose to write about status from the lens of how her status has shaped her interests in health care and serving her community. The reframing on the part of her counselor and the encouragement from her mother shows how others can help undocumented students relate their experiences.

Along these lines, many participants spoke about how others in their network helped put their experiences on paper and reframe their understanding of their identities. Consistent with some of the earlier themes on representation, both Teresa and Antonio described how others who were similarly undocumented provided them with valuable support as they thought about how they wanted to convey their experiences and what their undocumented identity meant to them. Teresa described how her two mentors had been instrumental in guiding how she responded to her PIQs. With her mentors' support and guidance, she began to consider her undocumented identity as one of her strengths. Teresa recounted the process of working with these two mentors, stating:

I remember [my mentor] Daniel would always tell me to dig deeper. I would write a paragraph about immigrating to the United States or learning English. He'd be like, "This is good, but this is very surface level. You have to *dig deeper*." Once I started to really explore my feelings and the journeys of my parents, I think I started to format everything in a way that made more sense. I was more in touch with my emotions, and I started to

understand what he meant when he said to “dig deeper.” Both Daniel and [his partner] Andrea come from a counseling background. They understood the work of writing personal statements, but more than that, they brought to the table their personal experiences. I could share anything with them about my journey, a barrier that I had confronted recently or in my past, etc. We went through a . . . [paused to think] what we just did now: an educational journey timeline. They would ask questions and I would answer. From there, we created a massive document. When I was writing my statements for the UC, Daniel encouraged me to think outside the box and think of my identity as my strength. He sat me down and told me, “There are few people that are from [your community], low-income, undocumented, have parents that work in the fields, and have done this you know. The university would benefit from your attendance at any UC.” Despite the different things that might have, in theory, set me back, there are aspects of my journey—the values that I hold and the certain things that I’ve been through—that have made me stronger.

Teresa’s quote highlighted a few important details. Both Daniel and Andrea had counseling backgrounds and as such, Teresa trusted the two were familiar with the process of writing the PIQs. In this quote, she acknowledged the significance of having mentors who were knowledgeable about the application process; however, the greatest value these two mentors provided Teresa was their personal experiences. Like Teresa, Andrea was also a DACA recipient and both Daniel and Andrea were first-generation college students. Teresa’s quote suggested that working with people who understood her experiences on a more personal level had a profound impact on how she was able to articulate her own experiences. Through the process of writing, Teresa came to reconsider her undocumented identity. She described how Daniel encouraged her to see her identity as her source of strength and affirmed that the institutions to which she was applying would benefit from her being there. This experience further demonstrated the reach of representation and how mentors with a shared background can aid in the development of these responses. Moreover, in light of some of the previous findings concerning participants’ conceptualizations of identity, Teresa’s experience reflected how the process of understanding one’s identity is an iterative process. Having mentors with a shared background can aid in the framing and understanding of one’s identity.

Antonio also wrote his PIQ responses with the support of a peer mentor who was also undocumented. He described the significance of having an undocumented peer mentor to guide his process and how this support helped him determine what to include. He explained:

I felt emotionally drained by just working on the PIQs because I feel like sometimes that can bring up a lot of surface trauma—both in talking about my status and my LGBTQ+ identity. I wanted to talk about those identities, but I feel like I couldn't really articulate them the best. Trying to write those experiences down on paper was emotionally heavy. I feel like having [my peer mentor] on my side and asking her for suggestions and tips allowed me to be more vulnerable and know that what I'm sharing is fine. The one thing she always said was, "Share what you feel comfortable sharing." She didn't tell me, "You should write about this." She didn't tell me what to write but to write to the level that I was comfortable sharing.

As with some of the previous participants, Antonio described the process of writing his personal statements as challenging and one that led him to confront what challenges he had faced in his life at that point. The process of brainstorming for these prompts had brought up trauma he had faced and, in his case, concerned both his immigration status and his sexual orientation. Though his mentor encouraged him to be vulnerable just as Diana's counselor had encouraged her, Antonio's peer mentor reminded him to only share what he felt comfortable sharing. The emotional support extended by Antonio's peer mentor suggests how those with shared experiences and backgrounds can aid in helping undocumented applicants establish boundaries over what they share. Because the process of writing PIQs can trigger experiences of harm and trauma, Antonio's experience here indicates that individuals with shared backgrounds can provide undocumented students with a safe space to unpack their stories and minimize the potential to incite further harm.

Integral Role of Community Colleges

In the previous section on policy, I frequently highlighted participants' experiences accessing information relevant to their needs while they were in high school. In this subsection, I

explore how the community college uniquely addressed the academic, financial, and status needs of the transfer participants who entered UCMB via the community college pathway.

Many of the participants who went to community college before attending UCMB reflected on how going to a community college supported their journey to the 4-year sector. The transfer participants commonly cited the affordability of going to community college and how the community college sector's comparatively lower cost made this option more accessible. As indicated earlier in the subsection on the CCPG, the community college provided many of the transfer participants with a more affordable means to explore their academic interests. All transfer participants spoke to varying lengths about how they used their time at community college to save money so these funds could be used toward any current or future living and educational expenses. Similarly, all but one of the transfer participants lived at home with their families while they were at community college, thereby enabling them to save money on living expenses.

One of the other primary reasons community college had been a valuable period in these participants' academic journeys is that it commonly provided these participants with the support they did not receive in high school. For instance, Ivan spoke about how when he was in high school, there was no one available at the high school to support him with his Dream Act application. The community college was the first place where he was able to receive any form of formal financial aid support. Melissa also described how her community college was instrumental in providing her with accurate support, and how she was able to receive more individualized attention at the community college. Melissa described some of her experiences navigating the lack of resources in her high school and how going to community college opened new doors. She explained:

In high school, I had practically no support. The only reason I may have felt comfortable was because I was in a Latino community where immigrants were all around. The college counselor at my high school thought that I couldn't go to community college because she wasn't knowledgeable on how that would work for undocumented students. Having misinformation is so dangerous for my community because it can hinder someone's possibilities or possibly even set them back years. When I got to community college, there was so much more knowledge. I think those two years allowed me to build habits, learn how I worked best in an academic setting, and [learn] what it meant to be an undocumented student in higher ed. I feel like I would've been really lost if I went straight into a 4-year. I don't think I would've had as much support as I did at community college, just because it felt really one-on-one even though it was online. It felt like they paid a lot more attention.

Within this quote, Melissa contrasted her time at community college with her time at high school. She explained that compared to the support she received in high school, the community college offered her a greater range of knowledge. In this quote, she suggested this knowledge was helpful in terms of coming to learn what being an undocumented immigrant in higher education was like. The prevalence of one-on-one support and individualized attention, in combination with the time and space to refine her work habits, helped Melissa become more prepared to transfer to the 4-year institution.

Joana similarly remarked on how community college provided her with additional support that specifically accounted for the circumstances surrounding her status. She remarked on how her high school only knew about the FAFSA and did not have any resources for undocumented students more broadly. She explained going to community college afforded her a team of support who could better assist her, especially in instances that directly concerned her status. She expanded, noting:

Back in my senior year of high school and as I applied to get into community college, I had to do it all on my own. The counselors at my high school did not know much about the Dream Act. They were just familiar with FAFSA. There were not many resources for undocumented students trying to transfer or trying to go to a community college or a university. Going to community college and then transferring was one of the best decisions I have made because my academic advisors and peers at community college provided me with all the resources I needed to attend a 4-year university. There were a lot

of advisors and college counselors at my community college who helped me and informed me of all the opportunities I could do. They informed me of the Dream Act as well because I didn't really know much about the Dream Act.

The community college helped to expand Joana's understanding of what she thought possible and introduced her to resources (e.g., the Dream Act) that could help make her goals of attending college possible. The significance of going to a community college and then transferring to the 4-year was so great that she referred to it as "one of the best decisions" she made, strongly suggesting this route was instrumental in preparing her for the 4-year sector.

As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, many participants held the misconception that they would be unable to attend college as undocumented immigrants. In one example, Alejandro described that because of this myth, he had not taken his academics seriously while in high school. He shared how after learning that he could go to college, the community college provided him with another opportunity to continue his studies and improve his academic performance. He explained:

I felt like I wasted my high school years fucking around. So when I went to community college, I thought about it as a second chance to really get the opportunity to go to college and to really move up the social ladder, even though there's not really social mobility anymore. I thought, "I could do this."

Alejandro's use of the term "second chance" implied that the community college route provided him with another opportunity to commit to his studies and work toward a college degree. His comment about social mobility simultaneously reflected his desire to use his degree to open up further possibilities (be that academic and/or professional) while simultaneously interrogating whether social mobility truly even exists.

The community college was also a source of valuable information to not just the transfer participants, but to the participants who entered UCMB at the freshmen level as well. In instances when the freshmen-level admits were unable to find support within their high school,

these participants described commonly seeking out the support of their local community colleges, particularly for information related to financial aid. For instance, both Chris and Oscar relied on staff from their local community college to receive assistance completing their Dream Act application. Chris had already taken courses through dual enrollment at his local community college and relied on his existing contacts at the community college when it came time to complete his Dream Act. Similarly, Oscar relied on the support of his friend's mother who worked at the community college, and colleagues in her network provided Oscar with the support he needed to complete his financial aid applications. These two experiences showed how community colleges can support undocumented high school status in addressing some of their more status-specific needs in instances where that support is not readily available at the high school.

Despite many of the meaningful ways in which community colleges supported these participants, additional work needs to focus on dismantling the stigma ascribed to attending the community college. Some participants described how they felt a sense of shame in attending the community college first. These sentiments spoke about the need for educators and peers to recognize the vital role that community colleges play in broadening undocumented students' access to higher education. For instance, Ivan shared how his high school counselor dissuaded students from attending community college. Ivan's counselor declined to help him and remarked that going to community college was "just like high school." Although Ivan was disappointed with her response, Ivan maintained that community college was the right option for him "because of the financial aid. [He] knew that my finances were going to be better if [he] went to community college. She didn't really see that because [he] didn't tell her [his] status." Ivan's remarks demonstrated how he was certain about going to community college and although he

acknowledged the counselor had been unaware of his status, the counselor was still unable to honor Ivan's academic goals and refused to support him.

Melissa similarly recalled how many of her high school teachers told their students, "Try to aim for the 4-year because you can get dumb in community college because it's not challenging." In her junior year of high school, Melissa struggled with her mental health and described experiencing "depressive states and went through a lot of anxiety." Melissa saw community college as an appealing option to further her studies in a manner that aligned with her wellness goals at the time. She explained she had to reassure herself by repeating, "It's okay. I'm going to go to community college because I need to focus on figuring out healthy habits." Melissa sought professional support in the following academic year, which led to her eventual ADHD diagnosis. Returning to the earlier point about her teachers' remarks about community college, she shared how this socialization of community college as "not challenging" and that the pathway would make her "dumb" made Melissa feel like she "was just lazy and wasn't smart." The stigma associated with the community college made her question her abilities and if going to community college would be right for her. Dismissing community college as a viable pathway can tarnish the value that community college has for a number of undocumented students who seek the community college path for a variety of reasons.

Antonio similarly described how the community college route was a joke among his friends and he felt a sense of shame for beginning his college career at the community college. When he first decided to attend the community college, he described how he felt "regret" for enrolling at the school. He described how his mindset had changed from this state of "regret" to one of appreciation for how the community college caters to historically underrepresented and marginalized populations. He explained:

The community college I went to was seen as a joke by many people in my high school. There was this image of students who went to community college; specifically, that if you went there, you weren't going to attain much and you didn't know what you were doing. When I started community college, I was like, "I don't want to be here" and I did have some regret. I think in some ways going to community college and really being there really did humble me cause I kind of got to understand more about what community college has to offer. That's something I really do miss about being [at community college] where you were able to meet people from different backgrounds in terms of their age, veteran status if they were a parenting student. . . . In that space [of community college], I remember people from all walks of life. That setting really allowed me to understand that I had the privilege of being here at this school and that I had an opportunity to prepare to transfer. My mentality shifted over time.

Similar to the previous two participants, Antonio described the stigma ascribed to going to community college and how this stigma had shaped some of his feelings about attending community college when he first began. Antonio's remark about how he was able to meet students from different backgrounds further demonstrated his appreciation for the community college and its ability to better serve the needs of diverse students. With this framing, Antonio saw going to community college as a privilege and reclaimed his time in community college as an opportunity that allowed him to prepare for his future academic pursuits. His comment about the community college exposing him to students from different "walks of life" further pointed to how the community college is a viable path to the 4-year sector. Such devaluation of community colleges has important implications for students from marginalized backgrounds.

Undocumented Student Programs and Dream Resource Centers

One resource that was commonly highlighted by the transfer participants involved their community colleges' Undocumented Student Programs or Dream Resource Centers. Participants often used the titles of Undocumented Student Program and Dream Resource Center interchangeably, but these two entities broadly refer to a campus student affairs unit that is directly tasked with supporting undocumented students (Immigrants Rising, 2020). Based on the accounts participants provided, these programs typically varied in terms of what services they

offered. For example, some programs provided resources to both undocumented students and their families whereas others were entirely student focused. Another example concerned the services provided by these programs. Some programs focused largely on providing support with the Dream Act application and AB 540, whereas others were more holistic in nature, offering everything from support with selecting classes, counseling on how to transfer, providing financial aid resources, finding legal counsel, or securing other resources.

Many participants described how the presence of a dedicated center or program for undocumented students at their community college provided them with a safe way of accessing and receiving support. Among the transfer participants who were concerned with safeguarding their status, Undocumented Student Programs or Dream Resource Centers were often their primary means of support as they looked ahead to applying to transfer. Raquel described why she had sought the support of her community college's Undocumented Student Program/Dream Resource Center and why she had been willing to trust program staff. She explained:

I don't randomly go up to strangers and say, "Hey, I'm undocumented. [Laughed] Check me out." At the resource centers, I know they're supposed to help me. They're not gonna turn me in to ICE. They're not supposed to and they shouldn't, so I feel that trust. Knowing that there's this trust or that it's a trusting environment makes me like, "Okay, I'll share [my status]." I think using these resource centers comes down to trust and the feeling of being comfortable.

By the very nature of there being a dedicated resource for undocumented students, Raquel described how the center's defined purpose made her more inclined to share her status with staff and make use of the resource. Raquel's continued use of the word "trust" still suggested some degree of reluctance on her part; nevertheless, her decision to share with center staff was facilitated by the assumption that no harm would come to her if she were to share. Ivan similarly remarked how he had been "comfortable sharing [his] status with them because those people understand [undocumented students'] situation. That space is specifically for people in

[their] situation.” Ivan’s quote suggested these spaces provide undocumented students with a sense of comfort where they not only feel safe in sharing their status, but they know their status will be heard and understood by those with whom they interact.

Joana offered very similar commentary to the previous participants. She outlined some of the key takeaways in seeking out this resource, including how having a dedicated resource encouraged her to embrace sharing her status. She also described how the support from her community college’s Dream Resource Center differed from the more generalized support she received elsewhere at the community college. She explained:

I felt really comfortable telling anyone and everyone within the Dream Center because that’s what they were there for: to help us navigate higher education as an undocumented student. Having someone that has focused their work on helping undocumented students made me very well informed. The counselor was always there to inform me and answer all my questions right on the spot or address any of the doubts I had. When I would go to the general counselor for all the 1st-year students at community college, she didn’t really know how to answer my questions, because that wasn’t her focus of work. Having that [specialized] support was really nice because I had all my questions answered all the time. If I had a doubt about a policy that was coming up or something that was happening in the news, she would be the first to inform me of everything.

Joana’s quote highlighted how the support she received from the Dream Resource Center had come from a lens that consistently considered her status needs. Joana’s comment mirrored those of Raquel’s and Ivan’s quotes in that she emphasized the Dream Resource Center was meant for undocumented students; as such, she felt more inclined to be her authentic self in these spaces. Joana also highlights toward the end of the prior quote that the Dream Resource Center also played a critical role in helping her understand policy developments when issues surrounding immigration were brought up in the news. This detail conveyed the value of more holistic support and how her experiences applying to transfer were shaped by these policy developments.

Along these lines, nearly all the transfer participants spoke about how the Undocumented Student Program or Dream Resource Center at their community college provided them with a sense of community and allowed them to feel less alone in their academic journeys. For many of the transfer participants, their Undocumented Student Program or Dream Resource Center provided them with one of their earliest forms of undocumented camaraderie. Returning to Joana, she held a leadership position in her community college's undocumented student club that was organized with the coordination and support of her community college's Dream Resource Center. Though the club's focus was largely on equipping its members with an understanding of the transfer process, Joana described how the community she built in that space was crucial to supporting her well-being in a time of marked uncertainty. She discussed how the club implemented "healing spaces" so its members could discuss how developments in policy were impacting them. She described:

When I was in community college, a lot of the news was mostly, "Trump said this," "Trump has said that," "Trump is passing this," "Trump is trying to pass that," "DACA has been stopped," "DACA is in the lower courts," "DACA is in the Supreme Court" and "the judge ruled this." It was just like a lot of stressful things in regard to immigration and what was going on. We would start our meetings with, "Okay, I know you guys heard the news, so let's take the time to just breathe, speak about what's going on, and let out any of our emotions." People were there to share what they were feeling in their hearts and minds. These healing circles were about being heard in a safe space. We had each other's back because it does get hard. A lot of us wanted to give up at times but we were there to remind each other of how far we've come. These spaces helped promote this idea that we've come this far and we shouldn't let one thing set us back.

Joana's quote highlighted how the spaces shared by undocumented peers provided her with much more than just academic support. Joana's experience suggested how communities can aid in feeling less alone during frightening times and persisting in the face of obstacles. She explained these healing spaces provided others with a space to share, process, and engage with

others, and shared how these forums are vital in encouraging its members to keep going in their academic pursuits.

Raquel also described how her community college's Undocumented Student Program provided her with community and how, through the Undocumented Student Program, she had been able to connect with peers who were undocumented mothers as well. Raquel described how she had made a friend through her Undocumented Student Program, and one of those friends was a peer who was of similar age, was a mother, and also did not have DACA. She expanded upon the significance of community she built through the USP and spoke about this friendship in further detail, noting:

I met other students there that were dealing with the same status situation as me and I was able to build community. Through [my peers], I learned that I could transfer. When I first started community college, I was trying to get a certificate but then I learned that you could transfer and you get a bachelor's degree. There was one girl that I met there and she's now at UCMB with me. Having that friendship and being able to move on to the next stage of our life together and experience similar challenges together has been helpful, because I know I'm not alone. I think bringing that person along with me has been valuable, because it's like, "Okay, we're in this together. We're going to do this together, and we're going to get through this together." We always say to each other, "Damn, we're going to make it. We're both going to walk down that stage together."

Like Joana, the relationships Raquel built from the time spent at the community college's Undocumented Student Program helped her to feel less alone as she navigated higher education. The knowledge that she and her friend would be going through this journey together provided her with the reassurance she needed to continue her studies, remarking on how they would continue to support each other until their eventual graduation from UCMB. On a broader level, the connections Raquel fostered through her Undocumented Student Program served to inform her of her options, including that she could transfer to the 4-year institution. Although the previous experiences participants shared focused largely on the information shared between Undocumented Student Program or Dream Resource Center staff and the participants, Raquel's

comment further suggested the wealth of knowledge that is built within and among the undocumented community itself.

Modes of Support in the Digital Space

Online resources played a valuable role in supporting many of the participants who had limited opportunities to connect with knowledgeable resources or who were more reluctant to share their status and discuss it with others. Examples of this form of support included social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook), video-sharing websites (e.g., TikTok, YouTube), and user-generated online forums (e.g., Reddit, College Confidential). Roughly two thirds of the participant pool described how these resources were crucial in enabling them to access information related to applying to college and understanding developments in policy.

The utility of these online resources was most profound among participants who were more reluctant to share their status with others. Forum-driven websites such as Reddit and College Confidential provided participants a space to safely access information without the need to disclose their status. On websites such as these, participants could pose their questions and receive support from a community of other anonymous users. The existence of such platforms allowed participants to seek support without ever needing to directly disclose their status to anyone and within the comfort of their own space. For instance, Melissa described using Reddit as a tool to ask others about the financial aid packages she received and would connect with other users to determine “how much aid the schools [were] going to give [her] in reality.” Ivan also used Reddit and College Confidential as tools to cross-reference any information he received about college, describing how he would “process and analyze the various questions that people were asking and any responses” that were posted to these forums. With a limited network of fellow undocumented peers, Melissa also used Reddit to learn about the undocumented

community at each of the campuses to which she applied. Though the answers she encountered “weren’t always that positive,” this information helped in providing her with a glimpse of what support was available at each campus, and if that school would be an appropriate fit for her status needs. Karina used Reddit for a similar purpose and described that because of Reddit’s anonymity, she found the site to have “the most honest responses in [her] opinion.” These examples all suggested online resources play an important role in allowing undocumented students to connect with one another and seek firsthand accounts while also preserving their safety and the safety of other undocumented members who participate in these online spaces.

Participants also described using online resources as a way to gather as much information as they possibly could. Participants commonly reported how when they were applying to college, they would follow the Undocumented Student Program account at all of the campuses to which they were applying and any other Undocumented Student Program accounts at universities across the state. These participants commonly shared that every Undocumented Student Program differed in terms of what or how often they posted. Broadening the range of accounts they followed enabled these participants to access the widest amount of possible information. As one example, Lizeth described how this practice was particularly helpful in identifying scholarships to which she was eligible to apply. She explained:

In high school, I applied for a lot of local scholarships but once here in college, I just followed all the USPs [Undocumented Student Program] across the UC. I followed every single one because a lot of them post similar scholarships—especially if it’s a UC-wide opportunity—but they also post different resources. I think I first started [this practice] when one of my friends who goes to a different UC reshared a resource. That UC’s USP was hosting a webinar on how to gain citizenship, so I went to the page and was interested in attending. I started scrolling through [the other UC’s USP Instagram account] and I realized how different everyone’s pages are. UCMB’s accounts talk more about events on campus whereas this other UC’s Instagram page posted more resources. I started to follow all of them and just kept up to date like that. It’s something I tell a lot of people now because if I didn’t do that, I would’ve missed out on a lot of things.

Prior to following all these accounts, Lizeth's scholarship search was limited to only the scholarships in her local area. By expanding her reach, Lizeth was able to learn about a wider range of scholarships; because these scholarships had been shared by the Undocumented Student Program account for reach campus, the scholarships shared by these resources were scholarships for which she was eligible to apply as an undocumented immigrant. Similarly, Lizeth found out about another UC's Undocumented Student Program which was offering a workshop on obtaining citizenship; subsequently, she was able to receive this information. Though Lizeth noted that there is often overlap in the information that is shared across these accounts, following all of the Undocumented Student Program social media accounts throughout the wider UC system enables her to receive as much information as possible.

The strategy of following multiple undocumented immigrant-focused social media accounts also extended beyond the scope of higher education and encompassed the likes of nonprofit organizations and undocumented professional groups. For instance, Chris described how he followed numerous accounts that have been helpful in uncovering a wider range of information, including updates to the DACA program. He explained:

When I started applying for DACA, there was all this uncertainty in the air. I sought out posts from valid and reliable Instagram users—like UndocuProfessionals, Immigrants Rising, and [name of a local immigrant rights nonprofit]. There are nonprofit organizations that are focused on helping the undocumented and immigrant community. They post different resources or different information.

Similar to Lizeth, Chris discussed following these accounts so that he could easily access information and receive updates on the status of DACA. Chris also commented on how he had seen these accounts as reputable sources of information and therefore could trust the information he received from these sources.

On the note of DACA, a little more than one third of participants cited video-driven sites (e.g., YouTube and TikTok) as their primary form of learning about DACA updates. Oscar described using TikTok, a video-sharing platform popular among younger audiences, to gain a baseline level of knowledge about policies that concerned him. Oscar described how he used TikTok to learn more about policies and how the accounts he followed would break down updates into more familiar, digestible terms that he could understand. He shared:

There are certain lawyers that I follow on TikTok that talk about immigration. There's this one lawyer who posts a lot about immigration. With stuff like that, that's my go-to place. I feel like law is very tricky. That's why I like looking at videos on TikTok and YouTube. It's definitely helpful because these lawyer creators dumb it down in ways that I can understand. They do the hard stuff. They do the readings of the law and provide a basic summary. They say, "What does this mean for you?" and then explain what it means. In terms of navigating anything legally, I would probably look to an attorney and I have a lawyer. I have a lawyer so if I really run into anything, I can call her but why would I if I can find that information on TikTok?

Oscar's example demonstrated how tools such as these help democratize information and make updates more readily accessible to a general audience. Consistent with the earlier findings that discussed participants' difficulty understanding often highly technical and jargon-laden updates, Oscar's example suggested these video-driven sites play an important role in making this information more accessible to a younger, less knowledgeable audience. Oscar also referenced his immigration attorney and cited her as a resource within this quote. Though not specified in the prior quote, using his attorney as a resource and seeking that attorney's counsel is likely to incur some monetary cost; as such, Oscar's comment suggested using online resources helps mitigate or lessen an exclusive reliance on costly legal counsel.

Participants also described how these online spaces provide a valuable means of accessing the stories and experiences of other undocumented immigrants. Both Joana and Raquel remarked on the dual purpose of online resources and how these resources provided not only

information, but a sense of community as well. For instance, Joana described how she watched YouTube videos not only as a way to stay informed, but also to know that she was not alone. She described:

I would go on YouTube and watch documentaries there. That's really how I stay informed. The documentaries were part of me trying to see the stories of others and to see that I'm not alone because there is a huge population of undocumented immigrants in the United States. I mean, it was very heartbreaking watching these videos, of course, but these videos detail stuff that needs to be seen and needs to be talked about.

Joana's quote suggested that not all the experiences she had come across online were positive, but these experiences still provided her with something that was valuable. In watching these documentary-style videos detailing the experiences of other undocumented immigrants, Joana was able to find validation that she was not alone. Similar to Joana, Raquel described how she followed an account on Instagram that fulfilled a similar purpose. By following accounts that catered and spoke to the undocumented experience, Raquel was able to think of new possibilities for the future and see stories that mirrored her own. She explained:

I'm very active on social media. I feel like, even a little too active [laughed] but I do consider that a source of information. I follow pages or organizations that are immigrant-based and stuff like that. They gave me ideas of what I could do myself. For example, there's a social media page called UndocuProfessionals and it has been very insightful. I love seeing their stuff because I always learn something new and then I also learn that it's not just me. There are millions of us out there who are dealing with the same thoughts, the same doubts, the same issues. I think social media is very powerful in that way - both to find resources and to use it as a resource as well.

Raquel used the Instagram account she referenced as a tool to learn more about what she can do with her bachelor's degree, particularly as an undocumented student without work authorization. In this quote, she also highlighted how the presence of such accounts also allows her to feel less alone. Raquel's quote reflects how these types of accounts serve not only in increasing undocumented students' access to resources, as resources in and of themselves because of the community they offer.

Almost all of the participants whose experiences were referenced in this subsection applied to the 4-year institution during the period of remote learning spurred by the COVID-19 global pandemic. The two exceptions to this detail, Lizeth and Karina, were 4th-year students who entered UCMB in Fall 2019. Because of the widespread shift to online modalities in 2020 and the increased utilization of online support methods since then (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2020; Singh et al., 2022), participants who applied to college after Spring 2020 were likely able to access a wider range of materials online than they would have otherwise. Although many institutions have largely resumed in-person operations, including UCMB, the uniquely hyper-digital landscape during this period of time and in the years following merits closer observation.

For instance, Raquel resumed her studies and enrolled in community college in Fall 2020 after a 12-year period away. Raquel explained when her three children began school online, she contemplated enrolling in adult school courses as a way to make use of this time. She later came across a sponsored advertisement on Instagram for her local community college's Promise Program and described how this advertisement was what led her to enroll. She recounted:

At that point, I was not working anymore because I was taking care of my kids because of the pandemic. I was just at home and I was like, I could do something. One day I saw an ad for the Promise Program at the community college. The ad said, "Immigration status did not apply" or "It's okay if you don't have an immigration status." I'm like, "Oh my God, I'm gonna check it out." I kid you not, it was like two in the morning and I'm over here reading all the requirements and I applied. I applied to community college. That's how everything happened. It was a random thing that appeared on my social media but I'm forever grateful because I was able to take advantage of that Promise Program at the community college.

Raquel's experience highlighted how the advertisement she had seen was what led her to resume her studies. By putting out advertisements online and shifting its recruitment efforts to the digital space, her community college was able to reach the demographic Raquel occupies.

Seeing that her immigration status did not apply and that she would be eligible to apply to the Promise Program, Raquel felt motivated to continue learning more. With the additional time she had while at home with her children, Raquel was eager to “do something” and said this opportunity presented itself at the right time.

Though Lizeth already entered the 4-year sector by the time COVID-19 entered the United States, the advent of remote learning also provided her with additional ways of accessing information related to her status. She described attending workshops for undocumented immigrants that were offered on Zoom and noted how Zoom workshops differed from those of the in-person workshops she attended. She explained:

Sometimes when I go into a room, I get kind of scared to go in not knowing if people are allies or undocumented, and not knowing how much I can share. When I see resources that are available on Zoom, it makes me more comfortable to go and attend those [workshops] and just listen in on what’s happening. I realized that there are a lot of resources that help clarify what’s happening in the media and the news.

Lizeth demonstrated how the prevalence of Zoom offerings provided her with a means to safely access information. By attending a Zoom workshop, Lizeth was able to listen in to the workshop’s informational content and still receive the benefits of this information without the need to disclose her status. Her final comment in this quote suggested that the availability of Zoom offerings exposed her to a wider range of information than if these workshops were offered solely in an in-person format. Both Raquel and Lizeth’s experiences suggest if institutions continue to offer resources in a variety of formats and across different spaces, critical information can be more readily accessed by undocumented students who would otherwise be challenging to target via exclusively “traditional” or in-person means.

Although online resources played a critical role in many of the participants’ journeys to college, these forms of accessing information were not always perfect tools. Among the

participants who used online resources to some degree, roughly one fifth of participants cautioned that online resources should be seen as complementary to in-person resources, not as direct replacements. For instance, both Lucia and Melissa described how they would have been fearful if they relied exclusively on online means of support. Lucia described how she defaulted back to her prior counselor's judgment anytime she came across something she did not understand and wanted additional clarification or support. She explained:

Online is really hard because it'll say something, but it could mean so many things. I've always been the kind of person to need that reassurance and that clarification because if it's saying something online, I don't know whether it means something else. Having someone who's seen the process multiple times, who has gone through the process themselves, made it so much easier to ask specific questions.

Lucia's quote highlighted that she trusted her counselor's judgment—and, and because they had been through the process of supporting students before, Lucia felt like they would be able to offer her detailed support. Lucia also had a counselor-like figure, where that person was affiliated with a local college access program and that person was stationed at her high school. Because that counselor-like figure was formerly undocumented, Lucia felt reassured to know that someone who was in a similar status had been through the same process she was about to embark on, and thus could trust her counsel.

Melissa similarly described her reluctance to rely exclusively on online resources, especially when it came time to fill out and submit her Dream Act application. She described her reservations, noting:

On TikTok, there's a search bar and I would search the Dream Act to see if anybody had said anything specific to what I was searching for. I honestly don't think I ever was able to get information online unless I could find someone else's YouTube video or TikTok video that I somewhat trusted. I literally would not trust myself to turn in [financial aid] forms unless I got it reviewed by someone because I was terrified of doing something wrong. I feel like sometimes I was able to find general information online, but I always had to make sure I got my forms triple—no, quadruple—checked before turning it in.

Melissa shared how she too used resources like TikTok and YouTube, but only in instances where she felt that the creator was reputable and someone she could trust. Melissa shared how she was scared of the repercussions she would face if she did not complete her financial aid forms accurately. Melissa's experience connected back to some of the earlier themes surrounding participants' concerns about whether they completed their Dream Act applications in a manner that truthfully and accurately depicted their family's financial state. Melissa described how she had to have her application checked several times over by another person to assuage her concerns that she had filled out her financial aid application correctly.

Ximena was the only participant to have no form of meaningful in-person support during her journey to college and had to rely exclusively on online resources. Although Ximena was able to gain admission to UCMB, she described how only being able to access support online frequently left her overwhelmed. Ximena described the significance of her markedly limited support system and what she perceived to be the limitations of online resources, stating:

[Getting into college] was just a bunch of random Google Searches. It was just a lot of unnecessary work. I mean, I was able to find a few YouTube videos that kind of walked me through it but I was just super overwhelmed with everything. It was difficult too because my laptop was old and would crash every so often. We were also living in a one-room apartment with the three of us—my mom, my sister, and I. I think about the fact that I didn't really have the space to just be able to look at things, talk things through, or talk about my application with other people. I had to figure out everything myself. It was a very, very difficult process. I'm starting to feel all of this again now that I'm considering grad school and I'm starting to figure it all out on my own again.

Ximena's comment simultaneously demonstrated a few points. Although she was able to receive some information online and reached her desired outcome in that she was accepted to UCMB, Ximena described how an exclusive reliance on online resources created a great deal of "overwhelm." With no one with whom to discuss her application and process the information she found online, Ximena was left to navigate the entirety of her college application

process alone. She also demonstrated in the prior quote a few points related to the accessibility of online resources. Although the digital landscape does promote accessibility in many ways, these resources can only be easily accessed by those who have the means of accessing them. Without consistent and reliable access to technology, Ximena shared how her laptop issues compounded her already existing stress. Moreover, Ximena's mention of her living space suggested that whatever technology the family had was to be shared among the three of them, and she had been unable to discuss her college application with her family.

The experiences shared by all the participants in this subsection pointed to the notion that online resources can be valuable tools for accessing critical policy information and more generally, seeking support that is specific to the undocumented experience. The participants who used online resources were able to benefit from additional streams of information that would otherwise be limited or difficult to come across without having to disclose their status. Along these lines, online resources also provided participants with the means to connect with or at least hear from those with similar backgrounds as their own. As Lucia's, Melissa's, and Ximena's experiences suggest, these resources are not meant to replace other forms of support in their entirety. These three participants highlighted the shortcomings of online resources and how the presence of an in-person mentor or other form of physical support would aid in addressing some of these shortcomings.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed how the Latinx undocumented student participants conceptualized their identities and, based upon this understanding, contextualized participants' thoughts on sharing their status with others. In this section, I examined participants' earliest exposure to college and when these participants first realized they could go to college. With their

college aspirations established, I reviewed the reasons behind why participants decided to pursue a college degree and how this goal was/has been shaped with participants' ongoing understanding of their identities. Next, I explored each of the three main policies included in the study's interview protocol—the Dream Act, AB 540, and DACA—and how these policies shaped the participants' goals of pursuing a degree from a 4-year university. In this first section, I demonstrated how many of the existing resources required participants to disclose their status to receive such support. In doing so, this section revealed instances where participants had been met with constrained and/or inaccurate information and instances when access to critical information had been delayed, thereby limiting participants' ability to maximize existing resources. Within this examination, I also highlighted other forms of financial support, including the CCPG, scholarships, and loans. The findings related to these additional forms of aid and income built greater context into participants' challenges both in accessing and affording the 4-year university and in doing so, demonstrated how existing policies have fallen short in adequately addressing undocumented students' needs. I also explored developments surrounding the Opportunity for All campaign and participants' thoughts on how this emerging policy would alleviate the financial stressors faced by undocumented students without work authorization. To round out this second section on policy, I provide insight into the ramifications of staying informed and participants' struggles balancing the need to educate themselves on relevant policies while also preserving their well-being. In the third and final section of this chapter, I discussed some of the forms of support that participants used and other resource-seeking strategies. I highlighted the modes of support that were most often compatible with participants' unique relationships to status disclosure. Along these lines, I provided insight into how these modes of support enabled participants to both access critical policy information and/or build a

sense of connection or camaraderie with others who shared similar backgrounds who lent valuable insight and support.

In Chapter 7, I discuss how these findings addressed the study's research questions and offer commentary on how the findings contributed to existing literature and connected to the theoretical framework. Using the study's main findings, I conclude with implications and suggestions for practice, research, and policy.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, I revisit the purpose of this study and discuss how the findings addressed each of the research questions. Next, I discuss how the study contributes to the body of literature and how the findings connected to the study's critical race theory (CRT) and Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit)-based theoretical framework. Following this section, I provide implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and research. Finally, I conclude this dissertation with reflections on developing and executing a policy-oriented study.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this dissertation was to retroactively explore how Latinx undocumented students currently enrolled at a University of California (UC) campus navigated policies concerning accessibility and affordability, and how these policies shaped their college goals and the forms of support they used in the process of applying. As a reminder, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Latinx undocumented students retroactively make meaning of the personal and academic challenges faced during their period of applying to college in pursuit of their bachelor's degree?
 - a. How do students conceptualize their identity as Latinx undocumented students?
2. How do Latinx undocumented students conceptualize immigration and education policy, and its impact on their goal of pursuing a college education?
3. How does immigration and education policy shape and inform the decisions made by these students during their college application process?
 - a. How does policy influence the strategies, networks, and forms of support these students utilize as they work toward their goal of pursuing a bachelor's degree?

In this first section of the chapter, I revisit each of the three main research questions. I also address the subquestions that correspond with Research Questions 1 and 3. In what follows, I revisit the purpose of each research question as defined in Chapter 1 and summarize how the findings addressed that question.

Research Question 1: Personal and Academic Challenges

The first research question aimed to understand the unique needs of the Latinx undocumented student population as they applied to the 4-year university. In a broader sense, this question sought to reaffirm and build upon the existing body of literature on undocumented students' challenges in accessing higher education. The corresponding subquestion aspired to understand how participants made sense of their identities as Latinx undocumented students and how this understanding of their identities intersected with and shaped the personal and academic challenges defined earlier.

Findings from this study revealed many participants came to understand their status in terms of its limitations and how their life experiences would differ from their U.S.-born peers. Though participants varied in terms of when they first learned of the “undocumented” terminology, many participants described how this identity began to take on a new meaning as they watched their similarly aged peers get their first jobs, obtain their driver's licenses, and go on trips abroad with their families. Given most participants were in middle school or early high school at the time of the 2016 presidential election, approximately half of the participants described how the early years of the Trump administration shaped their understanding of what it meant to be an undocumented immigrant in the United States and contributed to a heightened sense of fear surrounding their and their family's safety. Through this climate, participants

described the necessity of being cautious of their surroundings and avoiding situations that would put them or their families in danger.

This study also explored differences in terms of how participants with and without Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status conceptualized their undocumented identity. In summary, participants with and without DACA reflected on the privileges this status affords. More specifically, participants commonly cited how DACA recipients can more easily access opportunities than those without DACA and highlighted protection from deportation as another key advantage. Simultaneously, participants often acknowledged the DACA program's uncertain future. Participants' reckoning with this uncertainty highlighted that although these two groups differ from one another in terms of the protections and opportunities the status confers, these two groups are still inextricably linked to one another. As DACA was still unable to accept new applications as of Fall 2023, the college-going population will continue to see a rise in undocumented students without DACA. The current state of the DACA program provides strong evidence as to why educators and institutions at large need to (re)assess if and how they are prepared to meet the needs of undocumented students without DACA.

When turning to some of the academic challenges participants encountered in pursuit of a bachelor's degree, over half of participants shared they did not know going to college as an undocumented immigrant was a possibility. Explaining where they got this impression from, participants commonly cited the habitual and continued exclusion of undocumented immigrants from society. Witnessing how undocumented immigrants are barred from certain privileges and protections, participants thought of college as another opportunity they could not pursue. This assumption that undocumented immigrants cannot go to college further demonstrated

participants' emerging sense of identity and how this development was fueled by the effects of systemic exclusion.

Reflecting on the limitations imposed by their status, each participant described how they had struggled to define the value of a bachelor's degree and how their motivation to attend college had taken on different meanings over the years. Some participants shared they pursued college to honor their families' sacrifices coming to the United States, whereas other participants shared their desires to be positive role models for their loved ones (e.g., siblings, cousins, children). Other participants pursued college under the premise that a college degree would help them access opportunities they likely would not have been able to access due to their status. Along these lines, several participants spoke about how a college degree is a fixed qualification. In other words, if immigration policy were to change, these participants would still be able to benefit from the rights and privileges a degree affords. These findings demonstrated how participants' sense of identity and what it means to them is an iterative process. As participants brace themselves for an uncertain future, they must renegotiate their goals in a manner that aligns with the harsh realities of their status.

Many of the participants' academic challenges are implicated in the following subsections where I discuss how the findings addressed Research Questions 2 and 3; however, one central theme that emerged was the concept of status disclosure. Status disclosure—a concept referring to whether an undocumented immigrant chooses to share their status and the reason(s) behind this decision—frequently shaped participants' interpersonal relationships. Similarly, status disclosure also impacted participants' access to resources and ability to navigate support, whether that support came through participants' high schools, community colleges, college access programs, or other sources. Because many participants came to understand their

immigration status through a lens of fear and exclusion, these same participants struggled to determine whether it would be safe to share their status with others.

In Chapter 6, I detailed a few examples where participants observed anti-immigrant sentiments and behaviors from their peers and teachers. These experiences often further instilled in participants the idea that they would be unsafe if they were to confide in others about their status. Along these lines, a notable subset of participants also described the fear of being perceived differently because of their status and the desire to not have their accomplishments reduced to simply their immigration status. Even among those participants who were open with their status early on in their academic journey, they acknowledged the risks associated with sharing their status. These students highlighted the necessity behind sharing, explaining they likely would not have received the support had they not shared their status. These findings related to status disclosure build upon the existing body of literature and provide greater insight into how participants' understanding of their identity intersects with the topic of status disclosure. In the next subsection, I discuss Assembly Bill (AB) 540, California Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (Dream) Act, and DACA, along with participants' experiences navigating these specific policies. In this next subsection on policy and the final subsection encompassing participants' forms of support, I continue to highlight status disclosure, especially in relation to these three specific policies.

Research Question 2: Conceptualizing Immigration and Education Policy

The second research question had the most direct policy focus of the three research questions. This research question concerned how participants understood policies such as AB 540, California Dream Act, and DACA, and explored the impact of these policies on participants' college goals. In essence, this research question sought to understand the effects of

these policies on participants' college processes and the special considerations directly tied to their immigration status.

Beginning with the Dream Act, these findings revealed that many participants first learned about the Dream Act after learning they would not be able to apply for financial aid using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Several participants described how resources for the Dream Act application were strongly limited, especially when compared to the ample volume of resources dedicated to the FAFSA. Several participants also encountered educators whose knowledge of the Dream Act was significantly constrained, pointing again to how educators' limited knowledge of the Dream Act stood in stark contrast to educators' expansive knowledge of the FAFSA. More specifically, nearly two thirds of the participants described instances where educators were unfamiliar with the Dream Act altogether. Moreover, because of the limited amount of information dedicated to the Dream Act, participants described how the process of seeking support with the Dream Act required them to disclose their immigration status to others. Several participants had to inquire with multiple people until they were finally able to connect with someone who was knowledgeable about the Dream Act and could receive assistance. The combination of limited, visible resources and few educators who were trained to advise on the Dream Act often placed participants in the position of having to disclose their status multiple times.

The findings also revealed some of the participants' concerns about the Dream Act application. Many participants shared they were concerned about whether to include intimate details of their lives on the Dream Act application form and if certain details would be safe to include. Without a clear understanding of how these financial aid applications would be used or by whom they would be reviewed, these participants were concerned that sharing information

could place them and their families at risk of deportation. The findings also demonstrated the lack of clarity surrounding how to report family income, particularly among those who lacked work authorization. Roughly three fourths of the participants shared confusion and frustration over how to report the income earned from the “under the table” jobs they and/or their family members held. Along these lines, many participants voiced fear of reporting their families’ financial situations inaccurately, and the academic and/or legal consequences if found to be misreporting information. Participants also voiced concern that requesting aid would put them in a disadvantageous position should they try to obtain citizenship or apply for DACA later on. Though requesting and receiving financial aid does not have any bearing on either process, this concern demonstrates how educating undocumented students on matters pertaining to aid must actively consider and balance these students’ status in more ways than one.

Concerning AB 540, all participants were in unanimous agreement about how this specific policy allowed them to better afford public universities in California and how they likely would not have been able to afford schools that charged them nonresident tuition. Despite AB 540’s effect on widening participants’ college options and its ability to make 4-year institutions more accessible among this demographic, less than one sixth of the participants were aware of AB 540 before the start of the senior years of high school. Except for three participants, all other participants enrolled in this study learned about AB 540 well after completing their Dream Act paperwork. Among those participants who entered University of California Monarch Butterfly (UCMB) at the freshmen level, these participants most commonly learned about AB 540 after they received UCMB’s financial aid notification. Upon receiving their notification, these participants learned they were charged nonresident tuition, prompting them to inquire with UCMB’s Undocumented Student Program, financial aid office, and other relevant entities on

campus. Participants learned about AB 540 during this period of crisis where they scrambled from one office to the next to learn more about the nonresident charge. Among the participants who entered UCMB at the transfer level, these participants commonly learned about AB 540 after they already enrolled in community college. Some transfer participants did not learn about AB 540 until after they received the bill for the coming academic semester, requiring them to reach out to have their accounts adjusted. Interestingly, many of the transfer participants became acquainted with the California College Promise Grant (CCPG) and shared that in the process of learning more about this form of tuition assistance at the community college level, they were exposed to AB 540. These findings demonstrate that although AB 540 and the California Dream Act have helped to expand access to the 4-year sector in meaningful ways, the effectiveness of these policies rests on undocumented students being able to access these supports.

This study also demonstrated the reach of the DACA program within the educational space and how this specific policy impacted recipients' abilities to address whatever financial need remained after the aid received through the Dream Act. Those participants with DACA reported how, with work authorization, they were able to apply the money earned through their work toward their remaining educational expenses and their living expenses. Conversely, participants without DACA reflected on the extreme financial stress fueled by not being able to legally work and provide for themselves. Of those participants without DACA who are unable to legally work, these participants often found themselves in the position of taking low-wage "under the table" jobs to make ends meet.

Without a way of earning consistent and reliable income, several participants without DACA reported having to rely heavily on scholarships to narrow the gap. All participants who spoke about scholarships shared how the majority of scholarships they had come across were

limited to those with U.S. citizenship or required applicants to supply proof of work authorization. Many participants without DACA shared how they felt extreme pressure to maximize every source of available funding by applying to as many scholarships as possible, though often at the detriment of their mental health and well-being. These findings related to scholarships demonstrated some of the practical limitations of AB 540, the Dream Act, and DACA. In instances where undocumented students do not receive timely information related to AB 540 or the Dream Act, these students must determine other ways to finance their college education. This pressure was particularly pronounced among those participants without DACA.

To a lesser degree, I also explored loans and how these resources fit within the larger framework of aid and affordability. Participants' sentiments surrounding loans revealed a lack of clarity and confusion as to whether undocumented students at UCMB were eligible to receive loans. Still, many participants who considered loans to be an option available to them described their reluctance to take out loans in the first place and noted they viewed loans as a worst-case-scenario option.

The study also touched upon the Opportunity for All campaign and how this emerging policy at the UC level could address some of the non-DACA participants' challenges in being able to afford the 4-year institution. By providing undocumented students without DACA the means to seek on-campus employment at any one of the UC campuses, undocumented students without DACA would be able to earn a consistent form of income and could thus alleviate pressure to maximize all other forms of aid. Participants with and without DACA highlighted the urgency behind such a policy initiative and how Opportunity for All would expand access to the UC.

In discussing the likes of current and emerging policies, participants described struggling to balance staying informed with preserving their mental health. Despite remaining privy to any time a policy change is announced or enters the news cycle, participants discussed the need to engage with these topics with caution to not jeopardize their well-being. Even in instances where participants had taken steps to inform and educate themselves on policy updates, several participants described the challenge of navigating the highly technical jargon often used in these updates and determining how updates would apply to them and/or their families. These findings demonstrated how policy manifests every day. If the DACA program was to be fully overturned, for example, these participants' lives would be completely uprooted. The real, tangible implications of policies and how these implications would directly impact participants shape the ways they are or are not able to engage with updates.

The findings also explored participants' thoughts surrounding whether policy would change in the future. Several participants shared that although they hope immigration and education policies will change in a manner that improves the conditions of undocumented immigrants, they have often found themselves having to adjust their expectations. For instance, many participants shared their frustration with DACA being in and out of the courts in recent years and how no meaningful progress has been made to preserve the program or come up with a long-term solution. Using DACA as almost a case study from which to draw comparisons, some participants shared their doubts as to whether Opportunity for All would be able to see a full-scale implementation as originally envisioned, or if this campaign would see the same short-lived fate as the DACA program. As one last example, participants described how they had seen several politicians who promised to address immigration reform, and yet, all has remained the same, with no sweeping legislation in place to protect undocumented immigrants and provide a

pathway to citizenship. These findings provided further insight and context into the mental health ramifications described earlier. Moreover, these details also connected back to how participants conceptualized their immigration status and how this identity has been commonly framed through the lens of exclusion. In cataloging the ways in which their community has been failed before, these Latinx undocumented student participants felt dubious about what change they could expect to see in the future.

Research Question 3: Strategies, Networks, and Forms of Support

The third and final research question encapsulated students' efforts to address their unique needs and concerns, with particular consideration paid to the strategies and resources these students used to learn more about policies concerning their status. The third research question and its corresponding subquestion sought to understand how policy and the surrounding political climate shaped the participants' college-going decisions, such as (a) those whom students included within their support network, (b) to whom they disclosed their status, and (c) how they navigated or accessed various resources.

Although nearly all participants expressed a reluctance to share their immigration status with others during the period of applying to college, many participants reflected on the few individuals with whom they shared this information and why. One of the most central elements participants considered when deciding whether to share their status concerned the notion of trust, and whether they felt the person with whom they would be sharing this information would be safe. For instance, participants weighed whether others demonstrated any signs of unsafe or discriminatory behavior that could potentially signal hostility toward undocumented immigrants. Participants also often considered the length of time they knew the person and assessed the quality of the relationship itself when determining whether to share. Instances of positive status

disclosure, wherein the person the person they shared their status with was met with a warm or supportive reaction, often led to additional acts of status disclosure. In other words, positive reactions to students' status disclosure often created a domino effect that encouraged them to continue broadening their networks of support. Along these lines, referrals comprised one of the most common ways that participants were able to extend their networks and foster a sense of trust in others beyond their initial, immediate circles.

The findings also highlighted the significance participants placed in finding mentors and educators who shared similar backgrounds as them and how either a shared ethnic identity or immigrant background helped facilitate trust. Participants often felt more empowered to share their status and seek the support of others who likely encountered similar obstacles, knowing these figures would probably share commonalities in terms of familial or cultural values, lived experiences, and so on. Having educators and mentors with similar backgrounds led many participants to feel more comfortable not only in disclosing their status, but also details that were adjacent to their status (e.g., their upbringing, family dynamic). Finally, many participants spoke about the significance of representation and how seeing others like them who went on to achieve the same goals made them feel as if they could do it, too. In reflecting on earlier findings that concerned status disclosure, these findings demonstrated some of the ways in which participants were able to access information and navigate some of the fears and anxieties surrounding their status and the larger political climate. By seeking out figures they already trusted or those who shared similar backgrounds, these participants were able to establish support systems that enabled them to pursue their goals of obtaining a college degree.

Many participants also spoke about how community colleges were a central space for finding support that actively considered their status needs. All transfer participants spoke about

how the community college allowed them to save money on their educational expenses and how they used this period to save money for when they attended the 4-year institution. Each of the transfer participants also spoke about the prevalence of undocumented student-specific support, often contrasting this support with the limited support they found at their high schools. The Undocumented Student Programs and Dream Resource Centers at each of these transfer participants' community colleges served as valuable resources when it came time to apply for the Dream Act and AB 540. Because Undocumented Student Programs/Dream Resource Centers focuses on the undocumented experience, these resources are equipped with staff who are knowledgeable about policies that concern undocumented immigrants and thus can supply this information at the appropriate point in students' transfer journeys. Related to status disclosure, the very existence of dedicated undocumented student resources with trained staff provided participants with a safe space to seek support, wherein they knew that if they asked questions related to their status, they would be able to receive accurate information. In addition to providing informational support, the Undocumented Student Programs and Dream Resource Centers at the community colleges provided valuable spaces to unpack and process developments in policy, including those related to the DACA program. The sense of community built in these spaces provided participants with an outlet to share and process events together and discuss strategies on how to keep going in the face of obstacles.

In instances where in-person support was limited and among participants who were more reluctant to share their status, participants used resources in the digital space. Online resources—most commonly encompassing the likes of Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, and College Confidential—allowed participants to access resources in a manner that did not require them to disclose their status. Participants often used online forums such as Reddit and College

Confidential to learn about the experiences of other undocumented students. Participants also followed the social media accounts of Undocumented Student Programs at various universities across the UC system and immigrants-focused accounts beyond the scope of education to gain access to the widest amount of information possible. This strategy helped enable participants to learn about updates in the DACA program and uncover scholarship opportunities to which they were eligible to apply. These online modes of support also established community and allowed participants to learn about the experiences of other undocumented immigrants. Though these resources often provide access to resources that otherwise would have been challenging to come across without the need for status disclosure, these resources are not meant to fully replace other forms of in-person support in their entirety. For instance, participants highlighted how in-person support was often helpful in making sure information obtained online aligned with their individual circumstances. Similarly, the utility of online resources also rests on a student's ability to access technology that would allow them to use these forms of support.

Contributions to Literature

One of this dissertation's most significant contributions to the literature is that the study offered a direct examination of how key policies impacted these students' college trajectories. Although the effects of these policies had been implicated in other research that evoked policy as a way to build background and context—as highlighted in Chapter 2—this study brought three specific policies to the forefront and demonstrated how these policies have controlled access to higher education for this population of students. This study offered an investigation into how AB 540, the California Dream Act, and DACA shaped Latinx undocumented students' goals of pursuing a bachelor's degree and provided insight into how their conceptualization of policy intersected with that of how they make sense of their identities.

This study also explored status disclosure and provided greater context behind Latinx undocumented students' relationship with sharing their status. The previous body of literature affirmed that status disclosure is central to understanding how to serve this population (Gonzales, 2010; Kam et al., 2018; Muñoz, 2016; Murillo, 2017a; Nienhusser, 2013; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Roth, 2017; Suárez-Orozco & López Hernández, 2020; Yasuike, 2019). This study examined the undocumented identity more closely and offered an exploration into how participants came to learn about their status and the developing nature of what this status meant. As such, this study contributed to existing literature by providing more nuanced insight into the nature of status disclosure and how this topic interacts with and is shaped by policy and the larger political landscape. Furthermore, I explored some of the qualities and characteristics shared by those figures with which participants put their trust, thereby building upon literature focused on the importance of trust (see Kam et al., 2018; Muñoz, 2016; Roth, 2017).

This study also affirmed the importance of differentiating between informational versus emotional supports, as established by Kantamneni, Shada, et al. (2016) and Kam et al. (2018). This study approached this distinction in a slightly different way by focusing on undocumented students' interactions with policy. The findings revealed that supporting Latinx undocumented students as they navigate policy typically has two sides. Building from Kantamneni, Shada, et al. (2016) and Kam et al. (2018)'s definitions of informational and emotional support, one part of supporting undocumented students is helping them make sense of the actual language or mechanics behind individual policies, and contextualizing how these policies apply to them and their unique circumstances. Another part of supporting this population of students is providing space for these students to process and make sense of their identities and the policies that

concern them. In sum, this dissertation further established why this differentiation in support is necessary from a specific policy lens.

Along the lines of support, this study also demonstrated the significance of students' social networks, both in in-person and digital spaces. This study provided further insight into the reach of status disclosure by capturing the variety of strategies participants used to address their academic, financial, and status needs. Almost all participants expressed reservations over sharing their status at the time of applying to the 4-year institution; thus, this study is significant in that it captured some of the ways in which participants were able to access information about policy in a manner that aligned with their relationship with status disclosure. Similarly, the examination of how participants accessed online resources provided insight into how they accessed resources that otherwise would have been challenging to access without disclosing their status. In the continuing aftermath of the COVID-19 global pandemic and a progressively digital landscape, this study provides important early exploration into how this demographic of students uses online tools to address their needs.

Connecting the Findings to Theory

This study employed a CRT and LatCrit-based theoretical framework to explore how Latinx undocumented students' experiences navigating policies concerning accessibility and affordability are signifiers of a much larger system that is meant to marginalize and oppress communities of color. In this section, I discuss how the findings connected back to the theoretical frameworks used. I first discuss CRT and its use in enabling the study to examine the linkages between race, policy, and education. In this subsection on CRT, I discuss Harris's (1993) *whiteness as property* and how this tenet offered a lens to understand these findings. In the following subsection, I discuss LatCrit and how Pérez Huber et al.'s (2008) *racist nativism*

provided further insight into how Latinx undocumented immigrants experience exclusion within the educational space.

Connections to CRT

In what follows, I discuss each CRT tenet and highlight key findings that best demonstrate the utility of these tenets in guiding the study. In this subsection, I do not provide an exhaustive review of every finding that connects to each of these tenets; rather, the goal of this subsection is to illustrate a few key themes and experiences demonstrating the utility of these individual tenets and how I used the larger CRT framework to contextualize the findings.

Differential racialization and the *social construction thesis* were two tenets that emerged in similar ways. The former tenet refers to the ways that “dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 8). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) illustrated this term in terms of labor market needs; in Chapter 3, I compared this example to how Mexican farmworkers were contracted by the United States to grow and harvest crops on U.S. soil (Kanstroom, 2010; Ngai, 2004). The *social construction thesis* asserts that race and racism are concepts that are constructed and shaped by society; as such, these concepts do not have any fixed biological or genetic basis (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). These two tenets emerged in the findings where participants conceptualized their identities as Latinx undocumented immigrants. For instance, some participants provided the example of how present-day California was once part of Mexico. In one pointed quote, Ana interrogated the label “aliens” and questioned whether the U.S. government has the right to label people as such when they have played a direct hand in shaping this notion of (il)legality through colonization.

These two tenets can also be inferred in the framing of undocumented versus DACAmented. In Chapter 6, I discuss how half of the participants with DACA used the label

“DACAmended” to recognize the privileges afforded to this status and as a way to distinguish themselves from their undocumented peers without DACA. Though participants felt this distinction was important in terms of acknowledging privilege, Raquel described how many fellowships and research programs limit their application eligibility to students with DACA. In practice, the distinction between undocumented students with and without DACA creates stratification within this already marginalized community and reinforces the idea that those without DACA are “less than” their peers with DACA. The phrasing of “less than” was a sentiment that Raquel directly used. The *social construction thesis* provided a lens through which to examine the manufactured differences between these two groups. Though the undocumented and DACAmended identity groups are inextricably linked to one another, especially as DACA faces continued litigation, institutional personnel can use policy as a way to justify the further subjugation of those who do not meet the eligibility requirements of the program. *Differential racialization* offers a basis to interrogate how the DACA policy itself is a way of differentiating these two groups, wherein more favorable treatment is extended to those who entered the United States at a young age.

The tenets of *racism as ordinary* and the *permanence of racism* were most commonly implicated in instances where participants described their thoughts surrounding the challenges of staying up to date with policy and engaging with policy’s future. *Racism as ordinary* refers to how racism is a common experience shared by most people of color residing in the United States; as such, eradicating or addressing racism is an inherently difficult task (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The *permanence of racism* tenet is closely related to that of racism as ordinary and posits that racism has endured because of its conscious and unconscious origins (Bell, 1992; see also Capper, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). By the time these participants

reached college, nearly all participants were already familiar with the ways in which undocumented immigrants are excluded from society. *Racism as ordinary* was evident in how participants commonly constructed their undocumented identity as one of loss and exclusion. The common and repeated denial of opportunities and access to societal fixtures shaped many of the participants' earliest understandings of what it meant to be undocumented. In a similar regard, the *permanence of racism* most commonly emerged in the findings that concerned the future of programs such as DACA. Many participants spoke at length about DACA being in and out of the courts in recent years, and its continued state of limbo. Participants also spoke about the frustrating nature of hearing politicians on their campaign trail promise to enact immigration reform, but then witnessing little action taken to address the topic. The *permanence of racism* tenet offers an explanation as to why little reform has occurred and the challenge in enacting policy reform in the future. Although many of the participants voiced their optimism that change will occur, several participants described the necessity of having a backup plan in the event policy changes for the worse, or if circumstances require their removal from the United States. In this sense, the permanence of racism offers a lens to understand participants' guarded optimism for the future. When policymakers fail to address why the undocumented category was created and for what purposes, the manufactured differences between those with and without U.S. citizenship is preserved.

Interest convergence is another tenet that emerged as participants described the Opportunity for All campaign and questioned the intent of the UC Board of Regents in supporting this policy proposal. This tenet holds that social change occurs in instances where white supremacy can be preserved and communities of color can be kept at the margins (Bell, 1980, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998). After the UC Board of Regents

announced its support of Opportunity for All in May 2023, several participants interviewed after this date questioned whether the UC voted in support of the policy for its own benefit. In one example, Selena questioned whether the UC Board of Regents announced their support of Opportunity for All so the UC system can benefit from and exploit the labor of undocumented immigrants who otherwise would not be able to legally obtain work. *Interest convergence* offers a means to explain why the UC might want to create employment opportunities for a racialized student demographic and offers insight into Selena's concerns regarding the possible overworking and exploitation of these students.

Intersectionality was one tenet that participants often directly referenced to conceptualize how their undocumented identity is connected to other facets of their being. *Intersectionality* is a term used to describe the interconnectedness of social categories and how a person's experiences with privilege and oppression are shaped by their combined identities (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). In addition to being Latinx and undocumented, every participant enrolled in this study identified as low-income and first-generation college students. The identities of low-income and first-generation college students were discussed in many of the participant introductions included in Chapter 5; however, the widespread prevalence of these two identifiers demonstrates how the undocumented experience is grounded in and shaped by the other facets comprising these students' identities. Because all participants were first-generation college students, participants often had to be proactive as they sought out support related to their college application process. Understanding undocumented students' first-generation college student identities complicates literature on status disclosure, wherein participants are often forced to disclose their status to receive relevant and targeted support that is specific to their needs. Participants' identities as low-income were often evident in how participants described barriers to being able to afford their

education and the pressure to maximize available sources of funding. Moreover, the interconnectedness of immigration status and class was highly apparent among those participants who did not have DACA. These students' experiences navigating education were shaped by the lack of work authorization and a means to legally obtain work. In other words, intersectionality offers a way to understand the interconnectedness of these identities and provides context into the challenges these students faced in affording and accessing higher education.

The tenet concerning the unique voices of people of color is best demonstrated in how two thirds of participants spoke about the significance of finding mentors and educators who shared a similar background. This tenet affirmed the unique, firsthand experiences of people of color and underscores the necessity of learning from the perspectives of those who do not benefit from whiteness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Matsuda, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Tate, 1997). The findings from this study revealed how connecting with mentors and educators who shared their undocumented identity and/or cultural identity facilitated participants' willingness to share their immigration status. Finding figures of shared background often reassured participants that their college goals were within the scope of what is possible as a Latinx undocumented student. Similarly, seeing an educator of a similar background often signaled to participants that they would be safe in sharing their identities, knowing these experiences would be met with understanding and compassion. This tenet is further exemplified in the connections participants formed with other undocumented peers, as these relationships commonly facilitated access to information and provided a means to process their educational journey together.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I provided a detailed discussion on Harris's (1993) *whiteness as property* and each of the four primary ways that whiteness operates similarly to property. The

property functions encompass: (a) *rights of dispositions*; (b) *rights to use and enjoyment*; (c) *reputation and status property*; and (d) *absolute right to exclude*. In this chapter describing the study's theoretical framework, I asserted that *whiteness as property* provides a rationale for why researchers must consider topics concerning immigration in terms of who creates and controls access to societal functions, including higher education. At face value, policies such as AB 540 and the California Dream Act aim to expand undocumented students' access to the 4-year sector; however, in practice, the findings revealed participants' challenges in accessing financial aid resources that considered their status needs. Similarly, although DACA aims to provide its recipients with protection from deportation and a means to access privileges (e.g., work authorization), this policy has been subject to continued judicial scrutiny, thereby limiting its reach, as evidenced in this study. Such disparity between what these policies claim to address at face and how they function in practice demonstrate the limitations of these policies, wherein the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed is maintained.

As referenced in the theoretical framework chapter, *whiteness as property* also offers a framework to understand less tangible forms of property conferred to those with citizenship. To illustrate this point, I used feelings of safety, security, and stability as examples. The findings concerning status disclosure reemphasized this point, specifically in how many participants described the need to obscure their identity as a way of preserving their or their families' safety. The findings concerning work authorization, specifically the lack thereof, also illustrated this notion of security and stability. Those participants who were DACA recipients and had work authorization were afforded a means to earn a consistent, reliable income, and this experience contrasted directly with those of their undocumented peers without DACA. In the face of continued litigation, however, the privileges ascribed to the DACA status can easily be taken

away by those in power or by those who possess whiteness. DACA's perpetual state of limbo closely mirrors the *absolute right to exclude*.

Connections to LatCrit

By design, LatCrit aims to examine the experiences of the Latino/a community and how this population uniquely experiences racism (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). With this purpose in mind, I layered LatCrit into the study's theoretical framework to better situate and understand participants' identities as both Latinx and undocumented immigrants residing in the United States. In particular, Pérez Huber et al.'s (2008) *racist nativism* offered this study a means to understand the relationship between native and non-native peoples.

The concept of *racist nativism* enabled the study to better understand how natives, or those who commonly hold whiteness, oppress, and exert control over non-natives, who are commonly perceived to be people of color (Pérez Huber et al., 2008). As such, this concept offers a targeted lens to discern how and why this population of students has continued to be excluded from spaces of higher education. In Chapter 3, I referenced Pérez Huber (2010) and how this study employed *racist nativism* to understand how racist nativist sentiments shared by Chicana undocumented students' teachers and peers shaped their educational journeys. The use of *racist nativism* in Pérez Huber (2010) mirrors some of the ways that racist nativist themes emerged in this study, specifically wherein participants described their reservations about sharing their status. As an example, some participants shared instances where they observed other undocumented immigrants being treated differently because of their status. These peers were the target of jokes and further instilled in participants the notion they were different from their peers with U.S. citizenship. These racist nativist sentiments also appeared in interactions with faculty; for instance, Melissa described an instance where one of her teachers shared her belief that

“immigrants were stripping away jobs” and “stealing from the government.” In another example, Joana described how a high school teacher told her that she likely could not go to college as an undocumented immigrant and would be taking the seat of “someone else that deserves to be there.” These narratives exemplified *racist nativism* and mirrored the experiences described in Pérez Huber (2010)—though, in this study, these experiences provided justification and insight as to why these individual participants felt the need to safeguard their undocumented identity.

The aforementioned examples are more overt displays of racist nativist attitudes, but *racist nativism* can also be inferred in the ways that resources to relevant information are obscured or treated as an afterthought. Two thirds of the participants enrolled in this study described how resources surrounding the Dream Act were extremely limited compared to those of the FAFSA. Moreover, several participants described instances where educators were unfamiliar with the Dream Act altogether and suggested they look elsewhere to find support. Participants such as Alejandro mentioned having to connect with multiple entities until he finally connected with a counselor who was familiar with the Dream Act and could assist him. Conversely, other participants (e.g., Ximena) relied heavily on online resources to access information due to the limited in-person support that was available at their school. The prioritization and visibility of resources that cater to students with U.S. citizenship is a subtle manifestation of racist nativism. These instances, where participants cannot access information or are denied support, are symbolic of how the native upholds its superiority over the non-native.

As referenced earlier, these displays of racist nativism are more subtle in nature, but these experiences illuminate the myriad ways in which this population is kept at the margins, away from their goal of pursuing a bachelor’s degree. In Chapter 4, I discuss how the combined use of a CRT-based theoretical framework and a critical policy analysis (CPA) methodological

approach aims to examine racism in its “most ordinary and common forms” (Atwood & López, 2014, p. 1141). Guided by the aims of CPA and considering the relationship between the native and the non-native, this study illustrated how AB 540, the California Dream Act, and DACA do little in the way of disrupting the parameters used to define (il)legality. The inability to enact immigration reform that interrogates the relationship between the native and the non-native further exemplifies the ways that those who benefit from whiteness maintain their dominance and control over people and communities of color.

Implications and Suggestions

In this next section, I provide implications and suggestions for practice, policy, and research. I begin this section with practice and discuss how practitioners at the high school, community college, and 4-year institutional levels can better support the needs of Latinx undocumented students as they prepare to apply to the 4-year sector. Following this first subsection, I then move to policy. Within the policy subsection, I discuss emerging policy solutions that are already in the pipeline (e.g., Opportunity for All) and share additional recommendations for policymakers that would address many of the participants’ challenges in affording and accessing higher education. In the final subsection, I discuss how researchers can build upon this study and where additional scholarly attention is needed.

Implications and Suggestions for Practice

Practitioners working in the K–12 context (i.e., teachers, counselors, and administrators) should aim to adopt inclusive practices that actively consider the nature of status disclosure and understand how this phenomenon shapes undocumented students’ willingness to seek out support. Practitioners need to (re)examine their current approaches to college-type support and consider how these practices do or do not require undocumented students to disclose their status

or details surrounding their status (e.g., country of origin, language spoken at home). Examples of more inclusive practices include offering information related to financial aid that encompasses a wide range of circumstances and backgrounds. More specifically, school officials can promote the visibility of the Dream Act alongside the FAFSA and ensure there are resources dedicated to both applications. Offering financial aid resources in multiple modalities (e.g., workshops, online tutorials, or step-by-step walkthroughs) can also aid in ensuring that undocumented students with varying levels of comfort can safely access needed information. Relatedly, practitioners can support undocumented students by strategically leveraging tools such as social media and their online learning management systems to disseminate information relevant to this population.

Similar to the recommendations provided concerning the Dream Act, educators can also increase the visibility of AB 540 and provide additional information on what this policy entails. Though the process used to establish AB 540 eligibility may vary by institution, K–12 educators can provide early exposure to this policy so students can begin their college preparation efforts with the knowledge they can seek in-state tuition. I discuss the institution’s role in facilitating awareness of AB 540 later in this subsection. K–12 educators can also assist undocumented students by identifying scholarships that are inclusive of undocumented immigrants and making these resources visible to their students. Along these lines, K–12 educators can also work alongside scholarship donors and encourage them to open their eligibility criteria so that deserving applicants, regardless of their immigration status, can pursue these opportunities.

Given many participants described not knowing whether they could go to college as undocumented immigrants, educators working specifically in the middle school and high school settings can aid in combating this misconception by providing students with the knowledge that they can go to college regardless of their immigration status, family income, or other barriers.

Doing so at these points in students' academic careers can aid in addressing this misconception at around the point this misconception most commonly took form. Similarly, many participants spoke about the value of having educators or mentor figures who came from the same backgrounds as them; thus, school personnel should work to increase the number of educators who come from diverse backgrounds. Practitioners at the K–12 level may also find value in building and fostering connections with community entities, especially those who may be better positioned to support students' status needs. For example, there may be value in connecting with local Dream Resource Centers/Undocumented Student Programs at neighboring colleges and universities, immigrant rights organizations, or low or no-cost legal clinics. In doing so, undocumented high school students would be able to foster and benefit from a wider community of support.

In conjunction with the previous recommendations, I strongly urge professional organizations geared toward supporting students seeking higher education such as the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) to consider adopting guidelines that set forth best practices when supporting the undocumented student population. As discussed in Chapter 4, my interest in the broader topic of undocumented students' college trajectories was sparked by the limited range of information that detailed how to support undocumented students as they go on to college. Even after receiving a college counseling certificate from a well-respected program in the industry, I had more questions than I did answers, prompting me to pursue a doctorate program to continue this line of inquiry. To this end, organizations such as NACAC and educational spaces geared toward supporting practitioners who focus on college admissions counseling (e.g., certificate programs) must acknowledge their role in fighting for a more accessible and equitable higher education landscape. Instituting guidelines such as those

aimed at handling status disclosures with care and introducing resources that detail undocumented students' financial barriers can ensure counselors are better equipped to serve some of their most marginalized students.

Many of the recommendations for practitioners in the higher education space mirror the recommendations for practitioners for K–12 practitioners. In what follows, I provide more specific recommendations for California community colleges and the UC system. Starting with California community colleges, practitioners at the community college should continue to make a concerted effort to provide resources geared toward the Dream Act and AB 540, and increase the visibility of scholarships that do not require citizenship or proof of work authorization. Although many of the participants commonly accessed these services through their community colleges' Dream Resource Centers or Undocumented Student Programs, there remains a need for practitioners campuswide to understand what these services offer so that intentional referrals can be made to these resources. Many of the transfer participants enrolled in the study attended community college during the period of remote learning necessitated by the COVID-19 global pandemic; as such, practitioners at the community college level may wish to assess the availability of support offered via Zoom or other online mediums to better target students with varying sentiments surrounding status disclosure. To support incoming undocumented students, community colleges can also partner with local high schools to promote their undocumented student resources and services. Promoting the visibility of these resources can affirm to undocumented high school students that going to college is possible and ensure students have a clear understanding of where to seek targeted support.

Because the UC campuses operate on a much larger scale than that of individual high schools and community colleges, the UC system needs to ensure all its faculty and staff are

equipped with a baseline understanding of undocumented student resources. Providing members of the community at each of the UC campuses with this training can aid in connecting students with relevant, targeted support. The UC should broaden the support offered through the Undocumented Student Programs and Dream Resource Centers operating at each of its campuses and consider providing additional funding to these programs so they can provide services to prospective undocumented students. Alternatively, expanding support at the UC level may also take the form of expanding services offered through access programs (e.g., the UC's Early Academic Outreach Program) so they can provide more specialized support to prospective undocumented students. Given the centrality of DACA and the issue of work authorization in this study, the UC may also wish to consider expanding its career services and providing specialized resources to help equip its undocumented undergraduate students to seek employment opportunities postgraduation. Though this recommendation extends beyond the scope of applying to college, this recommendation was one shared by nearly all the junior- and senior-level participants.

In addition to increasing the support available through each Undocumented Student Program or Dream Resource Center on UC campuses, the financial aid units at each of the campuses ought to be provided with robust training on working with diverse populations. Understanding more about status disclosure, the types of concerns these students had in accessing aid, and so on, can provide financial aid staff with the foundation needed to support undocumented students as they try to navigate and secure the widest possible net of financial aid support. Given the topics of financial aid and affordability were central driving themes in this study, the UC may also wish to reconsider its practices concerning how and where they promote forms of aid and funding for undocumented students. Along these lines, the UC should promote

the visibility of AB 540 well before issuing financial aid notifications. Ensuring that students have this information can address some of these students' financial concerns and equip them with the information needed so they are not caught by surprise when they are charged with nonresident tuition.

Similar to the recommendations provided for the K–12 level, both California Community Colleges (CCC) and the UC campuses should consider their use of social media and how this tool can be leveraged to support undocumented students. The findings demonstrated that participants used and engaged with social media in a number of critical ways. Social media acted as a means to access financial aid information and learn more about scholarships for which the participants were eligible. Similarly, participants also described how social media was and has continued to be essential in learning more about policy updates and how to best prepare for these emerging policy changes. Higher education institutions should prioritize the expansion of needed resources such as those articulated previously; however, the visibility of these supports must be appropriately considered given the tensions surrounding status disclosure.

Finally, the UC system needs to acknowledge and consider its role in supporting undocumented students beyond their initial admission into the university. The findings from this study demonstrated that undocumented students face considerable challenges affording the university and accessing opportunities, especially when compared to students with U.S. citizenship. Although the crux of this study focused on issues of college access and affordability, this dissertation exposed how challenges affording the university continued to permeate throughout undocumented students' time in college. As such, UC system personnel must critically examine and reflect on the question of whether they are setting up their undocumented students for success, both with respect to their time in the university system and looking ahead to

these students' postgraduation landscapes. Along these lines, given the UC's position as one of the leading research university systems in the United States, UC officials should consider expanding the system's academic and research programs to better include undocumented students, especially those students without DACA. Establishing research and academic opportunities that are inclusive of undocumented students would enable these students to deepen the skills and knowledge learned during their time at the UC.

In the following subsection on policy, I discuss Opportunity in All. For the purposes of this subsection on practice, the UC Board of Regents should ensure this policy's full and swift implementation across its nine campuses. Many participants without DACA expressed concern that working on-campus may subject them to exploitation; subsequently, the UC Board of Regents and administrators at each campus need to ensure undocumented students can seek and benefit from on-campus employment opportunities with dignity and care.

Implications for Policy

Though Opportunity for All in its current form is focused on the UC level, policymakers at the California level should revisit the state's ability to hire undocumented immigrants consistent with legal theory that supports the implementation of Opportunity for All at the UC. In doing so, the state of California can increase employment opportunities for students at other public universities in the state, including within the California State University (CSU) system and the CCC system. Moreover, expanding the reach of Opportunity for All across the state can also enable undocumented immigrants to seek employment opportunities postgraduation.

Along the lines of campus policy, personnel at individual institutions and their governing institutional systems (i.e., UC, CSU, and CCC) may wish to adopt policies that establish formal guidelines surrounding the topic of status disclosure. Such disclosure policies may articulate how

instances surrounding disclosure ought to be handled with care and discretion, with the ultimate goal of preserving the safety of these students and their families. Similarly, such policies can introduce measures wherein personnel are obligated to introduce and/or facilitate a connection to appropriate campus resources. Establishing campus policies such as this one can provide campus entities with direction on how to support their undocumented students and act as a form of institutional accountability. Relatedly, implementing such campus policies can increase transparency on how instances of status disclosure ought to be addressed, which may encourage undocumented students to seek available avenues of support on-campus with these safeguards in place.

The previous subsection on implications for practice detailed the need for financial aid officers to receive additional training on how to support diverse student populations; with respect to campus policy, the UC, CSU, and CCC should consider adopting rigorous financial aid training standards for all of its financial aid team members. As illustrated in Chapter 6, several participants shared how they were often referred from one entity to the next until they were finally able to connect with someone who was knowledgeable about financial aid options for undocumented students. Instituting campus policies that mandate all financial aid officers receive a level of foundational, baseline training can decentralize critical financial aid information. In doing so, financial aid information can become more easily accessed by undocumented students and reduce the need to continually out oneself to receive support.

At the level of state policy, many participants also described the challenge of completing their Dream Act application in a manner that accurately reported theirs and/or their families' financial situation. State entities tasked with the administration and coordination of the Dream Act may wish to revisit the Dream Act application itself so that wages earned from “under the

table” jobs or similar positions of the sort can be appropriately reflected. Similarly, providing undocumented students and their families detailed guidance on how to report these earnings can act as a valuable resource, especially in instances where in-person support or more tangible forms at the high school, community college, or 4-year university are limited.

California Governor, Gavin Newsom, passed California AB 278 on October 8, 2023. This newly passed policy would provide funding to help high schools set up Dream Resource Centers within the state (Dream Resource Center Program, 2023). These Dream Resource Centers would provide similar resources to the ones that are provided by community colleges and 4-year universities, though these centers would focus on providing resources to high school students and their families (High Schools: Dream Resource Center Program, 2023). Though the bill has passed, there is no funding in the state budget for the Dream Resource Center grant, which cannot go into full effect until California lawmakers provide funding to support its full implementation (Stavely, 2023). The California legislature should ensure that these centers are adequately funded in the state budget so this policy can make a meaningful impact on undocumented students and their families. Moreover, funding the implementation of Dream Resource Centers across the state would better position practitioners working at the high school level to support undocumented students and their families, and provide them with targeted resources that support their status needs.

Finally, one important recommendation for policy concerns the DACA program. The primary reason why DACA has been in and out of the courts in recent years concerns executive overreach and whether the Obama administration overstepped by instituting the program (*Department of Homeland Security v. Regents of the University of California*, 2020; Duke, 2017; *State of Texas et al. v. United States of America et al. and Karla Perez et al.*, 2021). Congress

should work diligently to preserve and codify the DACA program so those who are current DACA recipients can continue to access the benefits of this program and so those who do not currently have DACA can access these privileges and protections. Still, DACA is only a temporary policy and does not offer recipients a pathway to citizenship. As such, the entire landscape of immigration reform needs to be revisited and scrutinized. These immigrants deserve to live in a manner that honors their humanity, which can only be possible if and when the relationship between the native and non-native can be disrupted.

Implications for Research

In this study, I focused on the experiences of Latinx undocumented students who attended high school in California and were current undergraduate students at a UC campus; future researchers may wish to explore the divergent experiences of undocumented students from other states. Specifically, exploring the experiences of Latinx undocumented students who reside in states that are much more restrictive than that of California may provide further insight into how policy impacts these students' higher education goals. Similarly, examining the experiences of undocumented students at other institutional types, or even capturing the experiences of undocumented students who did not go on to pursue higher education, may reveal a greater insight into the challenges these students faced accessing and affording higher education.

Though the study captured the experiences of current undergraduate students with the goal of better capturing the broader picture of their college application process, future studies may wish to examine the experiences of undocumented high school students as they undergo this process. This approach may help assess the strategies employed by these students in real time. With the long-term future of the DACA program in limbo, examining the experiences of current

high school students without DACA may help provide additional implications for practice and policy.

On a related note, researchers should also consider exploring the experiences of Latinx undocumented students without DACA. As the non-DACA population continues to grow without any sort of congressional action needed to codify and preserve the program, the body of research needs to accurately depict these students' needs so that practice is better equipped to serve these students. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 global pandemic, researchers may also find value in conducting studies that directly focus on undocumented students' use of social media and how these students use online modes of support. Further analyzing and detailing undocumented students' virtual supports can provide valuable insight on how to better tailor the supports that exist within the digital landscape.

In the next section, I share personal reflections on developing a policy-oriented study and some of the challenges I came across while examining a landscape that is constantly changing. My final recommendation to researchers is to consider pursuing studies that focus on policy and bring policy to the forefront. Although individual policies will change over time, education researchers have an obligation to consider and assess how policy impacts undocumented students' educational trajectories. Future studies that focus on policy are needed to continue the investigation started within this dissertation to keep pace with developments in education and immigration policy.

Conclusion: Reflections on Developing a Policy-Oriented Study

I first began working on what would become my dissertation topic in Fall 2018 in a seminar for my master's program. In that seminar, I conducted a systematic literature review on the role of high school staff in shaping undocumented students' college admissions process. In

the conclusion of the literature review I developed for this class, I shared my observation that many of the research studies I came across failed to consider the same policies that were evoked in those pieces' literature reviews. At a time when Donald Trump was still in office and the hateful rhetoric targeting immigrant communities ran rampant in national news media, I was frustrated to see the ways that researchers would dance around the details of policies such as the Dream Act, California AB 540, and DACA. In discussing my work and plans for where I would like to take my research in my doctoral program, my now-committee member, Dr. Katherine S. Cho, encouraged me to reflect on what challenges researchers may come across in pursuing research that is heavily focused on policy.

In the years that followed, this thought has stuck with me, and is one to which I have returned throughout the study's development, data collection period, and even after completing my dissertation manuscript. Since enrolling in that master's seminar in Fall 2018, I have witnessed many developments in policy that have required me to rethink the ways that I engage with this work. For example, I defended my dissertation proposal in June 2022, and the study's data collection efforts ran from February 2023 to early July 2023. Between the study's proposal defense and the time data collection began, the following developments to the DACA program occurred: in August 2022, the Department of Homeland Security issued a final rule attempting to codify DACA (American Immigration Lawyers Association, n.d.; DACA, 2022); in October 2022, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals maintained that the 2012 DACA memorandum was not legal (*State of Texas et al. v. United States of America et al.*, 2022); and also in October 2022, federal court Judge Andrew Hanen blocked regulations from the final rule from going into effect (*State of Texas et al. v. United States of America et al.*, 2022). In light of these events, the future

of DACA and the likelihood of whether it would be reinstated again was a heavy topic of discussion throughout the study's data collection period.

This study's data collection efforts also occurred alongside the Opportunity for All campaign. In May 2023, the UC Board of Regents unanimously voted to support a policy proposal that would provide undocumented students with a means to seek on-campus employment. Although the study's interview protocol did not contain questions about the Opportunity for All campaign, many participants referenced this emerging policy change as something they would hope to see implemented by the UC and shared their concerns on whether this policy would be fully adopted or what this would look like in practice.

I highlight these developments in DACA and Opportunity for All because these specific events provide insight into the challenges I encountered in developing a policy-focused study. In choosing to develop a dissertation study that focused on policy, I was keenly aware that the policies I discussed in the study's findings would likely see change over the years to come. As I began to refine my dissertation topic, I was initially hesitant knowing that whatever findings I presented may become obsolete as developments in policy occur and would thus not hold the test of time. Seeing that there was an absence of studies focused on the impact and ramifications of policy on students' college-going efforts, I trusted my gut and pushed forward with my topic. In conducting this research, I was required to reframe questions that centered around DACA and how this status, or the lack thereof, affected participants' abilities to participate in or engage in educational spaces. As the Opportunity for All campaign continued to pick up steam and pressure the UC Board of Regents to support the initiative, I spent late hours reading press releases, op-eds penned by current undocumented students on how this change would impact

their lives if enacted, and other works so I could more thoughtfully engage participants as they shared their reactions to these developments.

In the months following the study's data collection period, and as I finalized this manuscript, federal court Judge Hanen deemed the August 2022 final rule unlawful, thereby blocking U.S. Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) from processing new DACA applications (*State of Texas et al. v. The United States of America et al. and Karla Perez et al.*, 2023). Similarly, the UC Board of Regents and its working group tasked with developing an implementation plan and legal strategy announced their intent to share an update at the end of November 2023 (UC Office of the President, 2023b); however, at the time of filing this dissertation in mid-December 2023, the UC Board of Regents had yet to share an update about Opportunity for All's implementation plan, and had not yet published a revised timeline on when to expect further updates (Kaiser & Kodialam, 2023; Kodialam, 2023). As such, this dissertation spoke only to the developments in Opportunity for All from the time updates were last announced in May 2023.

With these considerations in mind, I believe there is an importance to recognizing that the mechanics of individual policies are bound to evolve. Consistent with the study's CRT and LatCrit-based framework and the methodological approach of CPA, this dissertation is meant to analyze and scrutinize the ways that policy affects the everyday and how policy is used to reinforce systems of power and oppression. This dissertation lays important groundwork for understanding how policy is embedded in Latinx undocumented students' college-going pursuits. I hope this work will offer a foundation for other policy-focused studies to consider exploring this work so that researchers can more accurately depict how current policies and those that emerge in the future shape college access and affordability among this population of students.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The following are questions that will guide the two semistructured interviews with student participants. Given the nature of the semistructured interview, not all questions below may be asked or asked in the order shown below. Over the course of the two interviews, new questions may emerge depending on the nature of students' experiences and what they wish to share.

Interview #1

Background Questions

- What year are you in school?
- What are you currently studying?

Motivations for Attending College

- Describe your reason/motivation for applying to or attending college.
- When did you first think of college? Who or what influenced your decision to attend college?
- Tell me a little bit more about your family and culture, and their influence on your education and goals.
- What led you to apply to or attend [*institution name*]?
- When you were applying for schools, what factors did you consider as you created your list of colleges?
 - *Probe:* Affordability? Availability of resources? Location?
- How often do you think about your immigration status in relation to your college goals? Explain.
 - Did your status play a role in shaping which schools you applied to? If yes, how so?

Examining Identity Salience

- When and how did you first learn that you were undocumented?
 - How did you feel when you found out you were undocumented?
- How do you conceptualize your immigration status in relation to your identity as Latina/o/x?
 - *Probe:* Have you ever been thought of as undocumented automatically because of your race?
- What does it mean to you to be a Latinx undocumented student?
 - How has racism and/or nativism shaped your educational experiences or experiences navigating day-to-day life?
- Do you disclose your immigration status to others? With whom do you share this information and why?
- How do you feel that others treat you because of your immigration status?

- *Probe:* Examples of positive or negative interactions? Can you describe an experience and how you addressed this?
- Given the current political climate surrounding undocumented immigrants, what do you see as some of the largest barriers to accessing higher education?
 - What challenges may be unique to Latinx undocumented students?
- How has your immigration status shaped your educational experiences so far?
 - *Probe:* How (did/has) your status affect(ed) your ability to participate in educational spaces? How has your status shaped your goals for the future?
- What do you wish more people knew about Latinx undocumented students?

Exploring Policy

- What has been the role of finances in your journey to college?
 - How are you financing the expenses related to your college degree? What forms of support are you utilizing, if any?
 - How or where (did you/do you) learn about financial aid policies relevant to undocumented students?
 - *Probe:* CA AB 540? CA Dream Act?
 - How effective have these policies been in helping you pursue a bachelor's degree?
 - What are the limitations of these policies?
 - What are some unique considerations that undocumented students must think about during their process of applying to college?
 - *Probe:* Additional forms? How to approach residency questions?
- Do you have DACA?
 - *If yes...*
 - How old were you when you first applied?
 - Why did you decide to apply for DACA?
 - Has DACA had any effects on the ways you approached your journey into college? Examples?
 - *If no...*
 - Did you apply for DACA?
 - If not, why did you not apply for DACA?
 - How has not having DACA status affected the way you approached your journey into college? Examples?
- Speaking more broadly, what do you believe is the impact of immigration and related education policy on your goal of pursuing a bachelor's degree?
- What do you feel are some of the greatest challenges in learning about policies that concern your immigration status and those that may be related to your college objectives?
 - *Probes:* Examples? How did you navigate this challenge?
- Where do you most often look to with questions that directly concern your immigration status and how this affects your college goals? Why?

Interview #2

Revisiting the Educational Journey Map

- [In reference to the educational journey map] Walk me through your college application process. What parts of this process do you find most memorable? Why?
- What were some of the biggest challenges or obstacles you faced as an undocumented student applying to college? How did you address them?
- Who were your largest forms of support as you applied to college?
 - What kind of support did these figures offer to you that you found were most impactful?

Schooling Experiences and Institutional Support

For Participants Currently Enrolled at the 4-Year Site But Had Previously Attended a Community College – Tell me about your former community college.

- How would you describe the relationship you had with your professors, student affairs staff, and administration at your community college?
 - *Probe*: Any memorable positive or negative interactions? Examples?
- What forms of counseling or support did you receive from these figures as you worked toward your goal of transferring? Were these forms helpful? Unhelpful? Why?
 - How is this support different from the support you received while in high school?
- While you were in high school, did you apply to any 4-year institutions?
 - *If yes*: How was the process of applying to transfer different from when you first applied?
- During your process of applying to the 4-year, did you have to disclose your immigration status to anyone at your community college?
 - *If yes...*
 - With whom was this information shared?
 - How did you navigate when or how you would share this information?
 - In what context(s) was your immigration status discussed?
 - *Probe*: Financial aid? Crafting your college lists? Personal statements? Residency questions?
 - How did sharing your immigration status impact your relationships with these figures and your ability to navigate the transfer process?
 - *If no...*
 - Why did you choose not to share your immigration status?
 - How did choosing not to share your immigration status impact your relationships with these figures and your ability to navigate the transfer process?
 - *All participants*: Have your thoughts around sharing your status or how you approach disclosure changed since you were in high school / over time? Explain.

- Within the context of your former community college, to what extent did you learn about policies that were relevant to your status and/or your educational goals (i.e., CA AB 540, CA Dream Act, DACA, etc.)?
 - What was the nature of these discussions and what did you learn from them?
 - What were the limitations of these discussions?
 - What would you have liked to have seen done differently?
 - How is this support different from the support you received in other settings (i.e., high school)? Explain.

For Participants Who Went Straight from High School to the 4-Year Site – Tell me about your high school.

- How would you describe the relationship you had with your counselors, teachers, and administration at your high school?
 - *Probe:* Any memorable positive or negative interactions? Examples?
- What forms of counseling or support did you receive from these figures as you were applying to college, if any? Were these forms helpful? Unhelpful? Why?
- During the process of applying to college, did you disclose your immigration status to anyone from your high school?
 - *If yes...*
 - With whom was this information shared?
 - How did you navigate when or how you would share this information?
 - In what context(s) was your immigration status discussed?
 - *Probe:* Financial aid? Crafting your college lists? Personal statements? Residency questions?
 - How did sharing your immigration status impact your relationships with these figures and your ability to navigate your college applications?
 - *If no...*
 - Why did you choose not to share your immigration status?
 - How did this impact your relationships with these figures and your ability to navigate your college applications?
- Within the context of your high school, to what extent did you learn about policies relevant to your status and/or your educational goals (i.e., CA AB 540, CA Dream Act, DACA, etc.)?
 - What was the nature of these discussions and what did you learn from them?
 - What were the limitations of these discussions?
 - What would you have liked to have seen done differently?

Broadening Social Networks: Forms of Support Beyond the School

- Outside of the context of your previous school(s), where else did you learn about policies that were/are relevant to your status or educational goals?
 - *Probe:* Community-based organizations? Family? Friends? Other institutions that are different from the one you attend(ed)?

- What was the process of seeking out these resources or forms of support?
 - How did you hear about these resources or forms of support?
- Why did you seek out these resources or forms of support?
- How did these resources or forms of support inform or shape your process of applying to college?
- How were these different from the resources or support you received in your formal schooling context(s)?
 - *Probe:* How do these outside resources or forms of support build upon other supports and/or fill in gaps?

Wrapping Up

- In regard to the college application process and speaking from your perspective as a current undergraduate student:
 - How do you think high school faculty and staff can better serve the needs of their undocumented students looking to go on to college?
 - [*If applicable to the participant*] How do you think community college faculty and staff can better serve the needs of prospective undocumented college students?
 - How do you think faculty and staff at the 4-year can better serve the needs of prospective undocumented college students?
- With respect to financial aid, what forms of support do you feel would have been most helpful to have while navigating the college application process?
 - *Probe:* CA AB 540? CA Dream Act? DACA? Any other policies that may be relevant to participants?
- What do you think needs to be done to improve undocumented students' higher education opportunities?
- What types of policies would you like to see implemented to improve access at...
 - The local level?
 - The state level?
 - The national or federal level?
- What types of interventions, more broadly, would you like to see implemented to improve access at...
 - The local level?
 - The state level?
 - The national or federal level?
- Is there anything else that you would like to share with me that has not been asked previously?

APPENDIX B

EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY MAP INSTRUCTIONS

Before our next interview, I would like for you to complete what is called an educational journey map. The purpose of this map is for you to visually represent your educational journey “timeline” and map out significant events, people, or encounters that have shaped your path to college. As you create this map, please consider integrating the following:

- Think about when and how you first learned that you were undocumented.
- Consider when you first started to think about college. At what point did pursuing a bachelor’s degree become a goal of yours?
- Identify a few specific obstacles, challenges, and triumphs during your process of applying to college. As you create your map, consider why these events are memorable to you.
- Think about specific people that you found important in shaping your journey to college – either positive or negative. As you create your map, consider why these people are memorable to you and the role that they played.

You are welcome to get creative with your map and I invite you to include as much or as little detail as you feel comfortable sharing. If needed, I can provide you with paper or other writing materials to complete the map. Please prepare this map in your own time before the start of our next interview and we’ll be discussing your map the next time we meet.

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