Deterred but Undefeated: A Study of Undocumented College Students in Southern California

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Masters of Arts
in Sociology

By

Esther Villegas-Sandoval

December 2014
The thesis of Esther Villegas-Sandoval is approved:

__________________________  _________________________
Kay Pih, Ph.D.                Date

__________________________  _________________________
Herman DeBose, Ph.D.         Date

__________________________  _________________________
David Boyns, Ph.D., Chair    Date

California State University, Northridge
Dedication

I am forever grateful to Dr. Vincent Jeffries and Dr. Jerald Schutte for having such a tremendous impact on my experience as an undergraduate student at CSUN and encouraging me to pursue graduate school.

I am indebted to Dr. Amy Denissen and Dr. Lauren McDonald for introducing me to the work of Dorothy Smith and John Ogbu. I also thank them for the inspiration they gave me in every class session and for supporting my research project.

My committee members, Dr. Kay Pih and Dr. Herman DeBose, were instrumental in this project. I am thankful for their guidance, support, and patience.

I would like to especially thank my chair, Dr. David Boyns for having a tremendous amount of faith not only in this research project, but also in me as a student. I am eternally grateful for his endless words of encouragement and dedication to my work.

I am thankful for my friends and family who have always supported me in my academic endeavors. My mother, Abelina Sandoval, has always been an incredibly strong woman who has taught me that education is a lifelong process, not a destination. I am blessed to have wonderful sisters, Elbia and Aurora Villegas, who despite having no prior exposure to sociological theory, often agreed to read my work and provide feedback. I am also grateful to my best friend, Yesenia Garcia, for her endless love, support, and patience. I am grateful for the support of my husband, Marlon Fernandez who has always believed that I can achieve greatness.

Lastly, I would like to thank three very important peers, Nune Sogomonyan, Lesbith Castillo and Orli Shmargal Koshet for sharing this special journey with me.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SIGNATURE PAGE</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPPORTUNITIES GRANTED BUT ULTIMATELY DEFERRED, A REVIEW OF THE LEGISLATION ON UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The California Context</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Federal DREAM Act</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statelessness and the Situations of Undocumented Students</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bifurcated Consciousness, the State of Undocumented Students</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping Strategies</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undocumented Students as Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEETING THE STUDENTS</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martín</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giancarlo</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernando</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernesto</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eduardo</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristina</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audelia</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anabelle</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adan</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESULTS – THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part One: The Perceived National Identities of Undocumented Students</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Two: Viewing Education as a Pathway to Citizenship or Safety</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Three: Institutionalized Limitations and Constraints</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Four: Exploring Emotional Distress</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult Transition to College and Adult Life</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of Being Stuck in Childhood</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Intimidated and Isolated by Peers</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Five: Accounts and Disclaimers, Coping Strategies, and Resiliency</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISCUSSION</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statelessness and the Situations of Undocumented Students</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bifurcation of Undocumented American Students</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping Strategies</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undocumented Students as Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

iv
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFTERWARD: LIMITATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Future Research</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Recommendations for High School and College Staff</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Policy Makers</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: First Interview Schedule</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Second Interview Schedule</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Recruiting Flyer</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

Deterred but Undefeated: A Study of Undocumented College Students in Southern California

BY

Esther Villegas-Sandoval

Masters of Arts in Sociology

This research study explores the experiences of undocumented college students in Southern California. While not born in this country, many undocumented college students self-identify as American. This unique situation of being born outside of the country while being largely socialized in the United States creates a bifurcated consciousness where they straddle between being undocumented, yet American. In many ways, we can explore and understand undocumented college students as stateless individuals who are both involuntary and immigrant minorities. This study suggests that undocumented college students face a myriad of institutional barriers that often lead to emotional distress. However, undocumented students use coping strategies and demonstrate resiliency. This study concludes by listing its limitations and making policy recommendations to future researchers, high school and college staff, and policy makers.
Introduction

About 50,000 to 65,000 undocumented students graduate each year from high school in the United States, more than 25,000 from California alone (Madera et al 2008). An estimated 3.2 million undocumented youth under the age of 24 currently live in the United States, most of whom were brought by their parents at a young age (Perez 2010). Although undocumented students are allowed to apply and to attend colleges and universities in most states they are typically excluded from receiving financial aid and in-state tuition fees. Federal law prohibits states from denying public education to undocumented individuals in grades K-12; however states are permitted to ratify their own policies for postsecondary education (Harvard Law Review 2002). Federal law states that undocumented students may not have access to any postsecondary benefit, including in-state tuition and grants, on the basis of residency. While some states like California have carefully created legislation to allow some undocumented students access to colleges and universities, most have not (Harvard Law Review 2002). Due to a high number of obstacles, only about 60% of undocumented adults ages 18-24 have completed high school (Gonzalez 2011). Furthermore, it is estimated that only about 49% of undocumented youth (ages 18-24) who graduate high school are currently in college or have attended college (Passel and Cohn 2009).

Despite their lack of legal status and levels of educational attainment, several studies (Abrego and Gonzalez 2010; Gonzalez 2009a; Perez 2009) find that undocumented students hold similar values to those of mainstream America, they believe in personal merit and being contributing members of society. Undocumented students who migrated to the United States at an early age come to identity with American culture
and view this country as their home. For many, the possibility of going back to the countries from which they migrated is simply not a viable option (Chavez et al. 2007). Like many other Americans, undocumented individuals pursue the “American Dream” (Drachman 2006; Abrego and Gonzalez 2010). They aspire to pursue postsecondary education and establish careers. However, lack of residency translates to a difficulty in not only obtaining financial assistance to pay for college but also being unable to use their education to secure employment.

Abrego (2004) describes the challenges undocumented students face in adjusting their legal status:

The legalization process for undocumented youth is a complicated one that depends on their parents, the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, and public policy makers. Under current law, many undocumented children of immigrants have no means of obtaining legal status, despite having lived in the United States for many years (226).

Without changes in federal law, undocumented students are unlikely to gain legal residency. One of the pathways to undergoing the naturalization process is through public legislation aimed at immigration reform (Abrego 2004; Abrego and Gonzalez 2010). However, there is significant opposition to such legislation, specifically by those who believe that undocumented immigrants are responsible for depressing wages and depleting public benefits (Drachman 2006).

Because undocumented students reside in the United States without legal permission, they are often placed under the general “illegal,” “unauthorized” immigrant umbrella. Despite identifying with American culture, knowing the English language, and sharing goals with their documented, American peers, undocumented students often feel and are treated as outsider (Perez Huber et al. 2009). As undocumented Americans,
understanding the experiences of undocumented students is important for several interconnected reasons. In the first place, laws regarding undocumented students are being proposed and challenged at the state and national level; hence understanding the experiences of these students has important policy implications. Second, the legal status of an undocumented individual largely restricts their access to resources which can improve standards of life such as a college education, financial assistance (loans and grants), and employment. All of which significantly affect their social status. Lastly, there appears to be a general consensus that education is an important resource for undocumented students. Education is often viewed as a vehicle to higher social and economic status which will enables individuals to be self sufficient, contributing members of society, and less dependent on government aid (Abrego 2006; Drachman 2006; New and Petronicos 1999; Fraga et al. 2000; The Future of Children 1995). Thus, the restriction of postsecondary education to undocumented students is detrimental to the entire society, not simply the individual.

This present study addresses how undocumented students navigate their world as they emerge into adulthood and seek to obtain a college education. Lacking legal status presents multiple challenges for undocumented immigrants, and the present study seeks to document the trials, strategies, and successes of these students. To frame the study, the following research questions posed are: How does the lack of legal status affect undocumented students pursuing postsecondary education in terms of career development and emotional well-being? How do these young adults cope with the limitations set by their legal status?
This study begins with a review of current statistics on undocumented immigrants. In Chapter Two, I review national and state legislation affecting undocumented students spanning from the 1982 Plyler vs. Doe case to the Federal DREAM Act and the recent Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Chapter Three focuses on previous theoretical and empirical research on the experiences of undocumented students. I utilize the concept of statelessness (Goris, Harrington, and Kohn 2009; Green and Pierce 2009; Lynch and Teff 2009; Wooding 2009) to explore the lives of undocumented students as individuals who have no clear country they call “home,” and as a result confront multiple obstacles in their educational and career trajectories; I introduce Dorothy’s Smith’s bifurcated consciousness to explore the ways in which undocumented youth may know the world from dual and contradictory standpoints- as Americans and as undocumented immigrants. I also present the work of John Ogbu to help explain how undocumented youth remain resilient in the face of adversity and explore their dual social positions as immigrant and involuntary minorities.

In Chapter Four, I describe my data collection process and methodology. I used convenience and snowball to reach the fourteen participants of this study and used focused coding to organize and develop the themes discussed. All of the students interviewed resided in California, thirteen resided in Los Angeles County, while one resided in Alameda County. As a Latina researcher who was born to undocumented immigrants, I found that my familiarity with the experiences of undocumented adults, children, and families helped me establish rapport with the students I interviewed. In Chapter Five, I move on to introduce the participants of this study. Each narrative is unique as students highlight different aspects of their experiences as undocumented
individuals. Furthermore, some interviewees were not as forthcoming as others. I suspect that their undocumented status may make them apprehensive to disclose personal details that can identify them as they are vulnerable to deportations. Chapter Six discusses the findings of this project and explores a number of reoccurring themes. In Chapter Seven, I elaborate on the findings of this study, linking these results to the theoretical concepts discussed in Chapter Three in order to explore how their experiences of undocumented college students crystallize into two forms of knowing the world- one as an undocumented immigrant and the other as an American. Chapter Eight reviews the findings and presents recommendation for legislation that allows undocumented students the ability to become legal residents of this nation. Finally, the study concludes by providing suggestions for high school and college staff, future research studies, and policy makers.
Opportunities Granted but Ultimately Deferred, A Review of the Legislation on Undocumented Students

Legislation pertaining to undocumented students in the United States has been anything but static. Since the 1970s, states have drafted laws in the attempt(s) to establish what educational rights undocumented students should be granted. Considered perhaps the most important and resilient case, Plyler v. Doe (1982) established that any child, regardless of his or her immigration status, cannot be denied free public education in grades kindergarten to 12th (Olivas 2010). While individual states like California have attempted to challenge its decision by drafting legislation and referendums, this 1982 Supreme Court case has been used throughout the United States to find laws preventing undocumented minors access to free, public education unconstitutional (Olivas 2010). However, Plyler v. Doe, in its limitations, can only guarantee the right to an education for undocumented youth in elementary and secondary schools.

Currently, there is no federal law that allows or prohibits undocumented students from accessing colleges or universities. States are thus responsible for and capable of executing their own laws regarding postsecondary education for undocumented students. However, section 505 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) states that any individual who is not lawfully present in the United States cannot be eligible for any postsecondary education benefit – including in-state tuition – on the basis of residency (FinAid 2012). As a result, some states have carefully drafted legislation allowing any student, documented or not, access to in-state tuition given that they provide proof that they have both attended and graduated from a local high school. Using these criteria, in-state tuition is a benefit distributed on the basis of
high school attendance as opposed to residency. These laws, enacted by states like Texas, New York, Utah, Washington, Illinois, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and California, provide economic relief to undocumented students while complying with the regulations set forth by federal law. In contrast, other states have created laws limiting the postsecondary educational attainment of undocumented youth. For example, as part of a broader anti-immigration bill, Alabama’s HB 56 made it illegal for undocumented students to attend any of Alabama’s public colleges or universities. This bill, signed into law in June 2011, had its most draconian elements blocked, including the inability for an undocumented student to attend a college or university.

The California Context

California’s own history with education and immigration policy has not been without controversy. The state has battled to establish what educational rights undocumented students should have in both childhood and adulthood. In 1994, Proposition 187 was passed by California voters and attempted to bar undocumented children from having access to a free public education in grades K-12. The bill was heavily opposed and after a series of lawsuits, Proposition 187 was found to be unconstitutional. More recent legislation has been directed at undocumented college students, particularly at making postsecondary education more financially accessible. To understand the significance of the recently approved California DREAM Act, a review of the state’s laws is necessary.

Much like the debates over Proposition 187, California’s history with laws pertaining to undocumented students has been contentious and dynamic. The conflict between opinions and views can be seen when looking at the laws that have been drafted,
vetoed, and opposed. In 1986, the outcome of Leticia A. v. UC Regents and CSU Board of Trustees granted in-state tuition and state financial aid to undocumented students attending public colleges and universities by classifying them as residents. However, these rights were taken away in 1991 after David Paul Bradford won his lawsuit against the University of California system. In Bradford v. UC Regents, it was declared that undocumented students were to be regarded as “non-residents” and as a result, ineligible for state funding or in-state tuition. While the lawsuit was only directed towards the University of California, California community colleges and state universities quickly adopted and implemented the decision. As a result, undocumented students were forced to pay out of state tuition. This placed a significant economic strain on undocumented youth as non-resident tuition usually costs three to seven times more than in-state tuition (Abrego 2008).

Changes occurred once again when California adopted Assembly Bill 540 in 2001. This legislation allows undocumented youth who meet certain criteria to be eligible for in-state tuition at California colleges and universities. In order to qualify, undocumented students must provide proof that they have attended a California High School for at least three academic years and graduated, have enrolled in an institution of higher learning, and have completed an affidavit stating that they will apply for US residency when possible (Oliverez et al. 2006). Assembly Bill 540 is seen as a significant triumph for undocumented students (Abrego 2006). It reduces the financial burden of a college education and makes postsecondary education more accessible (Abrego 2006). However, it is not without limitations. Unlike Leticia A., AB 540 does
not grant financial aid to undocumented students and they continued to be ineligible for grants, loans and federal work study programs (Oliverez et al. 2006).

To combat this issue, Assembly Member Gil Cedillo first introduced the California DREAM Act with Senate Bill 160 in 2005 (Oliverez et al. 2006). Under this bill, all public postsecondary institutions in California would provide student financial aid assistance to undocumented youth who qualify for in-state tuition under AB 540. Senate Bill 160, along with several other drafts of the California DREAM Act, were passed in the State Senate and State Assembly but vetoed by Governor Schwarzenegger (Oliverez et al. 2006). It was not until 2011 that Assembly Member Gil Cedillo was able to reintroduce the legislation under two separate bills, AB 130 and AB 131, and have them signed into law. The California Dream Act provides opportunities that complement AB 540 by making a college education more financially accessible to undocumented students. Assembly Bill 130 allows undocumented students who are eligible for in-state tuition under AB 540 access to non-state funded scholarships (California Student Aid Commission 2012). Its counterpart, Assembly Bill 131, allows AB 540 eligible students to apply for and receive state funded financial aid such as community college fee waivers and California grants (California Student Aid Commission 2012). Private scholarships under AB 130 became available for undocumented student on January 1st, 2012 (California Student Aid Commission 2012). Institutional grants such as the UC “University Grant” and the CSU “State University Grant a long with the California Community Colleges Board of Governor’s fee waiver became available on January 1st, 2013 (California Student Aid Commission 2012). While Cal Grant applications also became available on January 1st, 2013, funds will not be distributed until the Fall 2013
term (California Student Aid Commission 2012). The California DREAM Act serves to alleviate the economic hardships of obtaining a postsecondary education. However, legislation that allows undocumented students to adjust their legal status is unavailable and needed to eliminate the disparities they experience. Unlike their documented peers, they are unable to use their academic achievement or aptitude to participate in internship programs that require legal residency. Additionally, they cannot make use of their education to gain employment in a field related to their studies. While they may be eligible for financial aid in California, undocumented students continue to face multiple challenges in their attempts to improve their socioeconomic status.

The Federal Dream Act

The only legislation that tackles the larger issue of granting legal residency and authorization to undocumented students and young adults is the federal DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act). This legislation would allow states to make their own decisions regarding eligibility for financial aid for undocumented students. It would also conditionally grant undocumented students with permanent resident status for six years. The federal DREAM Act does have requirements and limitations. In order to qualify, undocumented immigrants must demonstrate good moral character by passing a criminal background check, must have arrived to the United States as minors, must have lived in the US continuously for at least 5 years before the legislation is enacted, must have graduated from a United States high school, and must be between the ages of 12-35 at the time of application. Once granted conditional permanent residency, the individual must either enroll in an institution of higher education or enlist in the United States military. Within the 6 years of conditional
permanent residency, individuals must complete at least two years of postsecondary education or military service. Individuals who do not meet these requirements will have their residency revoked and return to an undocumented status. Those who do complete these requirements will be able to apply for legal permanent residency and ultimately United States citizenship. Individuals who have already completed these requirements (i.e. undocumented students who completed their two years or received a bachelor’s degree) will still need to apply for a conditional residency and wait at least 9 ½ years to apply for legal permanent residency. While the federal DREAM Act would not provide undocumented students access to grants or guarantee in-state tuition, it would make them eligible for student loans (Immigration Policy Center 2010). Batalova and McHugh (2010) estimate that that there are about 2.1 million youth and young adults who meet the age, length of residency in the United States and age of arrival requirements to receive conditional residency under the federal DREAM Act. However, far fewer of these individuals would actually be able to progress to conditional or permanent legal status as they would not meet the law’s additional educational requirements (Batalova and McHugh 2010).

The federal DREAM Act is considered to be the single most important legislation for undocumented students. It is the only pathway to gaining residency for those undocumented youth whose parents do not have legal permission to reside in the United States. The federal DREAM Act addresses the single most important factor hindering their social mobility: documentation. Without documentation, undocumented students cannot legally gain employment even if they have obtained degrees and fulfilled all of the requirements for their careers and/or academic fields. Since its first introduction on
August 1st 2001, advocates of the DREAM Act have had difficulty in gaining support. Multiple forms of this bill have been introduced to the United States Senate and House of Representatives but have been defeated primarily because it has failed to gain bipartisan support (DREAMActivist.org 2012).

For some undocumented students the potential protection from removal proceedings and access to legal employment has come from Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a new policy under the Department of Homeland Security (Immigration Equality 2012). This policy provides temporary employment authorization and relief from deportation to those undocumented individuals who qualify for legal residency under the federal DREAM Act. However, DACA does not provide pathways to legal residency or citizenship. Furthermore, employment authorization and protection from removal proceedings for undocumented students can be revoked at any time. Due to its limitations, immigrant advocates continue to express the need for the federal DREAM Act (Immigration Equality 2012).

This review of legislation, while lengthy and complex, provides a socio-historical context for academic research on undocumented students. It is necessary to understand the federal and state laws that affect the lives of undocumented youth for a variety of reasons. Differences in state laws can help individuals anticipate and understand the diverse experiences of undocumented youth. Additionally, current legislation highlights the importance and relevance of exploring the experiences of undocumented students. The following section is dedicated to reviewing the limited, but growing literature on the experiences of undocumented students.
Literature Review

In examining the topic of undocumented, immigrant youth, many scholars (Abrego 2008; Abrego and Gonzalez 2010; Perez et al. 2009) acknowledge that there is limited, but increasing literature on the experiences of this population. Studies on undocumented students report that only a percentage of this population pursue postsecondary education, and that of those undocumented students who do attend college, not all perform well academically (Perez et al 2009). Research suggests that undocumented students have a myriad of obstacles that prevent them from performing well in school, including: needing to work multiple hours to pay for tuition (Perez et al. 2009), limited transportation that affects their ability to physically attend school and on-campus activities (Abrego and Gonzalez 2010), and living in crowded conditions which limit their ability to complete school work and study (Perez et al. 2009. Despite these hardships, researchers find that undocumented students are optimistic, perseverant, and academically successful (Perez 2010; Gonzalez 2012).

The following section reviews the existing literature that details the experiences of undocumented students as well as the theoretical concepts that will be explored in framing the topic of undocumented students in their pursuit of higher education. To begin, I introduce the concept of “statelessness,” a condition in which individuals lack citizenship to the country in which they were born. The literature reviewed does not suggest that undocumented students living in the United States are actually stateless. However, because the United States primarily grants citizenship by the practice of *jus soli* – citizenship obtained through birth, and not *jus domicili* – “by virtue of the reality of residence,” many undocumented students who have lived in the United States since early
childhood, come to see the it as their home, and might even identify as American, are not recognized as legal residents of this country. Because the social situation of undocumented students bears a strong similarity to the condition of statelessness, I suggest that the concept can be useful in framing the situation of undocumented students.

Statelessness and the Situations of Undocumented Students

The practice of granting citizenship to only those children of legally recognized residents, *jus sanguinis*, renders children of unauthorized migrants stateless in countries all over the world. As a result, stateless children lack documentation that can provide a country of birth or nationality. These stateless individuals who lack birthright citizenship “fall through the cracks” and are unable to exercise many of their human rights or fully participate in society (Goris, Harrington, and Kohn 2009; Green and Pierce 2009). Subsequently, they are often vulnerable to workplace exploitation, discrimination, and abuse (Green and Pierce 2009). While it is typical for stateless individuals to permanently settle in specific countries and communities, they are not legally recognized as residents or citizens by the countries in which they live (Gibney 2009). While most countries allow citizenship by naturalization, few stateless individuals can gain legal residency in their country of residence as the naturalization process is highly restricted and few opportunities exist (Goris et al. 2009; Gibney 2009).

The literature on statelessness acknowledges that, regardless of ethnic or national background, unauthorized individuals experience significant inequalities in their host societies (Gibney 2009). However, this literature agrees that the most vulnerable stateless individuals are children and youth (Goris et al. 2009; Lynch and Teff 2009; Wooding 2009). After all it is the younger, undocumented children and teens who
“through no fault of their own, inherit circumstances that limit their potential and provide, at best, an uncertain future” (Lynch and Teff 2009:1). Although countries differ as to what rights they give to their stateless population, certain threads are found. Research (Gibney 2009; Goris et al. 2009; Green and Pierce 2009; Lynch and Teff 2009) notes that stateless individuals typically have reduced access to public benefits like health and education, employment, tend to hold low status jobs, are ineligible to vote, and are at risk for deportation and family separation.

Without the proper documentation to grant them legal residence in their present home (the U.S.), undocumented students in the United States experience comparable challenges to those individuals who are actually stateless. Without legal status, undocumented students are unable to participate in many of the rights reserved for the citizens of this nation even when they demonstrate a high level of academic aptitude (Abrego and Gonzalez 2010). Because they are grouped in the larger undocumented immigrant group, undocumented students are labeled “illegal” and are unable to receive private and public benefits (Abrego 2008). As a result, undocumented youth, like stateless individuals, have limited access to postsecondary education because they typically cannot receive in-state tuition, loans, grants, or scholarships.

Lynch and Teff (2009) find that stateless children and teens are motivated to pursue primary, secondary, and postsecondary education but encounter structural obstacles that prevent them from attending school. Such obstacles typically manifest themselves in policies that give documented students priority enrollment, impose higher tuition prices on stateless individuals, or straightforwardly deny them the access to public education. Policies restricting education to stateless individuals lead them to abandon
their academic dreams (Lynch and Teff 2009). Similarly, Abrego (2008) finds that many undocumented students in California also encounter structural challenges that prevent them from enrolling in college. Like stateless individuals, many undocumented students are motivated to pursue postsecondary education, but simply cannot afford to do so. Research suggests that even if admitted to a four year postsecondary institution, attending a college or university is rarely an option as undocumented students have limited financial means (Abrego 2008; Gonzalez 2011, Gonzalez 2012). Until the recent passing of the California DREAM Act, undocumented students in California were only eligible for in-state tuition under AB 540 and excluded from most private scholarships and state financial aid. In their interviews with undocumented youth and young adults in Southern California, Abrego (2008) and Gonzalez (2011) find that although AB540 is a significant bill that aids undocumented students in California, the lack of financial aid continues to make a college education along with a bachelor’s degree expensive and inaccessible. Studies on the experiences of undocumented students also find that even high achieving students who are admitted to top ranked universities often have to lower their aspirations or end their academic pursuits as they do not have the financial means to pay for school related expenses of four year universities (Abrego 2008; Abrego and Gonzalez 2010). The experiences of undocumented students mirror that of stateless individuals as they too encounter barriers that jeopardize their ability to obtain a college education.

Another commonality between stateless individuals and undocumented students in the United States is limited employment prospects and possible lower standards of living. Green and Pierce (2009) note how lacking legal residency prevents stateless individuals from gaining legal employment in their host societies. Correspondingly,
Goris et al (2009) find that stateless persons are barred from certain public sector jobs in several European nations while Wooding (2003) highlights how they must often participate in cheap migrant labor like agriculture, construction, and tourism in countries like the Dominican Republic. The pattern of and necessity to take lower status jobs are also marked in the research of undocumented students in the United States (Abrego 2008; Gonzalez 2009a; Abrego and Gonzalez 2010; Menjivar 2008). According to Abrego and Gonzalez (2010) undocumented students typically find themselves with limited employment options even after completing their postsecondary education because they cannot legally compete in the labor market. In his interviews with undocumented youth, Gonzalez (2011) finds that undocumented students, like stateless individuals, are often forced to seek undesirable jobs in the services sector economy that do not require documentation or legitimate proof of residency. Abrego and Gonzalez (2010) suggest that because undocumented youth “are unable to make full use of their education” they are consequently “vulnerable to long-term poverty and extreme hardship” (145). Green and Pierce (2009) also note that the absence of citizenship prevents some stateless individuals from meeting their basic needs.

Finally, both stateless individuals and undocumented students in the United States are unable to obtain passports and study abroad (Lynch and Teff 2009; Gonzalez 2010; Perez Huber et al 2009). However, the inability to engage in internships, work study programs, or complete background checks due to the lack of legal residency were not noted in the literature pertaining to stateless individuals but was visible in the studies of undocumented American students (Gonzalez 2010; Perez Huber et al 2009). Furthermore, the effects of statelessness on individuals’ well being were also not
explored in any of the literature mentioned. Such effects were, however, found in the studies of undocumented American youth. Gonzalez (2007) suggests that undocumented students can experience feelings of stress, shame, or embarrassment as they are unable to make use of their education and must endure questions from coworkers and acquaintances regarding their decision to remain in a low status job even while having higher levels of education.

Nevertheless, there are ample similarities between undocumented American students and stateless persons. Undocumented youth, like stateless individuals, have limited access to postsecondary education, study abroad opportunities, financial assistance, and legal employment (Gonzalez 2010; Green and Pierce 2009; Lynch and Teff 2009; Abrego 2008). They experience the world, more or less, as Americans yet this consciousness is rivaled by the limitations they experience as undocumented immigrants. One has to wonder whether the marginalization produced by being “stateless” puts an individual in a liminal state, betwixt and between two separate worlds, one as an American and the other as a stateless immigrant.

**Bifurcated Consciousness, the State of Undocumented Students:**

Studies of individuals who have discrepant and often inconsistent experiences, like those of stateless individuals, suggest that these diverse experiences result in multiple and at times conflicting ways of understanding and engaging the social world (Du Bois 1903; Smith 1987). According to Dorothy Smith (1987), “we” (individual subjects) are impacted by “ruling relations” (a complex, pervasive structure comprised of interrelated organizations and practices) that construct our experience of the world by imposing forms of knowledge that are expected to be universal. In doing so, ruling relations affect the
way in which individuals come to understand the world. However, Smith (1987: 1) maintains that there are “marginal” beings who are almost entirely excluded from the “intellectual, cultural, and political world” in which they live. When there are distinct differences between an individual’s lived experiences and the way they imagine or come to know the world, a second form of consciousness arises. These two forms of consciousness, described by Smith as a “bifurcated consciousness,” can oftentimes contradict one another. On one side, the ruling relations “dominate and penetrate the social consciousness of the society in general” (Smith 1987: 55); inevitably shaping one dimension of our consciousness. If lived experiences contradict ruling relations, our consciousness may become bifurcated and the everyday experience of the world problematic.

Current examples of bifurcated consciousness may be found in the experiences of undocumented students. These individuals grow up, are socialized, and participate in American society alongside their documented peers. Because of this, undocumented students can develop a consciousness as an American. However, undocumented students also have lived experiences as unauthorized immigrants, specifically as they try to pursue postsecondary education and obtain employment (Gonzalez 2011).

Bifurcated consciousness may emerge as undocumented students increase their participation in the world and find themselves frequently defined as “unauthorized immigrants.” For example, in his interviews with undocumented students, Gonzalez (2011) finds that there is a period in which undocumented students “transition to illegality” as they emerge into adulthood and leave the protected realm of K-12 education. Gonzalez (2011) acknowledges that undocumented students may have been
unauthorized immigrants for many years prior to their high school graduation. However, he suggests that as children and teens, undocumented students have little need to supply documentation to participate in society. Yet, as young adults, documentation becomes increasingly important to partake in activities reserved for adults, such as working and driving. Unable to provide their residency “papers”, undocumented students begin to increasingly participate in society as “illegal” immigrants, working and driving without legal authorization and avoiding encounters with law enforcement (Gonzalez 2011). Engaging in the world as undocumented immigrants is “problematic” (Smith 1987) because it contradicts their experiences as Americans. Unlike their documented peers, with whom they attended secondary school; undocumented students cannot work, drive, or attend school like legal, documented individuals.

Research suggests that undocumented youth begin experiencing feelings of fear, criminality, and invisibility as they become young adults; leading them to feel like outsiders who cannot disclose their true identities (Perez Huber et al. 2009). Gonzalez (2007) finds that undocumented students consequently begin to “straddle two worlds” from contradictory standpoints. On the one hand, undocumented students are the everyday people who live and participate in mainstream society: and on the other hand, they are unauthorized immigrants living on the margins who may be deported at any time. As marginalized individuals, their outsider status as undocumented beings presents barriers that prevent them from feeling and being American.

For many undocumented students, their transition to adulthood means adjusting to a life filled with limited opportunities and exclusions while concealing their legal status (Gonzalez 2011). In essence, such students are asked to lead a “double life.” During the
“transition to illegality,” undocumented students begin to adjust to their standpoint as unauthorized immigrants and a bifurcated consciousness may be created or strengthened. However, it is unlikely that this transition is unproblematic. Gonzalez (2011) finds that undocumented youth experience disorientation, stress and anxiety as they as they begin to increase their participation in society as unauthorized immigrants. To grapple with the complexities of being undocumented Americans, undocumented students may demonstrate the use of coping mechanisms. The following section explores the way in which individuals diminish the impact of challenging situations.

Coping Strategies:

To grapple with the complexities of being undocumented Americans, undocumented students demonstrate the use of coping mechanisms. Pearlin and Schooler (1978) outline three basic coping mechanisms that can be applied to the social situation of various individuals including adult immigrants (Yakushko 2010), racial minority youth (Gaylord-Harden and Cunningham 2009), and urban students (Stanton-Salazar, Chavez, and Tai 2001). In this research paper, I will review their concepts and apply their work to the experiences of undocumented students.

According to Pearlin and Schooler (1978), coping mechanisms help individuals when they are emotionally harmed by problematic social experiences, and are used by ordinary individuals in their everyday pursuits. Oftentimes, these behaviors lessen the impact of individual challenges as well as those difficulties that are created by society. Pearlin and Schooler (1978) argue that some individuals share social roles and life-problems. As a result, there are standard coping responses. In their work, Pearlin and Schooler (1978) outline three major types of coping strategies/responses: 1) responses
that change or eliminate the source of strain, 2) responses that change the meaning of a stressful situation by minimizing the significance of the problem (this is achieved by having individuals either ignore what they once valued or change their priorities) and 3) responses which simply help individuals manage stress without being overwhelmed by it.

Several research studies (Gonzalez 2009b; Gonzalez 2011; Gonzalez 2012; Perez et al. 2009) note the different ways in which undocumented students handle educational and institutional constraints. Primarily, research reflects the third and second coping mechanisms presented by Pearlin and Schooler (1978).

Gonzalez (2012) finds that some undocumented students become academically successful by establishing positive relationships with teachers, school staff, and other high achieving peers. In fact, a significant difference between those undocumented participants who stop attending high school and undocumented college-going participants is the level of assistance and intervention given by teachers and counselors (Gonzalez 2012). Networking proves to be imperative for academic success as supportive adults and peers often encourage students to do well in high school and give them the confidence to pursue postsecondary education (Gonzalez 2012; Perez et al 2009). Family resources, social ties, and mentorship are also found to be crucial in developing positive educational experiences for undocumented youth (Gonzalez 2009b). These resources provide advantages to navigating the social world as they may lead to financial and emotional support (Gonzalez 2012). Furthermore, this research finds that those undocumented students who disclose both their legal status and financial difficulties have better access to resources including financial assistance. In reacting to their circumstances by reaching out to others, undocumented students demonstrate Pearlin and Schooler’s (1978)
third coping mechanism. They can rely on individuals from their primary groups to help manage the emotional and financial strain of being unauthorized immigrants.

However, current research (Gonzalez 2011) also suggests that undocumented students in their mid to late twenties are more likely to let go of dreams and aspirations related to career development and/or education. This disenchantment is caused by “prolonged experiences of illegality” that force undocumented students to view their legal circumstances as “more permanent” (Gonzalez 2011: 613-14). Inevitably, many come to accept the limitations of their legal status and begin to accept their lives as undocumented immigrant workers (Gonzalez 2011). These individuals are not choosing to eliminate their undocumented status by moving to their country of origin, a response which would coincide with Pearlin and Schooler’s (1987) first coping strategy. Instead, these undocumented youth employ the second coping strategy and demonstrate a shift in thought and priorities.

The coping strategies used by undocumented students to respond and adjust to their legal status indicate that they reflect characteristics of minorities who feel both empowered to overcome the barriers that are placed in front of them and minorities who come to believe that there is little they can individually to change the circumstances of their lives. The dualities and contradictions that are marked in the lives of undocumented American students is further explored in Ogbu’s work (1991) on Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities. In the following section, I explore how undocumented youth do not exclusively fit into either category but instead possess traits from both minority groups.
Undocumented Students as Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities

Ogbu (1991) studied the educational attainment of minority children in the United States by dividing them into two categories: immigrant or nonimmigrant (involuntary) minorities. According to Ogbu (1991), immigrant minorities have voluntarily relocated to a new country as they hope to gain better economic opportunities as well as a better quality life. In contrast, involuntary minorities (also described as nonimmigrant minorities), have been incorporated or brought to their current society as a result of slavery, conquest, or colonization; examples given by Ogbu include Native Americans, Blacks, and Chicanos in the United States.

Whereas research shows that both immigrant and involuntary minority children are less successful in school than children in the dominant group as they encounter cultural, linguistic, and structural barriers, Ogbu maintains that immigrant minority children “are relatively more successful in school than nonimmigrant (involuntary) minorities” (1991:4). Ogbu suggests that the integration, whether voluntary (for immigrant minorities) or coercive (for involuntary minorities), leads individuals to experience and perceive their society and life experience in distinct ways. Immigrant minorities tend to interpret the struggles they face as temporary problems that can be solved with higher levels of education and hard work (Ogbu 1991). Because they have recently experienced voluntary migration, immigrant minorities have a positive dual frame of reference as they compare their current positions to what their lives could be in their home country. For the immigrant minority community, education plays an imperative role in getting ahead, thus academic achievement is viewed as a path to social mobility.
Involuntary minorities, in contrast, lack a positive dual frame of reference as there is no ‘homeland’ to which they can compare (Ogbu 1991). They do not justify nor see the discrimination and prejudice they encounter as temporary. Instead, involuntary minorities come to interpret forms of discrimination as permanent and institutionalized (Ogbu 1991). Ultimately, involuntary minorities “come to realize or believe that it requires more than education, individual effort, and hard work to overcome the barriers against them in the society’s opportunity structure” (Ogbu 1991: 14). These views adversely affect involuntary minorities as they may not come to see education or individual will as a pathway to a better quality of life. As a result, involuntary minorities may lower their educational achievements. The pessimistic outlook and negative dual frame of reference that characterizes involuntary minorities more greatly coincides with Smith’s (1987) bifurcation of consciousness because their positions and experiences in life produce and reinforce a standpoint of marginality.

In many ways, undocumented students demonstrate characteristics of both involuntary and immigrant minorities; some accept the boundaries set by their lack of legal status while others, in the face of adversity, manage to pursue their dreams of achieving a postsecondary education. As anticipated by Ogbu’s work, Perez (2010) finds undocumented students who continue to overcome barriers and “exhibit the same type of tenacious optimism, drive and perseverance that fueled their parents’ desire to pursue a better future in the U.S.” (33). Perez (2010) finds that college-eligible undocumented students exhibit academic achievement and participate in extracurricular activities such as volunteering and civic participation. In his interview with these students, he finds that undocumented students demonstrate psychological resilience, perseverance, and
optimism (Perez 2010). This tenacity and optimism could lead undocumented to be partially classified as immigrant minorities who see their circumstances as temporary struggles that can be defeated by education and self-will. Despite the optimism and success of many undocumented students pursuing higher education, research suggests that not all undocumented youth have the motivation to pursue postsecondary education.

Some undocumented youth demonstrate the pessimistic outlook and low educational attainment found in involuntary minorities. Gonzalez (2009b and 2011), Perez Huber et al. (2009) and Perez et al. (2009) report that some undocumented students become discouraged, experience a decline in optimism and as a result drop their levels of productivity during the last years of high school. Based on his interviews with undocumented youth, Gonzalez (2009b and 2012) warns that without access to mentors and community resources, undocumented youth become more likely to independently deal with feelings of fear and depression, come to feel invisible in the societies they inhabit, and engage in illicit activities. In his study (Gonzalez 2012), the lack of network support, combined with the realization that they will be unable to use their education to secure employment or financial assistance, lead some undocumented students to surrender their educational dreams. Like involuntary minorities, some undocumented students come to view the structural limitations and inequalities they experience as permanent products of society. For these students, individual action and determination does not guide them to a better quality of life.

Given the literature reviewed, undocumented students in the United States may be described as straddling these two positions as involuntary minorities and voluntary immigrant- possessing characteristics from each group. Research (Chavez et al. 2007;
Gonzalez (2010) suggests that the obstacles and concerns that undocumented students must deal with can lead to a lack of focus on school, and in turn, negatively affect their academic performance. Yet, Perez’s (2010) research demonstrates that other undocumented students accept the challenges they will encounter and become motivated to work even harder.

It is important to note that I use Ogbu’s (1991) and Smith’s (1987) work not to exclusively place or label undocumented students as immigrant or involuntary minorities or as American or undocumented, but rather to highlight how as unauthorized Americans, undocumented students can simultaneously occupy opposing standpoints yet at the same time, express fluidity between different positions. Being brought without legal status to a new country at a young age, they struggle with knowing their worlds both as Americans and as unauthorized immigrants. Additionally, their struggles are compounded with them having positive, optimistic outlooks while at the same knowing that there are institutional limitations that can defer or prevent their academic dreams from becoming a reality. Faced with restrictions that mirror those of stateless individuals, undocumented students develop specific coping strategies to lessen the impact of limited opportunities.

In the following section I move on to describe the methodological aspects of this research study by discussing sampling methods, participants, and reflect on my ethnic background as a researcher.
Methodology

This thesis is based on in-depth interviews with eleven male and three female students ranging from 18-27 years old. Nine students entered the United States without legal permission while five overstayed tourist visas. Of the fourteen students, only one has adjusted his legal status, becoming a United States citizen. Another student received their work permit and the rest of the participants were waiting for current immigration policy to change.

My approach in this research study is largely inductive and informed by grounded theory (Charmaz 2001). That is, I began my study with certain research interests and general concepts that served as “points of departure to look at data, to listen to interviewees, and to think analytically about the data” (337). The theoretical concepts and analytical categories I utilize directly derived from my preliminary interviews (Charmaz 2001). While I did have interview schedules (see Appendix A and B), I allowed emergent themes to guide future interviews in my attempts to follow up on unanticipated topics.

Interviews focused on how the student’s experiences with high school graduation, the college admission process, employment prospects, financial aid opportunities, and development of career goals were impacted by their undocumented status. Most interviews lasted about two hours and took place in public spaces. All were audio recorded, with the permission of the participant, and transcribed.

I gained access to participants through convenience and snowball sampling. These sampling methods were used as undocumented students typically keep their lack of legal status hidden and are often indistinguishable from documented college students. To
locate participants for the study, I first distributed flyers (see Appendix C) in Sociology classes where instructors had allowed me to present myself and the topic of my research study. These flyers gave a brief overview of my research study as well as contact information. I also contacted CSUN’s Dreams to be Heard, an on-campus organization advocating for the rights of undocumented students. With the permission of their administration, I attended club meetings and distributed additional flyers. To protect their identities, I asked the students that they do not contact me during classes or meeting presentations. Lastly, I contacted family, friends, and acquaintances to inform them of my desire to interview undocumented students.

Seven of the participants interviewed were recruited from the flyers I distributed on campus and three were personal friends. I was able contact two through mutual acquaintances, one participant was a student I met in a class at CSUN, and another undocumented student was a family member. From the participants, eight students were active CSUN students, two were CSUN graduates, and four were students at community colleges in California. I snowballed the sample by asking the initial participants gained through the distribution of flyers if they knew other undocumented students who might be interested in participating in my research study.

The majority of the interviews took place at various locations within the CSUN campus such as in empty classrooms, private library rooms, and outdoor patios. In special circumstances, I arranged for interviews to take place at a private location chosen in discussion with the participant. Once the interviews were transcribed, I used focused coding to analyze data. This particular coding process was used as it is the most appropriate coding method to categorize large amounts of data to track themes that
reappear (Charmaz 2001). Because it is more selective and conceptual (Charmaz 2001), I decided to use focused coding as it helped me determine which concepts and theoretical ideas I would explore in my findings.

Gaining entrée, establishing rapport, and completing interviews was difficult. Documentation status is a delicate issue to discuss within undocumented immigrants because they are often labeled as “illegal” or “criminal.” The largest risk that exists in interviewing this sensitive population is breach of confidentiality which can lead to exposure of identity and legal status; potentially leading to deportation. I went to great lengths to maintain their identity concealed by treating participants on a first name basis only and by using pseudonyms in all notes, transcripts, and audio files. Participation was completely voluntary and all participants were informed that they may stop the interview at any time and/or may choose to not answer a question.

Conducting in-depth interviews and using a qualitative approach was the most appropriate methodology for this study. According to Marshall (1996), qualitative studies “are most useful for answering humanistic ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ questions” (522). While quantitative research has multiple strengths and uses, such methods are better suited for research intended to explore ‘what’ questions or test pre-determine hypotheses. Furthermore, quantitative research cannot thoroughly document the methods used by undocumented college students to accomplish everyday life. Although this study lacked a large sample, it examined narratives to help us better understand how lacking legal status affects educational aspirations, self image, and quality of life. This is invaluable as even large number of cases in quantitative research cannot depict the life experiences of their participants (Becker 2001).
Because this group is marginalized, undetected, and often labeled as “illegal”, there is little known about their postsecondary educational experiences. Research demonstrates that negative perceptions towards undocumented immigrants reduce public support for legislation benefiting undocumented students (Drachman 2006). As a result, this project seeks to not only “dismantle bad stereotypes but rather to construct good stereotypes by producing a more holistic and satisfying summary view of the subject” (Katz 2001: 379).

As a Mexican-American researcher whose parents were undocumented immigrants, I found that my ethnic and socioeconomic background, along with my family’s history with migration, facilitated my entrance to the field and understanding of the data. I grew up and worked in low income, immigrant communities; I also counseled and mentored undocumented students in high schools and referred undocumented adults to immigration attorneys. As Baca Zinn (1979) states, field research conducted by minorities has some empirical and methodological advantages. To begin, researcher and participant may share similar views of society. Consequently, the researcher may ask questions, gather information, and grasp data in a way researchers from the dominant group could not. While gaining entrance is complex process where relationships have to be established, Baca Zinn (1979) notes that this process may be facilitated for minority researchers by sharing a racial or ethnic identity with their participants and as so, be less likely to encounter hostility and distrust.
Meeting the Students

The data for this research study comes from the interviews held with fourteen students. The participants ranged in age from 18-27 years old. Their biographies reflect a range of immigration experiences. Nine students had entered the United States without legal permission while five had overstayed their tourist visas. From the fourteen students, only one had adjusted his legal status, becoming a United States Citizen. Another student was receiving his work permit and the rest of the participants were undocumented and waiting for current immigration policy to change. Currently, there are limited avenues to legal residency for unauthorized immigrants already living in the United States; marriage to a legal U.S. resident or citizen is one of them. The narrative accounts expressed by these students differed by participant as some were more or less forthcoming than others. In the following section, I introduce each student with a brief biographical narrative.

Xavier

Regardless of the DREAM Act, I’m still going for the master’s and the credential. I’m just saying that, (the DREAM Act is) not my only option ... I don’t want to be one of those persons where I have a job and I hate my job and I didn’t do anything with my life. That’s one of the things that I’m afraid of.

Xavier was brought to the United States without documents when he was eight months old. He grew up in Los Angeles, California and attended a Math, Technology, and Science Magnet school in the San Fernando Valley. Xavier states that his high school counselor discouraged him from pursuing postsecondary education and explicitly told him to not bother with applying for college because he was, and continues to be, undocumented.
After high school, Xavier became a student at California State University, Northridge and received his Bachelor’s degree in Spanish Language and Culture in the fall of 2011. Xavier would like to continue his education at a University of California and receive a PhD in Spanish. He hopes to one day be a high school teacher or college professor. He currently works as a bartender in a restaurant which his older brother, who is also undocumented, manages. Xavier spends his free time reaching out to high school students to inform them about policies like AB 540 to encourage undocumented students to pursue a college degree. Although Xavier is hopeful that immigration policy will change, his brother’s success as an undocumented worker allows him to envision a future without legal status.

Paul

*I just throw my hands up in the air and say “God, just help me out”... I always wonder how people with, that have an undocumented status, how they handle their situation, whether it’s through faith, because I always think without faith or without God, how do you even live through this?*

Paul is a second year business major student at California State University, Northridge. His family legally migrated to the United States from Korea when he was only a year old. As a teen, Paul performed well in high school graduating with a 3.7 GPA. His parents encouraged him to pursue postsecondary education and he applied and was admitted to multiple University of California campuses. Without financial aid, Paul’s father was unable to pay for tuition at a university. After high school he became a student at CSUN and joined an on-campus advocacy group for the rights of undocumented youth. He distributes information on the federal DREAM act and enjoys giving spiritual advice to other undocumented students.
During the interview, Paul stated that his parents had shared very little information regarding their legal status. They informed him that they did attempt to legalize his status but were unsuccessful. Paul does know that both his father and mother have driver’s licenses but does not know if his parents are residents or legal immigrants who simply have their work visas. Paul disclosed that any questions he asks of his parents are met with short answers.

Currently, his only means of income include tutoring elementary and middle school children. He does not work because he does not want to use a fake Social Security Card. Paul is the only student interviewed who spoke about his faith in religion and God, and specifically, how he uses his faith to allow him to cope with the lack of opportunities that are available to him.

**Nick**

_I started playing World of Warcraft and I enjoyed being treated as an equal there, in the game, because they don’t ask you “oh, are you legal here”? You’re just a game character, you’re like everyone else, so I started to live more in the game than live in life._

Nick is a 19 year old freshman at California State University, Northridge working towards a bachelor’s degree in Cellular Molecular Biology. His family migrated to the United States from Lebanon when he was six years old. For many years, his parents attempted to legalize their status but were unsuccessful. Like Paul, Nick has limited information regarding his parents’ attempts to gain legal residency. He claims that his parents have not been forthcoming about their experiences to adjust their legal status.

Nick confessed that there was a time period during high school in which he began to excessively play World of Warcraft; a multiplayer, role-playing, online game. He maintains that his appeal to World of Warcraft stemmed on its equal, meritocratic structure. According to Nick, his undocumented status was irrelevant to the status
mobility he could achieve in the game. Eventually, Nick regained his focus on his studies and continued to pursue higher education and has performed academically well. In high school, he took a total of 11 AP (advanced placement) courses and graduated with a 3.9 GPA.

Nick aspires to be a doctor but has not been able to apply or complete any internship programs while at CSUN due to his lack of a Social Security Number, which he reports are often needed to complete the background check on each participant. Nick strongly believes that immigration laws should be in place and are undeniably needed. However, he believes that deportation procedures should not be directed towards children and youth; and that these two populations should be allowed to adjust their legal status because they did not deliberately decide to move to the United States. Nick remains hopeful that immigration reform will be adopted so that he can adjust his legal status and pursue his goal of becoming a physician.

**Martín**

*I think that achieving that kind of academic greatness, just having a degree is, is one step closer to your dream. And no matter what kind of obstacle there is, there’s no way that’s going to change me in any way, just to work harder.*

Martín was brought without legal permission to the United States by his mother when he was six years old. His mother decided to relocate from Mexico as all of Martín’s siblings were already living in California. Martín reported having a difficult time with school, primarily because he had a difficult time learning English. During high school, he had lower than average grades, but after taking an interest in cross country track his grades rapidly improved. Martín maintains that his high school coach was instrumental in having him pursue postsecondary education; in fact, Martín credits his coach as the person responsible for his enrollment in college. Martín’s coach placed him
in contact with coaches from local colleges and pushed Martín to improve his running time hoping he could receive a scholarship to a 4 year institution. With increased speed and better running times, Martín’s confidence in himself and his ability to pursue postsecondary education increased.

After obtaining his high school diploma, Martín went on to study at College of the Canyons and Moorpark College. There he continued to improve his running times and was able to receive a scholarship to New Mexico Highlands University. He hopes to one day become a school counselor or coach.

**Giancarlo:**
*When I lived in Mexico, our house … didn’t have a roof over the bathroom, I remember taking showers with buckets of water because we had no running water … I remember some days, to eat, all we could get was some tortillas and avocado and that’s all we would eat the whole day … it’s just not a good situation over there, it’s really bad.*

Giancarlo and his family first migrated to the United States when he was five years old. After three years, Giancarlo’s family decided to return to their native country. However, due to financial difficulties, they decided to return to California when Giancarlo was in 7th grade and have remained in the U.S. ever since. During high school Giancarlo achieved good grades and played for his school’s soccer team. He graduated high school with a 3.4 GPA and went on to continue his studies at California State University, Northridge.

As a Biotechnology major, Giancarlo maintains that he should be participating in internship opportunities needed to get into medical school. However, he is unable to apply because he cannot provide a Social Security Number. Like other peers, Giancarlo chooses not to work with a fake Social Security Number. He hopes that the DREAM Act
will be adopted so that he can legally work, gain residency, and eventually become a citizen of the United States.

At the time of the interview, he discussed the possibility of moving to Canada under a student visa should he not be able to adjust his legal status in the United States. Giancarlo expressed his desire to live in a country where he is not “wasting his life away” – he maintains that he is unable to participate in activities that most people take for granted like being able to drive, go out with friends, apply to medical school, and use his education to find work. After completing his bachelor’s degree at CSUN, Giancarlo wishes to pursue medical school and become a pediatric oncologist or neurosurgeon.

**Fernando**

*My friends in Nicaragua, they call me a gringo now, and, people here, they think I’m a Latino. I guess I am what I am, I’m a human being.*

Fernando is a 24 year old male who first came to the U.S. when he was five years old with a tourist visa to visit his mother. His parents divorced at a young age and lived in different countries. His mother moved to the United States while his father stayed in Nicaragua. For nine years Fernando traveled back in forth between the United States and Nicaragua and at age 14 was told by his paternal and maternal families to overstay his visa to live with his mother in Northern California.

According to Fernando, one of the leading factors that persuaded his family to relocate him to the United States was a need for safety and security. Fernando maintains that his family has had continuous issues with the Sandinista National Liberation Front, a leading socialist political party in Nicaragua, since the early 1980’s. During this time, his grandfather was accused of being a counter revolutionist and was subsequently imprisoned and tortured. Fernando’s grandfather was threatened by the Sandinistas, told
that they would persecute his family, and was eventually murdered. Since his grandfather’s death, one of his uncles has been wrongfully imprisoned and his father has been stabbed on different occasions, although not critically injured. Some of the details regarding the attacks on his family are vague as Fernando was too young when they occurred to clearly remember them. However, he does know that the last stabbing incident occurred when he was 12, two years before his family decided to have him permanently settle in the United States.

Fernando states that he had difficulty learning the English language after he moved to California. Nevertheless, he enrolled at Chabot Community College after high school where he improved his English and continues to take general education classes. Fernando studies Kinesiology and hopes to transfer to San Jose State University and become a physical education teacher. He is a part-time Martial Arts instructor who teaches taekwondo.

Fernando is currently in the process of appealing a deportation order. After a night of hanging out with his friends, he was arrested while attempting to help an intoxicated friend in public. While in the local police station, Fernando and his friend, who is also undocumented, were forwarded to the station’s immigration department. Fernando did not have any criminal charges placed against him that night and his arrest was titled as an immigration hold. After being released, Fernando was served with a notice to appear in court and is now facing deportation. Fernando is hopeful that he will be able to remain in the United States legally because he has no criminal record. He is now working with a local organization to fight his removal proceedings. I have not had
any contact with Fernando and am unaware of where he is currently is living or whether
he has been granted the ability to legally remain in the United States.

**Ernesto**

*I think (when) graduating college ... your bubble is burst also... And all of a sudden you are an undocumented worker; you are no longer an undocumented student. And you don’t look any other different to an ICE officer than you know, any other migrant.*

Ernesto is a 22 year old student working towards his bachelor’s degree in Chicano/a Studies at California State University, Northridge. His family legally migrated to the United States from Mexico when he was six years old but overstayed their visas. Like other families, Ernesto’s parents attempted to extend their visas and apply for residency but were denied.

During his first week of school as a freshman at CSUN, Ernesto witnessed a rally held by two student groups who mobilize to increase awareness and support for undocumented and minority students. He quickly became motivated to join the movement. As an activist, Ernesto now organizes demonstrations, civil disobedience rallies, and marches for the rights of undocumented students and immigrants. However, his interest to help the disenfranchised extends to people of color and minority children who become victims of the leaks in the educational pipeline. He hopes to one day become an immigration lawyer or pediatrician.

**Eduardo**

*At first I just thought like “Oh, I was born in another country” like that’s it. No big deal. But then ... I started noticing little by little ... I started [thinking] “I don’t have papers ... what do I do from here?”*

Eduardo, a 20 year old college student, was brought from Mexico when he was one year old. Along with his parents and 3 older siblings, Eduardo lacked legal permission to enter the United States when he immigrated. Eduardo remembered having
a difficult time adjusting to the idea of being an undocumented young adult. He reported watching his older brother, who is also undocumented, drop out of high school only to work at a minimum wage job. Eduardo believed that his education would not lead him to a “good” job as an undocumented adult and as a result, became unmotivated to complete high school. Furthermore, he became frustrated when teachers would give him opportunities to take part of internship programs only to learn that being undocumented would make him ineligible to participate. Eduardo maintains that these factors discouraged him from attending and performing well in school. In the eleventh grade, Eduardo began questioning “what if” one day he was granted residency and did not have a high school or college degree. After reflecting on these thoughts, Eduardo began taking evening and weekend classes to make up for failed classes. He graduated high school and enrolled at Glendale Community College.

Eduardo studies Administration of Justice and hopes that his degree will lead him to work in law enforcement. Eduardo is currently unemployed as he has not been able to find a job that will pay him cash. He has rejected using a fake Social Security Card to find employment because he does not want to jeopardize his opportunity to legalize his status or his ability to find employment within law enforcement. From the 13 undocumented students interviewed, Eduardo was the only student who was in process of legalizing his status. At the time of the interview he was about 60 days from receiving his work permit. After a ten year wait, his petition for residency was eventually granted. Eduardo hopes to get his immigration “papers” so he can complete school, legally find a job, and help his mother purchase a home.

Daniel
When I was in middle school and high school, I thought that by this time I would have my papers already and that I’d be going to a university but nothing’s happened, it’s harder than I thought it was going to be ... Not having papers, it’s something that follows you. Not so much as a student but rather as a person.

Daniel was 12 years old when his mother made the decision to illegally migrate to the United States from Mexico to join his father who had been living in the United States as an undocumented immigrant since Daniel was a year old. Daniel recalled voicing his objection to moving to the United States but remembered having no choice in the matter. Once here, his parents enrolled him in middle school and Daniel began learning English.

He graduated high school in Ventura County with a 4.2 GPA. After graduating from high school, Daniel enrolled himself in Santa Barbara City College and hopes to transfer to UC Santa Barbara to pursue a degree in Computer Science. He currently works part time as a Bilingual Community Outreach Assistant providing translation services for a self employed individual. He is paid cash and does not use a fake Social Security Card.

Cristina
I’ve had to work for what I have and other people just take it for granted.

I first met Cristina when she was a 24 year old senior at California State University, Northridge finishing her Bachelor’s degree in Sociology. I conducted a total of three formal interviews with her at two stages in her life, two as a student, and one as a college graduate, and through personal similarities, developed a friendship. This friendship allowed us to stay in contact with one another and facilitated a certain level of comfort which, I believe, allowed her to disclose more information about her experiences as an undocumented student and individual.
During the interview, Cristina recalled traveling between the United States and Mexico continuously as a child; spending holidays, special events, and entire summer vacations with family in California. Her immediate family had passports and visas that facilitated their visits. When she was 14 years old, Cristina told her family that she wanted to move to the United States to attend high school and pursue a career as a lawyer. She believed she had better odds of completing law school and finding employment in the United States. She said that there is no free public education in Mexico. With an older brother already attending high school, she worried that two children in secondary education would be too much of an economic strain on her father. Cristina’s desire to leave her native country was supported by her family. Her father had lost his “good job” and her parents thought the decrease in his salary would prevent them from renewing their visas. When she made the decision to move to the United States, she did not know that she would be residing in the country illegally and could be deported. Her lack of understanding immigration policies was partly caused by the fact that she is in a mixed status family. Her older brother was born in the U.S. and is a citizen. Cristina maintains that as a young teen, she did not understand the immigration laws of this country or the implications of what it meant to be undocumented.

Once permanently living in the United States, Cristina attended high school in California and excelled. She graduated in only three years with a 3.9 GPA. Cristina applied to and was admitted to multiple University of California campuses. She completed her Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), hoping to secure financial assistance but not knowing that being undocumented would make her ineligible for government based loans and grants. Initially, Cristina thought she could overcome all
of the financial obstacles presented to her but stated that she quickly realized a UC was financially out of reach.

After high school, she attended CSUN. Cristina struggled to pay for tuition, and spoke of how the budget increases significantly affected her as she didn’t qualify for loans or grants. Having to work multiple jobs- as many as one full time and two part time jobs- distracted her from her studies. Cristina remembers having little energy or time to focus on her classes. Realizing she could not pay for tuition at CSUN, she began taking classes at Los Angeles Valley College and Mission College. After completing some units at the local community colleges, she was able to transfer back to CSUN. Cristina maintains that college counselors and professors scolded her for not putting enough energy on class assignments. Cristina confessed that she never disclosed her legal status to any of the college counselors or professors she spoke with. She felt as though they never understood her need to work so many hours, and as a result, was often misunderstood as unfocused and lazy. Nevertheless, she managed to receive her bachelor’s degree in Sociology in May 2010.

After graduating college, Cristina kept her position at the gym she worked at while she was finishing her undergraduate studies. She used a fake Social Security Number to keep her employment. During the last interview, she expressed feeling frustrated because several co-workers questioned her continued employment at the gym after graduation. Cristina maintains that lacking legal status limits the employment options of undocumented students.

Cristina wants to pursue graduate school and is interested in obtaining a degree in Marriage and Family Therapy, Psychology, or Speech and Language Pathology. After
the Department of Homeland Security released DACA applications, she applied for deferred action and was accepted as a candidate. She confessed that she has had difficulty in applying for legal employment because she feels apprehensive to disclose her work experience as an undocumented worker and is not accustomed to applying to entry level jobs. She continues to look for employment.

**Audelia**

*I felt like either way I was gonna lose; I think that’s what I was angry about. Even if I decided NOT to go to college I was going to lose, even if I decided TO go to college, I was going to lose. So I think that’s what I was angry at … that the system didn’t work for me … that it worked for everybody else but just not me.*

Audelia is a 24 year old college graduate who was born in Mexico and brought to the United States when she was three years old. Growing up, she knew she was born in a different country but did not know that she lacked legal permission to reside in the United States. In an attempt to prepare her for high school, Audelia’s mother informed her of her undocumented status during the last year of middle school. Like Xavier, Audelia reported being discouraged from pursuing a four year university. In her interview, she explained how her high school counselor advised her to refrain from applying to UCLA because she lacked access to financial aid. Regardless, Audelia graduated from high school with a 3.75 GPA and went on to complete her Bachelor’s degree in Sociology at California State University, Northridge.

Audelia wishes to pursue a PhD in Sociology at a University of California Campus. She is currently working as a barista at a coffee shop earning $30 a day. Audelia hopes to obtain a position as a youth advocate for at risk youth. She feels that her degree in Sociology can help her enrich the lives of others.

**Anthony**
I didn’t see the necessity for me to have one [a Social Security Number]. I mean I knew I needed it, but my mentality was more like “if I’ve been able to do all this through all these years then why not continue?” I might not be the champ right now but I know that in the near future I’ll probably have the chance you know with [the] DREAM Act, if not then hopefully marrying my wife [will grant me legal status].

Anthony was brought to the United States from Mexico when he was three years old. Like Audelia, his parents refrained from telling him that he was undocumented until he was a teen. It was not until he tried to obtain his driver’s permit that his father informed him that he lacked legal status. Rather than letting the new information defeat him, he acknowledged the difficulties he would encounter but continued to move forward. He graduated high school with a 3.8 GPA and enrolled himself at Valley Community College. There he spent about five years earning the credits needed to transfer to California State University, Northridge. Anthony is now a second year student at CSUN completing Bachelor’s degree in Sociology.

During the interview Anthony described the work ethic, optimism, and success of his parents. Although they are undocumented, they started a landscaping business and are rather economically stable. Having his parents as positive examples, Anthony began his own housekeeping company with the help of his fiancé - using her credit and Social Security Number to legally establish his business.

Although Anthony maintains that he makes “good money” from his company, he would like to enroll in a graduate program, receive his Master’s degree in Sociology, and pursue a career as a parole officer. However, he understands the limitations of his status. Although his interview is marked by hope and optimism, it is also filled with resignation. Anthony looks forward to the day when he will be able to enjoy the rights and privileges
reserved to his documented peers. However, he can also envision a future without legal status should immigration reform fails to pass in the United States congress.

**Anabelle**

*I still feel like a little girl, like my parents have to drive me around ... I just feel really dependent on people.*

I met Anabelle when she was a student pursuing a bachelor’s program in Accountancy at California State University, Northridge. She was legally brought to the United States when she was nine years old. Anabelle, her parents, and a younger sister came from Colombia with tourist visas. Immediately after arriving in the United States, her parents hired lawyers to help with their requests for residency as they had no intention of returning to Colombia. Both of her parents were accountants in their native country, but were jobless. Anabelle stated that her parents were motivated to migrate to the United States by the lack of employment opportunities and high crime rates.

While living in the United States, Anabelle’s mother gave birth to a third daughter- Anabelle’s youngest sister. Her parents spent many years petitioning for legal residency but were unsuccessful. Shortly before starting college, Anabelle, along with her father, mother, and middle sister, received deportation orders. On the day that I interviewed her we talked about her deportation order as well as the possibility of being removed. Anabelle displayed signs of being worried and stated that she had no desire to return to a country which she no longer considered her home.

After our interview, I was informed through a mutual acquaintance that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) went to Anabelle’s home to detain her along with her family. Her youngest sister, who is a United States Citizen, was at school while this occurred. ICE proceeded to deport her father but released Anabelle, her
middle sister, and mother; they were told to return for a hearing at a later date. Presently, I am not aware of Annabelle’s whereabouts. She has not been seen at CSUN and those who know her do not know if she continues to reside in the country illegally or if she has returned to Colombia. At the time of the interview, Anabelle worked full time at a fast food restaurant using a fake Social Security Number and aspired to be a Certified Public Accountant.

**Adan**

*I’m a Mexican and will always be a Mexican but I can also be part of this society, I’m a Latino living in the United States…* I love the United States, I think it’s given me the opportunities that I would have never gotten in Mexico. *I love my country but I love this country too because it’s given me everything that I have.*

Adan entered the United States without legal permission with his mother and sister when he was 14 years old to reunite with his stepfather in California. His stepfather had been living in the United States as a U.S. Citizen and had been sending remittances to Adan and his family in Mexico. Once in California, Adan attended high school and reported having a difficult time learning English stating that it was the “toughest part” about coming to the United States. During the interview, Adan reported being bullied by classmates and co-workers because of his heavy accent. He also recalled feeling depressed because he could not afford college. Adan first applied to college in the year 2000, before in-state tuition was available to undocumented students in California. Throughout his interview, Adan discussed how difficult it was for him to be undocumented- to conceal his legal status, fear deportation, and to feel like an outsider. He reported how his experiences as an undocumented teen often led to feelings of low self esteem and depression. At the same time, he claims that it was these feelings that led him to pursue postsecondary education. Adan wanted to compete with
documented, English speaking peers at school and prove to himself that regardless of his limited English and undocumented status, he could persevere.

After high school Adan persuaded his stepfather to file the necessary paperwork to adjust his legal status along with that of his sister and mother’s. In 2001, at the age of 19, Adan became a legal resident and began taking college classes at Mission College, Los Angeles Pierce College, Valley College, and College of the Canyons. He was able to become a United States citizen in 2007 and graduated from California State University, Northridge in 2008 with a degree in Sociology. Currently, he works in law enforcement and hopes to pursue a master’s degree in public administration.

Overall and in reflecting on the experiences of undocumented students, it is apparent that their lives are filled with diversity and complexity. Some undocumented youth arrive in the United States at a young age while others live a significant portion of their childhood in their countries of origin. The road to postsecondary education is different for each individual as well while some undocumented students have the financial and emotional support of their families and friends, others must overcome obstacles independently. Nevertheless, similarities in the experiences of undocumented youth as they attempt to pursue postsecondary education can be found. The following findings section highlights both the diversity and the commonalities of their experiences as undocumented college students.
Results - The Experiences of Undocumented Students

The students interviewed for this study describe their lives being impacted by their lack of legal status. Overall, the interviews expose their limited mobility, restrictions to resources and activities, and emotional distress. Although undocumented students report feeling no different, in many ways, than their documented peers, they explain that their life experiences are greatly shaped by their legal status. However, while undocumented youth may face multiple institutional barriers, and at times feel discouraged, their stories also illustrate the innovative and ingenious ways they cope with, negotiate, and overcome the obstacles placed before them.

This section begins, in Part One, by exploring the perceived identities of undocumented students. Part Two depicts the way in which these student view education as a pathway to citizenship and safety; shielding them from the possibility of deportation. In Part Three, I explore the institutionalized limitations and constraints to postsecondary education and career advancement, followed by Part Four where I detail the emotional distress many undocumented youth report. Lastly, Part Five is dedicated to highlighting the ways in which undocumented youth cope with and overcome the limitations of their legal status; finding innovative ways to obtain postsecondary education and inhabit a society that they perceive does not work in their favor. It is important to remember that all interviews took place before the California DREAM Act and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was enacted.

Part One: The Perceived National Identities of Undocumented Students
“I don’t know another place as home except for this place... I am American” – Xavier

Brought to the United States when he was eight months old, this is the only country Xavier has ever known as home. After migrating to the United States from
Oaxaca, Mexico, his parents moved to Southern California and raised Xavier and his older brother in Los Angeles. Xavier attended elementary, middle, and high school in the United States, never returning to the country he is bound to by birth. When asked what nationality he identifies with, he quickly responds “I don’t know another place as home except for this place… I am American.”

Many of his peers, as their stories demonstrate, identify themselves to some extent as American. Paul, like Xavier, was brought to the United States when he was only an infant. After arriving in the United States, Paul’s parents settled in Koreatown, a neighborhood in the city of Los Angeles. While he may have a Korean nationality and several acquaintances who are Korean American, Paul does not view Korea as his home country or associate with the broader Korean culture. He gives the following explanation:

I came here when I was one year old…I consider myself American and this is the only real culture I’ve grown up into, although I am Korean, I eat Korean food, I’ve lived in Koreatown for a lot of my years, it’s just, it doesn’t, it’s not as real as really living in Korea and experiencing only a Korean culture… the language barrier is always there, for me…I was never able, to really talk to my parents [in Korean] only because I was only speaking English… I basically think I was born here, I just think this is where I was raised my whole life, that distance from me being Korean, like being born there, doesn’t really translate to me. What my parents actually did in Korea, I don’t really think that far back, I don’t know why.

Eduardo was also brought to the United States at a young age. He also shares Paul’s disconnect from the country in which he was born, acknowledging that Los Angeles is the only home he is truly familiar with.

I do consider myself American… I don’t know anything else, like, just America…the U.S. I guess… I was just born in Mexico… I like being Mexican…I’m proud. But I kind of do want to be American too…I’ve
lived here all of my life like, where am I from you know? I don’t know where I’m from. I was born in Mexico but...I don’t remember Mexico. I’ve never visited Mexico... When I talk about Mexico I just have to paint a picture in my head. But when [I] talk about LA, I’m like “oh LA- yeah, I know everything about LA!”

I asked Eduardo if he would “have a stronger connection to being American” after he received his citizenship and he replied, “I think I’ll be more American. Yeah. Because, like I said, I don’t know Mexico.” Similarly, Nick, despite his undocumented status, also feels American. According to him, the only factor that separates him from his documented peers is legal status. He explains:

I consider myself to be American in every way other than what the government tells me...I don’t feel different, but I am... that’s the reality of it... I talk like them [documented peers], I dress like them, I have legs, arms, brains, a heart, like them. I’ve been with them most of my life, I feel just like them except for that paper that says I’m not.

Like Nick, Giancarlo’s connection to being American is compromised by his lack of legal status. While he may feel American, the limitations he experiences prevent him from fully embracing an American nationality. As he describes:

I feel I’m an American, because most of my life I’ve been here, and I just feel like this is what I know of as my country., there’s always a part of me that’s like I’m Mexican, but I feel that culturally wise, I’m American. All my friends say I’m white-washed...I feel like an American. I don’t feel I’m fully American because I’m not allowed to be fully American, it’s an iffy thing. Culturally I’m American but because of the limitations I feel a little bit of resentment towards the United States, so I don’t allow myself to feel fully American but I do feel that this is the country I know and would like to grow up in or finish growing up.

As their interviews suggest, these students experience a significant disconnect from their “home” countries. They all view themselves as American and identify with the culture. Brought to the U.S. as young children, Eduardo and Paul have no memories
of their lives before the United States. The only factor that leads some students to separate from their American identity is the exclusion they experience. Eduardo states that he will probably feel “more American” when he receives his citizenship when it, in the words of Nick, is simply “a piece of paper.” Nevertheless, that piece of paper has serious implications. Because it establishes formal citizenship, not having it, as they students will later explain, leads to socioeconomic and academic limitations. These students reject the idea of being fully American because they feel like they are not part of this country; they are illegal immigrants, illegally residing in the United States. This is problematic because as Eduardo states, if undocumented students are not American but at the same time don’t feel any ties to their country of birth, then, what or who are they?

When I interviewed Adan and the question of perceived national identity came up, I wasn’t sure what to expect. He had migrated to the United States when he was fourteen years old, endured what he considered to be a lot of teasing from classmates, and had a difficult time learning the language. After being petitioned by his step-father, Adan gained residency and eventually citizenship. While he had traveled back to Mexico after adjusting his legal status, he had no intention of ever permanently returning to his country of birth; Adan had decided to call the United States home. On this topic, he shares the following story:

When I went to Mexico… I felt like it wasn’t the same- that I had changed, like I lost a part of my life, not my life, but a part of, I don’t even know how to explain… it’s like they [his parents] take you from one place and then they put you in another. All that time that had passed, being here…you go back and… you don’t feel the same, you don’t know the people… It’s different, and simply said, I don’t feel the same, why? Because I’m used to a way of life, because I started working here, and made my life here… so what if Americans are usually light skinned with blue eyes?… We are the same… I’m a Mexican and will always be a
Mexican but I can also be part of this society, I’m a Latino living in the United States… I love the United States. I think it’s given me the opportunities that I would have never gotten in Mexico. I love my country but I still love this country too because it’s given me everything that I have.

It’s evident that Adan does not view himself as a thorough-going American even though he is now a citizen. He clearly states: “I’m a Mexican and will always be a Mexican.” However, the fact that he does not identify himself as being American does not mean that he has little to no interest in being part of this society. This is, after all, the country which he believes has given him the opportunities to succeed and now calls home.

The undocumented students who participated in this research study largely identify, to some extent, as American or see the United States as their home country. But, regardless of their association with the U.S. or the length of stay, they are not recognized as legal residents. All of the undocumented students interviewed hope to adjust their legal status and become recognized citizens of the United States. With limited avenues to lawful residency, many of the students interviewed report looking at education as a pathway to citizenship, or at the very least, protection from deportation. Part Two explores the ways that they approach higher education as an opportunity to open doors into a more promising future.

**Part Two: Viewing Education as a Pathway to Citizenship or Safety**

“I’ll be set, they can’t touch me” - Audelia

At a young age, and particularly through school, children are taught that if they work hard enough, they can attain success in the United States (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Gonzalez 2012). However, because undocumented students are unable to lawfully work, they are often unable to use their educational attainment to improve their employment opportunities or social standing (Gonzalez 2012).
The undocumented students interviewed in this study demonstrate high regard for their education. Although they know that it is unlikely that they will be able to use their education to secure employment while they remain undocumented, many of the students interviewed see education as a gateway for a better life once they gain legal status. Furthermore, many see postsecondary education as a potential shield from deportation and as a pathway for establishing their legal status when and if the federal DREAM Act is passed.

At the time of the interview, Daniel had been residing in the United States without legal status for about eight years. After an unsuccessful attempt to be sponsored by his mother’s ex-husband, Daniel placed his hope of legalizing his status on the federal DREAM Act. Like many other undocumented students, Daniel felt that he was unable to pursue a career with his degree unless federal law changes. Nevertheless, he is not discouraged from pursuing a postsecondary education. He explains:

I have hope that something will happen, and when something does happen, I want to be ready with the education. [Education] is not something that’s based on papers. Although I might not have papers, I can have all of the education I want. Once I have my social security [number], then, that education will still be there, it’s not going anywhere.

Unlike his legal status, Daniel knows that his level of education is not something that can be given or taken away by a government agency or federal law. His education belongs to him; it is something that he can achieve with or without legal status. Daniel knows that he must wait for “something to happen”- an opportunity to finally be eligible for residency. When that moment does arise he wants to be able to compete in the labor force by being “ready with the education.”
Daniel’s experiences echo in important ways those of Anthony. At the time of the interview, he was a few classes away from receiving his bachelor’s degree in Sociology. After graduating high school, Anthony did not question the expected boundaries of his legal status. He knew postsecondary education would not help him secure employment and decided to postpone his enrollment in college because he “really didn’t see a good outcome.” After being away from school for a couple of years, he decided to return to school to pursue a career as a parole officer. During his interview, Anthony explained his motivation to obtain a bachelor’s degree:

I also see education, if…something would happen to help people legally reside in this country, I believe that the first ones will be somebody that’s gonna be… productive… and that knowing English and hav[ing] school [can only help]…I want to be in that area already…There’s the DREAM Act. [ev: did being undocumented discourage from continuing school?] In the beginning it did… I guess I wasn’t mentally ready for that… but now…I see hope…I came back to school and I see that one day I am going to be able to reach my goals… Because, eventually, I’m going to be legal in this country.

For Anthony, education has a double purpose. On the one hand, being a college graduate will allow him to qualify for residency under the federal DREAM Act. By meeting its education requirement, he hopes to be one of the “first ones” chosen. On the other hand, furthering his education will help him obtain the career he desires once he adjusts his legal status. An important component for being ready and “in that area” is completing his bachelor’s degree.

Nick and Audelia also view education as a pathway to adjusting their legal status. Because they are pursuing a college degree, they believe that they have better chances at receiving residency than those peers who decided to not pursue a postsecondary education.
Audelia:
I’m going to go to grad school, I’m going to get my PhD- I’m gonna get my PhD because I can’t sit at home and do nothing…I figured if something happens where I can get my papers, I’ll have a PhD and I’ll be set, they [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] can’t touch me…I figured I’m gonna know so much and I’m gonna be a good choice. Cause of the whole DREAM Act thing… there’s this professor from UCLA that they interviewed and I saw the interview on the news, and I remember what he says. He said you’re not giving criminals papers, all of these people that we’re giving papers to, they are graduating from colleges or they’re serving the country. You are cherry picking, you are picking the best of the best!

Nick:
You keep thinking like “oh, if I get my degree. at least I’m a candidate for the DREAM Act”…If I get my degree and I apply for another college, or if I try to legalize myself through a court system…I’m more likely to be accepted than let’s say someone who is undocumented and a college drop out, or undocumented and only a high school graduate. Like, you have more of that advantage.

At the time of these interviews, Nick had just started his studies as a freshman while Audelia had finished all of her requirements to receive her B.A. in Sociology. Yet, neither of them had gained legal residency. Nonetheless, Nick and Audelia feel that being college students make them “a good choice” and “more likely to be accepted” for residency under the federal DREAM Act. Until legislation changes, Audelia is deciding to pursue graduate school to become “best of the best.” She would, in her own words, be a person “they can’t touch” and be granted some leverage should she ever be detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

While education may not immediately lead to employment or economic stability for undocumented students, it offers something unique- possible protection from deportation and a pathway to residency. The optimism of a potential future drives these students to overcome adversity in spite of the challenges they experience. However, as undocumented students attempt to further their education and increase their
socioeconomic status, they encounter limitations and constraints. Without legal status, undocumented students report having a difficult time securing financial assistance for college, employment, and even internship opportunities. The following section explores the challenges the students interviewed experienced as they exited high school and the limitations they continue to encounter as undocumented young adults.

**Part Three: Institutionalized Limitations and Constraints**

“The system didn’t work for me… it worked for everybody else but just not me” - Audelia

The undocumented students interviewed reported encountering a series of constraints when pursuing their educational and career aspirations. The following section describes many of these constraints as well as the consequences of such limitations.

For most undocumented students, their unauthorized status began affecting their postsecondary pursuits in high school. Audelia and Xavier reported being misinformed, discouraged from applying to four year institutions, and receiving little or no information for undocumented youth. When Audelia sought the advice of her college counselor, she reported feeling disappointed and upset after her counselor suggested that attending a University of California was not a feasible option. Audelia’s experience is the following:

**Audelia:**

In high school… I told the counselor that I wanted to go to UCLA, and she was like “since you weren’t born here, you’re going to have to pay [as an] out of state student, that’s a lot of money, and since you don’t get financial aid, it’s gonna be really hard for you.” She straight up told me, “maybe a university is not an option, you need to go to a community college or a trade school” and I got really mad and I walked out because I was like “that’s not what I want to do.”

Audelia maintains that she had high educational aspirations but after receiving inaccurate and discouraging information from her counselors and limited access to financial aid, she began questioning whether she really wanted to pursue postsecondary education. While
her counselor was correct in informing Audelia that she would not qualify for financial aid, the counselor misinformed her by telling her that she did not qualify for in-state tuition.

I remember I gave up, I didn’t want to go to college anymore, I didn’t want to do anything… After graduation I was at home for maybe 6 months not doing anything, and I was like…that’s it, this is my life. And I was kind of like depressed…I was like… in “child mode.” I would rely on my parents for everything… my dad always managed to give us an allowance… I was like I’ll just live off of that! And I was just gonna have to live off of that. I was 18…I had a curfew, and I was like, this is gonna be my life, I’m gonna have an allowance, I’m gonna have a curfew, and I’m gonna have to ask my parents for a ride everywhere…I don’t know what hit me that I was just like, I can’t fucking do this, I can’t, I can’t do this. And I remember my cousins who had their papers they weren’t doing shit with their papers and I was so envious of them… They were having lame little jobs that like, at Party City or whatever, and renting an apartment with 4 people and I was like that’s, THAT’S the life!? Oh god no… I was like, “you know what?…I was a little bit of a high achiever [in high school] … Why not do it again? What’s the worst that’s gonna happen?

Xavier had a similar experience. He states that he received little guidance from his high school counselor and experienced a decrease in motivation to excel in classes during his senior year. When asked to describe the type of support he received from his high school counselor, he responds:

She [the high school counselor] was all against it, “there’s no point to it” [she said]. She was not supportive, she had no information. I didn’t find out about the DREAM Act or AB 540 until I went to search for it. She had no idea what [they were], maybe at this point she does know because I went to lecture her a few months ago… If you have a college counselor like mine who says “hey you are undocumented, don’t even apply to school” and then you had your peers, peers that were really close to me who all went to UCs and I couldn’t, it was really sad for me, I was like- I mean we’re all the same, we’ve all been through the same thing but now I can’t do it, and they can so it’s sad.

He also describes his decline in academic motivation during high school:
Senior year, it came and I didn’t care anymore. I was really into it [school]. I took hard class, I took AP classes, honors, and everything. By senior year, I left school in the middle of the day because I was already 18 and it didn’t matter. I had already taken care of everything, I was set to graduate. Senior…I didn’t care anymore. I was like I’m going to Cal State Northridge, I got accepted like the week after I applied... Senior year, I took classes where I didn’t have to perform. It was a rough time when you realize that you can’t, pretty much, go to [the] college that you want to because of financial reasons. So at one point, I just didn’t care and I just applied to places that I knew I could afford. I didn’t even try to go to a UC, I didn’t even try to apply. But I know UCLA sent me a few letters like “Hey you’re on the top percentage of your school you should apply.” And I mean, I probably would have been accepted there.

Audelia’s and Xavier’s stories illustrate feelings of anger and disappointment. They both perceive their high school counselors to be “unsupportive.” Both students sense that their counselors didn’t see them as having the potential to attend four year universities because they were, and continue to be, undocumented. According to their reports, not only did their high school counselors discourage them from pursuing a four year college but also gave them little or incorrect information. For example, Audelia’s counselor told her that as an undocumented person, she would have to pay out-of-state tuition, which is not the case. Because she attended all four years of high school in California and graduated with a diploma, she qualifies for in-state tuition under AB 540. The lack of and improper information given to Xavier and Audelia is part of a collection of obstacles that many undocumented students report experiencing.

Other students described being not so discouraged from pursuing postsecondary education at four year institutions by their high school teachers and counselors but rather by the lack of financial assistance previously given to undocumented students. Prior to the adoption of California Assembly Bills 130 and 131, whose benefits were not placed into effect until 2012 and 2013, undocumented students were not eligible for public
grants or scholarships. At the time of their interview, Anabelle and Cristina were not eligible to receive financial assistance. They both described the frustration they felt when trying to secure financial assistance, including scholarships, at the end of high school.

Anabelle details her frustration in the following account:

Senior year [in high school] I tried to look for some [scholarships] but it’s really frustrating because everywhere it’s like requirement: Social Security Number, Social Security Number. It gets frustrating after a while, after looking at all of them. [You get] disappointed and discouraged like “ugh, I’m not going to find one because they are all like this, they all require that.”… it was discouraging to see that most scholarships looked for US Citizenship.

Cristina had a similar experience. She applied to various University of California campuses but was discouraged from pursuing postsecondary education at a University of California after learning that she was ineligible for financial assistance. In the following account, Cristina describes how she was accepted to different University of California campuses but could not attend due to limited financial means.

I remember that I was applying for it [Financial Aid] and I was completing my application, and I remember that I turned it in and they sent me a letter that I needed 9 numbers and I was like “what do you mean, what numbers?” So that’s when I got like the big “Whooa, I can’t”- first they make it seem like you can’t move beyond it like it was just “stop,” … A lot of my friends did stop because of that, like “that’s it, I can’t, I can’t do it anymore.”…I applied to Santa Cruz, Berkeley, UCLA, Santa Barbara, [I] applied to a bunch of schools… I did get accepted to half of them but it was just the letter that I got accepted because I couldn’t do more. For a month I was like, “no no no, I’m gonna go- I’m going and I’ll just figure something out with the money.” I applied to a bunch of scholarships [but] I wasn’t getting any responses… After that, I saw that I wasn’t getting anything I was like one out of a thousand, so I just kind of dropped it…

Ultimately, the lack of financial support led Anabelle and Cristina to “drop” further scholarship searches. For Cristina, not being able to secure grants, loans, and scholarships made her decline admission to the higher cost universities, and pursue
postsecondary education at a more affordable college. In California’s public postsecondary education system, tuition is most affordable at community colleges, followed by California State Universities, then Universities of California. Higher cost institutions include private colleges and universities. After high school, Cristina enrolled at CSUN but nevertheless struggled to pay for tuition without financial support.

[One semester] I got an email that they had done a 10% raise and I was like “fuck”, so I couldn’t get the full money … I think I over drafted my accounts, I only needed one thousand. So I over drafted my accounts and I think my boyfriend let me borrow the rest. But there was one semester where I didn’t have the money and then I was already late for my deadline and I remember I went to sell my blood.

Cristina went to great lengths to ensure that her tuition was covered, such as over drafting her bank account, borrowing money, and selling blood. Her experience highlights how she had to secure money in nonconventional ways (instead of perhaps taking out a student loan) and how vulnerable she was to tuition increases. However, the institutional challenges that undocumented students encounter in college are not limited to lack of financial assistance.

According to Giancarlo and Nick, being undocumented also affects their ability to secure internship opportunities. Giancarlo has researched several internship opportunities as they are required for admission into medical school but has not been able to participate in any of them because they have all required legal residency. His experience is the following:

… there’s a lot of different types of medical internships. For example I’m interested in one at UCLA. The thing is, you have to be a citizen or have a green card and it’s a requirement to apply so I can’t apply. And then there’s other ones for example, at hospitals where they (only) give you background check, but when you do a background check they ask for a Social Security Number, and I don’t have a Social Security Number so therefore I can’t do the background check and if they don’t do the
background check on someone they can’t have them as volunteers, so I can’t do those either. So basically I’m screwed either way, I can’t do any of them … I can’t do any internships, I can’t go into any medical preparation programs, and you need those to get into med school or else they won’t take you, because you have to show you have experience. I mean I’m really kind of stuck.

In one way or another Giancarlo is “stuck”. Not being able to complete a medical internship jeopardizes his ability to attend medical school and move forward in his education and career. Giancarlo’s issue, not being able to participate in medical internships, is not something that can be solved financially, the only solution lies in being able acquire legal residency. Nick describes a similar experience:

I’m not allowed to apply for internships because I’m not a legal resident. And I don’t have a Social Security Number to apply for it. For the internship stuff, they need to actually check if you are who you are, and without anything that proves you are who you are, then how do you know who you are? So I guess that doesn’t work … I want to be doing internships so that I have that experience so the medical schools can see but unfortunately I just can’t do it … I can’t have that extra umph for the medical school to want me. (ev: What kind of doctor do you want to be?) I’m not sure, that’s kind of like where the path leads me, that’s why I want to do internships … If you get the experience you know what you are good at. You know what you like doing but since I don’t have that opportunity to go and have that experience, then I’m not sure what I want or I’m good at, or what I like doing.

Among those interviewed for this study, the only student who completed an internship program is Anabelle. During high school, she was able to participate in an opportunity with Bank of America because it was part of a bank-school liaison where her Social Security Number was not needed. However, she reports that her internship opportunity could not lead her to permanent employment. When asked if she would look for a different job if she had her papers she responded with a deep sigh and an emphatic “yeah” and recalls her high school internship:
I really, really liked it as a bank teller and they actually offered me a job after the internship was over. I had to tell them that I couldn’t, I had to make up some dumb excuse, I just felt so horrible, I was really upset because I couldn’t work there, because they really check right there, there was no way my fake one was going to pass… It was really upsetting.

For many students, the progression from an intern during high school to an employee as a high school graduate is relatively predictable. However, for undocumented students like Anabelle, who lack legal status, the development from internship to employment in their field of study is problematic and unlikely. Anabelle’s experience with Bank of America is common among many undocumented students. The lack of legal status creates roadblocks in using acquired skills to secure employment. Anabelle is unable to accept job offers for which she demonstrates competence and the requisite skill level. Her opportunities are limited because the employers would “really check” - a phrase commonly used to explain that there will be a thorough investigation of the employee’s legal status and Social Security Number. While Anabelle uses a fake Social Security card to gain access to low status jobs, she is unable to use it to gain access to employment that suits her field of study or skill. Fake Social Security cards are often purchased on the streets and have Social Security Numbers that do not belong to the person who is listed on the card. While they may work to secure employment in business and sectors that do not verify the authenticity of their employee’s Social Security cards, they cannot be used for those companies and organizations that validate and investigate their staff members’ identities.

Ernesto is a year away from graduating from CSUN with a bachelor’s degree in Chicano/a Studies. He also details the challenges of finding employment in his field of study as well as the difficult transition he expects to have after finishing college.
Graduating college … your bubble is burst … all of a sudden you are an undocumented worker, you are no longer an undocumented student. [ev: what hardships do you think there are to being an undocumented, educated worker?] Just knowing that you have a degree- that you could be doing something else, and instead you’re stuck in a fucking deli or a restaurant or a McDonald’s. It’s just, mentally, like challenging to accept that, to come to accept that you’ve spent 4 or 5 years in school you know, becoming what we would categorize as “educated” in the U.S. and you’re doing a job that you could have done right out of high school you know. I don’t know, I think it’s just one of the most fucked up feelings you could ever have. Just, ah, I don’t know, what is it? Feeling neglected I guess? Feeling almost, like useless.

While Ernesto may be categorized “as educated in the U.S.,” he feels that he will be unable to use his college degree to secure employment because he lacks legal residency. He believes that, despite his college education, he will probably only be able to seek and obtain low status employment in fast food restaurants and other service-related sectors. Ernesto finds his employment prospects “challenging to accept” because he feels as though he could have obtained such positions without a formal education directly after graduating high school. Ernesto mentions that this causes him to feel “neglected” and “useless.” During the interviews I attempted to keep track of and return to comments that stood out or that I did not quite understand. Unfortunately, I did not follow up with Ernesto to ask him to elaborate on those feelings. I can only infer that by “neglected,” Ernesto may be talking about feeling overlooked as a serious candidate in the labor market by the society that inspired him to pursue higher education. After becoming a qualified, educated college graduate, Ernesto is left to fend for himself without any guidance because, in his own words, he will suddenly be an undocumented worker. Understandably, Ernesto may render his own education “useless” as institutional constraints, specifically needing to supply a Social Security Number to obtain legal
employment, do not allow him to use education as an avenue to a career in his field of study.

Unlike many of his undocumented peers, Anthony has been able to secure financial stability through his work. Anthony recently opened a housekeeping company with the help of his fiancé. During the interview, he explained how his fiancé received the appropriate janitorial permits and filed the needed paperwork to be listed as the primary owner of the company. While Anthony may not be the legal primary owner, he has been able to reap the financial benefits of their work. He states, “I consider myself a little bit successful.” As an undocumented young adult, he has found a way to circumvent the need for his own need for a Social Security Number to gain financial stability. However, as a Sociology major, Anthony aspires to be a parole officer and his current line of work lies outside of his academic and career interest. At the beginning of his interview account, he discusses the difficulties in finding employment outside of the service sector economy. Anthony shares the following experience in regards to employment:

My situation will not really allow me to find a real good job ... Finding a job in the regular field [is difficult] ... People tell me “oh you are doing house cleaning, really? You are very sharp” ... Yeah I make good money but I wouldn’t want to be working there you know … Something not [like] the common immigrant: landscaping, [chuckles] house cleaning, car wash, you know, stuff like that … I’m not ashamed of what I do because the money is good and I don’t feel embarrassed to say it because I’m my own boss. Nobody bosses me.

Being a business owner provides him with an amount of financial stability that allows him to own multiple vehicles, pay for his education, and lead a comfortable life. Yet, despite his success, Anthony is frustrated.
You couldn’t do this [register a business] without it [a legitimate Social Security Number]… It’s not like I need [legal status] but… I want to do myself under me, if I want to purchase a TV, I want to use my credit, I want to be able to build up my credit not under my fiancé… The cars that I own right now, [they are] under her name, not me though… Just things like… you need those little things [papers] to succeed … [to] make life a little bit easier, that’s it.

While Anthony considers himself to be somewhat successful, the excerpt demonstrates how lack of legal status impacts him in two ways. Though he would prefer to be employed in a field that is not typically associated to immigrant labor, Anthony cannot gain access those fields because he is undocumented. Secondly, he “needs” papers to accomplish tasks that may be mundane to legal residents but are fundamental in everyday life, such as establishing credit, registering cars, and purchasing goods.

In general, the experiences of students like Anthony suggest that they encounter limitations and constraints beginning in high school that continue through their college years and affect them after graduation. In some cases, their undocumented status impacts them in significant ways that affect their socioeconomic mobility, financial stability and academic prospects. The obstacles that arise from being undocumented, regardless of how large or small they may be, often produce feelings of emotional distress. The following section will explore how lacking legal status creates feelings of anxiety and frustration within undocumented students.
Part Four: Exploring Emotional Distress

“It’s Depressing to not Have Papers, Believe Me” - Adan

As implied by the previous section, the undocumented students interviewed express facing difficult and stressful situations. They suggest that emotional distress arises from multiple (and often a combination of) factors including, but not limited to: feelings of intimidations, exclusion, and dependency; having to conceal and/or manage their undocumented identities; and being unable to pursue their educational and career aspirations. While previous sections have briefly touched upon the emotional distress of undocumented students, the following section highlights those factors that the students most commonly described as responsible for creating and increasing feelings of depression and discouragement. The subsections below document the ways in which undocumented students experience emotional distress as a result of difficult transitions to college and adult life, feelings of being stuck in childhood, the fear of deportation and family separation, and feelings of isolation by peers.

Difficult Transition to College and Adult Life

Many of the students interviewed echoed the results of previous studies (Abrego 2006; Abrego and Gonzalez 2010; Gonzalez 2011) as they revealed the difficulty undocumented students had in transitioning out of high school and moving on to college life as young adults. Undocumented students continuously confront limitations and constraints; however, they are often not exposed to such barriers until the end of high school, when they begin seeking employment and exploring their academic options. The emergence into adulthood involves initial exposures to boundaries that not only affect their future prospects but also lead them to understand the meaning and significance of
being undocumented. The transition to adulthood is, in several ways, a “reality check” that produces feelings of distress.

Unlike his documented peers, Eduardo was not eager to graduate high school or complete college applications. His transition to postsecondary education served as a reminder of his marginalized status. His experience was the following:

I wasn’t excited. I just wasn’t excited at all … All of the other people at school were like “SATs? Let’s go take them!” I was like “yeah, whatever.” They were like “oh you’re not gonna take them?” No … What for? I [wasn’t] going to a university, you know? … I think I had filled out an application for Glendale [Community College] … and they ask you all of these things like where were you born and this and that, are you Asian, Latino, whatever. Then they ask you for your Social Security Number, and I was like “oh, what do I put there? Do I just leave it blank?” Like I wasn’t excited at all. I was just like … every time I see like Social Security Number I always get all bummed … I do get, like at some point I do get sad, like man I don’t have it …

For Eduardo, graduating from high school and entering college served as a reminder of his undocumented status. Yet, the transition into young adulthood was not only difficult for Eduardo, but also for Ernesto and Audelia who also describe feeling frustrated and depressed at the end of high school. Ernesto maintains that he felt depressed towards the end of high school because he couldn’t envision his life after graduation. He had the following experience:

Junior year I was sad and frustrated and maybe even depressed for … maybe 2 -3 months, and I felt so bad, just inside, I felt very, like alone … I found it necessary for me to see the school psychologist and just talk to somebody just … to let them know why I was frustrated. And wondering, “was this normal? What the fuck?” And after talking to this person, I was able to kind of find myself. Because at the time you’re thinking, from high school it’s your take off point, like to whatever your future is right? And I didn’t see a clear future for me … I was even considering not even going to school … [and] … my [high] school is very college bound. … So you’re always hearing “college” and always being brought into fill out your Cal Grant application, kept telling them “No, I can’t apply to this, stop calling me.”
When I asked Audelia what it was like graduating high school and being undocumented, she discussed the process through which she came to understand and recognize how her undocumented status would pose limitations, and the range of emotions she experienced as a result.

I felt weird, I felt like I wasn’t like everybody else… only a handful of friends knew. And, they were supportive in a way, they were like “well you could always just do something else, don’t worry about it.” And, I remember, getting really like, depressed, I’m not gonna lie, I was really depressed in high school, cause I was like “what the hell am I gonna do?” And I was thinking, “I’m gonna end up doing all of this work that I don’t want to do, just to… survive.” And then I remember, all of the things I had planned out- like maybe going to Europe, doing all the things that my friends were already talking about. “Oh I’m gonna go study abroad”- “oh great! I’m not gonna be able to do that!” I got, I got really depressed and really angry. And then all of my friends were like “oh, I’m just not gonna go to college, I’m just gonna get married, or I’m going to go to the Army”… Something else besides college I would get frustrated at them because, I was like you idiot! That’s what I wanna do! [chuckles].

Audelia, Eduardo, and Ernesto experienced feelings of depression, anger, and frustration as they emerged into adulthood, and particularly, college life. Part of their frustration was caused by the unclear or undesirable futures they imagined as undocumented adults. Like Audelia, they imagined taking employment in positions they didn’t “want to do,” but nevertheless, must accept simply “to survive.” Many of the students echoed Audelia’s feelings of frustration when they saw their documented high school friends not taking advantage of the opportunities they desired. In their eyes, the choice to not pursue these opportunities is “idiotic” and senseless. Another frustrating and discouraging factor relating to documentation is the constant need to provide a Social Security Number and/or proof of identity as they must apply for school and work and perhaps make plans to travel. As adults, it becomes ever important to provide proof of identity and residency.
Without legal status, undocumented students realize that they are unable to partake in many of the activities reserved for documented adults, causing them to feel “bummed” because they just “don’t have it.”

Much like the students mentioned above, Adan also described experiences of emotional distress that were produced by the structural limitations presented to him as an undocumented student. He found it necessary to conceal his legal status and did not expose himself as an undocumented student to any school officials. As previously stated, Adan was the only student I interviewed who was able to adjust his legal status. I decided to separate his experience from his peers because there is an element of comparison between the life he had as an undocumented student and the life he now has as a documented American. While other students can imagine what it would be like to have legal status, Adan has already experienced the benefits that come with being a legal citizen of the United States.

I wanted to study … I would go and ask [school staff] and “what if”, not saying it was me… [I asked pretending] like I did have papers … So I was looking and everywhere they would look for a social and green card- “what do you have?” [the college offices would ask], I would just walk away and feel like shit. I felt like freaking trash. It was like the most humiliating thing, because I would arrive somewhere and they would ask “so what’s your social?” and I would be like “um, you know I don’t know that.” You would just pretend like you didn’t know nothing … [When] I was in high school … I had all these things, I thought I knew how to do everything. I just needed one thing, and I didn’t have it- the social. I needed freaking legal status, and I felt like shit. It was tough, I cried, I cried - I was pissed. It’s depressing to not have papers, believe me … Going to school and having my social, made me feel much better, it changed my life.

Adan’s motivation to go to college was quickly challenged by his legal status. Although he had the grades and desire to pursue postsecondary education, being “illegal” hampered his dreams. It is important for me to add that when Adan graduated from high school he
had not yet fixed his residency status and Assembly Bill 540 had not been approved. If he had enrolled in college after graduating from high school, he would have had to pay out-of-state tuition which is more expensive than in-state tuition. Adan experienced feelings of inadequacy and stress when questioned for his documents- ultimately making him feel like “trash” and “shit.” When asked for such documentation, Adan played a game of “I don’t know” to avoid giving direct answers in regards to his documentation status- further deteriorating his self esteem. Facing the challenges of being undocumented and having dreams that could not be realized, Adan literally cried and had feelings of depression. Receiving residency was a life changing experience for Adan. After residency, could legally work, drive, go out without fearing deportation, and achieve his long time goal- receive a college education.

The participants of this study reported feeling emotional distress because of various factors. In addition to difficult transitions to adulthood and college life, the students interviewed also mentioned feeling inadequate and disappointed as they felt like they were stuck in childhood. In their interviews, these students explained how lacking legal status facilitates feelings of socially induced immaturity by not being able to participate in activities reserved for adults like legally driving or working.

Feeling of Being Stuck in Childhood

Eduardo was about 60 days from receiving his work permit from the time of the interview. Eduardo chose not to work with a fake Social Security Number as he did not want to jeopardize his chances of obtaining legal status. As a result, he depended on family members to provide financial assistance. He describes the consequences his reliance on his parents has had on him:
My mom only pays attention to me … like [thinking], “I have to provide for him.” So she treats me like a little kid in a way, she does baby me a lot. It’s a good thing in a way but dude I’m old already. I should be doing this on my own. She treats me like a little kid, sometimes I feel bad because … with my younger brother, I’m like “I’m the older brother, I should be giving him money.” Sometimes when I want to go out he’s like “oh, do you need money”? I don’t like to take money from people, “no, I don’t need money,” even though sometimes I do need the money, I’m like “No, you shouldn’t be giving me money, you are my younger brother.” I don’t know, it feels weird.

Not only does Eduardo feel like his mother still treats him “like a kid” but he must, reluctantly, accept the financial help of his younger brother, who as a United States Citizen, can legally work. Because Eduardo has limited employment opportunities, the birth-order roles are reversed. The discomfort that Eduardo feels with his current financial arrangements is evident in the fact that he attempts to turn down his brother’s help although he does in fact “need the money.”

The interview with Audelia also provides some insight as to why undocumented students report feelings of being stuck in childhood. As illustrated in the following accounts, Audelia’s parents constantly worry about leaving her alone without any form of proper identification. As a result, they limit her social life, making her increasingly dependent on those around her. She explains:

When I say qualities about myself I always add independent, but I know, I’m very dependent and it’s not by choice. It’s a necessity. I’m very dependent of my parents … and I’m very dependent of my boyfriend … but also, I’m very dependent of my sister, oh man I feel sorry for her … I always tell her…I’m depending on you, okay this is a vice versa, I’m depending on YOU, older one depending on the younger one. And I feel bad because she’s a kid, she’s still a kid.

Audelia would like to be independent, but sees herself as dependent by necessity. Like Eduardo, her undocumented status interferes with her role as an older sister as she must rely on her younger sibling for basic favors such as driving her to work.
For Giancarlo the urgency to be independent is a major factor persuading him to leave the United States and possibly migrate back to Mexico or apply for residency in Canada. In this statement, Giancarlo describes his situation:

That’s one of the reasons why I really want to leave…it started in high school when I couldn’t drive, I looked for a job and I couldn’t get a job, I’m dependent on my dad to give me rides, and I’m dependent on my dad to pay for school, and um, I just have to depend on everyone. Because I have to build my schedule around people who could give me rides to places. I don’t feel like I’m allowed to be an adult yet. I feel like I’m emotionally and mentally ready to take care of myself and live on my own, but I can’t because of the situation, I depend on people because I have to. I feel like I’m not allowed to be independent because of my situation. I do the best I can, for the situation I’m in I think I’m doing pretty good.

Like Audelia, Giancarlo’s depends on others because “he has to,” acknowledging that his inability to perform adult activities is due to his “situation” as an undocumented young adult. A portion of Giancarlo’s account highlights the frustrations of not being able to drive, and while asking for rides might not seem like a stressful event, it reminds Giancarlo that he cannot “take care of himself.” Being unable to obtain a driver’s license reaffirms his boundaries as an undocumented individual living in the United States. Although Giancarlo may feel like he is ready to be an adult, lacking legal status places him in a “situation” that relegates him, in many ways, to the realm of childhood.

Aside from feeling stuck in childhood, undocumented students also report feelings of isolation, separation, and the need to keep their legal status concealed. These feelings are often attributed to the way in which their peers, treated them and/or compared them to stereotypes.

Feeling Intimidated and Isolated by Peers
Audelia reports having limited support from peers during high school. Although she sought the company of other undocumented youth for encouragement, she had a difficult time contacting and talking to other students who lacked legal status. According to Audelia, these students were afraid to deal with the consequences of revealing their undocumented status. Her explanation is the following:

I know why they are afraid, it’s because you get … teased, I remember I got teased a lot, like “wet back”, “beaner” or whatever. [ev: From who?] My friends, my own fucking friends … “fucking wetback, you could always work at a corner and sell oranges” “Yeah, totally” [she would respond]. And there was a point I … would get really sad, like “why are you guys making fun of me?” “Well why not?” And then I just let it go and I would go along with them, “yeah, yeah, I’ll do that.” But seriously I learned how to shrug it off … they’re just gonna do that and they’re gonna say that because they don’t understand … And then when we would have P.E. [physical education], we would actually have to climb something … “hey Addy are you really good at climbing because you totally climbed the border” … “Yeah! I’m really good at that”… it was just dumb. [ev: Did that make you feel uncomfortable?] No, I think if anything it made me feel like obviously it’s something that I need to keep to myself. It’s obvious that I can’t just share with anybody and it’s just that some people are not gonna understand.

Audelia’s negative experience with disclosing her legal status left her feeling hurt and separated from her peers. At the same time, it reinforced the idea that having an undocumented status is not something that should be shared, but instead kept as a secret. Eventually, Audelia had to “shrug off” the nasty comments in order to prevent the teasing from affecting her.

Adan also recalled difficult times in high school; interactions with his peers led him to feel as though he was not welcomed. One day, Adan’s teasing escalated from verbal mockery to a physical act of violence. He describes his first encounters with hostility:
It [high school] was tough … the language. I had a … guy in one of my classes, this was like one of he most traumatizing experiences in my life, and it’s still here [points to head]. I was in my class, and the teacher asked me to read, and I said “well, fuck it … oh well.” I knew I had an accent and stronger than the one I have now, and sometimes I would get words that I didn’t even know how to pronounce, so I stood up and began reading, and they started making fun of me, really making fun of me. And that made me feel really bad, but at the same time it made me feel an anger … I changed my goals, like “oh okay you’re laughing, all right then.” I didn’t let it affect me so much, I’m learning English, I speak two languages. I would continue going to class and continue seeing the person and I would think to myself, “I’m just trying to learn a language, I know two and you only know one”, it was my defense, and one time, he hit me … He was sitting next to me, I think he was racist, I don’t know, but he hit me really hard and I got up and I pushed him, and I was ready, we got into it … It got to the point where I was like “I’m learning, leave me alone.” That was the worst experience I had in high school. My language, and that, made me, not assimilate more quickly, but it made me come to a realization that the people in this country, like they didn’t like me, they thought I was different from being from another country, I felt like I wasn’t welcomed. That was the most difficult.

Although Adan confesses having a difficult time with learning English and being mocked by peers in high school, he maintains that he did not let his experiences affect him—regardless of how upsetting they were. Instead, Adan reports being positively shaped by his experiences. The following section further explores how undocumented students demonstrate resiliency in spite of the challenges they face as well as the coping mechanisms they use to inhabit a society which requires legal status.

Part Five: Accounts and Disclaimers, Coping Strategies, and Resiliency
“Deep down you know that you’re just like everyone else, so why let that define you?”

The participants of this research study proved to be resourceful and reflexive individuals who are not simply passive products of the situations they inhabit. Although they report being discouraged from pursuing postsecondary education and lack access to financial aid, these students seek help and support from staff and peers, obtain jobs with
the use of fake Social Security Numbers to pay for school, and resort to other means of securing funds such as selling their blood or borrowing money. While at school or work, these students use accounts and disclaimers to blend in with the documented population and conceal their legal status. Undocumented students do face obstacles in pursuing postsecondary education but like Audelia and Cristina, they persevere and graduate college.

Many undocumented students are apprehensive to disclose their legal status. Because they want to maintain and manage their identities as documented individuals, many undocumented students give accounts and disclaimers when questions or situations that jeopardize their documented identity arise.

During their interviews, Anabelle and Xavier explained how they used accounts to maintain their identities as documented students and employees. Both have jobs that are considered low status and have been offered better paying, more prestigious positions that better suit their skills and academic level. Here, they both explain how using accounts allows them to decline employment opportunities made available to them without jeopardizing their documented identities.

After her internship at Bank of America, Anabelle received an offer to take permanent employment. However, she had to decline the opportunity because she lacks legal status. She had the following to say:

I became good friends with all the people who work there, and I talk to them … They would always ask me like “Why didn’t you take the job? You should apply. You should take the job. This is so good for you!”… I would just be like “oh no, I don’t want to” [laughs]. “I have too much with school”… that was my excuse, school and this job would be too hard to handle. That’s what I would say.

Xavier had a similar experience:
At the place that I work at, I meet a lot of people, and they're like “oh we do this” and [I say] “I know how to do that” and they’re like “oh well, do you want to [take a position]?” … But my excuse is always, if I don’t want to tell them my situation … “Oh well, I’m in college and I’m concentrating on my school right now.” But definitely, job opportunities are always out there for me.

Xavier and Anabelle use accounts in social interaction to maintain their legal status concealed. They both give the impression that attending school is time consuming and challenging, and as a result, it is reasonable for them to turn down full time employment with more responsibilities. By stating that “it would be too much” and they “must concentrate” on school, they create legitimate responses that will satisfy the inquiries of others while allowing them to keep their undocumented status hidden.

As a teenager, Cristina’s mother warned her to never disclose her legal status. Because of her family’s heightened sense of worry, Cristina rarely exposed herself as an undocumented individual. Now as a college graduate in her late-twenties, she has mastered the use of accounts and disclaimers to conceal her undocumented status. She uses these tactics to prevent any peers or co-workers from suspecting that she is not residing in the United States legally.

After working at a local gym for a couple of years, she developed close friendships with her co-workers and enjoyed socializing with them. Yet, she is apprehensive to attend social gatherings because although she drives, Cristina does not have a valid California driver’s license. Although she is good friends with her co-workers, she does not feel comfortable in disclosing her status. When going out with friends Cristina needs an excuse to get her out of driving. When asked what she tells her co-workers when they ask her about her driver’s license, Cristina responds:
I would say I lost it...I got a DUI [ev: why did you say that?]. Because I didn’t have it! [ev: that’s the excuse you thought of?]. Yeah it was easy- I have a DUI, I can’t drive. They [co-workers] always wanted me to drive and I would just say I can’t, I have a DUI. That’s smart, if you think about it... [ev: that is smart but a DUI? That’s a stigmatized label to have]. Well yes, but it’s better than having something else! [Both laugh] “Oh my god, I can’t drive for the next two years!”

In a “smart” move, Cristina told her co-workers that she had been charged with a DUI (driving under the influence). This excuse would allow her to avoid the need to give any new disclaimers or accounts for the next two years. Stating that she lost her driver’s would have only “gotten her out” of driving a few times, but since Cristina spent months and years with her co-workers, she had to come up with a more permanent solution - the account of the DUI. Cristina would rather be perceived as a reckless driver than risk her identity as a documented individual.

Both accounts and disclaimer (Hewitt and Stokes 1975) and coping mechanisms (Pearlin and Schooler 1978) help undocumented students deal with the circumstances of being unauthorized immigrants. However, accounts and disclaimers assist more in the management and projection of identities whereas coping strategies help undocumented students manage the emotions of being undocumented. Furthermore, coping mechanisms help minimize stress by allowing students to develop strategies to deal with their undocumented status, whether that entails finding support groups, adapting to living in the United States as an unauthorized immigrant, or leaving the country to seek legal residence elsewhere.

While accounts and disclaimers help us to explore how some of the students interviewed manage their undocumented status, an examination of the coping strategies these students use provides us with a different window into their circumstances and
motivations for continuing their education. Take the example of Paul. During his interview, Paul discussed how he turns to his faith to provide him with the energy needed to confront and accept the complexities of being undocumented. He explains:

I try to be patient, honestly the only way I’ve been able to handle any of this is just believe in God and yeah, have my Christian views. Really God has been probably 100% my asset, like why things happen, this is just my circumstance. I should be able to deal with it, because I understand that God doesn’t make it impossible for people to handle things, like he never give me a situation where I can’t handle. I just have all faith and trust in God to know that I’m as privileged as I am, growing up in Beverly hills, going to college, yeah very privileged … Honestly that’s the only way I can handle any of the situations. At the end of the day, knowing that I can’t really do much on my own strength to pull through, that somewhere down the line, it’s just God taking care of me, saying “Paul I will never forsake you or leave you alone.”

Unlike Paul, Nick uses feelings of frustration and exclusion to motivate him and finds solace in his friends:

When I started talking to my friends about it [being undocumented] … that’s really when I started to develop a sense of optimism like it’s [the Federal DREAM Act] eventually gonna pass, I have to work hard at it … As I grew up, and talked to more people and more friends, actually when I found out that so many people were going through the same thing that’s when I started to say “oh okay, maybe I’m not the only one going through this” because there’s a lot of people going through this ordeal… You just have to hope for the best… deep down you know that you’re just like everyone else so why let that define you? I mean, let it shape you, let it be how you grew up, having faced this, but don’t let it define you.

Eduardo is motivated to pursue postsecondary education by the possibility of one day legalizing his status. His older brother, who is also undocumented, dropped out of high school when he realized he had limited employment prospects. While Eduardo originally intended to do the same, he decided to graduate from high school and enroll in his local community college. He explains:

I have to better myself or something … I can’t be like him. And then my mom, she would be like come on, look at your brother. What if one day
you do get your papers, what if one day? So, I was like you know what, what if one day I DO? I was like you know what? I’m just gonna give it a try. And yeah I went from like Ds and Fs to like straight As. My senior year, I got straight A’s [in high school].

As the students highlight above, they are motivated and consoled by different sources. With the possibility of “one day” being able to adjust his legal status, Eduardo found the motivation to change his grades in high school and enroll in a community college. Nick finds comfort in talking to his friends and other undocumented students. Having found this support, he has developed a sense of optimism and hope for the future. Paul’s religious beliefs allow him to believe that there is no difficult task that he cannot overcome. He believes that God continues to stand by him and gives him the strength to handle the things that arise from his unique circumstances.

Other undocumented students found motivation in the barriers placed before them. By completing their college education, these students are proving that they can persevere regardless of the limitations they must endure. When asked what motivates Audelia to continue her studies, she responds:

That I want to be smarter, more educated, than the so called Americans that claim we are criminals and don’t deserve anything. I kinda want to show them, how smart are YOU? How much do YOU know about YOUR country? I think I know more than the average American. My boyfriend always says “you are 25% of America, only this amount of people go to college, only this amount of people have college degrees. You are a small percentage AND you are undocumented. You belong to all of these minorities, you are a woman, you are Mexican, you’re an immigrant, I mean like you belong to all these minorities, yet you are pursuing higher education, and a lot of Americans, people who are born here, don’t do that. You’re gonna be smarter than them, you are going to have more, you are gonna know more than them, be more educated than them” … I think it’s a fact that I’m gonna, that I’m gonna be [more] educated.

Xavier echoes a similar perspective:
I just think that I have to do this [graduate from college] no matter what, like I have to accomplish like going… I want to accomplish something. I have to do this and… [ev: And why do you feel like you have to do this?] Because okay, not only is it for my parents, because they are always pushing me to go to school, I have, cousins, nephews who look up to me, a lot of family relies on me graduating from college so all of these kids can follow me and that’s one reason, to demonstrate to the leaders of this country that we can do it, that you set barriers in our life but we’re going to overcome them.

Audelia and Xavier display coping strategies which help them reduce anxiety. These students, like Paul, Nick, Eduardo, and Xavier, are not eliminating or changing the stressor (their undocumented status) nor are they minimizing the importance of a college education or documentation. Instead, they are finding ways to manage and deal with the stress that comes with being an undocumented college student. By turning to their friends, religion, self-will, and/or potential futures, these students find ways in which they can cope with the difficulties of being undocumented immigrants without being completely engulfed by their circumstances.

However, other students come to accept their undocumented status in the United States and adapt to the social position. They change their outlooks, goals, and behaviors to become economically successful unauthorized immigrants. Students like Xavier, Anthony, and Cristina appear to have minimized the importance of being legal residents and instead prioritize being able to find jobs that provide financial stability. All three students are employed, drive without a California’s driver’s license, and are financially independent from their parents. Here are their experiences:

Xavier:
My brother is the manager of the place where I work at … They give a lot of opportunities there. My brother is an example of that. Even though he’s undocumented he’s the general manager of the place. I wouldn’t mind staying in that business. I’m well known. The company has a lot of restaurants and bars and I work for a few of those companies, so at one
point I might try to ask for a full time job and become a manager probably if I can.

Anthony:
My dad told me this … “you don’t really need your papers to be a successful person but you need to be very strong minded because a lot of people let all of these things get to them and that’s what puts them down” … Now I see it … I can’t get put down because I really don’t need my papers to succeed, that’s how I see it … I consider myself a little bit successful right now, I mean even though I might not have a good job … I’m my own boss.

Cristina:
I’m not worried that I’ll be stuck in the same [legal] situation. I know that I WILL be stuck in the same situation, but at least I’m moving forward … I’m doing something (working full time) that I hope eventually will pay off.

After spending all of their early adulthood years as undocumented immigrants, each student has learned to “do without” legal status and have adapted to being unauthorized residents. They have no intention of leaving the United States and know that staying here means living without legal permission. For Anthony and Xavier, contact with “successful” undocumented immigrants gives them hope that they too will be able to flourish without legal status. For them, “making it” and “moving forward” in the United States is about finding and taking advantage of the right employment opportunities.

Cristina has decided to stop worrying about when she will become a legal resident. When the DREAM Act first appeared, Cristina was 16 years old. In the last eleven years, she’s seen this piece of legislation be re-introduced in Congress only to be defeated. Understandably, she feels that she “WILL be stuck” in the same legal situation.

However, by coming to terms with her undocumented status, she is at the very least, able to gain some peace of mind. Xavier, Anthony, and Cristina show adaptation and
ingenuity as they learn how to successfully inhabit a society where they should not legally reside.

For other undocumented college students, living in the United States as undocumented workers who are unable to fully participate in society is simply not an option. In their eyes, their only feasible option is to move out of the United States to gain legal residency in another country. Ernesto emphasizes this point by stating that he would return to Mexico should he be unable to legalize his status. In the following account, he describes why he would relocate to his country of birth despite wanting to continue his life in the United States.

If I decide to become a doctor then I wouldn’t mind going over there and you know, even to another country … If this country … isn’t friendly to me then … I’ll be fine somewhere else, I’ll be happy anywhere else you know … I don’t want to glorify what we would call the American Dream, it’s not even all that pretty I think … It’s very unrealistic … just because [of] the disparities in class, here in the US, the gap is freaking huge. So most people are struggling right now here in the U.S. and I feel like you can struggle somewhere else and be okay somewhere else as much as you’ll be here… When I was in high school… I had thought … “what am I gonna do in the U.S. if I can’t do anything here? …I can’t go back to Mexico cuz there’s nothing there for me.” But [now] I feel like the language, I would just need to, you know, fix it a little, sharpen it up a little just to be, just to be able to speak it.

Like Ernesto, Giancarlo is also willing to relocate to a new country. When asked if he ever worried about graduating without papers, he gives the following response:

It did before but that’s why I decided to leave the country if the DREAM Act doesn’t pass. Before I used to be like what am I going to do with my life? It doesn’t worry me as much now because I’ve already decided I’m going to go somewhere else. I have to go because I can’t stay here any longer.

Giancarlo and Ernesto believe that social mobility is not possible in the United States because they will not be able to make use of their education to secure well-paying
employment. Unlike Cristina, Xavier, and Anthony, Ernesto and Giancarlo have no interest in living in the United States if they cannot participate as full member of the society. Although both students see themselves as American and want to gain citizenship, they are ready to relocate to another country in hopes of obtaining better lives.

While some of the undocumented students interviewed may feel discouraged and disappointed, like Giancarlo and Ernesto, they nevertheless exhibit adaptation, resiliency and optimism. These traits are visible in the narratives and accounts that are found throughout the findings section. Above, two students discuss locating to countries they do not know to pursue their own dreams of being legally recognized citizens. Furthermore, the students have shared narratives discussing the lengths they go to in order to secure employment and money to pay for school. Furthermore, they quickly provide accounts and disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes 1975) when their documented status is questioned or compromised. The students in this study continue to pursue postsecondary education even though they know undocumented students cannot gain legal employment. Before I conclude this section I will share a few more stories that will demonstrate the tenacity and ingenuity of the students who shared their stories to make this study possible.

During Martin’s interview, he, like many other students, demonstrated great drive. He knows the financial limitations undocumented students encounters and is aware of the importance of scholarships to financially secure his ability to transfer to a four year college. His motivation and hard work is reflected in the following account:

I think that achieving that kind of academic … greatness, just having a degree is, is one step closer to your dream. And no matter what kind of
obstacles there [are] … there’s no way that’s going to change me in any way - just to work harder. I believe in myself that I could get the times that I want to get to go, to get a scholarship somewhere.

Martin is undeterred by the financial constraints placed on undocumented students and relentlessly pursues scholarships to pay for his education. Anabelle is also just as motivated to finish her degree at CSUN. However, she cannot rely on athletic scholarships and turned to her pastor before starting her freshman year at CSUN.

I wrote a letter to the pastor and I told him about my situation [being undocumented] and I thought he was going to give me, I don’t know about 500 dollars at the most. But he gave me two thousand … that was … like oh my god.

However, Anabelle also advocates for the rights of undocumented students in general.

She provides this recent example:

I actually went to San Jose, because the Secretary of Homeland Security … was going to speak about the security of the country … We [Anabelle and other advocates] went to march and protest[ed] … We had a sit down, carried signs, chants … We’re just trying to remind her like “hey, we’re here, we need this [immigration reform].”

Xavier also feels the urge to help other students without legal status and goes back to the high school he graduated from to speak to undocumented high school students:

I didn’t find out about the dream act or the AB540 (bill) until I went to search for it … Now … I … go back to my high school and talk to other AB540 students and I lead them to the way, to help them out.

The undocumented students interviewed were not only resourceful and adaptive in their school lives but also in their personal lives. Like Audelia, Anthony, Daniel, Fernando, and Martin, Paul worked “under the table” – a phrase used to explain how they have jobs that pay them in cash. Paul refused to work using a fake Social Security Number and found tutoring jobs. He explains:
I can’t work legally and … I always have to be looking for jobs where I can paid ‘under the table’ and … hopefully you know whether they’re Koreans or people who have some kind of immigration background … [I] ask them [if they can pay me in cash] … I’m lucky to have a tutoring job.

As the accounts and narratives imply, the students interviewed adapt to functioning in the United States as unauthorized immigrants. The obstacles placed before them do not deter them from their aspirations. They are successful in pursuing postsecondary education and finding employment although they should not be legally residing in the country. Furthermore, students like Anabelle, Ernesto, and Eduardo find ways to bond with others and organize themselves to help other undocumented students. In the discussion of the findings that follow, I connect the experiences of the youth interviewed to the concepts in the literature reviewed.
Discussion:
Understanding the Experiences of Undocumented Students

For many of the undocumented students interviewed, the decision to migrate to the United States was not theirs. The United States is the only place they have ever called home and English has become, or always has been, their primary language. These youth are undocumented – figuratively stateless – lacking access to many rights and resources. As undocumented Americans, they occupy contradictory standpoints, giving rise to a bifurcated consciousness that sustains their similarities to immigrant and involuntary minorities. The experiences of undocumented youth shed light onto the consequences of living in a country where they cannot be at “home.” Despite the many obstacles these youth face, undocumented students adapt to their lives as unauthorized Americans, find ways to cope with the limitations they experience, and persevere.

Statelessness and the Situations of Undocumented Students

Undocumented youth in the United States are unlikely to be entirely stateless. They have documentation that provides proof of citizenship of a country where they no longer reside. Nevertheless, lacking proper documentation that grants them permission to legally reside in their present home - the United States - produces comparable challenges to those individuals who are actually stateless. Undocumented students, like stateless individuals, are vulnerable because they lack the same legal protection as documented, legal residents. The legal system they must confront is typically rigid and unsympathetic. It makes it difficult for undocumented students to adjust their legal status and also threatens to punish any unlawful conduct with deportation, regardless of how insignificant it is. Because undocumented students know that any confrontation with the law can be potentially dangerous, many try to stay away from trouble, deciding not to
drive and abstaining from using a fake Social Security Number. Instead, these undocumented youth rely on public transportation and opt for work that will pay them “under the table.” The need to be a perfectly/an impeccably law abiding citizen is something Paul is familiar with: “I’ve always had to live with making sure I don’t make mistakes, which is pretty impossible if you are a human being.” However, deportation can affect anyone. Anabelle, unable to gain residency after years of living in the United States and petitioning previous denial letters, was detained by Immigration Customs and Enforcement at her home and told to willfully return to her country. Fernando, after about a year of meeting with a local judge, has been unable to successfully revoke his deportation order. He was arrested after helping an intoxicated friend. Although Fernando was sober, he was taken to the local police station and later placed under an immigration hold. His ability to stay in United States remains uncertain.

Even if undocumented students can remain in the United States “under the radar” of immigration enforcement, they encounter multiple challenges. Without legal status, many lack access to in-state tuition or the right to lawful employment. In this sense, many of the students “fall through the cracks” and are unable to make use of their academic achievements. An example is Audelia, a CSUN graduate earning $30 a day working at a local coffee shop. With the high cost of living, she cannot meet her basic needs of shelter and food with a monthly income of $600. Her annual income totals $7,200, far below the Department of Health and Human Services’ 2012 poverty guideline of $11,170 for a single person (HHS Poverty Guidelines 2012). In the United States, individual states can introduce and pass legislation banning undocumented students from postsecondary institutions because their postsecondary rights are not
protected by federal law. Access to colleges and universities, in-state tuition, and financial aid are rights reserved for their documented peers, most of whom were granted citizenship through the practices of *jus soli*.

Although undocumented students experience their everyday world as unauthorized immigrants, they also come to have the consciousness of an American resident. The experiences of those students interviewed imply that they, as Smith (1987) has described, a bifurcated consciousness. Findings suggest that undocumented students shift between the standpoints of unauthorized immigrant and American student in their everyday lives.

The Bifurcation of Undocumented American Students

For Dorothy Smith, a bifurcation of consciousness arises when individuals have two “different modes of being” - a “double life” that results from operating in two worlds (1987: 6-7). In her work, she details how she shifted between two consciousnesses- one as a mother and the other as an academic. Smith’s world, she states, was structured by a “gender subtext” and a “gender divide,” and clearly marked her movement from one state of being to the other. The interviews with students suggest that they too experience a bifurcated consciousness. However, rather than experiencing a gender divide, these young adults experience an immigrant divide in a world that is structured by a society that requires and assumes legal status. The immigrant divide arises when students are enrolling in college, completing financial aid applications, seeking employment, and even are out with friends.

Following Smith’s analysis, undocumented students come to experience their world from two standpoints that are at odds with one another. These students grow up in
the United States, attend public schools and in turn share a consciousness with their documented peers. However, their lack of legal status leads them to confront part of their lives as undocumented immigrants. One can see how their modes of thinking, being, and feeling shift from that of student/American young adult to an undocumented, immigrant being. This is perhaps best illustrated with Adan when he states:

The first time I saw [a college presentation], I was really excited- I was like “fuck yeah, I want to go and I want to do this”… When I went home I was like “oh, but I’m an illegal, they are not going to take me”

When at school, Adan’s consciousness can be understood as that of any other documented, high school student, enthusiastic about his future prospects. However, when Adan goes home, his consciousness shifts to that of an unauthorized immigrant, he is no longer a student attending a college presentation but an undocumented student doubting his entrance to postsecondary education. Eduardo also hints towards this shift in consciousness when he recalls his experience enrolling at Glendale Community College:

They ask you all of these things like where were you born and this and that. Are you Asian? Latino? Whatever. Then they ask you for your Social Security Number, and I was like “oh, what do I put there? Do I just leave it blank?”

This shift from young student to undocumented immigrant is catalyzed by a situation that requires or questions legal status. This is also demonstrated by Anabelle as she shares how she had to decline a recent promotion at work:

A couple of months ago … the general manager … talked to me he said “I think you have potential … Do you want to be promoted to shift manager? And I was like “yeah, I would like that step.” But he told me that they actually really check your stuff … And … I told him “yeah, it’s fine.” But then I talked to my parents that night and my parents were like “no, you shouldn’t because you might lose your job as a cashier … The next day I told him, “hey. I don’t think my papers are going to pass, I’m interested
but I don’t think my papers are going to pass.” And he totally got it right there.

At work, Anabelle is a typical cashier excited to gain a new position at work. However, as she enters her home life, a physical space where her mental state shifts from “employee” to “undocumented immigrant,” she can have a conversation with her parents to discuss the possibility of the promotion and the actions she should take. Similar to Adan, Anabelle’s home life serves as a place where she can disengage from the need of managing her identify as an authorized immigrant. At home, she confronts the reality of being undocumented and explores the ways in which she can participate in a society where she should not legally live in.

In everyday conversations where legal status inadvertently becomes an important issue, maintaining the identity of a legal resident becomes the main objective for undocumented students. For example, when answering questions that may appear to be mundane to legal residents, undocumented students must organize their thoughts and remember to give an appropriate response that will allow them to conceal their undocumented statuses. This is also exemplified when Cristina explains how she avoids driving when out with friends by stating that she has a DUI charge and when Xavier turns down employment opportunities that would verify legal status by stating that it would be “too hard to handle” with school responsibilities. As Smith (1987) suggests, this shift in consciousness requires a “different organization of memory, attention, relevances, and objectives” (7).

Another consciousness shift marked by the immigrant divide is the transition from college student to college graduate. As Ernesto explains, “graduating college…your bubble is burst… all of a sudden you are an undocumented worker.” As they physically
leave the world of a student, they also enter another mode of consciousness. For Audelia, occupying two standpoints makes her feel like she doesn’t belong in either country. She explains:

I feel like [I have] one foot in one border and the other in the other border. Have you seen that painting by Frida Kahlo? Where she has one foot in the water and the other one in the dirt? She feels like she doesn’t know where she’s going … I feel like that sometimes.

Undocumented students engage and participate in their social worlds as ordinary students; sharing hobbies, interests, ideologies, and modes of speaking- among other things- with their documented peers. However, because other basis for participation is grounded on legal status (such as being able to drive, vote, travel, work, establish credit, participate in internships, etc.), undocumented students also experience the social world as unauthorized immigrants, unable to provide the required documents needed to be full members of the societies they reside in. Occupying these two contradictory standpoints, with marked differences in how they come to participate in and understand the social world, creates a bifurcated consciousness that not only affects their sense of self but also the way in which they view education, institutional barriers, and their futures. Nevertheless, as resilient beings, undocumented students find ways to cope with the challenges they encounter to reduce stress and be successful in their academic pursuits.

Coping Strategies

Undocumented students demonstrate use of all three coping strategies outlined by Pearlin and Schooler (1978). They deal with the ramifications of being undocumented in a variety of ways. Students like Paul and Nick respond by turning to different support systems like religion or friends. These responses simply help the individuals manage their stress without being overwhelmed by it. Other students, like Xavier, Cristina, and
Anthony do not seek emotional support from others nor do they attempt to eliminate the source of their stress. Instead, they change the meaning of what it is to be successful in the United States and at the same time change their priorities. After years of residing in this nation without legal permission and being exposed to other “successful” undocumented adults, these students began to downplay the importance of being documented in the United States. Xavier, Cristina, and Anthony feel like they are “making it” as undocumented workers because they have gained employment that allows them to be financially stable. By changing their mindset, they demonstrate the use of Pearlin and Schooler’s (1978) coping mechanism which suggests that individuals minimize the significance of a problem. Other students, like Giancarlo and Ernesto display another of Pearlin and Schooler’s (1978) coping strategy by stating that they are ready to eliminate the stressor in their life (being undocumented) by moving to an unfamiliar country where they can at least be acknowledged as legal residents. As the data suggests, undocumented students manage the limitations of their undocumented status in different ways, and this may be attributed to the different ways they internalize their experiences as well as the different attitudes they adopt.

Regardless of how motivated and resilient the students interviewed may be, they still have to deal with the limitations that are presented to unauthorized immigrants. Those who participated in this study demonstrated how they value education and strive to obtain a college degree as immigrant minorities but also how they interpret their struggles as permanent like involuntary minorities.

Undocumented Students as Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities
Ogbu (1991) creates a theoretical model of educational success to compare two groups, immigrant and involuntary minorities. According to his work, immigrant minorities, those who voluntarily relocate to a new country in hopes of obtaining a better quality life, are more likely to have a positive outlook on education and their life chances than involuntary minorities, those who have been incorporated, or been brought, to their current society as a result of slavery, conquest, or colonization. While Ogbu (1991) uses his work to explain the differences in educational attainments between these two groups, I employ his ideas and concepts to propose that undocumented students exhibit characteristics of both immigrant and involuntary minorities.

Ogbu’s concepts of immigrant and involuntary minorities are relevant to the narratives given by the participants of this study. To begin, the stories of the undocumented students interviewed suggest that they have a dual frame of reference as they either remember their home country or are reminded of the harsh living conditions and limited opportunities by other family members. The dual frame of reference is demonstrated by Giancarlo, who despite spending only a short amount of time in Mexico, remembers the poor living conditions of his home and states: “it’s just not a good situation over there, it’s really bad.” Adan, another student from Mexico, came to the United States when he was 14 years old. As a teenager, he was able to see the economic hardships his family faced. In his interview, he offers gratitude to the United States, acknowledging that it’s given him the opportunities that he “would have never gotten” in his country of birth.

The undocumented students who participated in this study are motivated to complete their college education, find employment, and legalize their status. Like
Daniel, they “want to be ready with the education” because they believe that eventually they will be “legal in this country.” These college oriented attitudes are almost always fostered by parents and other family members who highly value education. However, regardless of their academic achievements or positive dual frame of reference, undocumented students encounter unequal access to resources. Similar to involuntary minorities, their perseverance and academic performances are unlikely to elevate their social status. Because they lack legal status, they are prevented from competing for educational or employment opportunities that will allow them to advance their social status. Undocumented students internalize and accept these institutional barriers and come to understand that in order to succeed they need “the nine numbers.” As a result, they interpret their struggles as permanent, rooted in discriminatory practices over which they have no control. For example, when Cristina was asked if she worried about not being able to legalize her status in the future, she answered, “I’m not worried that I’ll be stuck in the same (legal) situation, I know that I will be stuck in the same situation.” Anthony’s response expressed a similar sentiment. He knows that he is educated but acknowledges that his professional aspirations will be delayed without a Social Security Number, “it’s like you kind of get stuck even though you might want to have a bigger dream.”

The conditions akin to statelessness produce frustration. Undocumented students, like Audelia, get “mad at the system” because it simply “doesn’t work.” They realize that “it’s not [equally] benefiting people that are educated.” The personal experiences of undocumented students lead them to believe that only documented, legal residents can use their education to pursue a career in their field of study; that “even if” undocumented
students graduate from college, their struggles will not be over. Undocumented students acknowledge that in order to be granted the same opportunities as their documented peers, legislation and institutions must change. Students like Audelia realize that their fates are in the hands of politicians who should “put their names to pass the DREAM Act,” or in other words, support the bill. For now, they realize that they are “stuck” in a country that will not recognize them as legal citizens. Like immigrant minorities, undocumented students demonstrate that they do internalize the desire to go to college and indeed see education as a pathway to eventually reaching their goals. They feel as though they are at least “moving forward,” doing something they hope “will eventually pay off in the future.” Nevertheless, resembling involuntary minorities, they also see their struggles as permanent; part of the larger anti-immigrant sentiment that can be found in the institutions of the United States.
Conclusion

This research study has sought to explore how lacking legal status affects the experiences of undocumented students in terms of career development and emotional well-being. Furthermore, it sought to explore how undocumented students coped with the limitations set by their legal status. In the course of the study, several themes emerged. Ultimately, it was found that the educational experiences of undocumented students are rooted in their legal status. This research study suggests that lacking legal residency has serious implications for undocumented youth who cannot make use of their education to secure employment and ultimately experience feelings of emotional distress. The participants of this study turned down admission to 4 year colleges or top ranked universities, have limited employment opportunities and mobility, deal with increased dimensions of emotional distress, and are situated in an overall lower quality of life. Dealing with such difficulties proved to be discouraging and distracting at times. Nevertheless, the undocumented students interviewed demonstrated resiliency and innovation by finding ways to cope with their legal status, either by finding support in friends, advocacy groups, or religion, changing their perceptions of what it mean to be a successful individual in the United States, or making plans to relocate to a new country after graduating college.

Findings from this study and previous research suggest that undocumented students are individuals who hold similar values to those of mainstream America, they believe in personal merit, and being contributing members of society. Like many other Americans, undocumented individuals pursue the American Dream (Drachman 2006), but it is a dream that has failed to become reality (Gonzalez 2009a).
This research study is significant at multiple levels. To begin, the use of qualitative methods allows for the examination of life stories which analyze the experiences and difficulties faced by undocumented students. Furthermore, the study makes a significant contribution to the academic field as few studies discuss the experiences of undocumented students in postsecondary education. Additionally, the use of in-depth interviews produced rich data which would otherwise not be available through a quantitative study. Using open-ended questions allowed the author to reflect and follow up on interviewees’ responses to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Future research should consider adopting a mixed methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative studies. Diversity among participants is also desired, both in ethnicity and college attendance. Lastly, it is important to consider the experiences of those undocumented students who wanted to attend college but could not do so because of their legal status. The investigation of the experiences and challenges faced by undocumented students is imperative as they constitute a significant number of the population and will eventually take part of the generations contributing to the country’s economy and organization.

It is important to note that while Assembly Bills 540, 130, and 131 have been a tremendous success for undocumented students in California, lacking legal residency continues to be a significant obstacle in accessing internships and employment opportunities. However, gaining residency for undocumented youth is extremely difficult. Abrego (2004: 226) highlights the complex route to legal residency in the following statement:

The legalization process for undocumented youth is a complicated one that depends on their parents, the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration
Services, and public policy makers. Under current law, many undocumented children of immigrants have no means of obtaining legal status, despite having lived in the United States for many years.

In addition to the legal and technical restrictions, Drachman (2006) acknowledges that significant resentment towards undocumented immigrants can affect support for legislation benefiting undocumented students. Negative perceptions are often shaped by beliefs that illegal immigrants are responsible for depressing wages, negatively affecting the national identity, and depleting public benefits.

In 2011, the DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act) was re-introduced to the Senate and House of Representatives. This legislation would allow states to make their own decisions regarding eligibility for in-state tuition. It would also conditionally grant undocumented students with permanent resident status. The DREAM Act does have requirements and limitations. In order to qualify, undocumented immigrants must demonstrate good moral character, have no criminal record, must have arrived in the US prior to being 16 years of age or have lived in the US continuously for at least 5 years at the time the legislation is enacted, must have graduated from high school or been awarded a GED, and must have been accepted to a community or 4 year college/university. While Drachman (2006) advocates the adoption of the federal DREAM Act, he notes how negative perceptions of undocumented immigrants are likely to give strong opposition to such legislation.

Abrego (2004) is concerned that lacking a formal structure designed to pave the way for undocumented students towards higher education and professional employment opportunities will result in undesirable futures for undocumented youth- possibly establishing them and future generations in “the lower segments of the economy” (pg.
These concerns are not unfounded as well-paying employment is easier to obtain for those who have postsecondary education. The constraints placed upon undocumented youth continue to deter many from pursuing a college education simply because they do not have the means to cover tuition. For those who are able to pay for tuition and receive a degree, their opportunities for employment are also limited because most employers require legal residency. Daniel, the undocumented youth attending Santa Barbara City College, expressed his concern straightforwardly: “If nothing happens with the immigration laws- I can study all I want but if no one offers me work I’m going to end up washing dishes just like everybody else.”

Without question, and by definition, undocumented students are unable to enjoy many of the social rights intended for the legal residents of this nation. Lacking legal status, they do not have the right to work, the right to an education, access to healthcare, or the guarantee of equal opportunities. Considering that, for all intent and purposes, the United States is their home, should we continue to deny undocumented students access to these rights? Is it sensible to continue to deny undocumented youth residency when their migration was not a voluntary decision and when they are already part of our society? Keeping in mind that we have pushed undocumented students to reach their full potential in their K-12 education, should we continue to deny them access to their educational and professional dreams? There are those individuals who are not persuaded to support the DREAM Act despite the economic benefits it would bring. Instead, these individuals continue to ask, “How does granting citizenship to undocumented youth benefit me?” I argue that all systems of inequalities, by default, have a system of privilege. Those of us, who are privileged, do in fact have little or nothing to individually gain from policies
promoting social justice. Surely, those who were privileged by the subordination of women, the institution of slavery, and the practices of institutionalized racism moved beyond this question during periods of great change. Had the individuals who helped promote the abolitionist, women’s suffrage, and civil rights movements taken such an individualistic stance, where would our nation be? In matters of social rights, we may have little to individually gain but we have a just world to achieve.
Afterward: Limitations, Future Directions and Recommendations

Each research study is not without limitations. Specifically when exploring the experiences of undocumented youth, there are many avenues a researcher can take. Unfortunately, it is not always feasible to explore a subject matter with ideal access to participants and information.

Locating participants can be a difficult task especially if they are marginalized and stigmatized by mainstream society. This was a challenge that I certainly encountered. Originally, I planned to interview an equal amount of students attending community colleges, CSUs, and UCs as well as have an even number of men and women. In the end, most of the individuals who participated were males and students who attended California State University at Northridge; I did not interview any students who attended a UC. I also wanted to meet with undocumented high school students who were preparing for college and undocumented high school graduates who decided to not pursue postsecondary education. However, for the sake of having a manageable thesis project that I could finish in a desirable amount of time, I decided to forego my efforts of having a distributed sample and I essentially decided to work with the community that was most accessible to me. I am quite positive that interviewing more students and having a more distributed sample would have made for some interesting, comparative data. Nevertheless, I believe that the findings of this research study make significant contributions to the scientific community.

Recommendations for Future Research

A majority of the research studies that explores the experiences of undocumented students focus on those who were actually able to attend colleges and universities.
However, there is a significant group of “college-ready” undocumented students who meet college requirements and are admitted to postsecondary institutions but do not continue their education (Chavez, Soriano, and Oliverez 2007). There is also limited research on the experiences of “early-exiters” (Gonzalez 2011) who decide not complete high school. Future research studies should tap into both groups to fully explore the factors that prevent undocumented students from pursuing their education. By focusing our research on undocumented students who graduate high school and attend college, we are excluding important experiences that can help us create a more holistic picture of this population.

As previously mentioned, each state is allowed to ratify its own laws regarding postsecondary access for undocumented students. Currently, there are only twelve states that grant in-state tuition for undocumented youth (National Conference of State Legislation 2011). While some states are mobilizing to make a college education more accessible, others, like Alabama, are not. It would be noteworthy to engage in a cross state comparison highlighting the differences between those undocumented students who live in more sympathetic states and those who do not. Without a doubt, there is a need to understand the diversity in experiences of undocumented youth, especially for those who were no longer enticed by enchantment of the American Dream.

Policy Recommendations for High School and College Staff

Perez et al (2009) found that relationships with school counselors and staff are imperative for educational success. Having close social ties with adults can lead to emotional and financial support and at the very least, better access to important resources (Gonzalez 2012). The literature reviewed and data collected suggests that not all counselors and staff, both at the high school and college level, are well acquainted with
policies aimed at benefiting undocumented students, such as AB 540. Additionally, not all high school counselors or staff encourage undocumented students to apply to four year institutions and instead direct them to community colleges. Because access to supportive adults, peers, and relevant information is crucial in developing the confidence needed to pursue and do well in school, it is only rational for our counselors and staff members to be better trained when it comes to matters pertaining to undocumented students. Because it is important that the identities of these students be protected, it is imperative that school counselors and other professionals abstain from forming any coalitions with immigration enforcement (Gonzalez 2009b). Lastly, building support networks with high achieving peers and mentors as well as experiences in youth clubs and organizations allow undocumented youth to succeed (Gonzalez 2012). As a result, I suggest that high schools and colleges form advocacy and/or support groups for undocumented youth so that these students have access to peers who share their experiences.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

Historically, schools have been one of the most important institutions for immigrant children (Gonzalez 2012). Without financial assistance for undocumented students, economic barriers to a college education continue to be upheld (Abrego 2006). As stated by Drachman (2006), many undocumented youth are motivated to pursue postsecondary education but simply cannot. My first suggestion for policy makers is that states begin to adopt policies allowing undocumented students access to in-state college tuition. According to Gonzalez (2007), in-state tuition benefits both undocumented youth and colleges as it increases school revenues by bringing in money from students who otherwise would not attend college. For undocumented students, postsecondary schools become more accessible. Once there, undocumented youth have the opportunities to not
only receive higher education but also participate in activities that can increase their sense of belonging (Perez et al. 2009).

Given the unstable economic condition undocumented students must often endure (Abrego and Gonzalez 2010), they would greatly benefit from the access to student loans, grants, and work-study programs. It would be ideal for states to adopt legislation like California’s AB 130 and AB 130. However, it should be noted that what undocumented students truly desire and would benefit from is the opportunity to legalize their status in the United States. After all, it is the lack of legal residency and citizenship that creates those difficult experiences that impact their lives.

The experiences and lack of mobility of undocumented students has gained more attention in recent years, and as a result, support for the federal DREAM Act has increased (Gonzalez 2010). Nevertheless, it has failed to pass Congress although there is evidence that the United States has much to gain from adjusting the legal status of undocumented youth and young adults. In 2010, the White House released a report debunking several myths about the DREAM Act and highlighting the benefits of adopting such legislation. Such benefits include having a larger recruiting pool for U.S. military, having a more educated nation that can in turn make the United States more competitive in the global economy, and ultimately provide greater economic relief. It is estimated that passing the federal DREAM Act would cut the deficit by $1.4 billion and increase government revenues by $2.3 billion over the next 10 years (DREAM Act White House Fact Sheet 2010). Furthermore, the DREAM Act could generate about $1.4 to $3.6 trillion in taxable income over the next 40 years (Hinojosa-Ojeda et al. 2010).
Without a legal pathway to citizenship, undocumented youth must rely on legislation to change (Abrego 2006). When we consider how much we have already invested in their K-12 education, the multiple benefits of the DREAM Act, and the fact that most undocumented young adults come to view this country as their home, it makes sense for immigration policies to change (Gonzalez 2010). While not all of the estimated 2.1 million undocumented young adults would be eligible for residency under the DREAM Act, the number of individuals who would legalize their status by meeting the educational and military requirements remains sizeable (Gonzalez 2010). During the interviews, I asked how gaining residency under the DREAM Act would change their lives as the answers were overwhelmingly similar. However, the essence of the impact was captured nicely in Giancarlo’s response. He stated:

It would seriously be the happiest day of my life if the DREAM Act passed, most important day of my life hands down. It would open the doors for me to do whatever I want with my life… It would just make my life normal I guess; even the playing field. Like I don’t care if I get married, I have kids- that would be the happiest day of my life, it would, no doubt. Nothing will ever compare to that.

Without legal status, these undocumented youth are trapped by the legal system and cannot reach their true potential. They are, to some extent, being held hostage by decisions they did not make. Currently, our political institution is responsible for changing immigration laws. Considering that there is much to gain for both our society as a whole and for individuals, it is time for the policy makers of this country to reconsider their positions and adopt practical and humane immigration policies.
References


Goris, Indira, Julia Harrington, and Sebastian Kohn. 2009. “Statelessness: what is it and


Students.” Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis.


Appendix A - First Interview Schedule

1) What college/university are you currently enrolled in?

2) What year are you in? First year, second year, etc.

3) What major/interest are you thinking of or are pursuing?

4) What would you like to do with your major?

5) What year did you graduate high school?

6) Did you go to college directly after graduating high school?

7) If not, why not?

8) At what age did you come to the US/How long have you been in the United States?

9) Can you tell me about your journey to the United States?

10) Why did your parents/family members decide to bring you to the United States?

11) When you were in high school did you have someone/or some office help you in learning how to get help for college?

12) What difficulties did you encounter in applying for school?

13) What difficulties did you encounter in learning about financial aid?

14) What difficulties did you encounter in receiving financial aid?

15) Are you receiving any type of financial aid? What type?
16) What difficulties do you encounter now because of your documentation status?

17) Can you think of other difficulties you experience because of your documentation status? Can you please share?

18) Have you ever dealt with negative stigma, discrimination, or discriminative comments because of your documentation status? How did it make you feel?

19) Growing up, how did you imagine yourself at the age you are now? Did you think it was going to be less or more difficult to navigate the world?

20) Is there or has there been anyone who has been supportive and helped you?

21) If you could help future generations in any way, what would you do?
Appendix B - Second Interview Schedule

1) What college/university are you currently enrolled in?

2) What year are you in? First year, second year, etc.

3) What major/interest are you thinking of or are pursuing?
   a. What would you like to do with your major?

4) What year did you graduate high school?

5) Did you go to college directly after graduating high school?
   a. If not, why not?

6) At what age did you come to the US/How long have you been in the United States? [Ogbu: Dual Frame of Reference]
   a. Can you tell me about your journey to the United States?
   b. When did you learn that you were undocumented?

7) Why did your parents/family members decide to bring you to the United States? [Ogbu: Dual Frame of Reference]

8) When speaking of nationality, how do you identify or see yourself? [Bifurcated Consciousness]
   a. Would you willingly move back to the country you were born in?

9) To what extent do you identify yourself as American? [Bifurcated Consciousness]

10) Can you tell me about your high school experience? [Meritocracy]
    a. GPA & School load
    b. Extracurricular activities
    c. Obligations at home
    d. Work
    e. Did you have someone/or some office help you in learning how to get help for college?
    f. Colleges applied and accepted to?

11) When did you know that you wanted to attend college?
    a. Were you aware that, as an undocumented student, you would have limited access to resources and opportunities?
       i. If so, what motivates you in continuing your education?

12) What was your experience like when you applied for college? [Statelessness]

13) Are you receiving any type of financial aid? [Statelessness]
    a. If so, what type?
b. What experiences/difficulties have you encountered in obtaining financial aid?

14) Does being undocumented affect your educational experience? [grades, involvement/participation, unit enrollment] [Statelessness]
   a. If so, in what way?

15) Outside of school, does being undocumented impact your life? [Including work, social life, self esteem, etc.]

16) Have you ever dealt with negative stigma, discrimination, or discriminative comments because of your documentation status?
   a. How did it make you feel?

17) What would your answer be to someone that says that undocumented students don’t deserve the right to an education or legal status?

18) Growing up, how did you imagine yourself at the age you are now?
   a. Did you think it was going to be less or more difficult to navigate the world?

19) What are your plans after graduation? [Work, Graduate School, family?]
   [Statelessness, Meritocracy]

20) How would receiving documents/papers change your life?

21) Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

22) If you could help future generations in any way, what would you do?
Appendix C - Recruiting Flyer

Seeking Undocumented Students for a Thesis Project

Hello, my name is Esther and I am a graduate student at CSUN (California State University, Northridge). I am currently working on my thesis project to learn of the experiences and/or difficulties undocumented college students face.

I would like to meet with and interview the following individuals:

- Undocumented students who are currently attending college

OR

- Undocumented individuals who have already received their college degree

*Each interview would last about 2 to 2 ½ hours.

Individuals who participate must be at least 18 years old

I will use a pseudonym (not your real name) in all written documents and notes to ensure confidentiality. These documents will be kept in a password protected computer.

If you would like to participate or learn more about this project, please contact me!

Email Address: esther-vs@sbcglobal.net
Graduate Advisor: david.boyns@csun.edu

Thank you!